# What is a community's desire? A critical look at participatory research projects with Indigenous communities

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**Abstract**

*Participatory approaches have become a critical and somewhat normalised methodology in geography for working in a positive and constructive way with Indigenous communities. Nevertheless, recent literature has seldom examined the sustainability of participatory projects or looked critically at their ongoing impacts. Since the early 2000s, Nibutani, an Ainu community in Hokkaido, Japan, has developed several participatory projects, led by a non-Indigenous professional. The projects have involved community members working to revitalise and promote local Ainu culture. Over the last decade, some positive outcomes from the projects have been observed; for example, the younger generation has had opportunities to engage intensively in learning local Indigenous knowledge and skills. The projects have also helped some participants to develop a stronger sense of ethnic identity and gain empowerment. Still, the power transfer from the talented non-Indigenous leader to community members has been limited and Nibutani has yet to realise a sustainable project structure. Also, community members have multiple perspectives in regards to the direction of participatory projects and their impact. I discuss these issues in Nibutani's participatory projects based on my observations and interviews and suggest that Indigenous geographies need to undertake follow-up evaluations of participatory projects.*

**Key words:** participatory approaches, participatory projects, community, Indigenous geographies, Ainu, Japan.

**Introduction**

Recently, geographical research with Indigenous communities has developed in a number of respects. In response to critiques from Indigenous peoples, researchers employing ethnographic and observational approaches have sought to avoid 'exploiting' Indigenous knowledge by providing better feedback to Indigenous communities. Concurrently, 'geographers have produced a number of thoughtful reflections on the possibilities of conducting more ethical, respectful, anti-colonial research pertaining to Indigenous geographies' (de Leeuw, Cameron, and Greenwood 2012, 181; see also Castleden, Sloan Morgan, and Neimanis 2010; Hodge and Lester 2006; Louis 2007; Shaw, Herman, and Dobbs 2006; Swanson 2010). Participatory approaches have been adopted by several geographers in their work with Indigenous peoples, and concepts such as partnership, participation, collaboration, empowerment, and power transfer have become popular and even normalised.

Despite these positive developments, there have been few attempts to assess the longer term impacts of participatory approaches on Indigenous communities. After a participatory research project has concluded, how are the changes it has facilitated viewed by community members? Do researchers have an obligation to be involved in the community after the completion of the project? Do they need to take responsibility for assuring the effectiveness of the change they cause? Is research truly participatory when it rests on the talent and interest of the non-Indigenous researcher? How many researchers actually perform follow-up investigations? Finally, can the 'community' under study be understood as a homogeneous entity with a shared set of interests? Although these questions have been discussed in the literature on participatory approaches, in particular with respect to case studies from developing countries (e.g., Cahill 2007a; Cleaver 2001; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004; Jupp 2007; Kesby 2005, 2007; Mohan 2001; Mohan and Stokke 2000; Walker et al. 2007; Williams 2004), I believe that the questions are worth readdressing in geographical research with Indigenous communities.

This article thus suggests that researchers developing participatory projects in Indigenous communities should consider follow-up evaluations of their projects. To this end, I evaluate transfers of power from participatory project organisers to community members as well as the sustainability of project structures using the case study of the Ainu community of Nibutani on the northern island of Hokkaido, Japan. Since the early 2000s several participatory projects to preserve and promote local Ainu culture have been developed in Nibutani. The discussion here will question the notion of 'community', paying special attention to multiple interests and actors in the community, as well as to

the gaps between the capacities and expectations of project organisers, participants, and other community members. Discussion will also consider whether changes brought on by participatory projects are desired by the Nibutani 'community', whether the structure of the projects is sustainable, and whether or not positive effects endure after the talented project organisers have left the community.

Data for this article was mainly obtained from interviews conducted with project organisers, participants, and other residents of Nibutani in August 2011 and November 2012. The details of interview methodologies will be discussed later, but at this point I wish to clarify my standpoint as an author. In this research, I was as an 'outsider'. I adopted conventional research practices, seeking a degree of detachment from members of the Nibutani community in order to analyse the participants' statements and to find 'objective' outcomes. Although this research itself was not collaborative and thus might be criticised for its colonial perspective (cf. Hodge and Lester 2006), I was seeking to observe and evaluate the participatory research projects of others, rather than to undertake one myself. For this particular piece, I was predominantly working *on*, not *with*, the Ainu.


## Participatory approaches in geographical research with Indigenous communities

As a theoretical framework and substantive direction, postcolonialism has been a significant feature in recent work in social science disciplines, including geography. Postcolonial scholars are especially concerned with power relations and positionality in knowledge production, and have raised objections to the Eurocentric epistemology that characterises much social science. Attention has been given to the multiplicity of marginalised voices, including those of women, non-Whites, and Indigenous peoples, who have been oppressed and often unfairly represented by those who have power (Jacobs 2003; Kobayashi and de Leeuw 2010; Rose 1997).

