

Hokkaido's Indigenous People

Connecting with the Outside World

An Interview with Masako Kubota

Japan is known for being one of the most homogenous societies, with a strong sense of nationalism, and little to no ethnic and cultural diversity. This is because Japan has made an extensive effort in eradicating the cultural distinction posed by ethnic minority groups, such as the Ainu people. After decades of forced assimilation and discriminatory policies, the Japanese government has finally taken major steps to fully recognize and protect the indigenous Ainu people. The *Journal* is honored to have Masako Kubota, an adjunct professor at Florida International University (FIU), to highlight the untold story of the Ainu people.

Academic Interest and Ainu History

Journal: You have previously stated that your encounter with the Ainu people began in 2010 when you visited Akan Kotan. Was there any particular point during your visit that you were inspired to learn more about the Ainu people?

Kubota: For my graduation essay, I read Hokkaido newspaper articles and I interviewed many Ainu people of different classes and occupations. There were several people who I was so interested in meeting. When I was a student, since it was just a graduation essay, there was no need for me to go all the way to Hokkaido. However, I decided to go and meet them after I graduated and received my master's. As I have written, I felt as though they were my friends. The newspaper people contacted the Ainu, and they were very happy to meet me. So, I met most of the people I wrote about and learned more about their lives. That was the beginning for me.

Journal: What knowledge did you have of the Ainu prior to your visit? Were Ainu rights and recognition part of the public discourse or was it largely ignored?

Kubota: I did not know anything about the Ainu before my visit. I think I only knew of spectacular things like Ainu *iyomante* which is the ceremony to “send off the bear” (*kuma okuri no odori*). *Iyomante* is the Bear Festival, and it is a part of Ainu bear worship. So, I knew about all of the very exotic things but I did not know much more about Ainu people. For the most part, they are just regular Japanese people living regular lives. However, they are facing poverty and a lot of discrimination. I did not know much about that. We are both Japanese, but I learned so much about reciprocity from them—not only between people, but between people, animals, and nature. *Iyomante*, this *kuma okuri no odori*, the Festival of the Bear, is about respecting animals and respecting nature. It was a lesson I was glad to learn.

Journal: How has Ainu society adapted and changed over time in response to discriminatory policies by the Japanese government?

Kubota: In 1899 the Japanese imperial government enacted *kyu dojin hogohō* (旧土人保護法) which is the Hokkaido Ainu Protection Act. *Kyu dojin – dojin* is a very segregated term, and then at that time they said *hogohō* (保護法) – which means “we will protect you” but they did not actually protect Ainu people. The Japanese imperial government controlled them instead. They transformed the Ainu into farmers and woodsmen. Traditionally, Ainu people are hunters and gatherers, not farmers. Then the government enacted assimilation policies. They wanted Ainu to get married to Japanese people and also to receive universal education in Japanese. From that time on, they have been gradually losing their language. In 1989, there was the construction of the Nibutani Dam and many Ainu people protested the construction. That was the first time I realized, “Oh there are Ainu people, and they are protecting their sacred land!” Many indigenous people from all over the world gathered to protest with the Ainu and protect them. They had a big demonstration to protect their sacred land and stop the construction. But the Japanese government still built the Nibutani Dam. I was very shocked and saddened. In 1997, the government replaced the Hokkaido Ainu Protection Act, but the new law only protected Ainu culture. It did not help with the poverty or daily challenges of Ainu communities. In 2007, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was introduced. This declaration helped convince the Japanese government to officially recognize the Ainu as indigenous people who had their own language, religion, and culture in 2008. Although the Prime Minister’s Office made that recognition over a decade ago, now in 2019, a new law was finally enacted.

The government is planning to spend lots of money for tourism in Hokkaido. When they said tourism, I became so afraid that Ainu people will be some kind of sightseeing items for tourists. They will not become *shuyaku* (主役), or in other words, I am worried that they will not have control over their role in the tourism industry. They are not the people who control that government money or tourism, but other people will like hotels or advertisement agencies. I am so afraid that very little will actually end up going to the Ainu people. Those kinds of things happen all the time, right? They happen even in the United States.

