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Dr. Chie Sakakibara

Collaborative Research with the Iñupiaq People in Utqiagvik, Alaska



By Lauren Rhodes

Dr. Chie Sakakibara is an Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies at Oberlin College. She joined Oberlin in Fall 2015. After coming to the United States from Japan, she majored in Native American Studies and earned her M.A. in Art History and Ph.D. in Cultural Geography at the University of Oklahoma. Her current project, which started out as her dissertation fieldwork, focuses on the indigenous Iñupiaq people's relationships with the bowhead whale as the foundation of resilience to climate change in Arctic Alaska.



Can you tell me about your research?

My research focuses on climate change and cultural resilience among indigenous peoples, especially those groups in the circumpolar Arctic. In particular, I've been collaborating with two communities: Utqiagvik (formerly called Barrow), and Point Hope, for the past 14 years, regarding how people solidify their culture and empower community to cope with various problems imposed by climate change. The local collaborators who had adopted me into the community have seen me grow up as a person as much as a scholar. I frame my research as a community-based and community-partnered collaborative effort across place, space, and time. It's been a pleasure learning about the Iñupiaq history, culture, ethics, values, and tradition.

How did you become centered on your research?

On my way to Oklahoma from Japan in 1998, I was already homesick on the airplane. Then I looked out of the window and saw the icy ocean. It was so strikingly beautiful. I thought, "Wow, Alaska is so beautiful, someday I want to go there and talk to the people, and get to know them and learn about their land." That was my initial emotional relationship with Alaska — I magically fell in love with a place where I had never been.

I finally had the opportunity to visit Utqiagvik as a Ph.D. student in Cultural Geography. A book that was written by a British ethnographer Tom Lowenstein, *Ancient Land, Sacred Whale*, reminded me of my initial fascination with Alaska. Tom is a British scholar who has been working closely with the Point Hope community for the past 40 years. The book is a combination of poetry and ethnography based upon what the people shared with him, including the origin stories of the land. One of them explains the integrity of the people's homeland and the bowhead whale, the cultural icon of the community, how the indigenous land is the whale and the whale is the land. I thought this was a very powerful story, and I wanted to know more about the people and whales. I arrived in the community without knowing anyone, and without having a place to stay. But by the end of my short, two-week visit, I was leaving the community and newly adopted family and friends behind. I knew that I would come back to the village for a longer term in the following spring. Northern Alaska already started feeling like home to me.

How does your reciprocal relationship with the community manifest?

My community collaborators have always been willing to teach me, educate me, share with me the richness of their culture and heritage so I can grow up into someone who respects and appreciates the Iñupiaq values. They are also willing to listen to me and are interested in learning about my cultural background, upbringing, and future plans. I started seeing this reciprocal relationship between myself and the community on my first visit. Sharing and gifting are important ideas for Iñupiat, and I wanted to do something for them, because I received many "gifts" from them. At the beginning of my fieldwork, climate change wasn't really on my research agenda. Many Iñupiaq hunters told me good stories about the bowhead whales, knowing I'm interested in this beautiful animal. I also started hearing their concerns about the changing environment, like the condition of the sea ice, changing of the wind patterns, coastal erosion, unpredictable weather patterns, melting of sea ice that results in the decline of the salinity level in the ocean, changes in animal migrations patterns — everything combined, these changes make the whale hunt very difficult. I thought, maybe there's a way for me to contribute to the sustenance and resilience of their culture as a scholar as much as an adopted community member. The Iñupiaq collaborators and I started coming up with various ideas about how to approach the issue of climate change.

We started working together, and the process became my doctoral dissertation project. Upon completion of the degree, I went back to one of the elders in the community (my mentor and principal collaborator) saying, "I was able to graduate thanks to you. Now I'm a Doctor. How can I pay you back for all your generosity and education you've given me?" She looked at me and told me, "You must be a good teacher! You just have to pay it forward. Let people hear our voices, let them know about climate change, and let them know what it means to be Iñupiaq at this time of difficulties. You will be a messenger and educator for a future generation." The lady has passed away since, but what she told me is what I'm doing here at Oberlin College.

What are your research methods?

I'm a humanistic geographer. One of my goals is to reverse the top-down approach from academia to indigenous communities. Reciprocal relations with community allowed me to establish a vital relationship with the Inupiaq community. Through this effort, I reciprocate benefits that I receive by collaboration with Inupiaq people. I share my work with collaborators, let them criticize my work, and shape the research design by asking collaborators to interpret their/our findings. This gives people an opportunity to explain their emotive bonds with whales and environment in culturally appropriate ways in their own terms.

"Let people hear our voices, let them know about climate change and let them know what it means to be Inupiaq at this time of difficulties."

As for specific research methods, I use ethnography and participant observation. Ethnography entails how people describe and understand their changing environment in their own words. Listening to their voices and learning their adaptation process has a strong potential to inform global climate change policies and facilitate dialogues. Collaborative community-based work in the Arctic can also serve as an important model for other regions where indigenous rights are not recognized in spite of environmental unpredictability. I do ethnographic interviews with the people to highlight the significance of their cultural integrity and prowess, and also elasticity and flexibility of culture with which they are able to cope with unpredictability of the future of climate change and other issues. I also do participant observation, which allowed me to reflect on my personal insights and interactions in producing ethnography. I had the opportunity to travel with local families and friends on camping trips or to whaling camps. I actively participated in community events. It was then that I felt a deep sense of community identity, something ethnographic interviews alone could never accomplish. The more I spent time with the villagers, the more I felt I was warmly embraced by the community as an adopted member of the tribe.

How was your trip in the fall to Utqiagvik with your research assistants?

Last year, I was privileged to bring three student collaborators from Oberlin to my adopted Arctic home, to start our dialogue on future collaboration on climate change and cultural resilience. It was rewarding personally and professionally. My student collaborators were all very responsible, and they were doing their best to be culturally correct and ethically just with the community collaborators. Kiley Petersen, Liv Roak, and Paulus Van Horne were able to immerse themselves into the framework of how indigenous people were dealing with climate change politically, emotionally, and culturally. They had some broad understanding of the topic that they were going to work with, and they worked with Inupiaq activists through Skype in my class (Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change), so they already knew some people before visiting this community. But in the field, everything was new to them. By the end of this visit, each of them was able to come up with more ideas for their future relationship with Utqiagvik. In a way, it became more complicated for them because the initial visit gave them more thoughts and a broader perspective, but I see this as an invaluable development and exciting beginning. Now they know the people, they've seen the land, and they can see the cultural, historical, and political context more clearly through their own eyes. The community collaborators were so excited to meet them. They already think of me as one of their own children who has grown up, and they have seen me as a mother — I have a four-year old daughter — and they have now seen me as a professor of these students who are so mature, thoughtful, and even taller than I. The recent visit helped me reaffirm my feeling that my relationship with the community has been reciprocal. ●

