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## Anthropology of Ethnicity and Identity

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## **Anthropology of Ethnicity and Identity**

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As stated in the Preface, the purpose of the studies in this volume was to understand the dynamics of ethnicity and identities of circumpolar peoples, and to clarify the true meaning of ethnicity and identity and their relationships, by taking an anthropological approach. One result is that a new paradigm of anthropology of ethnicity and identity has been formulated and the basic significance of Northern cultures redefined. I will discuss these developments in this conclusion.

### **A NEW PARADIGM**

Ethnicity and identity are dynamic, sometimes variable and even fictional, though they are the absolute truth for the people concerned. Identity is etic or emic recognition that certain attributes possessed by individuals belong to certain categories. Ethnicity is the wholeness of cultural characteristics that are recognized to be common in a group, and different from those of other groups. Therefore, based on ethnicity, recognition that an individual belongs to a specific group is ethnic identity. Based on these definitions, a new paradigm in the anthropology of ethnicity and identity will be presented.

In this new paradigm, identity and ethnicity can be positioned as follows.

Namely, identity:

1. is comprehended in the framework of the relationship between nature, human and society, and
2. is associated with a variety of groups ranging from individuals in society to the entire human kind.

Moreover, if ethnicity is added to identity, identity:

3. can be positioned in the relationships among groups, which come into contact with each other, and
4. is associated with the process of changes in population and its culture

These definitions are explained below.

First, humans identify themselves in their relationships with nature. Nature stated here is recognized by humans and sometimes even has animistic meaning. In other words, in personalized nature, humans conduct spiritual negotiations with animal-persons and establish their identity in relationship to them. At the same time, humans identify themselves and the group they belong to in human society. Relationships between nature and humans and those between humans and society project onto each other, and in this sense, relationships between nature, humans and society are connected in humans' minds. In a unique worldview, in

which the relationship between humans and nature is recognized, activities of livelihood and food are used as symbols of identity in social relationships. Therefore, identity is not merely a phenomenon limited to human society, but self-positioning amid relations with the world surrounding humans. Based on diversified relationships between humans and nature through various sorts of activities of livelihood, an ideal identity can be determined.

Secondly, in society a variety of groups ranging from individuals to the humankind are recognized. A variety of groups means kinship-based groups, cultural groups, regional groups and societies and nations that show the complexity of the combination of these groups, and moreover, biological groups of *Homo sapiens* including the entire humankind. Of course, in the last case, it is possible to assume a community consisting of all creatures on earth as well as humans. The thought that a community is part of the global ecosystem based on scientific information on global environmental problems and its analysis, after going through a period when humans and nature were considered to be separated and opposed to each other, seems to be returning again to a notion of oneness of nature and humans and positioning of humans as part of nature. Namely, group formation principles shifted from nature to culture, and will return to nature again. In these social groups, particularly in a variety of groups ranging from kinship-based groups to nations, it has been clarified that ethnicity is greatly involved with individual identity. Accordingly, ethnic identity is conspicuously found in these groups. In such groups, characteristics of groups other than kinships are used as a marker to symbolize ethnicity and express their identity against other groups. Needless to say, as kinship itself is cultural as well as biological, kinship as culture may be mythically applied to the constituting principle of a nation.

Thirdly, ethnicity and identity depend on inter-group relationships, which are exposed to each other. Historical and ecological inter-group relationships as well as politics, social systems and values of a suzerain state are important. Post-colonial and post-socialism political changes provide momentum for revitalization of minority cultures that have been hidden within nations. Minorities and majorities in nations, strongly dependent on their historical and cultural backgrounds, forge political relationships.

Fourthly, identity and ethnicity are associated with the process of changes in population and its culture. Groups and their culture that has been handed down will change through contact with other groups and cultures. On this occasion, the process of cultural changes and syncretism as well as biological and ecological changes, such as group migration, segregation, mixed habitation and biological mixture, will proceed. Syncretism stated here means dynamic interaction between different systems from a perspective of human activity systems, rather than mere assimilation of minority culture into the culture of a large-scale society as a result of acculturation. In this process, minority cultures, their languages in particular, are endangered, language shifts may occur and original languages may be disappeared. Conversely, however, revitalization movements of culture and languages may sometimes appear. It is during this period, when culture and languages are perceived to be in danger, that people become aware of identity and ethnicity and are concerned with expressing that identity and ethnicity. Though cultural revitalization movements are ideologically directed toward tradition, aiming for a reverse shift of a changing process, namely, for returning, as in reality it is impossible to go back in time, tradition reconciles its

differences with reality, new culture is created, or political settlement is made. Traditional systems may be changed and sometimes destroyed, and subsequently, fragments of culture and languages, which have lost their conventional functions, become ethnic symbols as the basis of people's identity in a new system. At times, under the circumstances where it is absolutely impossible to change reality, millenarian movements arise in which people believe the coming of the millennium will bring a culture hero who is used as an ethnic emblem.

