

# Ainu: Promotion of Culture and Suppression of History

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## 1. The history of the Ainu people and its indigenoussness

In the research of the history of Ainu, the term ‘Ainu culture’ is usually used referring to the religion, arts and lifestyle established around 13th century mainly in Hokkaido. Then where and how the ancestors of the Ainu people lived before the so-called ‘establishment of Ainu culture’? According to the natural anthropologists, part of — some say the eastern half of Hokkaido, others say the eastern half of Japanese archipelago — prehistoric Jomon people are direct ancestors of present Ainu people. Many historians suppose that the Emishi people, unsubjugated northern people who appear in old Japanese historical documents from 7th century, included direct ancestors of present Ainu people.

Parts of Jomon people and Emishi are also supposed to be direct ancestors of present majority Japanese (Wajin). It is difficult, therefore, to define the precise boundaries of both Ainu people and Wajin when we go back to these ancient periods. This never means that the history of Ainu was once included in that of Wajin or never denies the indigenoussness of Ainu. If Wajin can trace their history back to Jomon or Emishi, Ainu can also trace their history far beyond 13th century. We must also notice that such basic questions on the meaning and grounds of the ‘Japanese history’ are obscured when the ‘Ainu culture’ is limited within a specific period somewhere after those ages of unclear boundaries.

## 2. Ainu people and their culture in modern and present age

Usually, again, it is said that the ethnicity and culture of the Ainu people declined after a large number of Wajin trespassed upon their territory in Meiji era. Public or journalistic attention is usually paid, in the argument about the ethnic identity of Present-day Ainu, only to the revitalization of the ‘lost’ Ainu culture or its modern interpretation. Of course the political, economic and cultural autonomy of Ainu was considerably deprived after the Japanese trespass. Pre-Meiji Ainu culture is frequently regarded as traditional, playing the role of the symbol of the ethnic identity.

Identity and culture of minorities lies, however, not only in the tradition nor only in its modern interpretation. For example, an Ainu should be able to devote his/her energy to learn English instead of Ainu or to become a counselor instead of a specialist of Ainu traditional culture. No one — including Wajin and Ainu — can regard such a life as a post-Ainu one. The ethnic identity of the Ainu people should be expressed, in addition to the Ainu language and traditional culture, freely in politics, economy and culture, in as various aspects as possible. The Article 3 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples also states: “Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”

Promotion of the traditional culture without mentioning such freedom might lead to the proliferation of stereotypes. Here we must notice again that limiting the ethnic activities of modern Ainu people within stereotypes makes the basic questions on the ethnic composition of ‘Japanese’ in the present and future in-explicit.

## 3. The suppression of the history in the policy of the Japanese government from 1997 and in the 2008 revised version of the subtext on the Ainu people

In 1997, the Japanese government enacted the Ainu Culture Promotion Act in response to the request of the Ainu Association of Hokkaido for a new law for their ethnic rights. In this law and in the relating official documents, however, the political and socio-economical rights were excluded and the ethnic activities were

confined to the language and 'traditional' culture. While activities for the language, folklore, music or handicrafts have been promoted indeed since the legislation, the movement of the Ainu people for the wider claims have been preempted and disoriented. Now it even seems that the energy for the ethnic activity among young Ainu are absorbed for the most part in embroidery or in stage performances of dance and music.

One of the projects based on the law is the publication of subtexts on the Ainu people which are expected to be used in elementary and junior high schools in the whole country. The first version of the texts published in 2001 presented the history and culture of the Ainu people along the axis of time, following the historical change without stereotypical limitation. (It was only natural because I was actually the chief editor of this version.) In the new version for elementary schools revised in 2008, on the contrary, only the stereotypical image is presented as the Ainu culture, the age of Ainu is limited only from 13th to 19th century, and present-day Ainu culture is illustrated only with the activities for learning the Ainu language, creating handicrafts or performing dance and music, etc. Once again it should be noticed that the revision was edited under the principle of 'familiar to read, easier to teach'.

#### **4. on the diet resolutions for the recognition of the Ainu people as an indigenous people of Japan**

On June 6th, 2008, both the upper and lower houses of the Japanese diet passed the resolutions urging the government to recognize the Ainu people as an indigenous people of Japan. Even though this is a big change indeed, there still exist many problems and the bright future cannot simply be expected. As I explained above, the direction of the activity of Ainu has considerably shifted from social and political rights to the traditional culture after the legislation of the Ainu Culture Promotion Act in 1997. Outside the traditional culture, the future of the Ainu people themselves has not been, at least on the organization level, the major topic of discussion in these 10 years. If the preparation for the new legislation by the government progresses on schedule, the time left for the Ainu people is only less than one year. Then the Ainu people's new position in Japan will be not the one gained by Ainu themselves but the one granted by the government. The rights 'granted' would hardly go beyond the stereotypically defined traditional culture without historical dynamism.

In the next morning of the passing of the resolution, June 7, 2008, the famous newspaper column 'Tensei Jingo' of Asahi Shimbun, being supportive to the rights of Ainu, described this people as "kindhearted people who devote themselves on fishing, hunting and cultivation, getting along with Nature". The level of understanding among Japanese journalism represented in this description is also one of the reasons of my above mentioned pessimistic prospect.