
COMPARATIVE ISSUES:

RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS TO PROMOTE AND PROTECT AINU CULTURE IN JAPAN

by Masaki Oita

THE AINU PEOPLE

The Ainu people are an Indigenous people most of whom live around the northern part of the Japanese Archipelago, especially in Hokkaido, with a unique language as well as religious and cultural distinctiveness. The population of Ainu people living in Hokkaido is estimated at about 24,000 or 0.4 per cent of the region's total population (0.02 per cent of the national population). The population of Ainu people outside Hokkaido is unknown.

Around the late 19th century, when the modernisation of Japan and the development of Hokkaido Island began, a large-scale immigration of native Japanese and various modernisation policies resulted in significant impacts to the life and culture of Ainu people. At that time the then national government did not succeed in improving the Ainu's poor living conditions.

Today Ainu people live a lifestyle similar to other Japanese people in all aspects. However, while the gaps in living standards and educational achievements between Ainu people and other Japanese people have been steadily narrowed, they still remain.

POLICY ATTEMPTS TO IMPROVE LIVING STANDARDS AND PROMOTE AINU CULTURE

Since 1974, the Hokkaido prefectural government has been implementing measures for the improvement of living standards of Ainu people with the financial support of the national government. A variety of services provided by the prefectural government include: scholarships; welfare counseling services; job placement support; agriculture, forestry and fishery infrastructure development; and training in craft skills.

In May 1997, the Ainu Culture Promotion Act¹ was enacted, based on which the national government, together with relevant organisations, takes measures to promote Ainu culture including the Ainu language, and to foster the public understanding of the history and culture of the Ainu.

The major actor of Ainu cultural promotion, besides Ainu people and their organisations, is the Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture ('FRPAC'). The FRPAC was designated in November 1997 as the juridical person to implement the business concerning the promotion of Ainu culture, etc., based on the 1997 Ainu Culture Promotion Act. The FRPAC, with the financial support by the national and Hokkaido prefectural governments, offers a variety of opportunities for Ainu people to learn and inherit their own culture.

FROM UN DECLARATION TO THE ADVISORY COUNCIL

In September 2007, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples ('UN Declaration'),² which gave a certain conclusion to the long-term UN debates on Indigenous peoples.

In Japan, correspondingly, the House of Representatives and the House of Councilors unanimously adopted the 'Resolution to Recognise the Ainu as an Indigenous People' on June 6, 2008.

In response to these developments, the Chief Cabinet Secretary expressed the Government's position in his statement on the same day of the resolutions of both Houses, which said:

Not only will the government further enhance the Ainu policies taken so far, but it will make efforts to establish comprehensive policy measures, in reference to relevant clauses of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, with the recognition that the Ainu are an Indigenous people who have lived around the northern part of the Japanese Archipelago, especially in Hokkaido, with a unique language as well as religious and cultural distinctiveness.³

In July 2008, the Chief Cabinet Secretary called a high-level expert council, the Advisory Council for Future Ainu Policy, to consider principles and measures for future Ainu policy in Japan. The Advisory Council, with the representative

of the Ainu people, reviewed the history of the Ainu and their indigeneness, and comprehensively considered new principles and measures for future policy. In July 2009, after one year of deliberation, the Advisory Council submitted its final report to the Chief Cabinet Secretary.⁴

AFTER THE ADVISORY COUNCIL

Based on the report of the Advisory Council, the Council for Ainu Policy Promotion was set up in December 2009, hosted by the Chief Cabinet Secretary. In addition, the Comprehensive Ainu Policy Office was established within the Cabinet Secretariat, to serve as the secretariat of the Council and to coordinate Ainu policy across the government.

The Council for Ainu Policy Promotion aims to comprehensively and effectively promote Ainu policy, taking views and opinions of Ainu people into consideration. In particular, the Council now works on the realisation of comprehensive recommendations of the former Advisory Council, which identified policy priorities in Japan with reference to the UN Declaration.

To ensure this, the Council is comprised of 14 members in total, among which five are Ainu representatives, five are scholars and experts on Ainu culture and human rights, and the remaining four are leaders of the national and local governments. The Council is making steady progress in consideration of a variety of policy measures, including the landmark Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony.

RECENT TOPICS

SYMBOLIC SPACE FOR ETHNIC HARMONY

The Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony is a project proposed by the former Advisory Council as the key project of its final report. It is expected to be a national center for respecting and revitalising the way of life and culture of Ainu people, as well as a national and international hub for education, research, and exhibition of Ainu culture, with a national museum surrounded by a rich natural environment.