This epistemological critique has significantly influenced Indigenous geographies. In settler countries, Indigenous peoples have increasingly been calling attention to the need to 'decolonise' the research projects conducted by non-Indigenous researchers, their research methodologies, and the researcher-researched relationship. There has also been a growing body of Indigenous scholarship, and Indigenous scholars have attempted to take their own voices back (Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith 2008; Evans et al. 2009; Gilmartin and Berg 2007; Hodge and Lester 2006; Kovach 2009; Louis 2007; Shaw, Herman, and Dobbs 2006; Smith 1999; Swanson 2010). As a result, non-Indigenous researchers are discouraged from conducting research only for their interest and for the academic world. In terms of

Indigenous cultural representation, criticisms have been made of the colonising tendencies within ethnographic methodologies that represent Indigenous people as 'others', doing so without clear benefit for or feedback to Indigenous communities (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Indigenous peoples have criticised such exploitative methodologies for their marginalisation of colonised people (Coombes et al. 2011; Gibson 2006; Jacobs 2003; Johnson et al. 2007).

In response to the postcolonial critique of research involving Indigenous communities, Indigenous methodologies have been developed to decolonise the Western dominated paradigm. Indigenous methodologies are defined as research methodologies that are 'undertaken with communities (and prioritizing their concerns) as opposed to conventional research practice on Indigenous peoples that often projects a "detached" (and objective) researcher position' (Hodge and Lester 2006: 50). Their main aim is to ensure that research on Indigenous issues is accomplished in a more sympathetic, respectful, and ethical fashion from an Indigenous perspective (Evans et al. 2009; Kovach 2009; Louis 2007; Smith 1999). Also, Indigenous methodologies require the participation of the members of Indigenous communities in the process of research and the reflection of Indigenous voices in the research outcome. Researchers and Indigenous peoples are also required to develop research questions collaboratively. An important ethical principle of Indigenous research is that Indigenous peoples should retain control of their own knowledges (Battiste 2002; Gombay 2012; Pulsifer et al. 2011). Consequently, it is becoming difficult to argue that research on Indigenous issues should be conducted from a 'neutral' and 'objective' perspective based on the Western philosophy for 'scientific' purposes, all the while ignoring Indigenous epistemologies (Kovach 2009).

In the development of Indigenous methodologies, participatory approaches have enabled new understandings and possibilities. These approaches take several distinct forms: community research; community-based participatory research (CBPR, or simply CBR as community-based research); and participatory action research (PAR). The forms are not always exclusive and may share some elements, such as the involvement of Indigenous community members. Nevertheless, according to Goodson and Phillimore (2012: 3), CBPR 'is conducted as an equal partnership and community members are involved in all aspects of research process', while PAR projects 'are concerned with collectively improving the quality of their community'. Community research primarily involves communities to collect data but does not necessarily require empowering or changing the community, although intellectual empowerment may occur implicitly or explicitly (Goodson and Phillimore 2012). In any case, these methodologies seek 'to challenge the hierarchical social relationships that usually characterise academic research' and the challenge is achieved 'by changing *how* data are collected,

*what sort* of new knowledges and *what impacts* result; and, crucially, *who* direct investigation, and to *whom* any benefits arising from experience, learning, and findings of research accrue' (mrs c kinpaisby-hill 2011: 214; emphases in original).

In the research process, researchers are required to work with community members to develop research questions and research methods, collect and analyze data, and interpret findings. Researchers need to be sensitive to any issues that might come up as a result of their research actions. They are also expected to reflect the voices and perspectives of vulnerable and marginalised groups while limiting their domination by privileged people, including the researchers themselves. Furthermore, researchers must seek a way to share any benefits from the research and are expected to present findings in cooperation with the participants (Kindon 2010; see also Pain 2003; Pain and Kindon 2007). By adopting these approaches, participatory researchers seek to be open to alternative and multiple epistemologies (Evans 2009). They endeavour to intellectually empower those involved in the research by including their voices in the outcome, thereby challenging social exclusion (Jupp 2007; Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007; 2008; Pain 2003).

Participatory approaches are therefore considered as an effective methodology in research that involves those who have experienced historic oppression, such as Indigenous peoples, as 'participatory research frequently emerges from strong emotional responses to the existence of social injustice, and certainly requires a major emotional investment' (mrs c kinpaisby-hill 2011: 226; see also Cahill 2006, 2010; Kindon 2010). To ensure Indigenous involvement in the research process and the control of Indigenous knowledge, researchers are now encouraged to adopt participatory approaches. For example, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research's Guidelines for Health Research involving Aboriginal peoples states 'that [Indigenous] communities should be given the option of a participatory research approach' (McHugh and Kowalski 2009: 118). Reflecting this trend, there has been a growing body of research within the literature on Indigenous geographies that explores the benefits of participatory approaches (e.g., Castleden, Sloan Morgan, and Neimanis 2010; Christensen 2012; Fletcher 2003; Grimwood et al. 2012; Heikkilä and Fondahl 2012; Iwama et al. 2009; Koster, Baccar, and Lemelin 2012; Mistry and Berardi 2012; Mulrennan, Mark, and Scott 2012).

