

The Ainu and Japanese Archaeology: A change of perspective

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ABSTRACT

The aim of my paper is to reflect on contemporary issues surrounding the archaeological heritage and the Ainu in Hokkaido Island. Today, we know that archaeology is a powerful tool in the creation of cultural identities of the past. We also appreciate heritage ownership and the relationships between cultural heritage and intellectual property rights. Creating new relationships between indigenous peoples and archaeologists is a crucial duty for us as archaeologists.

KEYWORDS: Ainu, indigenous archaeology, heritage ownership, research ethic

1. Introduction

Between 15th July and 17th July 2016, twelve Ainu ancestral remains were returned to their original homeland from Hokkaido University, and reburied at a local graveyard after 85 years. The Ainu ancestral remains that were returned included one identified and eleven unidentified remains. This repatriation was the first formal indigenous repatriation from a university to a local community in Japan.

The archaeology of Hokkaido Island has long been recognized as part of Japanese archaeology, or as a northern variation of Japanese prehistory, without attention being paid to Hokkaido's particular history. This is despite the greater part of Hokkaido's history falling outside mainstream Japanese history. The Japanese state created the historical depiction of the Ainu, who do not have their own written history, as a peripheral, undeveloped population or as resister to the imperial Japanese state. However, archaeological information accumulated over the last decade suggests that the archaeological cultural sequences in Hokkaido and neighbouring islands had their own distinct and complex historical dynamism. Now, we must reconsider the normative framework and interpretation based on new perspectives.

In this article I will first confirm the current position of Ainu people in Japan. Next, I will explain how Japanese archaeology historically recognized the Ainu. Then, I will

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present unsolved issues confronting contemporary Japanese archaeology. Lastly, I will suggest a possible way forward for building a new relationship between the Ainu and Japanese archaeology.

2. The current status of the Ainu in Japan

Before examining the relationship between the Ainu and Japanese archaeology, I will confirm the current legal status of the Ainu in Japan. Ainu are indigenous peoples who inhabit the northern region of the Japanese islands. Ethnographically, Ainu have been classified as three local populations: Hokkaido, Kurile (Chishima) and Karafuto (Sakhalin) Ainu. Local populations include smaller local dialect groups. Anthropological and ethnological interest in the Ainu arose from their recognition as the indigenous population of the Japanese archipelago. However, the indigenous rights of the Ainu were not recognized for many years. On 6 June 2008, a bipartisan, non-binding resolution was approved by the Japanese Diet, which called upon the government to recognize the Ainu as indigenous to Japan. On the same day, finally, the Japanese government recognized the Ainu as an indigenous people of Japan. A living condition survey in 2013 estimated the Ainu population in Hokkaido to be just 16,786 people (Department of Environment and Lifestyle, Hokkaido Government 2015), but this number does not include Ainu populations around Tokyo and Osaka on Honshu Island.

In 1868, after the Meiji Restoration, Hokkaido was officially annexed by Japan. The Ainu language was banned and the Ainu were forced to take Japanese names. Then, under assimilation policies such as the Hokkaido Former Aborigines Act of 1899, the Ainu were prohibited from performing traditional activities that were necessary for their life and culture. This act was in force for 98 years until 1997. In 1989, two local Ainu leaders claimed the government had illegally seized their land. In a landmark decision, the Sapporo District Court stated that the Ainu people had established a unique culture in Hokkaido before the arrival of the Japanese (Kayano and Tanaka 1999). This decision meant that the Ainu had rights that should be given consideration under Article 13 of Japan's Constitution, which protects the rights of the individual, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

3. Perspectives on the Ainu in Japanese Archaeology

Next, I will discuss previous academic attitudes towards the Ainu and how the Ainu have been represented by anthropology and archaeology in Japan. In the initial stage of Japanese anthropology and archaeology the two disciplines were imported from the West. During this stage, the Ainu were treated as a research subject and regarded as the

“living Stone Age inhabitants” of the Japanese archipelago. Since then, many scholars have viewed the Ainu as a resource for anthropological and archaeological studies on hunter-gatherers society. Also, Ainu society has been considered as inheriting the Jomon traditions of the Japanese Neolithic.

Prof. Kindaichi Kyouzuke (1882–1971), who was a famous linguist and ethnologist of the Ainu, explained the significance and aim for Ainu studies as creating a “living catalogue of the primitive society” (Kindaichi 1924: 3–5). This point of view was not only the view of Prof. Kindaichi, but also of other many scholars. We can see this way of thinking presented in many works by anthropologists and archaeologists. Komai Kazuchika (1905–1971) was a founding member of the Department of Archaeology at Tokyo University, and he was the first archaeologist to use the term “Ainu archaeology” in Japan. He repeatedly explained how the study of the Ainu was important as the resource for understanding ancient Japanese culture in his book (Komai 1952). This stance on Ainu archaeology was not only popular during the 1950s: Fujimoto Tsuyoshi (1936–2010), who was also an archaeologist at Tokyo University, suggested the same significance for Ainu archaeology during the 1980s (Fujimoto 1984).