To realise this project, the Council for Ainu Policy Promotion established a working group, which finalised its consideration of basic concepts of the Symbolic Space in June 2011. The national government compiled in July 2012, the Master Plan for the Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony, which elaborates the work of the Council's working group and presents the overall picture of the Symbolic Space, including its location (around Lake *Poroto*⁵ in Shiraoi, Hokkaido, Japan) as well as its functions, zoning, and major facilities.

The national government, together with Ainu people and others, is now considering more details of the Symbolic Space to realise this unique attempt toward a harmonious society.

PROMOTION OF MEASURES TO BETTER THE LIVING STANDARDS OF AINU PEOPLE

The Council for Ainu Policy Promotion established another working group to research, for the first time, the living standards of Ainu people living outside Hokkaido Island. The result of the research was finalised in June 2011.

The Council and its third working group, the Working Group for Ainu Policy Promotion, are now considering what kind of effective policy measures could be introduced to better the living standards of Ainu people, particularly those who are currently beyond the reach of such measures by the Hokkaido prefectural government.

ISSUE OF AINU HUMAN REMAINS

Since the 19th century, the ethnic origin of the Ainu has attracted the attention of physical anthropologists. They have collected and studied human remains of the Ainu, especially their skulls, in some cases against the will of Ainu people.

Recently Ainu people have requested the repatriation of Ainu human remains possessed by universities or colleges to, if any are found, the descendants, and the rest to be transferred to the Symbolic Space described above for memorial ceremonies by Ainu people. Most of the universities and colleges in Japan, upon request of the national government, are preparing an inventory of Ainu human remains for future repatriation.

ENHANCEMENT OF PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING

Since the Ainu Culture Promotion Act was enacted in 1997, the national and local governments have taken various measures to raise public awareness of Ainu culture, such as holding seminars and lecture series on Ainu culture, establishing websites, and publishing textbooks for students and picture books for children on Ainu culture. It must be admitted, however, that the first 15 years since the enactment of the 1997 Act have not necessarily observed drastic changes in the people's awareness and understanding of the Ainu. To achieve such an outcome strategic public relations and communication activities will be required.

On appointment the Working Group for Ainu Policy Promotion, under the Council, considered how to

effectively raise public awareness and obtain understanding on the history and culture of the Ainu. One project recommended by the Working Group is called ‘*Irankarapte Campaign*’, which is inspired by the popularity of the Hawaiian word *aloha*, aiming to make the word *irankarapte* (meaning ‘Hello’ in the Ainu language) much more popular in various scenes, including tourist spots, to be a cool keyword in Hokkaido.

REMAINING ISSUES

Although Ainu policy in Japan has been making steady progress in a variety of policy areas, some have pointed out that major issues still remain to be solved. They may include: an official ‘apology’ by the government for its past integration policies; the full implementation of the UN Declaration and the establishment of Indigenous rights; the restitution of the lands that Ainu people historically used; and the enactment of a new law that legally recognises the Ainu as an Indigenous people and gives them special treatments. However, these issues are not easy to solve, requiring public understanding and a long-term dialogue between Ainu and non-Ainu people.

Even so, the Government of Japan will continue its active efforts to establish a solid partnership and enhance a constructive dialogue with Ainu people toward building a rich and cohesive society in which Ainu people can live with a sense of pride.

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- 1 In full, the Act on the Promotion of Ainu Culture, and Dissemination and Enlightenment of Knowledge about Ainu Traditions, etc. (*Ainu bunka no shinko narabi ni Ainu no dento to ni kansuru chishiki no fukyu oyobi keihatsu ni kansuru horitsu*), Act No. 52 of 1997, enacted 1 July 1997.
- 2 *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, GA Res 61/295, UN GAOR, 61st sess, 107th plen mtg, UN Doc A/RES/61/295 (13 September 2007).
- 3 Excerpt from the statement of the Chief Cabinet Secretary on June 6, 2008
- 4 The English version of the final report is available at <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/ainu/dai10/siryou1_en.pdf>.
- 5 ‘*poro-to*’ means ‘a big pond/lake’ in the Ainu language.



Amata Women With Their Birds 2011
Nyurpaya Kaika-Burton, Yaritji Young, Mary Pan, Ilawanti Ungkutjuru Ken, Paniny Mick and (hidden) Naomi Kantjuti

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