As stated above, ethnicity and identity are associated with the relationship between nature and humans, categories of human groups, inter-group relationships and the process of changes in population and its culture. Of course, elements stated here may not be the only ones. The most problematical thing is that ethnicity and identity are often significantly influenced by subjective interpretation of history and accompanying sentiments. Therefore, it may be difficult to express ethnicity and identity as rational and simple functions. However, it can at least be said that ethnicity and identity are dependent variables, and, accordingly, they are variable and dynamic as stated at the outset.

Moreover, according to the paradigm presented here, it is clear that identity may be associated with ethnicity in a variety of groups ranging from kinship-based groups to nations and in a critical period during the process of changes in population and its culture. Furthermore, it is clear that, under post-colonial conditions, particularly strong expressions of identity and ethnicity of minorities can be observed in inter-group relationships. In cultural revitalization movements as political movements, various cultural markers are used as ethnic symbols according to the relationship between nature and humans in groups, varieties of groups, process of changes and inter-group relationships. In such movements, the processes of conflicts and conflict resolution proceed. However, resolution methods and goals vary according to groups.

## **CIRCUMPOLAR ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY**

In this section, characteristics of identity and ethnicity of circumpolar ethnic groups will be stated in accordance with the paradigm presented above. Characteristics of people's identity in circumpolar areas are that they emphasize the relationship between nature and humans through subsistence activities, such as hunting and herding. According to the worldview based on animism and shamanism, people recognize the original oneness of humans and animals, and forge spiritual ties with personalized animal-persons (Irimoto and Yamada 1994; Yamada and Irimoto 1997). Supported by the reciprocal relationships between animals as deities and humans, and a concept of cosmic cycling, people possess the identity that humans are part of nature. People thank nature, and perceptually as well as realistically, they live symbiotically with nature.

In order to deal with various problems threatening their existence concerning development and environment in the present northern areas, they use their traditional worldviews as ethnic symbols with the help of science, on which they base their identity. Their traditional worldviews, some of which are, as can be seen in Sakha (Yakut), a philosophy of "Symbiosis with Nature," or as can be seen in the First Nations of North America, a concept of "bush" or more specifically "bush food," are used as symbols of

ethnicity and identity. Moreover, as can be observed in Saami, their identity in nature and life in it, along with a protest against historical events in which their identity was lost, while adopting forms of "literature" from outside large-scale societies, is expressed in their unique art.

Next, in many societies in northern areas, particularly in hunting societies, people show a strong tendency of egalitarianism, and individuals tend to refuse a dominator-subordinate relationship in the outside world as well as in their society. This indicates characteristics of these societies that they have weak group cohesion, and at the same time, they are tolerant of the existence of different outside societies. Realistically, unless they accept diversity, their minority groups will cease to exist. They identify themselves as part of nature, and at the same time, as part of a diversified society. A concept of symbiosis between nature and humans is projected on perception of the relationship with other human societies. "Symbiosis with Nature / Symbiosis with Ethnic Groups," concepts stated by the Ainu, coincide with this.