Of course, participatory approaches have not been free from critique. In particular, the concepts of 'participation' and 'empowerment' have been repeatedly examined in a number of articles in various sub-disciplines. Some critics argue that participatory approaches legitimise neoliberal programs (Cooke and Kothari 2001), and that they are not always the best approach, depending on space and time (Ansell et al. 2012; Klodawsky 2007). There has also been concern that participatory

approaches neglect local power relations and inequalities, and tend to represent dominant voices as the community voice (Ansell et al. 2012; Cameron and Gibson 2005). Another concern, especially related to CBPR and PAR, is 'how far power is actually transferred to participants through such processes, either within the setting of the participatory encounter or within the wider context of global inequalities' (Jupp 2007: 2832). PAR also expects participants 'to perform appropriately within participatory processes' (Kindon 2010: 530), which might be considered another form of domination by authority.

Despite these criticisms, participatory approaches are argued to be a vital approach in Indigenous geographies. The benefits of participatory approaches are not limited to social change but may also lead to personal transformation in that the approach helps participants cultivate 'new forms of subjectivity or other possibilities of being in the world' (Cahill 2007b: 269; see also Koster, Baccar, and Lemelin 2012). For example, project participants are given opportunities to critically reconsider and challenge dominant discourses; such transformations in thinking could be retained beyond the participating project and incorporated into the lives of participants. In such situations, Cahill's statement seems relevant: 'the boundaries between the inside and the outside of PAR projects are not so clear' (2007b: 287). Participatory projects empower individuals, especially those who have been oppressed by the dominant powers, and in this stance, the possibility of participatory approaches is strongly supported.

Still, some critiques need to be heard and responded to. According to Cleaver (2001: 36):

> There is little evidence of the long-term effectiveness of participation in materially improving the conditions of the most vulnerable people or as a strategy for social change. While the evidence for efficiency receives some support on a small scale, the evidence regarding empowerment and sustainability is more partial, tenuous and reliant on assertions of the rightness of the approach and process rather than convincing evidence of outcomes.

With regards to the efficiency and sustainability of participatory projects, Kindon refers to a video-producing project with a Māori tribe in New Zealand that adopted participatory methodologies. According to Kindon (2010: 534), in this particular project, 'the techniques that had worked well [elsewhere] … seemed forced and somewhat artificial with [the tribe], where there was no immediate "issue" or "problem" to solve'. Some questions arise here. If the change that occurs in a community reflects the interests of outside project organisers and is not what community members necessarily desire, are such forms of community change ethically problematic? Are the changes actually even necessary? If so, necessary for whom?

The second critique is closely related to the first. When a participatory project is planned by an external agent, some pressure might be exerted (i.e., imposed) on the community or individuals to make a change. Referring to Cooke and Kothari (2001), Kindon (2010: 529) explains an aspect of group dysfunction as following: 'Individuals may be convinced (some argue, "brainwashed") that the current situation they or their community face is no longer tolerable or sustainable and that there is no alternative but to change at an individual and collective level'. In this case, the community does not have the power to direct its own future and the situation would be against the nature of Indigenous research methodologies, which maintains that researchers are not authorised to impose change onto a community.

Furthermore, the 'community' cannot be assumed to be a homogeneous entity. As some have mentioned, a community has multiple interests and actors (e.g. Agrawal and Gibson 1999; Mulrennan, Rodney, and Scott, 2012). While some community members may be eager to collaborate with external actors to develop participatory projects, others might not be interested, might try to distance themselves from or even critique such projects. Also, community members are likely to have uneven access to information and external actors. In some societies, a particular group of people may be silenced, depending on methods and techniques adopted in participatory projects; e.g. young people may be prohibited from speaking publicly, while project methods require public speaking (Ansell et al. 2012, 172, see also Kapoor 2002). Even if a project is initiated through collaboration with local residents from the start, it does not mean that *all* community members are interested in the project. For instance, local residents have their own jobs, responsibilities, and interests, which might cause tension between what is hoped for in a project and what is actually possible. The organisers of collaborative projects should be careful not to 'facilitate certain dominant voices and subdue others' (Ansell et al. 2012, 172). The literature on participatory approaches in Indigenous geographies still needs examinations of who really are the active participants of collaborative projects, and who benefits from the projects among community members.

