

Overseas Ainu Collections and Info-Forum Museum Project : Comment

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My name is Koji Yamasaki, and I am from the Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies at Hokkaido University. I would like to thank you all in advance for your kind attention. Firstly, we presented in collaboration with the National Museum of Ethnology, an international symposium titled “Promotion and Communication of Ainu Arts and Culture: Learning from Native American Art Shows in the U.S. Southwest” at the center prior to this workshop¹⁾. There, we received reports of the art shows being held in North America by the directors Dr. Robert Breunig, Mr. Jim Enote, Mr. Octavius Seowtewa, and Dr. Ito, who gave presentations in this workshop. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the presenters and everyone at the National Museum of Ethnology who cooperated in our joint sponsorship.

In this comment, I would like to discuss the research outline of the Overseas Ainu Collections and my experiences with it. After that, I would like to introduce the current situation surrounding the Ainu people, which is likely to become a topic of discussion in this workshop.

My specialty is Ainu culture, particularly the cultural anthropology surrounding Ainu material culture and museums. I received my personal training as a researcher under the guidance of Dr. Yoshinobu Kotani, a professor emeritus at Nagoya University, through the Overseas Ainu Collections investigation project. There in the museum’s storage, I picked up real artifacts to sketch, measure and photograph and was taught many things by my senior colleagues. The knowledge and skills I learnt in these investigations have provided the foundations for my present day research. Since my employment at the Hokkaido University Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies in 2007, I have, parallel to my previous research, placed importance on passing on the information and results of the Overseas Ainu Collections not just to researchers, but to the lives of present day Ainu people, and my current research is based on the theme of “the modern significance of the museum.” Looking back upon my research, I believe it is undeniably tied closely to the conditions surrounding museums today.

The Overseas Ainu Collections already has a 30-year old history. Although I do not have time to delve into its details, the history begins with a collaborative investigation in the 1980s, of a wax cylinder left behind by the Polish ethnologist Bronisław Piotr Piłsudski. A report on this investigation was released in the *Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology Special Issue No.5* in 1987²⁾. Around

the same time as well, a group led by Dr. Josef Kreiner, a professor emeritus at the University of Bonn, carried out an exhaustive survey of Ainu collections owned by a museum in West Europe. Entering the 1990s and prompted by Dr. Kreiner's studies, Japanese researchers also began studying Ainu collections overseas. These later spawned the research of Ainu collections in North America by Dr. Kotani, and the Ainu collections in Russia by Dr. Shinko Ogihara, a professor emeritus at Chiba University. In 2001, this large-scale overseas research was completed, following the investigation of the Sakhalin regional museum (Сахалинский государственный областной краеведческий музей), whereupon it was confirmed that there were roughly 13,500 Ainu collections overseas.

The main characteristic of these investigations of overseas Ainu collections was the "exhaustive survey" conducted on of all the Ainu collections owned by museums. In other words, this work involved the creation of an inventory from scratch, without knowing the what, where and how many of the artifacts involved. Since the exhaustive survey was conducted during a limited and short period during the summer holidays, a highly specialized and mechanical investigation prowess, unique to such museum investigations was required in order to efficiently investigate, sketch, photograph and create an inventory of the collections. Although there were some Ainu researchers among the members involved, the other experts consisted mostly of museum curators and graduate students. The work that would be involved in taking time to scrutinize each item was left to the hands of future investigations. This work, when compared to the current situation of the National Museum of Ethnology's plans to launch an "Info-Forum Museum Project," all previous Ainu collection work overseas was mere preparation for this event through the "creation of inventory."

Currently, the inventory that was created in the overseas Ainu collection investigations is used not only for studies narrowed down to specific themes by researchers, but for the database of overseas Ainu collections, which are also continuously held by The Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu culture for the homecoming exhibition. Since it is known when and where each of the Ainu collections were found—many of which are older than those collected in Japan, and its likes cannot be found in Japan—there is great interest among the Ainu people right now for this homecoming exhibition of overseas Ainu collections. Although I personally believe this sort of activity should also be officially recognized, conditions permitting, we have provided opportunities for Ainu artisans to study the collections more closely before and after the exhibition.

At any rate, after the exhaustive survey was mostly complete, there had been instances when further investigations overseas were carried out, notably by Dr. Neil Gordon Munro of Scotland, who studied the Ainu collection of a special exhibition by The Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture,

however these were quite limited in number, due to geographical and language restraints. I myself, have also conducted a joint investigation with Ainu artisans from Nibutani at the Honolulu Museum of Art in Hawaii last year, however, this expedition was more the offspring of a series of fortunate coincidences, and cannot be considered the norm.