It is interesting to note that even if groups become larger, as can be seen from an example of the Republic of Sakha, a philosophy of the relationship between nature and humans is used as an ethnic symbol. Buryat and Mongols, who mainly engage in livestock farming as an activity of livelihood in the same manner as people in Sakha, use "Geser," a mythical epic hero, and "Chingis Khan," an actual historical hero respectively as ethnic symbols. This is probably because Mongols have a history of foundation of an empire, while Buryat, even though they are also Mongols, don't have a history of independence, and though they are one of the republics in the Russian Federation, they have been strongly controlled by Russia in the past and present. On the other hand, though Sakha is also a republic, people there graze cattle and horses in a harsh northern environment, and live more dependently on nature through hunting and fishing. Therefore, it is a matter of course that they differ in perspectives on nature and worldviews. Generally, as societies grow larger from families to nations, group cohesion will change from natural to cultural, and constituting principles of groups will change from egalitarianism to hierarchy, and national emblems will transform from nature into heroes, who are sometimes actual human heroes or sometimes mythical figures. Among such general tendencies, people in Sakha are characteristic in terms of their use of "Symbiosis with Nature," a philosophy of the relationship between nature and humans, rather than heroes as ethnic symbols, as well as in terms of a unique mode of life, in which they have built a republic where they earn a living by engaging in cattle breeding in Siberian forests.

Moreover, an example showing characteristics of inter-group relationships in current circumpolar areas is the relationship between minorities and a nation under post-Soviet circumstances after the implementation of *perestroika* by the former Soviet Union. Another example is the relationships between indigenous peoples—Inuit and Amerindian, who can be called people in the Fourth World in the Western democratic countries, such as in North America and Northern Europe—and nations, or those between the First Nations and nations.

In other words, it can be said that, in circumpolar areas, a variety of inter-group relationships can be observed, and each has a unique historical, political and cultural background. At the same time, in these areas, as part of world movements, movements to

demand indigenous people's rights are widely observed. However, though they use the same term "aboriginal rights," in North America, people's main concern is their lands, while Siberian ethnic groups of the former Soviet Union emphasize continuation of the social network of interaction between majority and minority. Meanwhile, in East Asia, because of the dynamic state there (Irimoto 2002), such as phylogenetic relationships among "peoples" dating back to prehistoric times, migration, segregation and syncretism, application of the notion of aboriginal rights may be difficult. Due to diversified relationships between nations and ethnic groups, goals and methods of resolutions for cultural revitalization movements are inevitably diverse.

Lastly, during the process of changes in groups and culture, many ethnic minorities are in a period of endangerment. At the same time, under the post-colonial and post-Soviet circumstances under which people experienced drastic political and economic changes, with the collapse of the once-powerful nation's framework, "peoples" who had been ruled started a new cultural revitalization movement to recover their identity. Cultural revitalization as a result came to be associated with once banned and persecuted religions—particularly, shamanism in northern Siberia or Tibetan/Mongolian Buddhism in Mongolia—and to be deeply involved in national politics. This movement was to recover cultural and political rights. This was to reintegrate their groups and to attain a new political position as a nation.

The third generation of a minority in a nation after a drastic cultural change is most likely to be involved in cultural revitalization. The first generation, even in a new environment, continues to use conventional and traditional culture or languages. The second generation becomes bicultural/bilingual, and sometimes by force or sometimes according to their judgment halts transmission of traditional culture to the third generation. They choose not to dare to transmit old culture so that their children can adapt themselves to the new environment. Consequently, the third generation will emerge knowing traditional culture and languages only in fragments or not at all. Under such circumstances, some people become conscious of a question about their identity and seek an answer from ethnicity that has lost the basis for identity. After reevaluating their culture, they initiate a cultural revitalization movement to transmit it to future generations. In this movement, they make social and economical demands on their positions in a nation, and conflict resolution is sought through a political movement.

Revitalized culture is not, of course, the traditional culture itself that existed in the past. A new "traditional" culture will be produced by selecting positive elements, excluding negative elements from the old one and reconstituting them. Sometimes it is used for "discourse" to make political demands as well as for tourism. Certainly, in the strict sense, images of "tradition" created in cultures are fiction identical to a utopia in messianic movements and millenarian movements. In contrast with completely unrealistic millenarian movements, however, the creation of "tradition" functions in the real world and enables people to establish relationships with others in the real world by identifying themselves. Furthermore, it enables them to establish new social relationships based on their philosophy. In terms of syncretism, this can be interpreted as a process of formation of a new third system through encounters between two different systems.

