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Since September 2012, some Ainu, including Ogawa Ryukichi and Jonoguchi Yuri, have paved the way to the repatriation of their ancestral remains through legal battle with Hokkaido University. Nonetheless, in December 2019, twelve Japanese universities, whose scientists unethically collected and kept Ainu human remains over the course of a century in order to propagate Social Darwinist ideologies, and the Hokkaido Ainu Association (HAA) carried out the relocation of Ainu human remains to a newly built repository at the Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony in Shiraoui, Hokkaido with the active collaboration of the Japanese government. At the same time, the Archaeological Society of Nippon, the Anthropological Society of Nippon,

the Japanese Society of Cultural Anthropology, and the HAA called for public comments on their draft of “Guidelines for the Ethical Research of Ainu People,” which proposed conducting research on the relocated Ainu human remains in Shiraoi (Hokkaido Ainu Association 2019) despite Ainu resistance.

The Japanese government states that the purpose of the relocation is to console the souls of the deceased and to manage the relocated Ainu human remains until concerned Ainu people are able to rebury their ancestral remains (Hokkaido University 2019). However, Kimura Fumio, who has been involved in the repatriation of Ainu human remains kept in Hokkaido University to his community in Biratori, recounts:

In 1916, our ancestors were forcibly relocated to Biratori, the place where I was born.

Later, their remains were exhumed from our communal grave and brought to Hokkaido University without our consent. In December 2019, they were forcibly relocated again to Shiraoi (Asahi Shimbun 15 December 2019).

Before the forcible relocation, the Japanese government published the “Guidelines Concerning the Repatriation of Ainu Remains Collected by Universities to Their Site,” but no Ainu have been able to apply for the return of their ancestral remains because of the Guidelines’ inflexible conditions for repatriation. As of August 2019, only 101 out of more than 1,600 Ainu human remains kept in the above-mentioned universities were returned to four Ainu communities. That any remains could be repatriated at all is thanks to the leadership of Ogawa, Jonoguchi, and other Ainu who do not affiliate themselves with the HAA, the largest Ainu organization in Japan.

The aggregation of Ainu human remains at Shiraoi is a result of a lack of morals in the Japanese government, universities and academic societies, the government’s poor regulation regarding the Indigenous Ainu people’s rights to the repatriation of human remains, and an inherently flawed decision-making process.

- The new draft of “Guidelines for the Ethical Research of Ainu People,” co-written by the Anthropological Society of Japan, the Japanese Archaeological Association, The Japan Society of Cultural Anthropology, and the HAA, fails to acknowledge academia’s role in perpetuating injustice against the Ainu people through unethical research practices. Instead, it only recommends that a new system for studying Ainu remains be established as quickly as possible, deflecting responsibility from the academic community itself.
- The “Guidelines Concerning the Repatriation of Ainu Remains Collected by Universities to their Excavation Site,” published by the Japanese government in December 2018, requires government approval of organizations representing the regions to which the human remains should return, thus shifting the management of the Ainu remains from the universities to the government, rather than to the Ainu themselves.
- Both of the above-mentioned guidelines were written without the consultation of Ainu representatives outside the Japanese government-affiliated HAA. The Association, with

only about 2,300 members as of 2016, represents just a tenth of Hokkaido's Ainu estimated population of 20,000. In other words, thousands of Ainu were excluded from participating in the creation of the laws and measures that affect them.

The following actions are recommended towards recognizing the Indigenous Ainu people's rights to self-determination and the repatriation of their ancestral remains.

- The twelve universities, Japanese academic societies, and the Japanese government are required to scrutinize and apologize for their long-term injustices, and commit themselves to the repatriation and reburial of Ainu human remains in cooperation with the Ainu people, rather than using them for research.
- The Japanese government should guarantee the Ainu their rights to self-determination and the repatriation of their ancestral remains, and should not create any law or regulation that affects them without their free, prior and informed consent.
- Any dialogue concerning the repatriation and reburial of Ainu human remains should be made open and accessible to all Ainu organizations, including not only the HAA, but also the Monbetsu Ainu Association, the Asahikawa Ainu Council, the Karafuto Ainu Association, and others.

References

- Hokkaido Ainu Association. 2019. "Ainu Minzoku ni kansuru Kenkyurinri Sisin An [A Draft Guidelines for the Ethical Research of Ainu People]". Accessed on 13 April 2020, <https://www.ainu-assn.or.jp/news/files/3b014e7a03b0c1567978f9a1da5f17b8e8813a5a.pdf>
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