Revitalization of Indigenous Culture and Community Museum: A Case Study of the Indigenous Ainu in Hokkaido, Japan

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Abstract: In recent years, a rise in indigenous movements has become pervasive. In this trend, museums come to be ‘contact zones’ where museums and their source communities debate how the communities should be represented and who holds the power to represent their culture. This shift has provided indigenous peoples with an opportunity to represent their cultures and histories from their own viewpoints. Attempts to establish their own museums have been popular in some indigenous communities. Such ‘indigenous curation’ has encouraged the struggle for cultural revival of the indigenous peoples. However, a museum as a model culture tends to represent past cultural traditions, rather than contemporary diverse ways of life, and to provide stereotyped images of the culture to visitors. Therefore, the representation of contemporary indigenous cultures is a key issue faced by such museums. This paper discusses a case study of the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, Hokkaido, Japan, which was established as a community-based museum in 1992. The museum not only displays local Ainu culture but also offers several learning programs for tourists, in cooperation with local artisans’ cooperatives and other organizations. These creative experiences offer visitors an opportunity to understand the life and cultural heritage of the Ainu beyond that exhibited in the museum. In this paper, it is argued that this kind of community-based museum contributes to deconstructing the stereotypical image of the Ainu among the majority Japanese and to reviving the cultural heritage of the Ainu in the contemporary world, by clarifying the concepts of ecomuseum and community museum.

Keywords: indigenous peoples, community museum, ecomuseum, the Ainu, the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum

Introduction

In recent years, a global struggle to regain indigenous rights has become active. This trend encourages indigenous peoples to open museums and represent their histories and cultures by themselves. Often, such tribal museums are
the cultural centers of local communities, as well as being popular tourist destinations. However, a museum as a model culture tends to represent past cultural traditions, rather than contemporary diverse ways of life, and to provide stereotyped images of the culture to visitors. The representation of contemporary indigenous cultures is a key issue faced by such museums.

In discussing the matter, it is crucial to consider the concept of the ecomuseum (Arai 1995; Fuller 1992). The idea of the ecomuseum was developed in France in the 1970s and spread globally afterwards. Influenced by the rise of the environmental movement and the 1968 Paris riots, the French opened several decentralized museums in various regions such as Normandy, Brittany and the Camargue (Fuller 1992, p. 329). Georges Henri Rivière, the first president of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), was the father of the movement, and he created and defined the concept. Ecomuseums are based on the idea that museums and communities should be related to each other, and their mission is to develop community autonomy and identity, acting as community learning centers that link the past with the present (Fuller 1992, p. 328).

On the other hand, the rise of the civil rights movement in the United States encouraged ethnic minorities to establish their own community museums to secure ethnic rights. This museology also shares the concept of the ecomuseum because both movements consider museums as tools for community development and self-determination. However, the ecomuseum is defined by geographic areas, and is not just a museum as a single building (Fuller 1992, p. 330). In this sense, the ecomuseum can be argued to be an evolving model of community museum (Nunotani and Yoshida 2011, p. 193).

This paper discusses a case study the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, Hokkaido, Japan, and demonstrates the manner in which the museum represents contemporary and diverse indigenous Ainu cultures, in collaboration with the local people, by clarifying the concepts of ecomuseum and community museum.

Nibutani is a well-known Ainu settlement, where approximately 70 percent of the population is of Ainu origin (Nakamura 2007, p. 151). In this community, a dozen prominent artisans are engaged in the production of traditional Ainu crafts. In 2013, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry certified two
of their local crafts, *Nibutani-ita* (wooden trays) and *Nibutani-attus* (textiles made from tree bark), as “officially designated traditional craft products”.

The Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, which was established as a community based museum in 1992 (Nakamura 2007), not only displays local Ainu culture but also offers several learning programs for tourists, in cooperation with local artisans’ cooperatives and other organizations. These creative experiences offer visitors an opportunity to understand the life and cultural heritage of the Ainu beyond that exhibited in the museum. Based on my ethnographic research conducted intermittently during 2012-2017, this paper considers how these learning programs can contribute to deconstruct the stereotyped image and help the tourists gain an understanding of the contemporary and diverse ways of life and cultures of the Ainu ethnic group.

