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KIRSTEN REFSING (1948-2023)

This writer started, initially involuntarily, his interest in the Ainu and their language in mid 1970s, in relation to his queries concerning possible Polish contribution to global Japanese studies which resulted in “discovering” that practically all (not so numerous) publications of authors with Polish roots (Dybowski, Piłsudski, Radliński, Sieroszewski) listed in renowned older (from Wenckstern 1895) international bibliographies of the discipline focused on the Ainu, particularly just their language and anthropology¹ (for query results see Majewicz 1979, 1993). That interest led to, and got solidified by, the rediscovery (actually for the fourth time) of Bronisław Piłsudski’s 1902-1903 phonographic wax cylinder recordings of Ainu folklore and their preliminary inspection approximately around the time Refsing (as Taguchi) 1974 was published. Finding out that the book mentioned almost the same names (Dybowski, Piłsudski, Radliński (but also Ivan Kozyrevskiy ~ Ignacy Kosarzewski, cf. Golder 1914: 294-7)) was for this writer a motivating pleasure.

We both participated in a number of the same international conferences like at Warsaw (*Man in Contemporary Society and Culture of Japan*, Sept. 25-6 1981, cf. Refsing 1984a), Bochum (*Transcultural Understanding and Modern Japan*, Oct. 1-2 1981, cf. Refsing 1983a, Majewicz 1983) and Bonn (*History and Present State of Ainu Collections in Europe and European Studies on the Ainu*, June 24-7 1987, cf. Refsing 1993, Majewicz 1993) Universities, and in IBPC-1 (Hokkaido University, Sapporo and Nibutani *Ainu Bunka Shiryōkan*, Sept. 16-20 1985, cf. Refsing 1985, Majewicz 1985) and IBPC-3 (manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology in Kraków and Tatra Museum in Zakopane, Aug. 29-Sept. 7, 1999, cf. Refsing 2001, Majewicz 2001), and occasionally met in Hong Kong where Kirsten ruled over the Department of Japanese Studies at Hong Kong University² or in Japan.

In 1986 her most widely known and influential book – the grammar of one of southern Hokkaido Ainu dialects (actually, the idiolect of one of its allegedly two last female

¹ No wonder: “the Ainu race” became in the second half of the 19th century a long-lasting “sensation” not only in the academic world.

² 香港大學 in Pok Fu Lam 薄扶林 on Hong Kong Island 香港島 (not to be confused with the Chinese University of Hong Kong 香港中文大學 in Sha Tin 沙田).

speakers) was published in her native Denmark to soon meet with a warm reception. For instance, as early as 1987 the cultural anthropologist Bowles managed to print that “At last there is available to the English reader an intensive, in-depth analysis of the Ainu language, prepared by a competent Western scholar” (p. 671); similarly, the (also Denmark-born) linguist specializing in Japanese (especially historical) linguistics Takeuchi began (1988: 197) her review of the grammar with remarks that: “This attractively produced book presents the results of the author’s field-work on one of the eastern Ainu dialects on Hokkaido, making available for the first time in English a firsthand, comprehensive account of that language”. This writer, *and in this journal*, in turn concluded our review (1987, printed 1990) with equally enthusiastic welcoming words: “Refsing’s book is both important and outstanding – and the only reliable reference grammar of the Ainu language so far published in any European language. It clearly surpasses in value any one of the Japanese grammars of Ainu [mentioned in the review] as well. [...] attractively edited, printed and bound [...], a splendid book in almost every aspect” (135), and an entire 6-page section (pp. 592-7) was devoted to Refsing’s book by Dettmer in the third volume of his impressive four-volume “Ainu grammar” (1997) including an equally impressive overview chapter on “authors of writings on Ainu grammar and their works” (392-607, divided into three subchapters: “Ainu informants” 393-421, “Japanese scholars” 422-520, and “European and American scholars” 521-607) pronouncing that “the grammar represents a significant advance in European Ainu linguistics and in linguistic studies in general; the author took advantage of probably one of the last, after Batchelor¹, opportunities to collect, edit and publish previously completely unknown and unpublished material. Her description covers the entire thematic spectrum of Ainu linguistics”². The situation “before Refsing” emerges from the “Introduction” to the “Appendix. A grammatical sketch of Ainu” in Patrie 1982: 124-158: “Although a large amount concerning Ainu has been written in the Japanese language, the little that has appeared in English is totally inadequate and must not be relied on. [...] It is for this reason that this sketch has been included as an appendix to my book. I have translated, collated, and summarized the data from the various works of [Mashiho] Chiri, [Suzuko] Tamura, [Kyōsuke] Kindaichi, and [Shirō] Hattori. The various analyses presented in this chapter [sic!] are basically those of these authors” (*ib.*, 124). In other words, Refsing 1986 became a milestone in the history of Western studies on the Ainu.

