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Rediscovering an Appreciation for Ainu Culture

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In this presentation, I will talk about a rediscovery of an appreciation for Ainu culture on the bases of my own experiences as an Ainu. I was born in Chitose in Hokkaido. My parents are Ainu. But, by the time I was been raised, Ainu culture was not so common, and my parents spoke Japanese. My grandmother was not so good at Japanese. So, she often spoke in the Ainu language, but she did not try to teach the Ainu language to us. When I was in elementary school, I was greatly discriminated against and hurt very much. The Ainu were told to speak in Japanese, because they were Japanese. Ainu were also told not to follow Ainu traditions in their everyday life. Moreover, of course, my parents thought that that was also the best way for their children as well.

In elementary school, I was surprised to face such severe discrimination and I started to think that Ainu were of lower or lesser ethnicity compared to Japanese. I heard stories that Ainu did not know how to be polite, or did not know how to speak proper Japanese. So, I was led to believe that the Ainu were inferior. Thus I lived with an inferiority complex. Then, I married a Japanese and moved to Sapporo, but after five years of marriage, my husband was killed in a traffic accident. I continued to live in Sapporo for five more years. So, it was 10 years, before I went back to Chitose.

Because I had been living in a big city, I had not been exposed to Ainu culture much. When I was fifty years old, I went back to Rankoshi in Chitose, where I was born and raised. Rankoshi was a traditional Ainu village, or *kotan* in olden days. Then, I started to wonder if Ainu should be regarded as inferior people compared to the Japanese. But I was busy earning a living, and I did not think about it much. But, because I went back to my home village, I asked the elder women there about the old stories. From this I learned some very nice Ainu songs with beautiful melodies and stories, which I remembered that I had heard in my childhood. Then, I knew that we are not an inferior people. And so I come to like Ainu ethnicity and culture very much. So, it was not until after I was fifty years old that I started learning Ainu culture.

Then I discovered that Ainu are not a rude people, but that they are polite. I also learned that we live off nature and give thanks to nature. The earth is the deity and we are born as children of the deity. The Ainu do not have the idea of owning the land as property. Land is everyone's, or actually the deity's property, and we are allowed to live on the land. So, whenever Ainu collect plants, or fish from the river, or hunt deer and bear, we give thanks to deities for the gift. Animal deities bring gifts to humans. So, whenever we eat bear meat or fish, we try to eat with many thanks, and then we send the deity back to the divine world with a lot of souvenirs. Moreover the returned deity tells other deities in the divine world

that the Ainu people were nice. Then other animal deities may dress in hides and bring meat as gifts on their visits to the Ainu land. So, that was a very reserved idea and also we believe that all food is precious because of this idea. We also think that everything has the life in it. So, although I was trying to live as a Japanese, I found that the Ainu world was a completely different, wonderful world. I found that the Ainu are a wonderful people. The difference was not one of one culture being superior or inferior. It was just a difference of the culture.

Then, I decided I wanted to learn more about Ainu culture, including the language and songs. Actually, I am a better singer than I am a speaker, but I was asked to speak today, so I am speaking instead of singing. Anyway, I have realized that it was wrong to think of the Ainu culture as inferior. And also, I have understood that the Ainu people are nice, so wonderful, because they do not judge people from their appearances when they visit somebody's house, and because they do not pry into peoples' privacy. Ainu are polite people.

As I learned more about Ainu culture, I did not even know that there were some scholars and researchers studying our culture, since we were told that there was not much Ainu culture left in the Chitose area. The word "Ainu" actually means human, but "Ainu" was considered a discriminative word at that time. So, in Chitose, when the word "Ainu" was used, it was said that the Ainu people closed their hearts, and that the scholars could not learn about Ainu culture. After I came back to Chitose, I found out about the Hokkaido Utari Association, and I suggested we study Ainu culture. However, this was something new for Ainu people, because they did not like being Ainu. At first, people did not think about using the community hall, but the elder women got together at my house. So I said, "Why don't we find a place, a public place to study Ainu culture?" Therefore, I proposed this to the Hokkaido Utari Association, and they agreed. Then, I became the manager of the culture class for the Chitose branch of the Hokkaido Utari Association. So, we started learning Ainu culture. Later, the Ainu language class was opened and many people started to learn the Ainu language. So, I became the manager and also a lecturer of Ainu language class. Although I am not a fluent speaker of the Ainu language, I try to remember what I've learned from the elder women. Because I am getting old, I wanted to convey everything I know about Ainu culture and language to the younger generation (Nakamoto 1999; Nakagawa and Nakamoto 1997). This is why I'm so active.

The Ainu regard everything in the world, trees, insects and animals that can do something that humans can not do, as deities. For example, if people cook food but they do not eat it and the food goes off and is wasted, the deity cannot go back to the world of deities. Moreover, the deities would say, "We do not want to visit those people, since they do not regard us as valuable." People will suffer because of the lack of food or become sick, and can not eat food even though they want to eat. I did not know if this lesson was part of the Ainu philosophy or my mother's own idea, but later by learning from elder Ainu women, I learned that this was the Ainu philosophy.

So that's why I came to like Ainu philosophy or culture more. When I was younger, I disliked being Ainu, but now I found that I like being Ainu. So, whenever I'm asked to visit children to tell them about the Ainu, I tell the children not to hold a biased view of people just because of differences in culture or ethnicity. I also tell the children that they have to be friendly to everyone in many countries and that they should not be prejudiced against

people who have a different color and culture. And children are good listeners. So, I continue working, since I really want them to like Ainu culture.

I am seventy-two years old now, and am suffering from several diseases. So, I do not know when I may be called for. Previously, I feared death, since my children were so small. Actually, I have overcome several diseases, but I am still alive and well. I feel glad to be able to speak like this in front of you. Probably, the deities and my ancestors are protecting me. I do not know how long I can live, but I really like to live with a sincerity of the Ainu heart. It is said that after Ainu people die they go to the other world through a cave. The other world means our ancestor's world, and I think that in that world everything is the same as this world. Of course, I will miss people here in this world, including my friends, children and grandchildren. But, I may meet my husband who passed away forty-two years ago, or maybe he is married to somebody else and has forgotten about me, and may say, "I don't want such an old woman." But I believe that he surely has not forgotten me. So, probably, after I have left this world, I will face many enjoyable things in that world.

Studying something new is enjoyable. So, as long as I am well, I want to speak. I am not educated well enough to speak in front of people like you, but I hope that I could be of some help in understanding our culture. That is why I accepted this role of speaking in front of you, and I would like to continue to my work.

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