Indigenous Methodologies: Suggestions for Junior Researchers

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Abstract

Indigenous methodologies in geography have been recently developed to decolonise Western dominated paradigm and it has been argued that research which does not benefit the Indigenous community should not be done. However, Indigenous methodologies are still not systematically taught in post-secondary institutions and junior researchers have to learn such methodologies by themselves when they pursue Indigenous topics. Indigenous methodologies cannot be defined in a single way and are also too diverse to learn in a short span. In the particular context of Japan, where the existence of Indigenous peoples is not widely recognised and there is not enough research accumulation on contemporary Indigenous issues, the concept itself is rarely discussed; therefore researchers hardly identify that their research really adopts Indigenous methodologies and benefits the community and students are even discouraged to purse the topic. Furthermore, a methodology or a thesis statement which researchers presume reflecting Indigenous perspectives often does not get support from Indigenous peoples. The experience of my master's research on the Ainu was one of such cases. Indigenous methodologies are still not easy to learn; however, junior researchers should not be discouraged to engage with them. Practical suggestions are therefore necessary. Based on my experience, I suggest: approaching to an Indigenous community as a learner is effective since researchers can be open-minded and sensitive; researchers also should be ready to refine research questions and conduct the second literature review after fieldwork. Misinterpretation and exploitation of Indigenous knowledge could be avoided by these strategies.

Keywords: Indigenous methodologies, Fieldwork, Cross-cultural Research, Qualitative Methods, Research questions, Ainu, Japan

Introduction

Recently there were two geography journals that published a special issue on Indigenous geographies (*Geografiska Annaler*, 2006; *Geographical Research*, 2007). I learned a great deal from these two volumes and was happily surprised that there were some research articles on Indigenous issues in Malaysia (Nah, 2006) or Northern Europe (Lawrence, 2007; Riseth, 2007), which I have had few opportunities to learn. Among a series of articles, 'Can you hear us now?' by Louis (2007) intellectually stimulated me as I have long been interested in Indigenous methodologies and the topic is relevant to my standpoint as a researcher who is doing research on Indigenous issues. Meanwhile, her article brought some concerns that I would like to further discuss. They are related to one of her arguments. She states that '[i]f research does not benefit the community by extending the quality of life for those in the community, it should not be done' (Louis, 2007, 131). What are the measures to judge if research benefits the community? Isn't it hard to predict in a short span that research really benefits? Which research benefit and which do not?

Another concern is what researchers should do first if they want to engage with Indigenous methodologies. Louis defines Indigenous methodologies as follows:

> Indigenous methodologies are alternative ways of thinking about research processes. They are fluid and dynamic approaches that emphasise circular and cyclical perspectives. Their main aim is to ensure that research on Indigenous issues is accomplished in a more sympathetic, respectful, and ethically fashion from an Indigenous perspective. (Louis, 2007, 133)

This is a broad definition. An Indigenous perspective cannot be defined in a single way because Indigenous peoples are diverse. How can researchers identify that they are adopting Indigenous methodologies and respecting Indigenous perspectives? In actuality, non-Indigenous geographers are often insensitive with Indigenous perspectives and they are unaware of this insensitiveness while they argue they are doing research for Indigenous communities. An example is a researcher who 'presented statistical data about particular medical problem area for an Indigenous

population' (Louis, 2007, 135). Such insensitiveness does not often derive from non-Indigenous geographers' fault but they are systematically formed.

I am a non-Indigenous geographer who is interested in Indigenous issues. As far as I know, I am one of the only two Japanese geographers who are doing research on the Ainu, an Indigenous people of Japan, and the only one on contemporary Ainu issues. I did my bachelor's and master's programs in Kyoto University, Japan. I never had a chance to learn Indigenous methodologies there. I never heard even such a word. No geography faculties systematically taught issues on the Ainu, cross-cultural research methodologies, and research ethics. I had to learn everything by myself, from the literature of Indigenous studies to methodologies, when I decided to write on the Ainu in my master's thesis in 2001. There were no such good textbooks as *Decolonizing Methodologies* (Smith, 1999) in the literature of Ainu studies in Japan. I tried to make my research benefit the Ainu since some anthropologists argued that researchers on Ainu issues have to do so; however, I found my project rather insensitive with the Ainu who are engaging in activities of cultural promotion, despite my struggle to reflect Indigenous perspectives. I really got lost in the mid way of my master's research and it rook for a while to recover from this shock. I would have given up on pursuing this topic in doctor's program if I had been told not to conduct research if it does not benefit the community.