For organisers of participatory projects, it is easy to positively evaluate their own work when an immediate and direct impact on the community or participants is observed. Nevertheless, if, as Cahill (2007b) suggests, the project organiser is interested in the impact of the project beyond process or the sustainability of the impact, then observation and analysis of the post-project stage is also necessary. In addition, this evaluation should ideally be conducted by a third party, as project organisers tend to positively evaluate outcomes. Furthermore, it would be ideal to listen to the voices of community members who did *not* participate in the project, so as to be aware of their evaluations (e.g. Koster,

Baccar, and Lemelin 2012; Mulrennan, Mark, and Scott 2012). To what extent are the organisers responsible for the change caused by the project after its completion? Who actually becomes empowered: 'the individual, the "community", or categories of peoples such as "women", "the poor" or the "socially excluded"?' (Cleaver 2001: 37-38) Are projects even participatory if they serve the interest of organisers and if there is legitimate doubt that a legacy will remain from their work after their departure? The recent literature on participatory projects in Indigenous geographies still lacks a thorough analysis of these issues.


**The Ainu and participatory projects in Nibutani**


The Ainu are an Indigenous people of Japan. The majority of Ainu live on the northern island of Hokkaido. Historically, they have experienced hardships and racism like many other Indigenous peoples in different parts of the world. In particular, the Ainu have experienced long-term colonisation by the Japanese, government policies of assimilation, relocation of their communities, spread of disease, a decreasing population, and discrimination (Siddle 1996; Walker 2001). The Town of Biratori, located in central Hokkaido, is a small municipality with a population of 5,530 (July 2014) in a mainly mountainous region. The District of Nibutani, approximately 6km northeast of the town centre, is situated on the Saru River (Figure 1). Roughly 70 per cent of the district's residents are of Ainu ethnicity, and Nibutani is popularly known as the 'Ainu village', thanks to a famous Ainu, Shigeru Kayano. The Ainu have no special legal status or political rights in Japan, and an Ainu village simply refers to a district where most residents are of Ainu ethnicity.

** Figure 1 about here **

In Nibutani, the preservation of Ainu artefacts in the local Ainu museum was the result of Shigeru Kayano's perseverance. Disgusted by non-Ainu anthropologists who conducted research unethically (i.e., stealing artefacts, excavating graveyards, and collecting blood samples from living humans), Kayano began collecting Ainu artefacts in the 1950s. Although his acquaintances wondered why he spent a large amount of money for 'useless' things, he was passionate enough to collect almost 2,000 artefacts over twenty years and his collection led to the establishment of a private museum in 1972 (Kayano 1990). The ownership of his collection was later transferred to the Town of Biratori and

the Town opened the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum in 1992. His effort to promote Ainu culture did not end there. Beginning in the 1970s, he revitalised a traditional boat launching ceremony called *cip-sanke*, started the Ainu language school for children, published some seventy books, launched legal action against the national government's land expropriation to construct the Nibutani Dam, and became the first Ainu member of the Diet, where he strived to enact the Ainu Culture Promotion Act of 1997 (Kayano 1990, 2005). Although he passed away in 2006, the area's rich Ainu cultural heritage and Kayano's name has attracted many tourists, students, journalists, and researchers. As a result, Nibutani is mentioned in many published sources (e.g. Honda 1993; Kaizawa 1992; Kaizawa et al. 2012; Sjöberg 1993). Kayano also inspired many young people, including non-Ainu from outside Hokkaido, and personally taught Ainu language and traditional knowledge and skills (e.g. Honda 1997). Hideki Yoshihara, a staff member of Biratori's Department of Ainu Affairs who is currently organising the cultural impact assessment project for the Biratori Dam construction, is one of them. Originally from outside Hokkaido, Yoshihara majored in cultural anthropology at university and studied Ainu culture under Kayano's instruction. Later, they worked together to establish the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum and Yoshihara served as the curator from 1992 to 2008. In the 1990s, he actively collaborated with local professional carvers and craftspeople to organise special exhibitions of Ainu craft (Yoshihara, 4 August 2004 and 1 November 2012, conversations). In terms of museum-based Ainu cultural promotion, Yoshihara is seen as Kayano's successor in Nibutani.

Kayano's activity in Ainu cultural promotion, however, did not always attract the attention and participation of local residents, except for professional carvers and craftspeople. This is partly due to the assimilation and Japanisation of their lifestyles and their incorporation into the market economy, which resulted in the decreased significance of traditional skills and the Ainu language. In the twenty-first century, the number of native Ainu language speakers is about ten. The Ainu also do not solely rely on hunting or gathering for survival. The younger generations have left the town after high school since the town, like other rural areas, does not provide good opportunities for employment. In addition, Kayano's legacy seemed too large to be taken up by local residents. On the one hand, the Nibutani of today would not exist without Kayano's long struggle. On the other hand, local people, especially the younger generation, were often afraid to confront Kayano's authority and were hesitant to nurture a new, evolving local Ainu culture (Nakamura 2007b). Until the early 2000s, the number of local residents who were passionately learning local Ainu culture was decreasing while the population with traditional skills and knowledge was aging. This situation put the transmission of local Ainu culture from the older generation to the younger generation in great danger (Sawanobori 2003).

