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Inheriting Ainu Ethnicity

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Inheriting Ainu Ethnicity

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In this presentation, I will talk about the cultural heritage of the Ainu. I live in Nibutani. I was born there and it is about two hours drive from Sapporo. Nibutani has the biggest Ainu population density there. Of course I have Ainu in my blood. As Ms. Nakamoto mentioned in her presentation, our culture, language, and customs were banned at the beginning of Meiji era, so it is unfortunate that I was not taught about Ainu culture and language. Since I was raised in that kind of situation, I dare not say that I was Ainu, until I was twenty. But, after I got to know other foreign indigenous peoples, I started to wonder why I had to abandon my ethnicity, and why the majority could deny the minorities' culture (Kaizawa 1994: 222-224).

To be honest, I dreamt of Ainu independence when I was in my twenties. That would allow us to recover our culture and language. But when I traveled to China and talked about that with the government executives, they said, "You could be independent, but if you want independence you will have to shed blood to achieve it. That is because Hokkaido, the United States, China and the Japanese government would not accept you becoming independent, so you had better rethink about seeking independence." So, I thought "That is true. There is no use for the people to kill each other." Of course, the Ainu spirit called *ukocharanke* tells that we should solve problems through discussions rather than by force. So, we gave up becoming independent, and concentrated our efforts on restoring our culture through negotiation.

At present, I am a secretary general of the Society for Preservation of Ainu Culture in Biratori. This is one of the seventeen Ainu culture preservation societies in Hokkaido. And, our Biratori Society has about eighty members. The purpose of our activity is to learn about our own ethnic culture, since we could not learn Ainu language and culture in school. So, the quickest way to learn the spirit in our culture of ancestors is to join the Ainu culture preservation society. Recently, elders over eighty years old say, "When we were young, we were scolded if we spoke Ainu language. We were scolded if we practiced traditional customs. Now, we look at the knowledgeable scholars that come to us and ask us about Ainu culture. They ask us what it was like before. Then, I think that I should have studied harder when I was younger." Finally, our Ainu ethnic culture was recognized by the public.

Then, when we look at the Japanese government, we realize that they still have not acknowledged Ainu ethnicity. That is to say, they say that Japan is the mono-ethnic society, constituted only by one major ethnic group. Of course, there are Ainu people, like us. There are Korean people who live in Japan and Buryat people who moved to Japan from the former Soviet Union. So, in reality Japan is a multi-ethnic nation but the Japanese government does not accept the fact. Our Ainu people are of course Japanese citizens. However, if we

were acknowledged, then our language or culture or history should be included as part of the compulsory education. We have a right to that. But, through the compulsory education system, we were taught Japanese history and Japanese culture, not Ainu culture and history. So, is this really a country of equality? That is the question I want to ask. Just because they are the majority, or group with power, it does not necessarily mean that they can oppress a minority. Our tradition, language, culture, everyday customs have been banned for about 100 years, but still we want to insist that we are Ainu. I hope that they know that even the majority cannot eliminate a minority. We want them to acknowledge the differences. The majority culture does not mean that it is the best. The minority culture is also important. So, the situation is a result of not accepting the fact. If we recognize each other's differences, the problem would not exist. Think about the situation even when everybody is in the same ethnic group. Everyone has a different face, feature and thought. Everyone is unique. So, wherever you are from, whichever country you are from, or who you are, everything is different. So, because they do not try to accept the differences, our situation is a result of that kind of attitude. Everyone ought to worship their ancestor, and to value their ancestor's culture or language. I want to say that they should not try to eliminate our culture or language.

In our village, the Japanese government built a dam. We opposed the construction of this dam. One person, a scholar of Ainu language, and I sued the dam. Then, about three years ago, we received the result of the suit, that the Ainu were the indigenous people, but still the Japanese government does not accept that fact. Japan is a country where the administration, the legal part and the diet have equal right. Unfortunately, the legal part is weaker and the administrative part, which is the government, is stronger. Even in this situation, many minorities in Japan wish that their culture and language should be preserved. Also, in Hokkaido, when our ancestors were alive, it was full of trees. Moreover, in the forest, our ancestors lived a rich life, receiving everything they needed from nature. But, after only 200 years, nature in Hokkaido has been totally destroyed. That is to say, we have lost the ground on which to succeed with our culture. So, since 1994, a national trust movement has started. This is a movement to recover the real forest in Hokkaido. Probably, after 200 to 300 years, the real forest in Hokkaido will come back. I am not able to witness that forest, but my grandchildren or great grandchildren or their descendants will look at that forest, and realize that the Ainu people constructed their culture in that real forest in Hokkaido.

I mentioned that I thought of Ainu independence when I was younger. I still wish that there were an autonomous region in a part of Hokkaido. However, the situation is that Ainu people live in a mixed situation with the Japanese majority. So, it is difficult to preserve our own language or culture in this situation. Therefore, I wish that there is one part of Hokkaido preserved as an autonomous region, then we can teach our traditional Ainu culture and language. I do not think it is impossible. This is because the legal authorities have acknowledged that the Ainu people are indigenous people, so I would at least like to see them say that they should give Hokkaido back to the Ainu people. I wish I could. But Japan is small country, so what happens if we kicked out the non-Ainu people. Then, they would loose their place to live. Therefore, we don't want to say that. The Hokkaido Utari

Association tries to discuss the best way for Ainu people and Japanese people to co-exist. But the government refuses and does not want to join the negotiations. Then the 1899 “Protection Law for the Former Natives in Hokkaido” that tried to discriminate Ainu people, was abolished three years ago, and the new “Law Concerning Protection of Ainu Culture and Dissemination and Enlightenment of Knowledge about Ainu Traditions” was established. However, this law does not contain the word “Ainu ethnic group,” but only “Ainu people.” This law is a law preserving culture. But, we are a living people. We are not a culture only. It is no use if only our culture is preserved. We would like to recover our rights as human beings. We also want young Ainu people who have not yet been born to have pride in their ethnicity, and we want them to learn how to co-exist with other Japanese people. In that sense, I would like to continue my effort for future generations.

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