¹ 1854-1944, contact with the Ainu 1878-1940.

² “Diese Grammatik bedeutet einen erheblichen Fortschritt in der europäischen Ainu-Sprachwissenschaft und darüber hinaus auch für dieses linguistische Gebiet allgemein; denn die Autorin hat, nach Batchelor, eine der letzten Möglichkeiten genutzt, bislang noch gänzlich unbekanntes und unpubliziertes Material zu sammeln, zu bearbeiten und zu veröffentlichen. Mit ihrer Darstellung behandelt sie die ganze Breite der Ainu-Sprachlehre, die Synopsis zeigt es” (596-597). In relation to our LPos review, Dettmer wrote: “Dieser Kritik des polnischen Sprachwissenschaftlers kann man in einigen Punkten ohne weiteres zustimmen, aber gewiß nicht in der Hinsicht, Refsings Opus sei höher zu bewerten als alle japanischen Ainu-Grammatiken, wenngleich die Verfasserin die Wörter anders klassifiziert” (*ib.*, 595).



Kirsten participated in two of the so far four International Conferences on Bronisław Piłsudski and His Legacy in Sapporo and Nibutani (IBPC-1, 1985; left, cf. Refsing 1985) and in Kraków (IBPC-3, 1999; right, cf. Refsing 2001) and Zakopane

That history of exploration, collection, and research by Westerners turned out to be ages-long and astonishingly rich in travelogues and records of both material and intangible culture as well as language data from virtually all regions inhabited by the Ainu, and since the Ainu language is now actually extinct and the people underwent a sweeping acculturation within the period between ca mid 19th century – ca 1930s, such testimonies, collections, and records became invaluable for further investigations in many disciplines. Access to those written sources, especially those of earlier dates, however, was very limited not only because of their age but also because most of them were printed in limited editions in remote places with turbulent and tragic past. The situation changed dramatically with the publication of Refsing's 25-volume 8094 pp. anthology of reprints of 165 such works by about 84 authors (Dybowski, Radliński 1891 and Piłsudski 1912 included) in four series (see EEWCR, EEWCT, EEWI, EEWL) entitled *The Ainu Library Collection*, each series preceded with Refsing's competent extensive introduction in vol. 1 (cf. Refsing e.g. 1996, 2000).

With such experience and published research results she was predestined to substantially contribute to at least the Ainu volume (Bugaeva 2022) in the HJLL series, and at least particularly authoring the planned chapter on "European /Western" records of the language as this writer recommended. Yet, it was she who recommended otherwise. Apart

from perhaps the innermost circle of her acquaintances, hardly anyone well acquainted with her academic output could perceive her denial as a signal of something getting wrong, judging rather, with full understanding, that she was too busy to squeeze any consecutive obligation. Kirsten Refsing was really discreet, only now scanty but positively moving memories in Danish from her last place in this world – Plejehjemmet Slottet in Nørrebro, the palace in which she could enjoy the autumn of her life – slowly make her personality more complete.

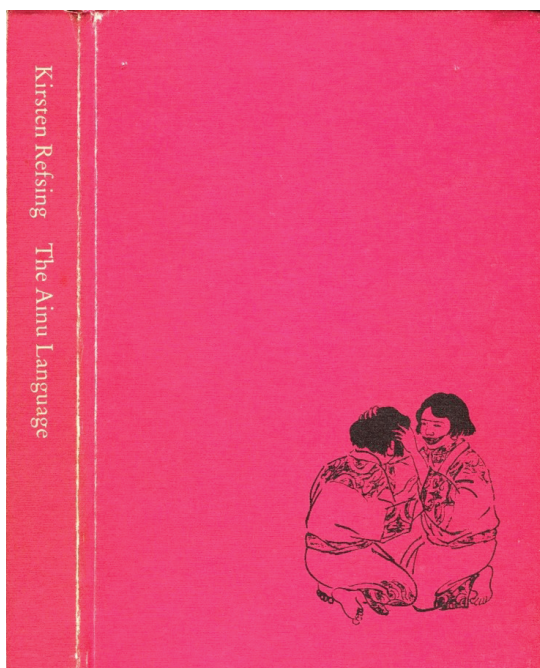
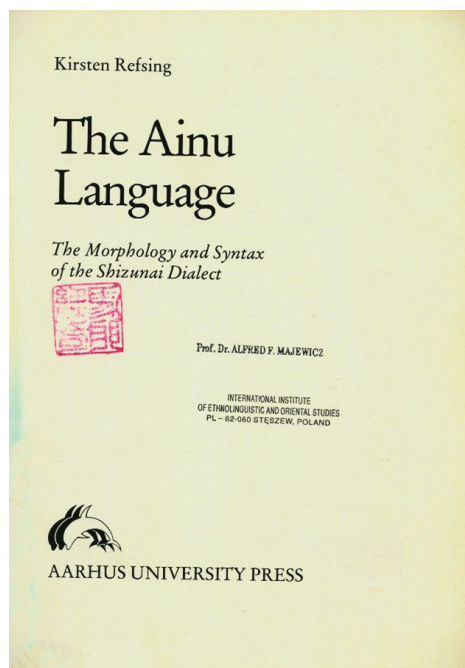
Born and educated in Fredericia in south eastern Jutland (Region Syddanmark), Kirsten graduated (MA) in Japanese from the University of Copenhagen in 1977 and it was her 1986 grammar that secured for her the PhD degree from the same University in which, after 1984-90 years spent as assistant professor at Aarhus University, she served as Associate Professor and Head of Department at the East Asian Institute (Østasiatisk Institut) and in 2006-11 as Dean of the Faculty of Humanities. 1995-2006 were her Hong Kong years mentioned above.

