Reclaiming Culture

reclaim’, v.t. & i., & n. Win back or away from vice or error or savagery … civilize (COD until 1990)
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Reclaiming Culture
Indigenous People and Self-Representation

Joy Hendry
For Keith and Phyllis, with thanks
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Contents

List of Figures viii
Note on Spelling and Terminology ix
Prologue x

Introduction 1
1. Museums are Transformed 28
2. Aboriginal Tourism and that Elusive Authenticity 56
3. Indigenous or Alter-Native Forms of Cultural Display 81
4. Language and Formal Cultural Education 105
5. Arts, Architecture, and Native Creativity 131
6. Land Claims, Archaeology, and New Communities 156
7. International Links, Cultural Exchange, and Personal Identity 178
8. Conclusions: What We Can Learn 200

Epilogue 218
Index 221
List of Figures

(Photographs by Joy Hendry, except 1.1)

1.1 Model of Baldwyn Spencer in Bunjilaka (reproduced courtesy of Museum Victoria, photograph by John Broomfield). 39

1.2 *Gus-wen-tah*, the two-row wampum, in the Woodland Cultural Centre. 41

1.3 Iroquoian ironworkers display at the Woodland Cultural Centre. 42

2.1 Leonard George in the offices of Historical Xperiences. 72

2.2 Greeting for visitors at the Maori Arts and Crafts Institute. 73

2.3 Men’s Fancy dance at the Grand River Powwow, Ohsweken, Ontario. 76

3.1 The Woodland Cultural Centre, formerly the Mohawk Institute. 88

3.2 Keith Jamieson in the Library at the Woodland Cultural Centre. 88

4.1 The First Nations University of Canada building, Regina, Saskatchewan. 122

4.2 Students of the Aang Serian School in Arusha, Tanzania. 124

4.3 Bernadette Wabie talks to a Grade 3 class. 126

5.1 The Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Noumea, New Caledonia. 134

5.2 The Dänojà Zho Cultural Centre in Dawson City, Yukon. 140

5.3 The Emily C. General School, Ohsweken, Ontario. 142

5.4 “The Great Tree” carving by Stan Hill. 154

6.1 Iqaluit cathedral, Nunavut Territory, Canada. 165
Note on Spelling and Terminology

I mulled for sometime over the question of whether to write appellations such as Aboriginal, First Nations, Indigenous, and Native with capital letters or not, and, indeed, how and when to use the terms in this book. Some of the people who are referred to by such terms find the very words unacceptable, others like a capital letter to be used in reference to themselves. My own first inclination was not to use capitals because the peoples I am describing are clearly all of these things in their own contexts; indeed it is by defining them as such that I chose my subject matter. The people I worked with all claim first status in the lands where they live, and I respect their claims. However, in the end, I decided for two reasons to use the capital letters. First, because it seemed that it would be more offensive to people who like their use not to use them than it would be to my sense of English grammar to use them. Second, it provides a way of emphasizing the shared context within which all the peoples I talk about exist. If, to some people, the use of the terms themselves is offensive, then I apologize unreservedly. Part of the very movement I am describing is that people around the world are regaining pride in their Aboriginal/Native status, and I use the terms always in that context, rather than in any derogatory sense they have acquired in the past.

Another concern was whether I should use capital letters for places of spiritual importance, notably the “longhouse,” and I decided to use the capital for its use in that context, but not when it describes a place of residence (as in the past), or learning, as at the University of British Columbia.

As for the spelling of tribal names, this is also difficult, because sometimes several different conventions have been adopted. Here I have as far as possible used the spelling preferred by the people with whom I have worked.
In the summer of 1971, when traveling around Japan, I visited a place in Hokkaido described as an Ainu village. It contained a couple of rows of houses, built in a fashion that was said to be traditionally Ainu, and a bear was tethered in the middle of the street. In some of these houses, accoutrements of daily and ceremonial life had been arranged for the visitor to examine, and in others, craftspeople were to be found carving wooden bears, very often holding a salmon in their mouths. Those working in the village were wearing garments that one assumed to be Ainu, but when asked if they were actually Ainu people, they shook their heads and explained that they were students from Tokyo engaged in summer employment. One of them went on to tell me that the Ainu people had died out, or become assimilated into mainstream Japanese society, but that if I went with him I might meet the last remaining Ainu man. The person in question was also carving, but he was clearly very old, with a long white beard, and I felt privileged to have met him, though deeply saddened by the situation he portrayed.

Some years later I attended an anthropological conference and heard a middle-aged man, who described himself as Ainu, addressing the audience. He was speaking in Japanese, the language of the assembly, but to my astonishment, he spoke with a strange accent, almost foreign-sounding. Could it be that this man’s first language had actually been Ainu, the language that was supposed to have died out with its people? As I listened to his talk, I became aware that there were other Ainu speakers remaining, and some had agreed to offer classes and even to speak on the radio in a special early morning slot that would not—he explained somewhat ruefully—interfere with the regular Japanese language broadcasting. A move was clearly afoot to revive at least the Ainu language.

My next ‘Ainu experience’ took place in England, when I was asked to help entertain a group of Ainu dancers who were coming to Oxford to perform. They knew little English, but it was assumed that they
would know Japanese, and indeed we were able to communicate quite well. They had presented themselves as Ainu, so I asked them if they also considered themselves to be Japanese. They answered without hesitation, “We are the first Japanese.” There is a collection of Ainu objects in the Pitt Rivers Museum, and I suggested that we make a tour and see what was in the display. I was unprepared again, particularly for their laughter, and I felt embarrassed to discover that an item used by the Ainu in a sacred ceremony for the soul of a slaughtered bear was displayed upside-down. I’m not sure how they felt about the sometimes quite old and decrepit representations of their culture that were on display, but at least I was able to arrange for the poor bear’s skull to be set up the right way.

About ten years later, and over thirty years after my first visit, I made another trip to Hokkaido. This time I encountered a splendid culture center run entirely by Ainu people, including Masahiro Nomoto whom I had inadvertently entertained in Oxford. There I observed carefully produced representations of Ainu activities, past and present, and I learned much about Japan’s “first peoples,” all against the backdrop of the beautiful northern scenery that characterizes their homeland. I also visited two well-stocked museums, one that had been put together by the man I had heard talking at the conference, none other than Shigeru Kayano, who has written some 80 books about his people. I stayed in a hostel run by an Ainu family, headed by a local Ainu councillor, and I talked to a large number of other people who were happy, once I had described my intentions to their satisfaction, to talk about themselves and their situations as Ainu people.

What then has taken place during this 30-year period? How could a people described by university students as virtually extinct be flourishing again? Where were the people I met on my recent trip 30 years ago? They were certainly not all descended from the one old man I met. For one thing, he lived in a different, distant part of Hokkaido, and in any case, many of them were well over thirty years of age. No, these people have been there all along. Presumably, they have been Ainu all along. How can it be, then, that university students, wearing Ainu clothes and working in a village set up to represent an Ainu way of life, were describing them as extinct? And what, mercifully, has changed? This book is dedicated to answering questions such as these.

Reference