

Letter from abroad: Living in a small town of south Greenland

Naotaka Hayashi

March 2009



Photo: Naotaka Hayashi, Plantation site, 23 September 2008

Naotaka Hayashi is a PhD student at the University of Alberta, spending this year in Greenland, conducting his field research. He is working with Professor Mark Nuttall in the Department of Anthropology.

Introduction

Since the end of May 2008, I have been in Qaqortoq, Greenland (60° 43' 0" N, 46° 2' 0" W), conducting ethnographic field research. The population of Qaqortoq is approximately 3,500. This figure may give the impression that this town is in the countryside, but Qaqortoq is the fifth largest town in Greenland, which is inhabited by Inuit descendants, called 'Kalaallit' (hereafter, Greenlanders), and foreigners (mainly Danes), together about 56,000 people. In January 2009 Qaqortoq became an administrative centre of the southern district of Greenland.

Objective of my research

The objective of my research is to examine how Greenlanders exercise their adaptability to respond to environmental changes induced by global climate change. In particular, I am focussing my research on sheep farming, fishing and hunting in western Greenland. My hypothesis is that, by using environmental knowledge, these people can cope with unusual changes in nature's living resources and other

environmental changes. I have also presupposed that, based on traditional Inuit values, such as generosity and strong family ties, Greenlanders can take collective action by networking at all levels, from community, to region, and to national and international levels, so they can retain essential social structure, economy, and cultural identity necessary for community viability.



Location of Qaqortoq, Greenland, the town Naotaka and his wife are calling home for a year.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julianeh%C3%A5b>

Why I chose to go to Greenland

Originally, I was interested in the relationship between humans and their (natural) environments. I sensed that the study of the impact of change in the environment on society would be a good approach to analyze how humans have maintained and will redesign their relationship to nature in future. According to the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), substantial warming is projected for the Arctic region over the 21st century, and

the melting Greenlandic ice sheet has been one of the biggest issues of the climate change debate. I wanted to understand the strategies Greenlanders, such as farmers, fisherman and hunters have been using to cope with and adapt to climatic changes. Another reason is that while I was writing my MA thesis on Aboriginal forestry in northern Alberta three years ago, I became fascinated by the North as such. I ended up choosing as my study area the land which conveys an image of "real North" — Greenland.



Photo: Naotaka Hayashi, Qaqortoq, 30 December 2008

Qaqortoq, Greenland

A long way to settle in the town

Looking back at the time when I was a Master's student, I have to think I am happy doing "live-in" type of fieldwork. At the time, I could not stay on the Indian Reserves for many reasons, and the largest part of my work was based on library research. As I started preparations for fieldwork in Greenland, I soon realized that it was tough to actually settle in the community. From Edmonton, and with much assistance from the Department of Anthropology's professors and friends, I had to fill in applications for my and my wife's residency in Greenland. After five months I still had not heard anything from the Danish Immigration office. When we finally arrived in Qaqortoq, there was no place to stay, as like elsewhere in Greenland, there is an acute shortage of housing. In the end, a public officer kindly offered us one room of his house. We were just plain lucky! Otherwise, we would have ended up moving

around town from one unused space to another for the next 12 months.

A higher cost of living

The higher cost of living surprised us very much. Had we rented an apartment, it would have cost at least CAD \$1,200 per month. A cabbage at the grocery store costs CAD\$6. This is the case for a Chinese cabbage. A dozen of eggs cost almost CAD\$6, 1 kg of rice, CAD\$2.5, and 2 kg of powdered detergent, CAD\$12! This is likely the result of high costs of transport. Food and other life necessities are shipped from Denmark by a big liner. Taxes are higher than in Canada. My wife luckily got a part-time job, but approximately 45% of her earnings go to taxes.

The first six months I focused my research on sheep farming

During the first six months in Qaqortoq, I dedicated my research to sheep farming which, in south Greenland, has already one hundred years of history. Currently, approximately 22 thousand lambs are sent from all sheep farmers to a slaughterhouse in the neighbouring town, and packed meat is domestically distributed.