Moreover, what is important here is that a phenomenon of cultural as well as biological

mixing between two groups that come into contact with each other can be observed. It is true that status of Amerindians is specified in the Treaty in North America. Minorities in the former Soviet Union, present-day Russia and China are identified by each nation, and each individual is registered by the ethnic group to which he/she belongs. However, all these are on paper, and realistically non-Treaty-Indian and métis exist. Treaty-Indians are recognized based on artificial rules that they should be at least quarter-breed of Amerindian—i.e., at least one out of four grandparents should be a “genuine” Amerindian—which is biologically nothing but a mixing. Even in China and Russia where preferential treatment is given to minorities, children born through marriages between minority and Russian or minority and Han tend to be registered as minorities. Although biologically they are mixed-bloods, culturally, “ethnic groups” they should belong to are determined between the two groups.

Cultural mixing also occurs. In the past, when I asked a Koryak woman in Russia to show me hunting and trapping, she introduced me to her husband. He, however, was Russian. His background was that he had been born in the village, and had attended the same school as his wife. When I hesitated, she insisted that he hunted in precisely the same way as the Koryak and could probably do it more skillfully. At least for her, what he did was considered the same as what the Koryak did, even though he was Russian. Of course, though she herself was Koryak and had a strong Koryak identity, in truth, her father was from Kazakhstan. Despite opposing factors of Koryak and Russian in ideological terms, in reality, they all are mixed culturally as well as biologically.

As for the Ainu in Japan, a funeral for a certain elder famous as a traditionalist of Ainu culture, following his son’s strong wishes for the revitalization of Ainu culture, was held in the traditional Ainu style that had ceased for a long time. However, the funeral was held in a mixture of Ainu and Japanese Buddhist styles. It happened after considering relations with a Buddhist monk of the temple and social solidarity with local residents and the family members—many of whom were non-Ainu Japanese including the deceased elder’s son’s wife.

Therefore, culturally as well as biologically “genuine” “ethnic groups” do not exist. Or rather, in reality, a variety of cultures and peoples have been produced and will continue to be produced through the process of mixing. The concepts of race and ethnicity are ideological and artificial. Consequently, identity is not a fixed dual opposition to both themselves and others but hybridity. Identity is multiple and will be transformed as time goes on as well as according to circumstances.

## **PROSPECTS OF ANTHROPOLOGY OF ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY**

Important points that have been clarified in previous discussion are that ethnicity and identity transform themselves and that the ethnic identity, in which ethnicity and identity correlate, is often connected with inter-group conflicts. In many cases, inter-group conflicts in circumpolar areas are associated with the relationships between post-colonial nations and minorities there, and occurred under circumstances where a minority culture was endangered during the process of syncretism.

Certainly, goals for demanding rights vary according to the kind of minority group.

If their size is relatively large—for instance, ethnic autonomous regions in nations as seen in the former Soviet Union or China—demands to win rights will head toward the goals of assuming sovereignty and founding an independent state, which will consequently incur the collapse of the former state. On the other hand, if the size of minority groups is small, they will be swallowed by outside large-scale societies and become extinct. Ethnic conflicts exist in various forms between these two extremes. In inter-group conflicts, ethnic identity is expressed culturally, politically or sometimes violently.

As stated above, I have mentioned and analyzed the past and current state of research subjects from an anthropological perspective. Even though anthropology is criticized for only analyzing and not playing an active role in society, analysis is the fundamental mission of anthropology. However, I may explain that anthropology has a further mission. More specifically, based on the facts that were clarified from previous analyses, it offers advocacy for the future. That means advocacy for conflict resolution. Now that it has become clear that ethnicity and identity are deeply associated with inter-group conflicts, expressing opinions on resolution to those facing these problems, though imperfect, will provide them with clues for considering their future.

Although detailed information analysis and respective and specific strategies for resolution are required for each conflict, they will not be discussed here. Matters that will be stated here are advocacy for human levels of thought on ethnicity and identity, and in particular, a concept of “symbiosis,” gaps among groups in understanding its meaning and conflict deterrence. In delineating these, I will start with a conversation with a certain Ainu man.

On one occasion, I conversed with an Ainu man on Ainu ethnicity. I asked him questions about Ainu ethnicity, namely, elements that constitute the Ainu ethnic group. “Actually, I think it is spirituality. That means Ainu spirits to live with nature,” he replied. Living with nature means “symbiosis” between nature and humans, and spirits cited by him are Ainu frames of mind and they mean Ainu perception of the relationship between nature and humans. This can be referred to as Ainu spirituality.

