

**My Personal Recollections of the Early Ainu Believers:
Chief Takeichi Moritake (1902-1976) and His Son,
Mr. Kazutomo Umegae (1924-1992)**

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Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, very much recommended extremes in teaching, so to speak. For example, at the time of the launching of the Guardian's monumental Ten Year Crusade (1953-1963), he wrote that the pioneers should scatter as widely as possible in the world. He wrote that they should "brave the fearful cold of the Arctic regions and the enervating heat of the torrid zones, heedless of the hazards, the loneliness and the austerity of the deserts, the far-away islands and mountains." He was very interested in taking the Faith to the so-called minority groups or races everywhere in the world. He recognized that some were, as he said, "down-trodden". He welcomed diversity in the Faith.

When the Guardian heard that attempts were being made in the late 1950s to contact the Ainu, the aborigines of Japan, he was greatly interested and a letter written on his behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly stated, "He (the Guardian) was greatly pleased to learn of the contacts which have been made by the friends with the original natives of Japan, namely the Ainu people. He hopes that some of them will be quickened in the Faith so that they may teach the call of God to the remainder of their people. There is no doubt that great results will be achieved if this can be done."

Several different pioneers, usually with Japanese Baha'is, went among the Ainu villages to teach the Faith to the Ainu. Those specified villages have almost disappeared and have become Japanese towns. In December 1961, six Japanese of Ainu ancestry became Baha'is. Prominent among them were Mr. Moritake and Mr. Umegae. The new Baha'is were mostly leaders of the community. Mr. Moritake, one of the town's head men, usually called chief in English, was a cultured gentleman, a poet of Ainu lore. He had a shop where he was preserving Ainu artifacts. He was pure Ainu but had married a Japanese so his son, Mr. Umegae was half Japanese, however, he considered himself as an Ainu. Mr. Moritake was one of the few pure-blooded Ainu left. Statistics vary but in the 1970s there were estimated to be only a couple of hundred pure Ainu. Although recent statistics claim that there are about 20,000 Ainu, it is doubtful if any are pure blooded Ainu.

In the Meiji era (1868 - 1912) the government decided to try to assimilate the Ainu. The government decreed, and this was later followed up in the 1930s, that the Ainu must take Japanese surnames, go to school and be loyal to the Emperor. Mr. Moritake did not feel that the government's edict was unreasonable, because, as he said, the old Ainu way of life could not be followed in a modern society. He felt that education was important. Traditionally the Ainu did not have a written language and did not have schooling. One thing that attracted Mr. Moritake to the Faith was that he firmly believed that "all men were brothers." He, like all Ainu, felt a kinship with nature. He wrote a book of poetry entitled *Kaze No Yo Ni* (Like the Wind). Here are some examples translated into English.

Primeval Life

Fire, water, plants, animals
Everything was divine
In the primeval life
Of our group.
Prayers of thanksgiving!
Life of devout faith!
Memories dear to me
Of our ancestral life.
Primitive but full
Of awe and reverence
Toward every being.

Death of an Old Man

With his beard white as snow
His eyebrows covering eyelids
His back bent like a bow
The Old Man is dead
Of a sudden.

Our Old Man
Died a natural death
So say the group
No one looking sad
Women making cakes of millet
Offering wine to his spirit
All talking about the departed Old Man.

From a long pipe,
Leaning against his cheek
Rises the smoke
Quietly wavering.

At the head of the Old Man
Stands a large bowl
Filled with wine.
Behind him stands
A pear-shaped grave marker

Hung with a cloth
And a quiver

An Ainu must go hunting in the mountains
Even in that other world.

The smoke goes out
His widow's sobbing
Rises above the crowd
One more Ainu gone.

The Old Man's grandchild
Due tomorrow
Will grow up as a Japanese
Although his flesh and blood
Are Ainu.

I made a trip to Hokkaido in the early 1960s and became acquainted with Mr. Umegae and his family. That era was poor, the prosperity was yet to come. Even though his house was simple and our meal consisted only of potatoes, the warmth and welcoming to a fellow Baha'i touched me. We went teaching together among some of the other villages. After that time he and I had a firm friendship which lasted through the years until his death.

Mr. Umegae had inherited his leadership qualities from his father. He had been subjected to discrimination and prejudice when he was a boy growing up but it did not affect his warm, outgoing nature. He became a spokesman for the Ainu and conducted a successful business whereby he could sell Ainu handicrafts. He himself was a wood carver of considerable skill. In the later 1960s and 1970s the prejudice had all but died out and there was more interest in the Ainu and their life. Mr. Umegae appeared on television and in magazines demonstrating Ainu culture.

He was appointed as an Auxiliary Board Member by Hands of the Cause Miss Alexander and Dr. Muthajir in 1965. He remained in that capacity for over 20 years.