Is it Possible to Hear the Voices of Ainu Women?
Silence and Empowerment

Masumi Matsumoto*

Abstract

This chapter focuses on the life stories of Ainu women. The Ainu, an indigenous ethnic group who live in Hokkaido, has faced social discrimination particularly since the Meiji Restoration period. Many Ainu are not proud of being Ainu, and some even strived to erase their ethnic identity in order to avoid discrimination and social exclusion. The stipulation of the Act of the Promotion of Ainu Culture in 1997 seemed to promote ethnic pride, but fostering young culture bearers of both genders is hard. Since 1997, the government has financed various Ainu culture projects and dispatched Ainu to Japanese and overseas districts to provide introductions to Ainu cultural activities, such as dancing, playing music, carving, embroidery, and so on. Although these performers included women, they never confessed during the “performance” how Ainu women were discriminated against and their voices were muted in front of audiences and male Ainu leaders. After listening to several old women’s life stories, the author points out how Ainu women were undereducated and low-paid and had low self-esteem because of the structural violence. They are still “subordinate” in post-colonial theory (Spivak). However, some Ainu women have empowered themselves by teaching the Ainu language and traditional culture and have begun to tell their life stories. The author describes how sisterhood among Ainu women and teaching their language to others, including the next generation, empowered them and discusses the difficulty of hearing their muted voices.

Introduction

Ainu issues are very difficult for Japanese (wajin)1 who live outside Hokkaido to understand. First, “Japanese” in general know that Japanese society is

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1 In this paper, “Japanese people” are called wajin, which indicates immigrants from the Honshu Island, Shikoku Island, and Kyushu Island. It was commonly believed that wajin and the Ainu had not only linguistic differences but also racial differences. In terms of nationality,
heterogeneous. The In 2006, the Ainu population in Hokkaido was 23,767. However, Ainu also live on the Honshu island and other islands. The precise population is not known because of the lack of demographic statistics in Japan. Presumably, 99% of the main Japanese population will answer that they have never seen real Ainu. Within the realm of public education, Ainu issues are touched upon only in modern Japanese history, such as the colonization of Hokkaido Island by Japan and the island’s development by Japanese settlers. Despite the recent description of indigenous Ainu characters in textbooks, the majority of “Japanese” do not know or are not interested in what Ainu history was like before the modern period, how their lifestyle was forcibly changed by the assimilation policy, what kind of rights the Ainu have, or how their livelihood has improved since the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act (CPA) was enacted in 1997.

Most “Japanese” in Hokkaido are almost the same as the residents of the other islands of Japan in terms of their knowledge and understanding of Ainu issues. Hokkaido has a population of 5.4 million, and the majority of “Japanese” on this island are the descendants of settlers who arrived after the Meiji Restoration. However, only a few recognize that the name of Hokkaido appeared as a new colony of Japan and that the Meiji government confiscated the Ainu’s homeland by force and subterfuge. In other words, students have less opportunity at school to learn about the modern history of Hokkaido, including the expropriation of Ainu lands, the loss of their fishing and hunting rights, the forced assimilation policy, and uncontrolled discrimination. Therefore, the Ainu’s ethnic rights as indigenous people are still invisible to the majority of “Japanese.”

However, in the wake of the 2008 Parliament resolution to seek the possibility of recognizing the Ainu as an indigenous people, Ainu indigenous status will be recognized formally in the hope of inaugurating the National Ainu Museum and the Symbolic Space of Ethnic Harmony in Shiraoi in 2020, when the Olympic Summer Games will be held in Tokyo. Over the last two decades, the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games have presented elements of the indigenous people’s cultures of the host country, and we predict that the Ainu culture will be also highlighted during the 2020 Summer Games. Some Ainu still want to hide their ethnicity for fear of discrimination, while the government is in the process of recognizing the Ainu as an indigenous people in accordance with the global movement to recognize indigenous people’s rights. There are contradictions between the government’s will and some Ainu’s will.

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both wajin and the Ainu had Japanese nationality. Therefore, pressure upon Ainu to be authentic Japanese was very strong.