In the Western part of Hokkaido there is a city called Tomakomai, which is one of the five different places where the Japanese government is allowing gambling, officially. Within one hour of Tomakomai they have a big museum called the *kokuritsu ainu minzoku hakubutsukan* (国立アイヌ民族博物館 or the National Ainu Museum). This will be opened in 2020 because the government expects high volumes of tourists because of the Olympics. The *bunka-chō* (文化庁 or the Agency for Cultural Affairs) is invested in it and they made it a *kokuritsu* (国立) or national museum. Here in Florida, the Seminole people are doing excellent in business through casinos and they have all of the domestic and international rights to the Hard Rock Café. This has been really beneficial for the economic status and resources of the Seminole people. However, I am unsure if this same tactic will be good for Ainu people or not. The government is building an integrated resort, which is essentially a casino, in Tomakomai. They are spending a lot of money, but I do not know if any of that will help the local Ainu community. I think now is the time that Ainu people really must have their own identity and they also have to clearly say what are their rights. They are a very nice and quiet people, who have suffered greatly and that is the reason that until now they have not had a chance to declare their rights. Now, they can clearly say that they are indigenous people who have rights and deserve respect.

Perceptions and Scholarship on the Ainu

Journal: There seems to be a lot of literature on discrimination by the government. Could you tell us about how Japanese society views and treats the Ainu people?

Kubota: There is a scholar called Harumi Befu, who is a Professor Emeritus at Stanford University. He wrote about *Nihonjinron* (日本人論 or theories about the Japanese people) in his 2001 book, *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of "Nihonjinron."* In this work, he said that Japan is not the mono-ethnic country that people think it is. It clings to the idea that there are pure Japanese and non-pure Japanese who are ranked accordingly. This definition emphasizes the homogeneity of the Japanese in genetic and cultural terms, ignoring the reality of heterogeneity and us being xenophobic, patronizing, and discriminatory against those who are not pure. Elderly Japanese people, maybe over the age of 60, still think that being pure Japanese is good and they do not believe that Ainu people are pure Japanese. In many cases, their beliefs focus solely on ethnicity. Ainu people are Japanese though! They are the original Japanese! These beliefs are changing now. Young people today do not have any of those same feelings. When many Japanese people hear that I am studying Ainu people and how there are many of them in Hokkaido – they say, “Oh I did not know! I thought they all disappeared!” That kind of attitude is not stupidity, merely ignorance. They simply do not know about Ainu people, because they never learn about them.

Journal: What is the state of scholarship on the Ainu in Japan? Are there many prominent academics who study Ainu culture and language? How have they helped the Ainu community?

Kubota: Most of the people who are studying the Ainu live in Hokkaido. Hokkaido University has an Ainu Institute and there is a very famous professor called Kitahara Jirōta. He is not one of those archaeologists who study Ainu, but he is actually Ainu. He knows much about the culture and daily lives of Ainu people. He learned the language from his grandmother and he is one of the very few young people – I think he is a little bit over 40 – who speaks the Ainu language fluently. His work on the Ainu has been incredible. The government even consulted him about the new national museum because of his heritage and his groundbreaking research.

Then, there are many archaeologists. The Ainu have a long history of living in Japan. Archaeological evidence shows that they have resided in Hokkaido since the Jōmon period (1000-300 BCE). There is another very significant scholar, her name is Yuko Honda. She is a professor at Sapporo University and she started an organization on campus called “*Urespa*” that has helped Ainu people greatly. She created a *shōgakukinseido* (奨学金制度 or a scholarship system) for Ainu people who want to go to university. She has also asked many industries in Hokkaido to donate money to *Urespa* and she has helped them develop new jobs for Ainu people. This organization, *Urespa*, has helped redefine Ainu rights in Hokkaido. It emphasizes that Ainu people are good, and that they should have pride in their fascinating culture. I think this kind of movement is empowering for Ainu people, and I am so lucky to have met both Honda Yuko and Kitahara Jirōta.

Crosscultural Exchange

Journal: What value do the intercultural exchanges you organize have for your students and for Ainu people?