Not all institutions effectively teach Indigenous methodologies at the moment. Furthermore, in some countries like Japan, where even the existence of Indigenous peoples is not widely recognised, either domestically or internationally, nothing on Indigenous issues are taught in post-secondary education. Students have to learn everything by themselves if they pursue Indigenous topics. If it is just broadly argued that research should benefit the community, it would unnecessarily discourage junior researchers who are planning to conduct research on/with indigenous communities. Louis introduces four examples of research done using Indigenous methodologies (2007, 134-5) and Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* lists up 25 Indigenous projects (1999, 143-61). My observation is that it takes so long to digest these approaches. Non-Indigenous researchers who just started learning Indigenous methodologies may get lost: they have no ideas what they

should do first. Meanwhile, some projects like master's need to be completed within a short term. Practical suggestions are therefore really necessary to make Indigenous methodologies more approachable. No one should be discouraged to engage with Indigenous geographies and junior researchers can have a sense of Indigenous methodologies by experiences and practices. Based on my master's experience, I would like to offer some practical suggestions. My article is in part directed to junior researchers who are considering engaging with Indigenous methodologies or cross-cultural research.

My experience in master's research

It is a little long story why I was interested in the Ainu when I was in a master's program in Kyoto. To make a long story short, I chose the Ainu as a topic for my master's research. In geography, few researches on the Ainu were (and still are) available then. A few exceptions were a series of Endo's historical research (1997; 2001; 2004; 2006), which did not attract me because his research was too specific; therefore I reviewed other disciplines that had undertaken research on the Ainu. They were history, archaeology, and anthropology. Since my interest was in contemporary issues, I mostly reviewed the literature of anthropology, which had been a dominant discipline in the studies on the Ainu until the 1970s.

Since the 1980s, experiencing some lawsuits for researchers' unprofessional research techniques and publications, Japanese anthropology regarding Ainu studies has been in a tricky situation. Anthropologists have been discouraged engaging with research on the Ainu. Responding to this situation and influenced by postmodern anthropology in English-speaking countries, some anthropologists have discussed the validity of ethnographic approaches, questioning the role of the researcher in writing about others (Kinase, 1997; Ota, 1998; 2001; cf. Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986). The Japanese Society of Cultural Anthropology released the research ethic guidelines (Nihon Minzoku Gakkai Kenkyu Rinri Iinkai, 1989). In actuality, however, the Society has rather avoided discussing research ethic issues and even not published any ethnographic research articles on the Ainu in the *Japanese Journal of Cultural Anthropology* since the late 1990s. The Society has

rejected articles on the Ainu simply using an excuse that Ainu issues are 'sensitive.' It seems that the Society does not want to experience another lawsuit or critiques from Ainu activists (Cheung, 2004). One of few articles published recently is Kinase's work, which argues that the issues of researchers' positionality and politics need to be addressed in Ainu research. He argued that it is necessary in research on minorities, including Indigenous peoples, that researchers clearly explain their purposes, for whom they are researching, and their own positionality. Since Japanese anthropologists have not seriously addressed these issues, ethnographic research on the Ainu is now at a standstill (Kinase, 1997, 12). It was the reality of 2001 that there were few research articles on contemporary Ainu issues.

Kinase argues that depicting Ainu society as a traditional hunting and gathering society could be one of the causes of stereotypes against the Ainu because they do not live in such a way in the contemporary Japanese society. Doing research on the Ainu is political and researchers should always keep this politics in their mind (Kinase, 1997, 14-5). Having a little anthropological background, I was attracted with Kinase's arguments without any critical notions. I decided to focus on the issues of researcher's politics and stereotypes against the Ainu in my master's thesis. In Hokkaido, where the majority of the Ainu have lived, there are some Ainu museums. Their exhibitions mainly restore the traditional Ainu lifestyle such as hunting, fishing and gathering and display old artefacts. In fact, no Ainu museums systematically exhibit contemporary Ainu culture (Nakamura, 2007). I thought that this kind of exhibition forms negative society-wide stereotypes against the Ainu. I decided to criticise exhibitions which timelessly restore only past Ainu culture as if the Ainu lifestyle had not changed over thousand years. I anticipated that the critique of ethnographies, including museum exhibitions, could deconstruct the power relation between the researcher and the researched, demonstrate an alternative 'new' perspective toward Ainu studies, and even contribute the solution of the issue of discrimination.

In the field

During fieldwork in the summer 2001, I visited several Ainu and historical museums.