A series of projects developed by the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum in the 2000s, under the supervision of Hedeki Yoshihara, can be seen as a trial to change the risky tendency. Yoshihara had long believed that Nibutani's Ainu culture could be passed down to the next generation and he encouraged young residents to engage in local cultural activities (Yoneda 1999; Yoshihara 2009b). His approach and methodologies in these projects were innovative. I briefly discuss two of the more important projects.

The first was the Ainu Culture Cluster Project (2002-2005; hereafter, the Cluster Project), which aimed to have local residents learn local Ainu culture and traditional skills as their occupations (Nakamura 2007b). Yoshihara was successful in getting funding from the national government to create temporary local employment, and about ten local residents were hired each fiscal year as trainees. They conducted archival research, interviewed local elders, learned skills and performing arts, and helped in cultural events. In the final year, Yoshihara planned to restore a bear ceremony of *Iomante*, which had not been held in Nibutani since 1977. Initially, the trainees were reluctant to become involved in Yoshihara's plan, as this particular ceremony was considered extremely sacred, and the trainees lacked any experience in dealing with a live bear. To alleviate their fears, *Iomante* was to be performed as a contemporary stage play, without a bear. Nevertheless, even with great effort on the part of the organisers, including Yoshihara, staff members of a think-tank, and a community arts specialist, the plan was not carried out. The reason was said to be that the preparations for the sacred ceremony was putting too much pressure on the trainees. Still, the intensive engagement in the local Ainu culture inspired the trainees who were able to learn many skills. Some of the trainees also began to consider local Ainu culture as their own culture. As a project that used the participatory action approach, the Cluster Project contributed 'to personal change within a poststructural framework' (Cahill 2007b: 273). The project also demonstrated that a small-scale community-based museum could serve as a basis for revitalising the local Indigenous culture and community development in a situation where local Indigenous members were losing interest in their own culture. In March 2005, many local residents came to enjoy the Cluster Festival, which included a stage performance by the trainees.

The second project is the Cultural Impact Assessment in the Saru River Region (2003-ongoing; hereafter the CIA project), which aims to assess the potential impact of the Biratori dam construction on local Indigenous cultural activities and resource use. This project represented the first to involve a site investigation in Japan to preserve an ethnic minority culture with regards to dam construction. Again, Yoshihara was successful in getting funds from the national government to hire about twelve local residents each fiscal year as research staff. The Report released in 2006 significantly included the

first three-year investigation of input by local residents. In this sense, this assessment succeeded in effectively involving Indigenous people in its process, with reflections on their cultural values in its results (Nakamura 2008). Furthermore, since 2006, research staff members have suggested alternative ceremony sites and conducted experimental transplants to protect the local cultural activities and heritage (Nakamura 2013). In this project, research staff members have also had great opportunities to intensively learn about local Ainu culture. Like the Cluster Project, they conducted archival research, interviews, experiments, and simulations. They also occasionally presented their findings to local residents and the general public. Of particular significance was the fact that research staff contributed to publishing (cf. McHugh and Kowalski 2009); the report released in March 2008 included many figures and graphics made by research staff and it has been used as a template manual for local Indigenous resource uses in the early twenty-first century (ABKHT 2008). Also, many of the research staff members in this project are former trainees of the Cluster Project, so that several of the project employees have accumulated rich knowledge and skills pertaining to the local Ainu culture (Yoshihara 2009b).

The projects developed in Nibutani over the past decade have many participatory elements, including the involvement of local residents, their contribution to the final products, and the collaboration between specialists and local participants. By adopting participatory approaches, Yoshihara has tried to make local residents recognise Nibutani's local Ainu culture, which was initially revitalised by Kayano, as their own. Also, for some participants, the projects have worked as a space of personal transformation. Some participants have become more interested in local Ainu culture, while others have become confident with their ethnic identity (Yoshihara 2009a, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Yoshihara and Nagano 2012).

Nevertheless, despite Yoshihara's passion and endeavours (and some major positive results), the degree of empowerment and power transfer needs to be carefully examined. Also, it must not be assumed that the Nibutani community has a shared interest in ways in promoting local Ainu culture and the development of this kind of participatory project. Cahill (2007b: 268) states that 'the goal in [a participatory project] is not only to describe reality but to change it' and Kindon (2010: 521; emphases in original) states that a participatory project should be conducted with community members 'to achieve change that *they* desire'. It is also argued that a community transformation must occur not by external agents of change but internally (Esteva, Stuchul, and Prakash 2005). In Nibutani's case, according to Yoshihara, local residents are still passive in promoting local Ainu culture. That is, local residents recognise the importance of local Ainu culture and are interested in participating in the

projects if someone organises them, but they are not always enthusiastic to start a new project by themselves. After more than a decade of Yoshihara's encouragement and input into the local resident-involved cultural promotion, the residents still need to be empowered by external agents for directing projects and figuring out a blueprint for local cultural promotion (Yoshihara, May 2009 and August 2011, conversations). Nibutani's major projects have been, and still are, predominantly organised and directed by external agents, including Yoshihara, think-tank staff members, and consultants, most of whom are of non-Ainu ethnicity. Even Yoshihara, who has lived in the town of Biratori for almost three decades, is seen as an outsider by many local residents. This situation brings attention to empowerment and power transfer within these projects, in particular in regards to Indigenous control of their own knowledge and project development.