**Museums, indigenous peoples, and the politics of representation**

The museum, a modern institution for collecting and exhibiting objects, was developed in parallel with Western colonialism. The concept of museology dates back to the 16th century, when wealthy Western nobles were eager to exhibit objects collected from around the world in “cabinets of curiosity” in their homes. These private collections formed the basis for the later public museums, for the curious to view other cultures through a Western cultural lens (Onciul 2015, p. 4).

Evolving from the “cabinets of curiosity”, public ethnographic museums were established in the 19th century. These ‘scientific’ exhibitions became powerful tools to justify Western colonial interventions, by representing indigenous peoples as ‘uncivilized’ or ‘backward’, and needing to be civilized by the West. In other words, the Western colonial ideology provided the intellectual framework for interpreting other cultures (Smith 2003, p. 126).

Until recently, representation of indigenous cultures was mostly left in the hands of non-indigenous peoples, and their cultures were described with nostalgia, implying that they had vanished, rather than being dynamic and ongoing (Smith 2003). For aboriginal peoples, opportunities to represent their own voices through museum exhibitions were rare in the past.
Against this marginalization, *Indigènitude* (Clifford 2013), a rise in indigenous movements, became pervasive in the 1980s, especially in the former settler states, such as Australia, Canada and the Americas. As James Clifford discussed, indigenous traditions recovered, and transnational activism among indigenous peoples to regain their rights increased around the world. Like *Négritude*, *Indigènitude* is a vision of liberation and cultural difference that challenges the modern Western hegemony (Clifford 2013, p. 15).

In these circumstances, museums have come to be ‘contested terrain’ (Onciul 2015) or ‘contact zones’ (Clifford 1997) where diverse communities and actors debate what culture is, how it should be represented, and who holds the power to represent it (Onciul 2015, p. 4). In this sense, the 1980s represented a turning point for the rise of new museology, when collaboration between museums and source communities became common (Kreps 2009, p. 193; Onciul 2015, p. 4). This shift provided indigenous peoples with an opportunity to represent their cultures, histories and voices from their own viewpoints (Yoshida 2003, p. 151). As a result, the museum has become an important point of entry into mainstream society for indigenous peoples’ voices (Onciul 2015, p. 8).

In addition to collaboration with major museums, an attempt to establish their own museums has emerged in some indigenous communities. The so-called ‘indigenous curation’ (Kreps 2009), ‘tribal museum’ (Clifford 1997), or ‘community museum’ (Camarena and Morales 2006) consider museums as vehicles for local cultures to legitimize their presence in a global civil society, carrying out cultural exchange and building networks for their struggle (Camarena and Morales 2006, p. 327).

Among these institutions, the U’mista Cultural Center on the northwest coast of British Colombia in Canada is said to be one of the pioneering projects (Yoshida 2003, p. 152). Gloria Webster, a woman from the Kwakwaka’wakw community of Alert Bay led a movement to regain the rights to own and represent their cultural heritage. Using her experience of working at the university of British Colombia Museum of Anthropology, she demanded that the Canadian museums repatriate potlatch-related artifacts prepared by her father in 1921.
In the past, the potlatch, a traditional ritual of some indigenous communities on the north-western coast of Canada, was illegal under Canadian law. Thus, the treasures for the ceremony had been taken away by the government and kept in several national museums for a long time. To combat this injustice, Webster started a campaign to repatriate these items representing her cultural heritage in 1975, and the museums agreed to return those materials to her community in 1990 (Clifford 1997, p. 122-127; Yoshida 2003, p. 152). To exhibit their repatriated treasures, a community-based museum, the U’mista Cultural Center, was established at Alert Bay. It functions not only as an exhibition facility but also provides activities to transmit the traditions to future generations (Yoshida 2003, p. 152). Compared to major Western museums, the alternative museums have different agendas, and encourage the struggle for decolonization and cultural revival of indigenous peoples (Clifford 1997, p. 122; Onciul 2015, p. 3).

