

Editor's Picks

Japan Wednesday, August 2

Bringing Home Ancestral Remains



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- Taich

Indigenous people in Japan called "Ainu" have lived mainly in Hokkaido, the northern part of the country, since ancient times. They have their own language and culture, based on respect for nature. In the 19th century, the government aimed to develop the island of Hokkaido, and it forced the Ainu people to change their traditional lifestyles on the pretext of protecting them.

The remains of many Ainu were taken from graves for academic research, and are still stored in museums and universities worldwide. Now, efforts are underway to have them returned to their original sites.

On July 31st, a ceremony was held at the Japanese ambassador's residence in Berlin, Germany.

An Ainu skull was returned to the Ainu people. It had been taken from Hokkaido, and stored for research by an academic organization in Berlin.

The remains had been dug up and stolen from a grave in Sapporo in 1879. It was the first time for Ainu remains to be repatriated.

"The grave-robbing is something that took place in the distant past. There is a historic

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"I can only say that I'm happy beyond words. I hope to restore the dignity and honor of the remains, expose them to the air of Hokkaido, and lay them to rest in the soil of our homeland," said the Chief Director of the Ainu Association of Hokkaido, Tadashi Kato.

In the nineteenth century, researchers based in Europe collected remains to aid their studies on the differences between people in various regions. At the time, people believed a person's culture is reflected not only in the tools they used but also in their bodily structure.

Many remains are still housed in museums and universities, a practice indigenous groups strongly object to.

As awareness of the human rights of indigenous people grew around the world, the UN made a formal declaration in 2007 confirming their right to have remains returned.

Recently, it was decided the remains of the Ainu would also be returned from Australia.

Three sets were found there. A letter was discovered along with them. Researchers apparently negotiated an exchange of Ainu remains for those of Australian Aborigines.

"Whether Australian aboriginal remains or overseas remains, we would always make those available for repatriation," says Museums Victoria's Head of Humanities, Richard Gillespie.

In June, the Australian Ambassador to Japan visited Sapporo and spoke with the largest organization of Ainu. He said the museum would return the remains.

"We really welcome this positive outcome," said the Ambassador, Richard Court.

"We are grateful from the bottom of our hearts," said the Vice President of the Ainu Association of Hokkaido, Kazushi Abe.

NHK World's Taichi Soga joins Newsroom Tokyo anchors Hideki Nakayama and Aki Shibuya in the studio.

Shibuya: Why were remains of Ainu collected by international researchers in the first place?

Soga: The study of Ainu first received attention because there was interest in their racial origin, as Ainu features were thought to resemble those of Europeans. This theory was later proven false, but that is why researchers began collecting Ainu remains.

According to the Japanese government, at least 4 countries have Ainu remains: the USA, the United Kingdom, Australia and Germany.

In addition, past documents and research papers show 4 other countries, including Switzerland and Hungary, could also be storing them. Among them, Germany returned one Ainu skull recently, and Australian museums are prepared to return 3 others.

Nakayama: What about the situation in Japan?

Soga: Remains have been stored in Japan too, but only a few have been returned to Ainu communities. Let's look at the issue in more detail.

Currently, over 1,600 Ainu remains are being stored across a dozen Japanese universities. Some Ainu have been filing lawsuits to request their return.

"University labs still have the remains of about 1,600 people. We demand the return of these remains in their entirety," says Kenichi Kawamura of the Asahikawa Ainu Council.

Japanese guidelines say the remains of individuals whose identities are known must be returned to family members of the deceased, and unidentified remains must be returned, when possible, to the community from which they were taken. But the identities of almost all are unknown.

In addition, some researchers claim that it's still too early to return them. At a meeting in June, researchers stressed the need to continue to study the remains.

"If we continue our current research, we will be able to learn about the origins of the Ainu people in more detail. We do hope to continue to do research, but only under acceptable terms," said Kenichi Shinoda, Vice President of the National Museum of Nature and Science.

But some Ainu say it's unjust to keep the remains for any longer, since most of them were taken without permission.

"We're just asking for the return of what they took from our communities. Only after that can we discuss whether they can research the remains or not," says the President of Biratori Ainu Association, Hidehiko Kimura.

Shibuya: Why is it so difficult for the researchers and the Ainu people to reach an understanding?

Soga: The researchers want to investigate the Ainu's origin, but many Ainu people are opposed to the research because they see the stealing of the remains as an insult. Some say the idea behind the research is discrimination, in a way.

Nakayama: But why are these remains not returned?

Soga: There are 2 main reasons. First, the population of Ainu has been steadily declining and ties among them are not as strong as before. This is a result of past Japanese government policies. So there are few Ainu communities left that are able to accept such remains.

Another reason is that Japanese universities are cautious about returning remains because it's difficult to confirm exactly which community individual remains definitely came from.

Shibuya: How should they proceed with returning Ainu remains?

Soga: First of all, the government and universities should look at this as a positive

One good example comes from Australia, which stands at the forefront of indigenous repatriation. It has government policies and funds in place to support these kinds of activities. Funds are set aside for museum researchers to visit aboriginal communities, or for the transport of remains.

To proceed with returning remains, universities should tackle the issue more actively and the government must support the institutions.

I think the repatriation by Germany is a good first step. The Japanese government took leadership in a diplomatic way and supported an Ainu group to visit Germany. I hope this example will set a standard for the future.

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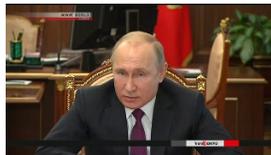
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