**Community's multiple interests and some shortcomings of Nibutani's projects**

In this section, I address some shortcomings of recent projects in Nibutani. I also question the homogeneous notion of 'community desire'. As has been mentioned, in recent literature on participatory projects in Indigenous geographies, project organisers have tended to positively evaluate their projects, often by facilitating certain voices, under the assumption that the community has a shared view. Meanwhile, communication between project organisers and the community members who do *not* participate in the project has been lacking. How do community members in Nibutani, including those who do not participate, perceive the projects? Do they really hold the same views as project organisers and participants, in terms of positively evaluating the projects and their outcomes?

As I stated in the introduction, as an 'outsider' I adopted conventional research practices to address these questions. My approach can be justified for a number of reasons. First of all, the project organiser Hideki Yoshihara expects his projects to be evaluated by those who are familiar with the context of Nibutani, and has tried to identify problems regarding sustainable project development by the community members. Nibutani residents also often say that they enjoy learning about how outsiders perceive them (unless the perception is discriminatory). Also, conventional research practices from an 'outsider's standpoint' make it possible to collect the voices of those who have been critical about the projects. Furthermore, a follow-up evaluation by a third party is useful for assessing the shortcomings and failures of participatory projects. Thus, based on my own interpretations, my writing contributes knowledge on Nibutani's Ainu cultural projects.

To analyse the impact of recent participatory projects over the long-term and to collect the multiple perspectives of the Nibutani 'community', I conducted open-ended interviews with ten individuals in August 2011 and November 2012. While my previous works mostly focused on the voices of Yoshihara and project participants (Nakamura 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2013), this time I also approached individuals who appeared familiar with the projects but did not participate in them. Thus, in addition to three project employees, the interviewees included: current staff members of the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum and the Historical Museum of the Saru River, professional carvers, and other residents whose close acquaintances were project employees. In a small community like Nibutani, where most people know everyone else, it is difficult for individuals to hide their identity or personal views. Controversies and conflicts about how to represent local culture are often explicit. Still, my wish is not to cause unnecessary conflicts or tensions in the community, especially when project employees might be making a critical statement about their boss; i.e., Hideki Yoshihara. Thus, in this article, the identity of an informant and the exact interview date are not revealed. I simply state that all informants were aware of what I had done in Nibutani. I recognise that, as an outsider, I am privileged to know some criticisms (and complaints) that may not be directly exchanged among the community members, and that I am accepting some risk by describing the controversies. In any case, my critical analysis of Nibutani projects and my inclusion of informant statements are part of the experience shared by myself, the project organisers, the employees, and other residents.

First of all, no informants denied the positive impacts of the recent projects. The informants praised the projects that provided employees with an opportunity to learn local Ainu culture as part of their occupation. In particular, the Cluster Project was seen as being innovative in that professional cultural activities were conducted by residents, other than craftspeople and museum staff members. Over the decade, a certain amount of time and experience has been shared by the project employees, who have been accumulating knowledge and skills. Occasionally, some employees bring their children to the workplace for educational purposes. Ongoing funding for the CIA project from the national government has kept the positive cycle alive (Informants, August 2011 and November 2012, conversations). Although project employees are required to renew their contracts each fiscal year, and face the possibility of termination, most of them have been able to continue, and some of them are thankful for this employment structure. For example, one employee who has been involved in two projects for a decade was motivated to continue studying local Ainu culture. The interviewee stated that having an opportunity to work for the Cluster Project changed the interviewee's life (Informant,

August 2011, conversation). For this informant, participation in the projects has meant more than just creating good memories.

Some of the informants, however, were somewhat critical of the projects. For example, one of the informants claimed that participatory approaches were not particularly new in Nibutani:

Since the early 1980s, many local residents, including those of Ainu ethnicity, have been involved in cultural activities and museum-related projects, especially archaeological excavations. All archaeological sites in this region are tied to the Ainu people. As such, activists don't want any of the archaeological sites excavated without Ainu involvement. So to help excavate the sites we simply hire local residents, because the majority of them are of Ainu ethnicity. In this way we cannot be accused by activists of not involving the Ainu. This is a kind of participatory approach.… [Because Nibutani is widely known as an "Ainu village"] we receive a certain amount of funds each fiscal year, but not huge amounts like those associated with the CIA projects. Nonetheless, we have managed to hire a few local people, develop some collaborative projects, and organise special exhibitions. Also thanks to Kayano, people visit Nibutani anyway. (November 2012, conversation, my translation)