In the context of Japan, exhibitions of indigenous Ainu were mostly created by Wajin or the majority Japanese. From 1872 to 1922, some Ainu were put on display at the expositions held in Tokyo and Osaka as well as in St. Louis and London. At the domestic exhibition held at Osaka in 1903, living Ainu were presented with other ethnic minorities from some parts of Imperial Japan such as Taiwan, the Korean peninsula and the Ryukyu Islands. These expositions caused the spread of a stereotype image of the Ainu in Japanese society (Hasegawa 2010, p. 211).

However, a new attempt to exhibit Ainu culture emerged in the late 1970s. In 1977 the National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) was opened at the site of the Japan World Exposition, Osaka 1970, and a new permanent Ainu exhibition was completed in 1979. In those days, indigenous movements to regain their rights had become active internationally. This global trend affected the politics of minority issues in Japan, and some Ainu activists became committed radical movements to protest against marginalization. However, the Japanese government did not recognize the Ainu as a distinct ethnic group or indigenous people at that time and it saw the Ainu culture simply as a kind of local variation of Japanese culture. For instance, the Ainu language was considered just a local dialect of Japanese (Ohtsuka 1997, p. 109). Under these circumstances, the Minpaku decided to show Ainu culture as an indigenous culture and to keep the exhibition separate from that of Japanese culture (Ohtsuka 1997). Ohtsuka (1997), an anthropologist who curated the exhibition argued as below.
A fundamental idea of the display was as far as possible to highlight in visual terms how Japanese culture and Ainu culture have different roots, and to show this in particular by what used to characterize the spheres of livelihood, belief, and rituals (Ohtsuka 1997, p. 109).

Although a Canadian anthropologist, Sandra E. Nissen (1994), criticized the Minpaku exhibition because it did not represent the dynamics of contemporary Ainu’s struggle and fell into the discourse of ahistorical and cultural essentialism, Ohtsuka insisted that the exhibition clearly supported the claim of the Ainu to be considered as an indigenous people in Japan (Ohtsuka 1997). In this sense, the representation of the Ainu in Minpaku should be understood as strategic essentialism or a counter discourse to the dominant discourse of homogeneity.

In reality, the display was developed in collaboration with several organizations promoting the indigenous rights of the Ainu, and the Minpaku commissioned some Ainu to produce traditional artifacts to display at the exhibition. It can be argued that these efforts provided the contemporary Ainu with an opportunity to learn and revive their traditional skills and knowledge (Ohtsuka 1997).

Following the pioneering exhibition, Minpaku hosted a special Ainu exhibition in 2003. The exhibition “Message from the Ainu; Craft and Spirit” aimed to encourage the Ainu to represent their own culture. To do this, a planning committee was formed, and members of Ainu descent were invited from various communities. They were committed not only to creating the concept of the exhibition but also to selecting artifacts to exhibit. After nearly two years of planning for the opening of the exhibition, the concept of focusing on “Ainu history directly leading up to the present” and bringing “people” rather than objects to the fore was addressed (Yoshida 2003, p. 154). This special exhibition was the first time for the museum to provide representatives of an ethnic group with an opportunity to present themselves (ibid.).

However, there were a few exceptional ‘indigenous curation’ among Ainu (Kreps 2009), before the emergence of the collaboration between major museums and source communities as I discussed above. For instance, the Kawamura Kaneto Ainu museum was established as a ‘tribal museum’ (Clifford 1997) at
Asahikawa, Hokkaido in 1916. Later, in 1972, an indigenous activist, Kayano Shigeru, opened the *Nibutani Ainu Shiryoukan* to exhibit his private collection, and re-established in 1992 as the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum. Those museums are unique facilities in that Ainu culture is represented from their own perspective (Yoshida 2003, p. 154). In this paper, I argue that this kind of community-based museum contributes to deconstructing the stereotypical image of the Ainu among the majority Japanese and to reviving the cultural heritage of the Ainu in the contemporary world.