Although her publications make their author an unquestionable authority on the Ainu and one of the most important names in the entire bulk of Ainu (thence, of course, also Japanese) studies (cf. selected titles in the bibliography appended), and at least one of aids for Japanese text translation coauthored by her (with Lundquist, 2008) had worldwide circulation, she was also engaged in translation practice (cf. e.g. Kamo-no Chōmei 鴨長明's 1212 *Hōjōki* <方丈記> into Danish published as *Den vemodige eneboer* 'the melancholy recluse', 2020), editorship of collective volumes (like *Ideology and Practice in Modern Japan*, co-editor Roger Goodman, 1992), and writing... novels in English (at least two – *Eliza, A Missionary Wife*, 2018, and *Changes in the Shadows*, 2020). Much about *this* Kirsten Refsing the author of the present text learned, however, only in the course of composing it in March 2024. The distressing news reached him in late January 2024. Too many persons leave us too early...

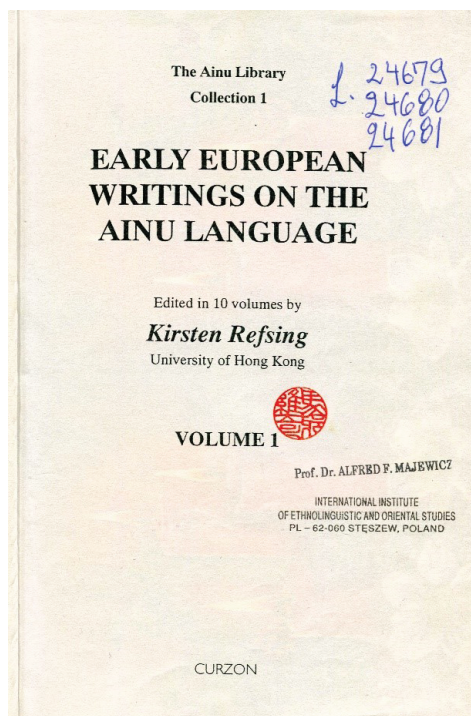
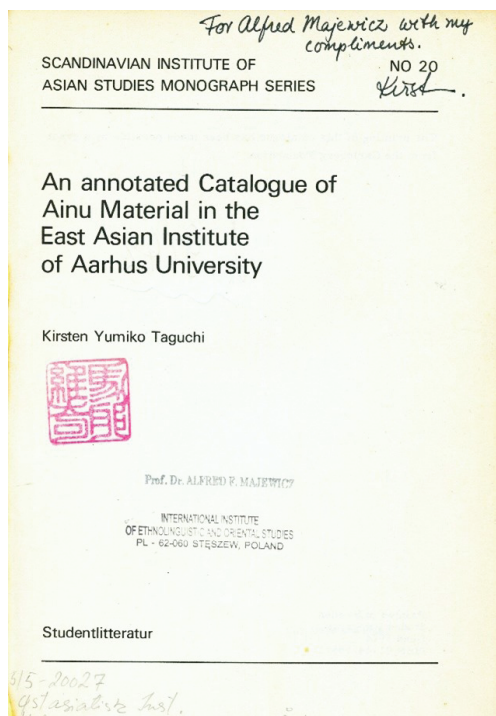


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