It was not until 2008 that the Ainu were recognized as an indigenous people of Japan, despite strong earlier demands from the Ainu community owing to the government’s delay in making such a decision. The evaluation of the historical and cultural heritage of the Ainu and the full examination of their uniqueness have also been delayed in legal terms. This has all greatly influenced discussions about the Ainu and their place in the Japanese archipelago. As observed by Fujisawa Atsushi, this has often resulted in sweeping observations that ignore temporal scale, assuming vague commonalities between the Ainu and Jomon cultures, and evoking aspects of a simplified collective genealogy (Fujisawa 2006).

4. Recent issues surrounding the Ainu and archaeologies

Ainu studies have been undertaken ignoring the native point of view, and most studies have depended on descriptions of Ainu culture by non-native scholars. Today scholars should be aware of the inequality between archaeologists and Ainu people in the process of archaeological investigation, preservation and management of indigenous cultural heritage. . .

As part of the racist-based studies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Ainu ancestral remains were collected from Ainu cemeteries in Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and the Kuril Islands. Currently over 1600 Ainu ancestral remains are stored in twelve Japanese universities. Ainu ancestral remains collected in this way are also stored in museums in UK, Germany, Russia and other western countries.

After the policy shift outlined above, and based on the Report of the Advisory Council for Future Ainu Policy in July 2009, the Japanese government established the Council for Ainu Policy in December 2009. In 2013, the chief cabinet secretary decided to set up a new national museum of Ainu people and a memorial facility to store unidentified Ainu ancestral remains, which are presently stored at universities across the country, in Shiraoi, Hokkaido (scheduled to open in 2020). The chief cabinet secretary also recognized the need to establish set up guidelines for the repatriation of Ainu ancestral remains and grave goods. To further promote Ainu policy, it is now necessary to consider the perspectives and methods of the preservation and the use of indigenous heritage. As has been pointed out world-wide, the normative perspective for the assessment of historical cultural heritage based on the Western modern science cannot accurately evaluate the sacred sites and the holy places of indigenous ideological systems.

In addition to the already mentioned initiatives, the chief cabinet secretary recognized the need to establish guidelines for the repatriation of Ainu ancestral remains and grave goods as soon as possible (MEXT 2014). However, some Ainu individuals, including plaintiffs appealing to the Sapporo District Court for the return of ancestral remains, disagree with the intent to store unknown ancestral remains in a national keeping place. Issues around repatriation are not simple. Further complicated issues are encountered during the handling of ancestral remains and grave goods excavated from graves of historical Ainu during rescue excavation in the course of land development. Again, what is needed, but where there has yet to be much progress, is discussion with the intention of listening to the Ainu side, involving all stakeholders. Unfortunately, until now the discussion involving academic societies and Ainu communities has been insufficient.

5. New collaboration with the Ainu

During recent years these problems have been compounded by the unequal relationship between archaeologists and the Hokkaido Ainu. However, a new relationship is now being established. In an interim report, presented at the end of March 2016, two academic societies, namely, the Anthropological Society of Nippon and the Japanese Archaeological Association stated that they recognized and deeply regretted how past research had been conducted, including inappropriate research resulting in the unjust excavation on the Ainu graves (Hokkaido Ainu Association, Anthropological Society of Nippon and Japanese Archaeological Society 2016).

In November 2015, the Hokkaido Ainu Association, the Anthropological Society of Nippon and the Japanese Archaeological Association started round-table discussions which included a critical evaluation of previous academic research and further collaboration between the Ainu and academic communities. Through these round table

discussions, the Hokkaido Ainu Association, the Anthropological Society of Nippon and the Japanese Archaeological Association have identified the following points for future discussions:

- a) Archaeological sites and archaeological ethnicity;
- b) Descriptions of Ainu culture in museum displays and history textbooks;
- c) Conservation and management of previous collecting of human remains from Ainu cemeteries;
- d) Repatriation claims about ancestral remains and grave goods collected unjustly;
- e) Participation of Ainu people in preservation planning and archaeological survey.

Another outcome of the round table was the decision to establish a neutral committee on research ethics on ancestral remains and grave goods. Ainu representatives will participate as members of the committee. Once this committee is founded, it is strongly recommended that professionals follow the recommendations of the committee or obtain the committee's approval, before starting any further research on Ainu ancestral remains and grave goods.

As Hokkaido is home to many people with different historical backgrounds, archaeologists should strive to treat all local parties involved as equal partners to support the development of programs for local heritage protection and management. They should then work to establish a framework for the expression of Ainu history (e.g. Segawa 2015; Minoshima 2015; Sekine 2016). It is fully understood today that archaeology is a powerful tool for the creation of cultural identities in the past. It should also be understood that archaeologists cannot operate in the absence of partnerships with host communities (Kato 2010, 2014, 2017).

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