**Indigenous Ainu and the modern Japan**

Traditionally, Hokkaido, the northernmost prefecture of Japan, has been the territory of the indigenous Ainu. The Ainu called this area ‘Ainu Mosir’ (the land of humans), and they enjoyed an autonomous lifestyle for centuries, mainly relying on hunting and gathering activities. However, the Japanese government considered this territory as ‘ownerless land’ and consolidated it as Hokkaido under the jurisdiction of the nation state in 1869. After the Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act was enacted in 1899, the national government treated the Ainu as ‘barbarian’ people and implemented an aggressive assimilation policy. During that time, the immigration of Wajin or majority Japanese was also encouraged to cultivate agricultural land. Consequently, it is said that the Ainu lost approximately one-third of their agricultural land (Sugimoto 2014, p. 217).

As a result of colonization, much Ainu traditional culture was destroyed, and they became a socially, economically, and politically disadvantaged minority in Japan (Hasegawa 2010, p. 208-209). The racial discrimination and prejudice against the Ainu came to be a serious problem, forcing some Ainu to hide their ethnic identity.

According to a survey conducted by the Hokkaido prefectural government in 2013, the Ainu comprise approximately 17,000 persons, which is 0.3 percent of the total population of Hokkaido. The population of Ainu living in other areas is still unclear because no comprehensive survey has been conducted. However, it is estimated that a few thousand Ainu live in the Tokyo metropolitan area (Sugimoto 2014, p. 216-217). Occupationally, many Ainu worked in the primary and construction industries in the past, however, the number of those engaged in tertiary industries has increased recently. Some
have faced economic hardship and the number of Ainu receiving welfare assistance is 1.4 times higher than the average in Hokkaido. In this sense, the socio-economic situation of the Ainu is much worse than that of the majority Japanese (Hasegawa 2010, p. 214).

Despite marginalization, the movement to regain their rights started after World War II. In 1946, the Ainu Association of Hokkaido was established to improve their living standards, and this provided an interface between the Ainu and the state by implementing Ainu welfare policies (Siddle 2009, p. 31).

In the late 1960s, some Ainu youths, inspired by other social movements, sought to reassert their identity, reviving traditional rituals and creating cultural events to celebrate the heroes of their history (Siddle, 2009, p. 31). The revitalization and creation of the ceremonies was accompanied by preparing traditional food and handicrafts, dancing, and praying in Ainu language, which had a positive impact on their identity formation (Hasegawa 2010, p. 218). To recover their traditions and ethnic identity, ‘tribal museums’ (Clifford 1997) have had a crucial role because they have acted as ‘knowledge centers’ (Sjöberg 2008, p. 202-203) for the Ainu to learn and express their Ainu cultural heritage. In this sense, Indigènitude (Clifford 2013), or the new trend of indigenous activism, emphasized not only social welfare but also the struggle for identity and recognition. In other words, the Ainu have been challenging the dominant discourse of a ‘dying race’ and attempting to create their identity in a contemporary world (Siddle 2009, p. 31).

In the 1980s, the Ainu Association of Hokkaido prepared a draft of ‘Ainu New Law’ (Ainu Shinpo), demanding the implementation of a new policy for the Ainu, instead of the Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act. After 1987, Ainu leaders began to participate in the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, constructing a network with overseas indigenous groups (Siddle 2009, p. 33). In 1994, the Year of Indigenous Peoples proclaimed by the United Nations, Ainu groups organized an international conference at Nibutani, Hokkaido, inviting indigenous peoples from various parts of the world (Sugimoto 2014, p. 218).

The year 1997 was a turning point in their struggle. The Sapporo District Court ruled that the dam construction on the Saru River near Nibutani was illegal because the research on its impact on Ainu culture had not been conducted
The decision included the recognition of the Ainu’s indigenous rights. In this sense, it can be said to have been a landmark decision for the Ainu movement (Hasegawa 2010, p. 213; Siddle 2009, p. 33-34; Sugimoto 2014, p. 217).