This statement suggests that Nibutani does not have immediate issues or problems to solve in regards to collaboration with local people in museum activities and Ainu cultural promotion. According to this informant, the changes that have occurred in Nibutani via Yoshihara's recent projects did not necessarily reflect the desire of some community members. This informant further touched on the tension between what is hoped for and what is possible in Nibutani:

We can use the existing structure to educate the governments of Hokkaido and Japan on the importance of Ainu culture. This is enough for us. We don't always need drastic changes. The reason why I say so is because at the moment there is a significant gap between Mr. Yoshihara's expectations and the capacity of local residents. Local residents, even project employees, are not really catching up with him. Neither are town office bureaucrats. Since 1992 we have had the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum. At the time of its opening, it was the only local government-run cultural institution specifically dedicated to an ethnic minority group in Japan. Then, following the Nibutani Dam Lawsuit, the national government established another museum (the Historical Museum of the Saru River, established 1998) …. A single cultural institution is hard enough to maintain for small municipalities yet Biratori has had the almost impossible task of maintaining not only one but two cultural institutions. I think the town is now reaching a consensus to support Yoshihara's projects but I don't think they know how to evaluate the projects or they have a

clear blueprint, because the projects are too innovative and the amount of work and funds to deal with are too huge for them. Mr. Yoshihara could slow down. (November 2012, conversation, my translation)

This informant held a negative view about Yoshihara's projects having a sustainable structure, as they have placed an additional burden on local residents and town bureaucrats. Even some project employees expressed a similar view and implied a gap between themselves and other local residents. One of them stated:

> A couple of years ago I came back to Nibutani due to family reasons and I applied for the CIA's research staff position, as there were no other jobs in the town, and I was luckily hired. When I started, I had no idea what was going on. So many unfamiliar terms and Ainu words were being used without any explanations. I felt like I jumped into a totally different world in the place where I was born. (August 2011, conversation, my translation)

This informant wondered if the concept of the projects were really understood by other Nibutani residents. Another informant questioned the sustainability of the projects:

> The recent projects have been led and developed solely by Yoshihara's hand. Getting funds, instructing research staff, negotiating with the national government, how to present findings to whom, and monitoring the direction of the projects, everything relies on him. I don't think this is good. Mr. Yoshihara will retire sooner or later, but who will be able to take over from him then? When the museum was developing the Cluster Project from 2002 to 2005, there really were not enough staff members. They were overworked. Since 2008 the projects have been supervised under the Department of Ainu Affairs and he was transferred there. The museum is now capable to handle curatorial works with the limited number of staff. I think this is how a small-scale museum should be. (November 2012, conversation, my translation)

With regards to the level of understanding of the projects, a gap between Yoshihara and the other informants can be observed. Yoshihara firmly believes that the Nibutani projects are significant at a national level and that the national government-funded cultural promotion projects are practical and effective for realising Indigenous rights (Yoshihara 2009b; November 2012, conversation). He argues that the projects, especially the protection of Ainu heritage in terms of water development, should be developed in other regions of Hokkaido as an ethnic policy (January 2012, e-mail). According to Yoshihara, the national government must assume responsibility since it favoured the United Nations

Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007. Meanwhile, other informants are positive about project continuation for protecting local employment, though they are unsure if and for how long the national government will continue funding it since the neoliberal trend is to reduce public investments. They are also uncertain about the goal of the CIA project (Informants, November 2012, conversations).

In response to my question about whether or not someone from among the project employees can take over from Yoshihara, most of the informants are not optimistic because most of the employees were originally motivated on economic grounds (cf. Cleaver 2001). The informants insisted that it would be too demanding to ask a project employee to take on the tasks of Yoshihara (August 2011 and November 2012, conversations). In essence, a barrier exists in the town's administrative structure. While Yoshihara is employed as a full-time staff member by the town, the project employees are considered as part-time workers in a national government-funded project. They need to renew their contracts each fiscal year as their jobs are not automatically transferred into full-time positions.

The economic structure and the presence of gender inequalities are another barrier. Since the beginning of the project series in 2002, more than half of the project employees have been women, most of whom were full-time homemakers. The Biratori men generally have full-time jobs, are self-employed, or tend to leave the town after graduating from high school. The women, however, tend to stay in the town with their family or become homemakers after getting married. In theory, the women homemakers would be preferred by employers for limited-term contract positions, which usually require unskilled workers for minimum pay, and the women workers are considered more obedient than the men. Employers can also easily find replacements for the women; workers who want to earn some extra money (cf. Domosh and Seager 2001). In the Nibutani projects, employees have accumulated experience and knowledge about local Ainu culture and the Ainu language for many years. Many of the employees are attracted by the kind of knowledge they can learn from the occupation, even though they admit that they began their position for economic reasons (Informants, August 2011 and November 2012, conversations). Most of the employees are becoming increasingly skilled workers. One of the female informants stated:

> I have often neglected my housework responsibilities due to the amount of work I put into the project and I don't think my husband really likes it. Because of the nature of this project, we sometimes have to work after regular business hours or on weekends, even without pay. Still I'm expected to do housework. I am lucky because my family has supported and understands the significance of our project, but other [female] staff members are not always so lucky. In general, Japan is a male-centric society and it's really hard for

women to devote themselves to a big thing outside of the home. We don't get raises either, regardless of the number of years we have worked for the project. I agree that we should learn more and be engaged in preserving our own culture, but under such circumstances, none of us really has a clear vision about the future of our project. Should part-time workers really have to spend time thinking about the direction of the projects we are engaged with? (August 2011, conversation, my translation)

The informant added that she was still hesitant to instruct the other male research staff members, even though she was more experienced than many of the others.

The case of Nibutani demonstrates that even an 'innovative' participatory project does not always progress in an ideal way. Some of the benefits received by participants and the community can be observed; however, it is not always straightforward to evaluate the projects in terms of empowerment and power transfer. In Nibutani, many project participants have gone through a 'post-structural' transformation and have become confident living as an ethnic minority outside the project framework (cf. Cahill 2007b). Nevertheless, they are not empowered at a level of equality (cf. Jupp 2007). For example, female participants are not truly free from the existing divisions of gender. Also, in the Japanised capitalist society, Ainu traditional skills and the Ainu language that are learnt by the project participants do not always provide a means for survival. Thus, the empowerment of the Ainu as an Indigenous group of Japan is limited in the national context.

Power transfer is also limited. Most community members do not participate in the process of determining project goals. At the moment, Hideki Yoshihara is the sole driver of project direction. Despite the strong belief and desire of the participatory project organiser that local residents can become the principal force for cultural promotion, many steps must still be taken to reach this stage, and full realisation of the goals may require a large social structural change. Community development and cultural activities must also rely on the national government. Government-funded projects do not completely provide answers to the questions of whether or not the development is sustainable and whether local Ainu culture can be passed down to the next generation without employment. At the moment, Nibutani has not yet reached a stage where the structure can be maintained without a passionate and talented leader.

Interviews with the informants clarify that the Nibutani community does not have a single shared interest or expectation about local Ainu cultural promotion. In particular, the gap between the project organiser's expectations and local residents' capacities is typically observed, even though the importance of local Ainu culture is recognised among community members. Some argue that participatory research needs to benefit *all* parties of the community and participatory research is *for*

Indigenous communities (e.g. Mulrennan, Mark, and Scott 2012). However, Nibutani's case study might suggest that such views are idealistic. At least, the organisers of participatory projects should carefully question the homogeneous notion of a 'community's desire'. Without recognising multiple voices, the limitations and challenges of participatory projects will be hardly found. In Nibutani, as a positive aspect, the concept of the projects has not been totally rejected and the community members have a shared perception about the value of the projects for local cultural promotion.

## Conclusion

> Extraction of data and imposition of initiatives must give way to a sharing of research products and benefits and the mutual determination of development goals. Research and development must be with, and bring real benefits to participants and ought to facilitate empowerment in ways that enable participants to develop solutions in their own lives. (Kesby 2007: 2814)

The Nibutani projects and Ainu cultural promotion pose challenging questions, both in regards to the ethics of project development methodologies and with respect to the effectiveness and sustainability of participatory projects. When a project is organised and developed predominantly by external actors and local community members passively acknowledge its significance, is the project colonial? Can such a project be considered to be adopting participatory approaches in an effective manner? Geographical research with Indigenous communities still tends to lack such evaluations. Of course, the Nibutani case cannot be over-generalised as an example of an unsustainable participatory project. However, given that participatory approaches tend to be seen as the only 'appropriate' and non-colonial method in geographical research with Indigenous communities, the Nibutani case is still suggestive of ways to address the shortcomings of such approaches.

Currently, the majority of participatory projects in Indigenous geographies are developed by professional researchers from outside the community, as participatory *research*. Some of these researchers have been successful in building a meaningful relationship with community members, even after the completion of the project, while others are still at the initial stage (see Castleden, Sloan Morgan, and Lamb 2012). To what extent are researchers responsible for caring about the community after the completion of a participatory project? Can positive outcomes simply consist of the creation of good memories for the participants, with few impacts in the post-project stage? Is it enough if community voices are heard and the names of community members are credited? If participatory

research is for Indigenous communities, researchers should question the homogeneous notion of a 'community's desire', step back and listen to multiple voices, including those who do not participate in the project, and consider follow-up evaluations. Regardless of the degree of 'success' in participatory research and benefits for researchers and students, community members will have a daily life there, even after the researchers have left.

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Figure caption

Figure 1: Town of Biratori, Hokkaido, Japan (after ABKHT 2008)