Photo: Naotaka Hayashi, Potato farming, 20 August 2008

Potato farming in Southern Greenland

Also, some sheep farmers have started to grow potatoes, which are also distributed to all over Greenland. I wanted to see their farms and interview farmers regarding the kinds of 'problems' they were encountering relating to

changing climatic conditions. However, I soon found myself having "problems" in doing so, and my problems were accessing these farms and language barriers.

Problem 1) Difficult access to farms

First, farmers established their farms far back from Qaqortoq, along the coasts of the fjords. As elsewhere in Greenland, there are no roads linking one settlement with another. The only means of transport is by boat (which has an engine, of course!), and a helicopter in some cases. Only once did I travel by helicopter as it is so expensive. Even boat access is expensive as except for a couple of places, there are no regular (sailing) lines between my town and neighbouring farms. Fortunately there is an agricultural advisory office in this town, and I was permitted to accompany the staff members who paid visits to farmers' places during the summer. Although I could not interfere during their visits, I would try to speak to farmers after paperwork had been completed or during the survey of their hay fields. Although the time I could speak with farmers was limited, I was at least able to get acquainted with farmers. I also visited tree plantation sites at nearby farms. Greenland will be a real "green" land in future.



Photo: Naotaka Hayashi, Sheep herding, 25 September 2008

Sheep farming has close to a hundred years of history in some Greenlandic towns.

Problem 2) Language

Second, language is another problem. I first learned Danish, taking Danish courses for two terms at the U of Alberta. Many Greenlanders are bilingual — 'Kalaallisut' (hereafter, Greenlandic) and Danish. However, many farmers, fishermen/hunters prefer to speak Greenlandic. I had wanted to learn Greenlandic first, but Greenlandic grammar books and dictionaries are written in Danish. There are a few textbooks and dictionaries written in English, but they were not good enough for my purposes. During this past summer, I picked up a grammar book written in Danish, and translated it into Japanese. It took me four weeks to translate that 150-page book, plus two weeks for corrections. After all, I needed to know Danish. Once I got a general picture of the grammatical system of Greenlandic, I felt I had some clues to people's conversation, TV and radio news, and newspapers, which previously looked like some mysterious strings of alphabet. Still it is tough to learn Greenlandic to me. I have to go through a Greenlandic-Danish dictionary, a Danish-English, and an English-Japanese dictionary, and vice versa. I heard that Greenlandic is one of the most difficult languages in the world. This may be true, but in my opinion, a lack of learning materials makes it so.

Greenlanders are proud of their own language

Living here, language really matters. When I started my graduate course in Canada, I had, still have (!), a language difficulty, and then, I ended up burdening myself with one more hurdle in Greenland. It takes time to learn a foreign language, but I want to continue to learn Greenlandic. There were many times when my few utterances in Greenlandic made them smile. Probably the fact that I look like a Greenlander may have helped me a lot. Greenlanders are proud of their own language. Boarding an aircraft bound for Greenland, you would be surprised by flight attendants announcing first in Greenlandic, next in Danish, and finally in English if there is still time remaining. People from youngsters to

elders speak Greenlandic. I have not been to Nunavut, but I imagine this is one of the biggest differences between Nunavut and Greenland. The percentage of people of mixed heritage, particularly Greenlandic-Danish, is higher than I originally would have thought. It seems that what makes a person identify as a Greenlander is a competency in the Greenlandic language. The mixed heritage is also reflected in physical appearance, and it often surprises when a Caucasian-looking person is speaking Greenlandic and self-identifies as a Greenlander.

Greenlandic culture influenced much by Europe

I have had the impression that Greenland is part of Europe, maybe one of the Nordic countries, from a viewpoint of a cultural linkage. Actually, it was Norsemen in the 10th century and Norwegian in 18th century that brought domestic animals to south Greenland, such as sheep and cattle. Today's Greenlanders have rye bread, many different types of cheese, oatmeal in the morning, greet by shaking hands, kissing, and hugging, and have events and ceremonies in a Christian style, such as 'julemarked' (Christmas sale), funerals in a church, and parties associated with Lent. This surprised me who grew up in a rice-eating, Buddhist country. However, they still keep and want to keep an Inuit way of life style, such as having seal meat and fat, whale meat, and wild birds. An image of dog sleds, ghost and scary stories are often seen and heard in everyday life. Just a couple of months ago, there was a big debate about whether they should call themselves 'Inuit' rather than 'Kalaallit'. An interesting, persuasive opinion popped up, saying that they are actually a mixture of Inuit and Danes, which makes them 'Kalaallit'.