The Nibutani dam ruling had an impact on the government’s drafting of new policy for the Ainu. Finally, the government repealed the Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act. Instead, a new law, the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act was introduced in 1997. Under this new law, a project for reviving traditional Ainu living space was started in 2006. The so-called Iwor project targeted six areas, including Shiraoi, Biratori (Nibutani), Sapporo, and other parts of Hokkaido. The Ainu term of Iwor signifies a hunting territory shared by community members (Cheung 2005, p. 200). The Iwor project is expected to assist the revival of Ainu culture, through reforestation of natural resources utilized for Ainu traditions. It might be true that the new law has provided Japanese as well as Ainu with an opportunity to learn about the cultural heritage of the Ainu. However, it did not recognize the indigenousness of the Ainu. In other words, although the new law was enacted, their indigenous rights were off the agenda (Siddle 2009, p. 34-35).

In 2008, more than ten years after the Ainu shinpo was enforced, the government formally recognized the Ainu as an indigenous people of Japan, however, their indigenous rights are still hardly mentioned in the government policy for the Ainu.

Commodification of the Ainu’s Cultural Heritage and Reconstructing Ethnic Identity

In Hokkaido, the tourism industry developed in parallel with the internal colonization, expanding particularly rapidly after the Russo-Japanese war in 1905 (Ohtsuka 1999, p. 92). For the majority Japanese, Hokkaido was perceived as a ‘wilderness’ land surrounded by a richness of nature and it became a famous destination for nature tourism. Soon after that, the Ainu also began to play a crucial role in Hokkaido tourism (Ohtsuka 1999, p.92). While the government banned their traditional ways of life, including their own language, rituals, and traditional hunting and fishing activities, some aspects of the Ainu culture were promoted in the tourism industry. For instance, their
handicrafts, such as wood carving, textiles made from tree bark (attus) and embroidery products, became popular souvenirs and icons in Hokkaido, and their traditional dances and songs were presented for tourists.

The development of the tourism industry in Hokkaido resulted in the establishment of the Ainu kotan (village), or permanent tourist center exhibiting their culture. Shiraoi and Lake Akan were the two major tourist destinations for ethnic tourism. The boom of the tourism industry in Hokkaido in the 1960s and 1970s dramatically expanded commercialization of the Ainu culture. While traditional Ainu settlements and houses had almost disappeared due to the government’s assimilation policy, tourists could see the Ainu’s pseudo-traditional ways of life in the Ainu kotan. It might be true that this kind of touristic experience had a risk of reproducing a stereotyped image of the Ainu and of misunderstanding the Ainu’s ‘real’ way of life. However, Ohtsuka argues that these tourist centers have become not only places to demonstrate the Ainu’s traditional culture, but also spaces to reassert their ethnic identity and to transmit their cultural heritage to the contemporary world (Ohtsuka 1999, p. 95). In this sense, indigenous tourism has the potential to stimulate the Ainu’s cultural revival and to resist the dominant discourse of ‘homogeneity’ (Sugimoto 2014).