Kubota: Honestly, I am still learning the value. I want them to influence my students. This year, we started to study Seminole Native Americans. Before we go to Japan, we must learn about the Florida Seminoles and Miccosukee. We went to a pow wow the other day and all the students volunteered and learned about Native Americans – their dancing, what they think, their philosophies. Then, during our trip to Japan, I lead the students to an Ainu village where I hope they can learn more about indigenous people. When they went previously, they felt so welcomed. When we went to a mountain, Ainu people showed us that we have to appreciate the mountain god. We brought many things on our journey, like nice water and tobacco, to show our respect and appreciation to the mountain god. We brought over some cigarettes, rice wine, and a few sweets to distribute. Then, we prayed to the mountain god and picked up some edible plants. Through those rituals, my students learned how important it is to these villagers to protect the mountain because they harvest edible plants there. At the same time, we appreciated the lesson and learned that we must also protect the mountain. Intercultural exchanges like this help my students and Ainu people learn about each other, and it gives them a chance to teach others about their own culture.

Journal: What were the Ainu able to learn from your students and from the Seminoles when they visited Florida?

Kubota: Ainu people were very surprised when they came to Florida. We went to a charter school for Seminole people, and they learned that the Seminoles are doing very well with the Hard Rock Café and the casino. They allocate their new resources to elder care and improving the charter school so that the tribe's children can receive a great education. Until recently, just like the Ainu, members of the Seminole Tribe did not have the same access to higher education. Ainu people were also interested in the immersive language classes that the Seminole have for their children. Some of the children, maybe 8 months or so, come in the morning and they will stay with elders. They immerse themselves in the language in everyday life. This immersive language class is quite new, but it helps to perpetuate the language and prevent it from dying off. Another thing the Ainu were impressed with was how much the Seminoles allocate to elder care. For young Ainu, they say their elder people have really helped them. Young Ainu say that elders have shown them their culture and helped to develop a sense of pride in being Ainu. They want to safely care for elders in return as thanks. During this trip, some young Ainu learned that the Seminoles have excellent 24-hour care for their elders. They also learned that the U.S. government does not supply any of the resources for this, but that the Seminoles themselves are doing it.

Journal: The Endangered Language Project puts the number of native speakers of the Ainu language at just 10. Do you believe that there will be a revival of the language if they start these immersion language classes with young Ainu people?

Kubota: Yes, I do. When Honda Yuko was young, she went to an Ainu village and she learned from Kayano Shigeru, who was a very famous Ainu activist and elder. He was the first Ainu ever elected to be a politician in the Diet. She went to his village and she became like his daughter. She learned the Ainu language from him. Now, she is the one who is trying to start an immersion language movement in Japan. Ms. Honda has written many papers on the Ainu language and developed many resources for language learning. Now she is contributing to the national museum and her work is respected by both Ainu leaders and officials in the Japanese government, which is very important. Hopefully, the government will see the value in preserving the Ainu language and devote some resources to it.

Journal: The government recently approved a bill recognizing the country's Ainu minority as an "indigenous" people for the first time, granting them a significant amount of money each year. This is certainly a major step forward on policies toward the Ainu people. What implications do you think this will have on cultural and linguistic preservation and do you think the government will fully commit to this new bill?

Kubota: I think so. I hope so. They are doing it just before the Olympics and similar things have happened in other countries as well. The Olympics are a time when many people come from across the entire planet, so the government is under heavy scrutiny and wants to impress all of the visitors. But I hope this money will be allocated for the Ainu people, not just for tourism. This new law is a step forward, sure. However, the amount of money the government will give to Ainu people annually is small

compared to how much they are spending on the new integrated resort in Tomakomai or the new national museum. I was talking to Ainu people the other day and they said they are going to have some kind of an illumination display near the integrated resort so that they can also benefit from the tourism. In Akan, they are going to highlight the forest so when people go there, they will see singers and storytellers. I really want Ainu people to have a part in all of this, not just the people who are providing the money and pulling the strings.

Journal: What role has FIU played in raising awareness about the lives and cultures of the Ainu people and other indigenous people around the globe?

Kubota: When the Ainu people came, they learned that Native Americans share the same ideas about reciprocity between people and nature. They also learned many best practices about community care and language preservation. Sadly, our Ainu guests could not speak English, so I became the volunteer guide and I had my Japanese language students assist in translating during the visit. Our job was to play an intermediary role between our Ainu guests and the Seminoles of South Florida but through that role, we also learned much about Seminole and Ainu culture. We even presented what we learned to FIU's Global Indigenous Forum. The forum allowed our Ainu guests to perform and share their culture as well to the local community. Through this forum, FIU has played an important role in promoting the cultures and voices of indigenous people. I am thinking about inviting the Ainu once again to visit Florida and I am also thinking about taking my students to learn about the Seminoles and Miccosukees.

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