Weather

Many people would think that it must be cold here, but as long as the weather of south Greenland is concerned, the winter is much colder in Edmonton. When a northwest wind

blows, the temperatures may drop to fifteen below, and it brings snow. Then, the direction from which a wind blows changes to the northeast in several days. This wind is an equivalent to Chinook in Alberta. When this wind blows, the temperatures go up to plus ten or so. Snow melts, streets turn into black, and occasionally we have rain. It is very strange for me to have rain in the winter because I lived in the "winter city" Edmonton and inland towns in Hokkaido, the northern island of Japan. Then, we have snow again with a north-west wind. Since November, this pattern has been repeating. The winter may be the nasty season for people of this town.

Experiences in a sheep farmer's settlement

I stayed at a sheep farmer's settlement for three weeks from the end of September. That settlement is relatively close to my town, but still it takes two hours' sailing. During my stay at a farmer's place, I went to mountains almost every day with sheep farmers in the settlement to collect sheep. It was an interesting experience, and I was able to interview a couple of sheep farmers about the history of sheep farming in the settlement and their thoughts about sheep farming, changing climate conditions, and their relation.

Last month and this month

During the period from the end of January to the beginning of February, I was visiting another sheep farm down south over the fjord. Although I was supposed to stay for less than ten days, I ended up staying for two weeks as a strong northeast wind came, and it was not possible to sail back to my town. Here, the weather is the ruler of everything. There have been many cases where things did not go as scheduled. If the weather is fine next week, I will go on a trip to a small island down south to interview seal hunters. However, I have no idea how I can sail back to my town after the interview! It is tough to find a boat going to the places where I want to go.

"Patrolling"

When staying in Qaqortoq, I try to go out every day, if time permits. I call this "patrolling." If I confined myself to my room working on the computer all day, nothing would happen. However, if I go out, I may see someone, learn something new, and I will come up with a new idea. As time passes, I have gotten to know many people in this town. Now, when I walk around to the local market by the harbour, I am likely to greet ten people whom I know. This never happened to me even in local towns in Hokkaido, much less in Edmonton where a million people live.

What is meant by sustainable development?

There are a lot of abandoned or declining settlements surrounding this town. Previously Greenlanders lived in small numbers in many settlements. They were rather small-scale fishermen, hunters or sheep farmers. Times change. There has been a trend in fisheries and sheep farming toward scaling up. More people are living in towns; consequently, the number of fishermen/hunters and farmers are declining. On the other hand, a once-thriving town started to be depopulated, for example, when a shrimp factory was shut down. This trend reminds me of coal-mining towns and forestry towns in Hokkaido. Once natural resources were fully used up or the resource exploitation did not pay any more, there remained only deserted towns. While I was working for forest protection in Hokkaido, I had a lot of opportunities to visit these desolate towns. Thinking about the rise and fall of communities, and the lives that existed before, I had mixed feelings that I could not explain. I have always considered what makes a community liveable and sustainable.

Plans for this spring

Since Greenland is so vast, it would not be wise to talk about the region by just looking at south Greenland. The distance between the north and the south Greenland roughly equals the distance between Copenhagen and Tunisia. I am planning to go on a trip to the northernmost settlement in this spring, and to see the differences between the north and the south.

Final comment

I will be in Greenland until early summer to wrap up my research. What I want to do when I am back in Edmonton is taking a cup of coffee at my favourite coffee shop downtown with a "huge" Canadian-size muffin, which I would never have appreciated in Japan.

Contact:

Naotaka Hayashi
Department of Anthropology
University of Alberta
Edmonton Alberta Canada
Email: [nhayashi\(at\)ualberta.ca](mailto:nhayashi@ualberta.ca)