I first saw the exhibition to confirm that the museum exhibited only ‘traditional’ Ainu culture; then I requested to see a curator and asked questions. My purpose of fieldwork was to get evidence to support my thesis statement. Of course I was critical about museum exhibitions. I asked a couple of questions.

> Why do you exhibit only ‘traditional’ Ainu lifestyle in this museum? Does not such exhibition cause the stereotype that the Ainu still live in such a traditional way? Why don’t you exhibit contemporary Ainu culture?

I was expecting that the curators would agree with me and criticise exhibitions as well as ethnographic research in anthropology. I was expecting such an answer as: it is wrong that museums only exhibit ‘traditional’ Ainu culture because they form a negative stereotype. Things did not go like that, however.

Many curators disagreed with my view. They sometimes argued that they were trying to exhibit contemporary culture and sometimes argued that it was important to introduce a ‘different’ culture to the general Japanese public since most of them do not know very much about the Ainu. Furthermore, they argued that the museum is not just an institution to statically exhibit things. The curators also explained that the typical Japanese stereotypes that the Ainu still live in a ‘traditional’ lifestyle or they have long been extinct are mostly caused by the lack of education and information. They argued that the stereotypes and discrimination against the Ainu are systemic. Curators repeatedly told me that criticising museum exhibitions for the lack of contemporary culture is rather pointless.

Furthermore, a curator of Ainu ethnicity stated that reading ethnographies was an important process to learn Ainu culture and form Ainu identity since this curator did not know much about Ainu culture before becoming a curator. This curator stressed that the value of ethnographies should not be degraded even if they were produced in an unprofessional way and caused lawsuits (see Howitt and Stevens, 2005, 35). Another curator complained about Kinase’s argument and was dissatisfied that the Japanese Society of Cultural Anthropology does not publish any ethnographic research on the Ainu. These conversations made me re-think my initial assumptions.

The issue of discrimination is not to be easily solved by simple measures such as exhibiting contemporary Ainu culture in museums. I was missing the point in that I simply tried to criticise static-look museum exhibition or the production of ethnographies without recognising the fact that the Ainu find ethnographies useful in the formation of their identity. Of course, having less background then, I had no idea what I was missing in the field. The point is that the thesis statements and methodologies that I thought reflecting Indigenous perspectives did not get support from those who were promoting Indigenous culture in the museum.

Unfortunately the situation that research on contemporary Ainu issues is not available has not significantly changed since 2001. It is cynical that a few research articles on contemporary Ainu issues are published by non-Japanese researchers (Stevens, 2001; Siddle, 2002; 2003; Cheung, 2003). Hideki Yoshihara, the curator of the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, once stated that the Japanese academic has not supported museum activities and not provided a future vision regarding Indigenous issues including cultural development, collaborative projects, research methodologies, and multicultural education. According to Yoshihara, there are no Japanese specialists on Indigenous issues. Rather, specialists who research something close occasionally discuss Indigenous issues as their 'side business.' Graduate students are often discouraged to pursue Indigenous issues since few academic positions are available (Hideki Yoshihara, personal communication, 2004).

There are no institutions that systematically teach Indigenous methodologies in Japan. If graduate students in geography or anthropology develop a project working with the Ainu, they have to learn everything from literature review to methodologies by themselves and most likely they have to struggle to locate the case study in literature and find a theoretically meaningful question, which is required for an academic paper. Supervisors may discourage such projects. They hardly predict if their research would contribute to the community. I do not disagree that geographers should engage with Indigenous methodologies but the fact is that it is hard to learn them in the particular context of Japan. For me, the argument that research should not be done if it does not benefit the community sounds somehow negative.

Indigenous methodologies: some suggestions

I would like to suggest something practical regarding cross-cultural research. If you are trained in a Western paradigm and have never learned Indigenous methodologies, it would be a good way to approach to an Indigenous community (museum, organisation, school, activists, or whatever) that you would like to learn their philosophy and volunteer for them. This way would enable researchers to be sensitive, open-minded, and ready to deal with unexpected issues, and to strive to avoid misrepresentation, misinterpretation, and exploitation of Indigenous knowledge. In my doctoral project, first of all, I had much opportunity to learn the literature of Indigenous geographies in Canada, where I started my doctor's program. I adopted participant observation as a methodology. I approached the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum if I could volunteer for them, particularly stressing that I wanted to be a learner. This approach was effective. Curators encouraged me and looked forward to the completion of my doctoral project. I addressed these questions:

> How do the Ainu use ethnography to learn about themselves? How is Ainu culturally represented based on museum activities? How do the Ainu engage in such activities? How do such activities help them to form their identity? How might museum exhibits be improved to explain the circumstances and processes of Ainu participation?