Tourism and the Ainu Culture in Nibutani

Nibutani is one of the districts in the town of Biratori located in the Saru river basin, where approximately 70 percent of the population are of Ainu origin (Nakamura 2007, p. 151). In this area, the myth of their ancestral god, ‘Okikurumi Kamuy’ who is believed to teach the traditional ways of life to the Ainu, is rooted, and several archeological sites, casi, also remain. These historical sites have proved the centuries-long settlement of the Ainu in this area. While the landscape and their lifestyle have drastically changed due to the national integration since the end of the 19th century, Nibutani is still known as one of the most active communities in the struggle to revive Ainu cultural heritage. The production of traditional Ainu crafts is especially famous here and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry certified two of their local crafts, Nibutani-ita (wooden trays) and Nibutani-attus (textiles made from tree bark), as ‘officially designated traditional craft products’ in 2013. Among the 19 ‘excellent Ainu craftsmen’ certificated by the Hokkaido Ainu Association, five artisans are based in Nibutani (Uchida 2015, p. 76).
Commercialized craft production in Nibutani dates back to the Meiji era, the late nineteenth century. There is a historical record that two prominent craftsmen in Nibutani, Kaizawa Uesasashi and Kaizawa Uorentoku, engaged in the commercial production of wooden trays and saucers decorated with traditional Ainu designs, and sold them in Sapporo, the prefectural capital of Hokkaido. Besides that, some Western anthropologists also came to Nibutani and purchased wooden handicrafts for souvenirs. Considering these historical records, this seems to represent the beginning of the tourism industry in Nibutani (The Editorial Board of the Nibutani Community History 1983, p. 236).

While handicraft production for tourists declined after the two pioneering artisans died, in the 1960s it resumed and developed dramatically. Kayano Shigeru, a well-known indigenous activist from Nibutani contributed to the growth of this tourist-oriented economy. After World War II, he started to tour with his companions across the country, demonstrating traditional Ainu culture. Through the exhibitions, he became aware of the economic potential of traditional Ainu crafts. After he came back home, he learned how to make wooden handicrafts from the elderly Ainu and started commercial production. Following his success, the Nibutani Artisans’ Cooperative was established in 1964, and handicraft production boomed until the 1970s (The Editorial Board of the Nibutani Community History 1983, p. 162). During that time, there were some 30 craft shops around Nibutani, and it was remembered among the villagers as the golden age of mass tourism. However, due to the spread of overseas travel and the diversification of Hokkaido tourism, the tourism industry in Nibutani gradually declined in the 1980s.

In 2017, the number of households engaged in craft production was 13. Among them, only five had their own craft shops and others sold their handicrafts at the cooperative shop located near the museum. In spite of the turndown of handicraft industry, Nibutani is still known as one of the most energetic communities for traditional Ainu crafts, and there have been attempts to revitalize their cultural heritage as I discuss below.
The Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum

*The history*

The Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum managed by the town of Biratori is a ‘knowledge center’ (Sjöberg 2008) not only for tourists but also for local community members. Though it was established in 1992, awareness of the previous struggle of a prominent Ainu activist, Kayano Shigeru is essential to understand its history.

Since his childhood in the 1940s, he had complained about the Wajin researchers’ behavior in Nibutani, such as taking away their traditional artifacts without permission, and stealing skeletons from graves for ‘scientific research’. To counter their rude behavior, he started to buy Ainu artifacts from neighbors when he was in his 20s. He worked in the logging industry as well as the tourism industry to earn sufficient funds to purchase as many objects as possible. He collected more 2,000 objects in 18 years, and it was difficult for him to keep them at home (Kayano 1990, p. 170-174). Therefore, he attempted to establish a museum to keep and exhibit his private collection. Fortunately, he received financial support from the town of Biratori and the Hokkaido Ainu Association, and the Nibutani Ainu Shiryokan was opened in 1972 (Kayano 1990, p. 170-174).

In the late 1980s, the national government offered to provide some funds to the town of Biratori in exchange for the Nibutani dam construction, and the town had a plan to establish a new museum with these funds. Kayano agreed with the plan and sold most of his objects to the town. Eventually in 1992 the new town-managed museum, the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum was opened (Nakamura 2007, p. 153). Kayano’s original museum reopened as *Kayano Shigeru Ainu Shiryokan*, his private museum, exhibiting the handicrafts made by himself and his wife as well as his life history and achievements.

*The Exhibition*

According to a curator of the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, whom I interviewed, approximately 90 percent of the collections are Ainu artifacts from the Saru river basin. Ainu culture differs regionally, and this is the only comprehensive collection that represents the Ainu culture of the specific area.
Because of their value, 1,121 objects from this museum and Kayano’s private museum were designated as an ‘Important Tangible Folk Cultural Property’ by the Cultural Affairs Agency.