However, in the past one or two years, there have been indications that the situation is going to radically change. I am sure you are all aware, but in 2008, the House of Representatives and the House of Councilors unanimously adopted the “Resolution to Recognize the Ainu as an Indigenous People.” And in 2009, the Advisory Council for the Future Ainu Policy’s Final Report was submitted, indicating the basic guidelines for future Ainu policies instigated by the Japanese government. Among the major initiatives proposed regarding Ainu policies were the “Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony (Symbolic Space)” and “Research on Living Conditions of Ainu People outside Hokkaido.” The basic concept of the “Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony” is to “provide an autonomous hub (or national center) for the promotion of Ainu culture, with core cultural facilities in a natural outdoor museum setting, where Ainu culture and traditions can be practiced/passed on and experienced/exchanged,” which was decided to be built on the shores of Lake Poroto in Hokkaido’s Shiraoi-cho. The government (or more specifically, the Agency for Cultural Affairs) has also decided to take initiatives to build a museum inside this “space, which symbolizes communal racial harmony.” In fact, the museum’s installment is scheduled to take place in 2020. Since it’s already 2014, there is only six years left. Although there are differing opinions regarding the lack of preparation time, to those involved, the general consensus is “we can’t miss this opportunity, so we just have to do it.” This year, a special committee that was established to formulate the basic plan has also taken action.

There are five basic duties regarding the museum that is to be installed inside the “symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony”: exhibitions, education/popularization, investigations/research, nurturing the museum’s human resources and collection/preservation/management. Each of these items are related to themes that are discussed in this workshop, and in particular, the content of No.5, the collection/preservation and management will likely be tied to this workshop’s discussions on a fairly concrete level.

The purpose of this duty is to construct “an Ainu-related museum collection installed inside the symbolic space, and a network related to information on Ainu culture,” and the target of this network will be the domestic and overseas museums possessing Ainu collections. In this regard, inspections and public hearings have already begun. Dr. Shiro Sasaki, who is also present today, traveled to the U.S. as vice-chairperson of the investigation examination committee regarding the preparation/operation of the new museum, for a series of inspections and hearings

held last March at the National Museum of the American Indian, the Brooklyn Museum, and other East Coast museums, along with members of the Agency for Cultural Affairs. A report on this trip has also been released³⁾. The report states that hearings were conducted regarding collaborations with overseas museums that possess Ainu collections, and especially the possibility of long-term rentals and the use of these overseas Ainu collections, to which most museums provided a positive response. Museums responded positively to the issue of long-term rentals, and also accepted that young researchers of Ainu origin could handle and reviews. The report also stated that due to the lack of personnel knowledgeable about Ainu culture in museums overseas, there were requests for experts on Ainu culture to provide a closer inspection of their collection and information, and provide them with any additional information required.

While concrete talks regarding overseas museum collaborations, long-term collection rentals and the possibility of accepting researchers are underway, the issues pertaining to the natural next step that follows, namely, how to tie in the rented overseas collection with the Ainu people, or in effect, the source community, and how to manage this information, are important issues that still require serious discussions. Of course, reproducing these museum collections to promote the culture (or in the case of Indigenous peoples in Taiwan, reappearance) may be one of the more predictable methods of its empowerment; however I believe there are many more possibilities. As well, how we will postscript the information regarding the collection, and how we manage/publicize this information, are issues that will also affect the needs of the overseas museums who will be lending their Ainu collections to us.

Taking into account the history of this nation's past policies that often dealt a severe blow to Ainu culture, the "Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony" must be installed with the government taking full initiative. Since the budget will also be distributed, a variety of attainable possibilities can be examined. At the same time, however, since the installment is a government initiative, the approach is by its nature, a top-down process. Therefore, unless the vital questions of how the collaborations between the Ainu people and the source community will be established, and how to make their presence recognized by the source community, are handled as extremely important issues, there is a risk that this facility may end up as a simple showcase of Ainu culture. The same can also be said regarding the museum inside this symbolic space. Careful consideration must be given to how to utilize the collection, which will provide the basis for the museum's activities.

This workshop was planned as a way to put the teachers and staff members of the Minpaku into the listener's position, with the goal of the "Info-Forum Museum for Cultural Resources of the World" planned by the National Museum of Ethnology in mind. However, as someone who has been involved in Ainu research,

I would like to stress that issues discussed here must be tackled by the government, which is currently taking initiatives to give rise to a new Ainu museum. Taking into consideration the fact that our facilities will both share the title “national museums,” and our common interest in the Ainu as the indigenous people of Japan, there is a lot that this new museum can learn from the Info-Forum Museum challenges of the Minpaku, which stands at the forefront of Japan’s cultural anthropology scene. Indeed, it seems inevitable for our paths to cross in the not so distant future, and it is my personal wish that this occurs. In this light, I would like to end my comments by pointing out that the upcoming challenges of the National Museum of Ethnology will not be restricted solely to the duties of the museum.

Thank you very much.

Notes

- 1) Koji Yamasaki, Atsunori Ito, and Rina Shiroishi (eds.) 2015 *Promotion and Communication of Ainu Art and Culture: Learning from Native American Art Shows in the U.S. Southwest*. Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies, Hokkaido University.
- 2) Kyuzo Kato and Yoshinobu Kotani (eds.) 1987 *Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology Special Issue 5*.
- 3) Tanseisha Co., Ltd. (ed.) 2013 *Business Summary Report on the Fact-finding Tour of Overseas Ainu Collections and Museums*. Traditional Culture Division, Cultural Properties Department, Agency for Cultural Affairs.