The last question was particularly effective to have productive conversations with the museum staff. I do not claim that my research fully reflected Indigenous perspectives because some community members were critical with the projects the museum was developing and I did not listen to all of these voices. For me, however, the way to approach to the museum, that I wanted to be a learner, was definitely an alternative research process, which I never learned in university.

Another suggestion is that you do not always have to keep the initial research questions. There are many textbooks on research methodologies in geography (Limb and Dwyer, 2001; Shurmer-Smith, 2002; Clifford and Valentine, 2003; Scheyvens and Storey, 2003; Cloke et al., 2004; Hay, 2005). They generally argue that research

questions should be refined in the preparation stage and making a good research design is important. For example, Bradford states that:

> An extensive approach to human geography research will identify the research questions, decide the methods and choose appropriate analytical techniques to address the research questions *before* the collection of evidence is begun. (Bradford, 2003, 529; my emphasis)

This argument is not wrong at all because of practical reasons: your supervisor would not say: Yes, you can go for fieldwork!; your proposal is never approved without a research question; or you cannot submit a grant application without a research question.

I would argue, however, that flexibility is important in cross-cultural research. In the field, just be open-minded, listen to Indigenous voices, and think what you can say from them, then refine new research questions in the final writing stage. Furthermore, you should be ready to conduct the second literature review and these works should be included in the research timeline. As a Japanese sociologist Ikuya Sato argues, 'the failure of social survey often comes not from collecting useless data or documents and getting wrong answers but from meaningless research questions themselves' (Sato, 2002, 85; author's translation). One of the important elements of fieldwork is 'the process of **finding theoretically meaningful questions**, in other words, a question of questions themselves' (ibid, 126, author's translation, original emphasis). Research process from design, data collection, data analysis to write-up is not 'a linear sequence of stages… but a rapidly rotating wheel, in which all four aspects are performed virtually every day while in the field' (McCall, 2006, 5). Indigenous people can tell you if your research questions make sense.

I have to admit that I am not free from critiques for the lack of contribution to the community. This is mostly because I wrote my dissertation and published articles in English, a language of which most people who supported my research do not read. I wrote in English because I belonged to a Canadian institution and am pursuing my academic career in Canada. I did my research for my own needs. Of course I should

present community members what I learned and I am actually planning to do so in the near future; however, there has been no direct contribution to the community by now. Would then my research be one of which it should not have been done?

The presentation of my materials in English may attract international attention and enhance the understanding of the Ainu in a wider context. Indigenous peoples in countries other than Australia, New Zealand/Aotearoa, United States, and Canada are often excluded from the literature of Indigenous studies. The arena of 'international' Indigenous studies (researchers in English-speaking countries often use this word mentioning only those four countries) is not truly international if the literature of these four countries dominates discussion (cf. Gutiérrez and López-Nieva, 2001; Short et al., 2001). Strangely enough, even Latin American countries that have a large Indigenous population are often excluded from this arena even though there are many American/Canadian geographers who are working with Indigenous communities. I sometimes want to shout: Can you hear us now? If I do not present in English, how could Indigenous geographers who do not read Japanese learn about the Ainu and share information with them? Am I just arrogant?

In April 2007, Hokkaido University established the Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies. The Center is the first national institution in Japan which is specifically dedicated to Indigenous studies and its policies are interdisciplinary approach, collaboration with the Ainu, and the development of education. In the first year, the Center held public lectures, recruited researchers, and organised symposiums. The Center is also eager to develop Indigenous methodologies and train researchers of Ainu ethnicity (Tsunemoto, 2007). Yoshihara once stated:

> We need more discussion on Indigenous issues and create a future vision on cultural promotion, multicultural education, etc. In general, we have not been concerned with such issues in Japan. In terms of the lack of discussion and concern, we are two or three decades behind of some counties like Canada or Australia, where these issues are discussed in nation-wide. (Hideki Yoshihara, personal communication, 2004, author's translation)

Not only Indigenous methodologies but also Ainu Studies as a discipline are still in the stage of creation. We need to accumulate research results inter-disciplinarily and encourage young researchers, either of Ainu or Japanese, or any other ethnicities. It is hard to identify in a short span which research benefits the community and which does not. We have much to learn from the literature of Indigenous studies in English-speaking countries. So please encourage young researchers. Some research may not directly benefit the community but may indirectly do so in a long span.

Acknowledgements

I thank Leah Huff for her helpful comments on the draft.

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