Ainu multimodality in performance art amongst the urban diaspora of Greater Tokyo

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Over the last 10 years, the Ainu diaspora of Greater Tokyo have begun to explore more fluid and creative ways of exploiting their multilingual resources to form new linguistic and cultural possibilities for the formation of a new urban Ainu Indigeneity. The migration or ‘escape’ to Tokyo challenges the core-periphery dynamics of traditional Ainu identity formation away from the traditional homeland of Hokkaido in northern Japan towards the urban diaspora of Greater Tokyo. The dynamics of this urban linguistic hybridity and mixing can be viewed in terms of a more heteroglossic use of Ainu, incorporating multilingual practices with visual and material resources from both local and global contexts. For many young Ainu people, the available repertoire of Ainu linguistic resources has been severely restricted due to the interruption of intergenerational transmission over the last 150 years. This means that the usage of the ‘full’ linguistic code of Ainu is impossible in the 21st century. However, if the concept of Ainu multimodality is adopted, Ainu cultural and language practices using the visual and material indices of local and global culture can act as a means to strengthen contemporary Ainu cultural identification. A number of Ainu youth in Tokyo have chosen to (re)explore their Ainu Indigeneity through performance art. These performances are a juxtaposition of local Ainu linguistic, visual and material indices such as Ainu words and phrases taken from traditional rituals (‘kamuy-nomi’), heroic tales and songs known as ‘uwepeker’, ‘yukar’, ‘upopo’, and dances (‘rimse’) along with global cultural and language flows as represented in use of Japanese and English and such music genres of hip-hop, rap and synthesised music. Thus, Ainu heteroglossia or multimodality has become a key element in the construction of a new urban Ainu Indigeneity.

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