

Minoru Hokari 1971–2004

The passing of Dr Minoru Hokari, one of the brightest and most innovative young scholars working in Australian Indigenous history research, is a tragic loss to the field. Minoru – or Mino to his friends – had a spirit of adventure and a creative intellect marked by a flexible, imaginative style. While studying economics at Hitotsubashi University, Japan, he began to dream of living with an Australian Indigenous people, a dream he was deeply satisfied to have fulfilled. His 1996 Master of Economics research was on 'Aboriginal economy and cattle labour: economic history of the Gurindji people' – a somewhat unusual choice at the renowned and often business-oriented campus of Hitotsubashi.

In order to make his studies more interactive, Minoru Hokari obtained prestigious scholarships to study in Australia. Minoru was a distinguished scholar from a young age. In 1991, he won a scholarship for overseas education from the Josui-kai Committee of Hitotsubashi University, then in 1994, a first category scholarship from the Japan Scholarship Foundation, followed in 1996 by a Rotary Foundation multi-year ambassadorial scholarship, and a research fellowship for young scientists from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science. He remarked to me that his parents, Mr and Mrs Nobuo Hokari, never stood in his way, providing computers and other practical support to enable him to continue his work. He commenced his Doctor of Philosophy at the University of New South Wales and completed his thesis – 'Cross-culturalizing history: journey to the Gurindji way of historical practice' – in January 2001 at the Australian National University's Centre for Cross-cultural Research. His parents flew to Canberra to attend Minoru's graduation.

After much hard work amongst the Gurindji people, Mino made exciting breakthroughs in understanding their historical stories. Mino never ceased to be amazed that the Gurindji had enabled his far-off aspirations to come true; he viewed his learning experiences from Indigenous teachers as one of his life's great privileges. His modes of fieldwork transport amused the Gurindji community, as he first arrived across great distances on a small motorbike and, on a later visit, returned in a bright orange four-wheel-drive Landcruiser he dubbed 'Pumpkin'.

As a rebellious youth, Mino had been pleased to get away from some of the expectations of Japanese culture. He knew that, as a talented young man, he was heading towards life as an economist or a businessman. However, rather than gaining wealth in these fields, Dr Hokari soon found himself sitting on desert ground, listening in a respectful fashion to Gurindji teachers, learning their language, and collaborating with their elders as equals. Mino was willing to sit down and live for lengthy stints in very basic conditions alongside his new teachers – fellow historians as he understood them – in remote areas of northern Australia. Although not seeking and even sceptical of religious beliefs, Dr Hokari was humbled and thrilled to be invited to watch Indigenous ceremonies and to be taught and mentored by their leading philosophers and historians.

One of Mino's main teachers was Jimmy Mangayarri, affectionately known as 'Old Jimmy', who passed away before Mino's thesis was complete. During Mino's final illness, a particularly aggressive form of lymphoma, Mino often looked at the photo of

his 'number one' teacher, that old Gurinji man who seemed to know the full extent of Mino's mission even before he did. The Gurindji people had been pleased to have a young Japanese man in their midst. They explained to him that their country had called Mino into it, in order for him to take their stories and their messages back to Japan and to other Asian nations.

When Minoru first arrived in Australia he spoke limited English, but when mistakes were pointed out, he found these not just entertaining but hilarious. Minoru charmed the people he met. His sense of fun made him popular in any company, whether among leading scholars, Indigenous university students or Gurindji elders. He was sincere, conscientious, open to new people, experiences and cultures and deeply committed to historical scholarship. Greg Denning, who Minoru greatly admired, described him as a 'handsome' and 'elegant young man'.

It was my great privilege to have been Minoru's supervisor throughout his thesis. Deborah Bird Rose, Professor Ann Curthoys and many other mentors also assisted its development. I will never forget Mino's joy and excitement when he read his extremely enthusiastic examiners' reports. His voice took on a peculiar high-pitched tone, yet it was as though he could embrace the world.

Mino was passionate about funk and other varieties of late-night live music and his peers who joined him in a postgraduate workshop at the Centre for Cross-cultural Research remarked that he was 'cool' and possibly the 'coolest'. He had a style about him and a *joie de vivre* that was palpable. Other students at International House at the University of New South Wales relied on Mino for assistance with Japanese, and for friendship. This institution has now named a scholarship in his honour. After Mino graduated, he readily agreed to mentor Japanese students at the Australian National University. He had many close friends in Australia and Japan who he greatly valued. In his last year, on a huge email network that his sister Yuki dexterously managed, he warmly and poetically thanked all for their friendship.