His remarks followed, “The Ainu live shrewdly.” The word “shrewdly” represents a flexible way humans carry themselves to live in nature, and furthermore, to live taking on nature. In other words, it means their ability to employ strategies to flexibly carry themselves dealing with the environment surrounding them. The Ainu live in nature, which means they live in nature by not unilaterally depending on nature but utilizing it. This does not mean the control or destruction of nature. It does not mean being unilaterally controlled by nature either. It means living in symbiosis with nature while in nature. It can be said that Ainu spirituality is the frame of mind of the Ainu on the relationship between nature and humans, and this is Ainu ethnicity.

His remarks continued, “The World consists of different things. Nature is not created equal. Animals, plants, humans and stone are different. Even humans are not created equal. Some people have ability, and some don’t. However, in this world, different things foster each other.” In this manner, Ainu spirituality also reflects on interpersonal relationships.

However, a concept of symbiosis can be seen in Japanese culture as well as in Ainu culture, but it should be noted that there are commonalities and differences in the meaning



of the word “symbiosis” in respective cultures. A concept of symbiosis in the Japanese language means harmony as a whole maintaining the relationship of mutual assistance. On the other hand, though the concept of symbiosis in Ainu culture means giving recognition to and fostering each other, substantially, “shrewdness,” a strategy by which an each individual lives, is emphasized.

The Ainu do not obey others if they do not want to. Conversely, they cannot make others obey against their will. In this manner, a festival is said to be the only place where people with different perceptions can gather. However, even during a festival, they cannot force people to attend it against their will. They refuse dominator-subordinate interpersonal relationships just as in the relationship between nature and humans. The idea of symbiosis, as he expressed, is “Difference is beautiful,” based on all-out individualism and egalitarianism in Ainu society.

In contrast to the concept of symbiosis in Japanese culture being static and passive, symbiosis in Ainu culture is active and dynamic. This may be due to differences in activities of livelihood between farming and hunting and in the ways in which they deal with nature. These two cultures, however, share common premises that they give recognition to different things and avoid conflicts on which a concept of symbiosis is based.

It is intriguing that perhaps most of the people who belong to each culture do not clearly perceive the differences in the meaning of the concept of symbiosis, and the word “symbiosis” alone is used as a symbol of cross-cultural commonality and they are convinced that they understand each other. In the context of each culture, they interpret the same word differently. Therefore, it can be said that mutual understanding stated here at least partially includes misunderstanding. From a converse point of view, they have commonality in partially misunderstanding each other. For this reason, the effects of “discourse” on “symbiosis” to at least avoid cross-cultural conflicts when crossing cultural borders, and at the same time, sharing values attached to the word can be seen.

Interestingly, symbiosis, unlike an evolutionistic idea that the strong survives in competition, is another form of existence observed in the evolutionary process. It can be also said that it is another evolutionary principle. As a matter of fact, a variety of animals have symbiotic relations with various plants in the ecosystem. Respective species with forms and functions in the ecosystem have been evolving in mutual or overall relations. Indeed, it can be said that the entire ecosystem is a product of symbiosis. Humans are also included in the ecosystem, and continue evolving in overall relations.

Positioning humans in overall relations enables them to feel gratitude and show compassion to others and nature. At the same time, they can feel identify toward the humankind transcending individual human groups. This isn't just a feeling but a reality before the current global environmental problems and use of weapons of mass destruction. As ethnic identity can be observed in various societies ranging from kinship-based groups to nations, conversely, if the borders of nations are ignored, ethnicity is not strongly associated with identity. This represents a transcendence of ethnic identity, and ethnicity changes into humanity and ethnic identity transforms itself into identity as the humankind. That means universally taking a concept of original oneness (Irimoto 1994:426-427) as a concept of the relationship between nature and humans and applying it to ethnicity based on cultural

differences of human groups. This represents the establishment of original oneness of the humankind.

Through the studies on ethnicity and identity in this volume, the question about "what humans are" has been addressed. On various occasions in these studies, humans could be seen doing their best for their own or their groups' existence, positioning themselves in the nature-human as well as interpersonal relationships to seek the meaning of life. Sometimes this included confrontation and sometimes symbiosis. It will take a long time to resolve conflicts, and will require practical measures. However, in order to turn the 21st century from a century of conflict into one of reconciliation, and from a century of confrontation into one of symbiosis, I would hereby like to advocate the concept of symbiosis from an anthropological standpoint.

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