Minoru organised a diverse range of conferences and programs: in Japan these were the All Japan University Business Strategy Conference (1991) and Annual Conference of the Research Institute of Universities, 'Towards multi-ethnic and Multi-cultural Japan' (2002). At the Humanities Research Centre of the Australian National University in Canberra, it was 'Locations of Spirituality: "Experiences" and "Writings" of the Sacred'. He worked as an interpreter, and as a translator of several academic texts for Japanese and English audiences. The Daguragu community government council asked him to act as their historical consultant. He was a research assistant for the Asahi Shimbun newspaper company, an editorial supervisor and a research consultant and interpreter for the National Museum of Japanese History, the Kampo Museum in Kyoto, the National Museum of Australia and for Dr Caroline Turner in Canberra. Research topics ranged from history, nature, and curatorial research on Indigenous art, to the pop-culture surrounding the Japanese outlaw Ishikawa Goemon, who was notoriously executed in a cauldron of boiling oil.

Minoru's writing was in strong demand in both Australia and Japan, and in the few years after he completed his doctorate he published numerous academic articles in leading journals, in both English and Japanese. Themes ranged widely, from the Gurindji mode of historical practice, anti-minorities history, globalising Aboriginal rec-

conciliation, and reading oral histories, to 'history happening in/between Body and Place'. His writing was clear and to the point; some of it had a poetry, a gentleness and wisdom that makes it profoundly moving. He was an energetic paper-giver and several further articles are still in press. Although he eschewed reading theory himself, his work was often praised for its theoretical insights.

Although Dr Hokari gained Australian residency, and published his innovative writing in both Australia and Japan, it is significant that his first book, *Doing history! Paying attention to the historical practices of Indigenous Australians*, was published by Ochanomizu Shobo in Japan in 2004 and therefore first reached the Japanese speaking people of the world. It is a playful, whimsical opus of integrity, imagination and breathtaking audacity. Another somewhat different book that he based on his doctoral research and prepared in English, awaits publication.

Determined to fulfill his dreams and accepting his mission to take the Gurindji story back to Japan, Mino worked in a conscientious fashion until the very last days before his passing. He chose to remain in Australia for treatment and although his parents were based in Niigata, Japan, and his sister Yuki in New York, they made many trips to Australia to be with him, and attended him throughout his illness. He died at 32 years of age at St Vincent's Hospice in Fitzroy, Melbourne.

Minoru Hokari learnt how to communicate across multiple languages, across multiple cultures, and across many historical trajectories. As well as speaking Japanese and English, he had a basic understanding of the Ngumpin language family spoken at Daguragu.

Mino's sense of fun and his humility will not be lost; they are clear in his writing. Here are the last paragraphs of his doctoral thesis (2001):

I feel that I have been writing a long letter to whoever you are, reader. I wanted to share with you how challenging but enjoyable it is to perform cross-cultural practice. I also wanted to share with you how apparently impossible but still possible it is to 'communicate over the gap'. Above all, I wanted to share with you the teachings from the Gurindji country ...

It is up to you whether you shift your being fully into the Gurindji historical reality (if you think you can), or firmly reject it. An alternative choice is, as I have been struggling through this thesis, trying to find a way of being 'cross-cultural'. I believe cross-cultural practice, by definition, cannot avoid the risk of destabilising one's own cultural framework. Otherwise, what is the point of calling it 'cross-cultural'?

I threw a petal.

Let's wait for the bang.

The Minoru Hokari Memorial Scholarship

The Australian National University has established the *Minoru Hokari Memorial Scholarship*, which will assist a postgraduate scholar to conduct fieldwork with Indigenous Australians. For details about making a donation, contact:

Ann McGrath

Email: ann.mcgrath@anu.edu.au

Website: www.hokariminoru.org/e/scholarship-e/scholarship-e.html.

Yuki Hokari, Mino's sister, has posted full details including donation forms on the website www.hokariminoru.org. The first award will be made at about the time of Mino's birthday in July 2005.