The gallery comprises four parts: Ainu (life of the people,) Kamuy (gods), Mosir (the earth), and Morew (traditional design). The first three sections exhibit the somewhat ‘traditional’ lifestyle of the Ainu dating back to the early 20th century, including equipment for hunting and gathering, religious utensils such as Ikupasy, audio data of traditional lyrics and other artifacts related to their ordinary life in the past.

However, this museum does not only have exhibits showing ‘past’ traditions. For instance, there are a dozen text plates in each section, explaining how local villagers have tried to transmit and revitalize the Ainu tradition, including foods, language, rituals, and crafts. The ‘Morew’ section, the fourth part of the gallery, displays traditional as well as creative craftwork mostly produced by local contemporary artisans with their nameplates and portraits. This exhibition, which sheds light on the contemporary Ainu culture, should be understood as a space for visitors to understand the struggle of the current Ainu in Nibutani to revitalize and articulate their tradition in the contemporary world.

**Cooperation with the local community**

A curator of this museum says that what the museum can do is limited, therefore, cooperation with local community organizations and members is crucial. For instance, the museum often invites elderly local residents to talk to tourists about their life history. They tell us from their personal perspectives how the local Ainu have struggled to pass on and revive their cultural heritage under the pressure of assimilation and racial discrimination. This effort can be said to complement the museum, enabling tourists to understand local Ainu’s lives and histories more deeply and realistically through face-to-face communication with local residents.

In Nibutani, there are several community organizations which aim at the revitalization of the Ainu culture, including a branch organization of the Hokkaido Ainu Association, the Nibutani Ainu language class, the Ainu Cultural Preservation Society and the Nibutani Artisans’ Cooperative. The
Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum not only displays local Ainu culture but also offers several learning programs for tourists, in cooperation with some of these organizations. For instance, the museum provides tourists with an opportunity to experience traditional wood carving and embroidery in cooperation with the artisans’ cooperative.

It can be argued that this creative experience helps the visitors to gain an in-depth understanding of the Ainu from two aspects. First, a new tourist experience viewing the Ainu crafts from a different perspective emerges through the learning program. Most tourists do not have experience of carving or embroidery in their ordinary lives. That means it is difficult for them to understand how high skills are necessary to produce traditional Ainu crafts even though they have observed many kinds of artifacts in the exhibition; the class helps the tourists understand how difficult it is through their own experience. It is true that the tourists’ view of the exhibition dramatically changed between before and after the learning program. Most visitors I met at the museum wanted to go back to see the exhibition again after the craft workshop, to see the design and patterns of each handicraft in more detail. In this sense, the creative experience has the potential to transform the tourists’ view of Ainu crafts and to help them gain a better understanding of the intangible cultural heritage.

Secondly, this program is an opportunity for tourists to engage in dialog with local artisans who are mostly of Ainu origin. As I mentioned above, the exhibit introduces local artisans from around Nibutani, and their works, and the learning program offers face-to-face communication between tourists and the Ainu presenting at the exhibition. In the handicraft learning program local artisans not only teach how to make the Ainu crafts but also tell tourists their life history and how they relate to the Ainu tradition. This encounter leads tourists not only to understand the Ainu crafts more profoundly but also to deconstruct any stereotypical preconceptions. Through the face-to-face communication, the tourists come to avoid viewing the Ainu just as an anonymous ethnic category, and to understand them from the perspective of a singularity (Karatani 1994) with specific names and faces.

Often, the tourists come to understand that the artisans and their handicrafts are not monolithic. Each artisan has developed his/her own style and identity. For instance, there is an artisan who only replicates traditional artifacts. There are very few Ainu who have enough skills and knowledge to make certain
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kinds of artifacts, such as traditional shoes made from salmon skin, or water bottles made from the bladder of a deer. In this case the artisan has engaged in reproduction of these traditional artifacts to transmit their heritage. On the other hand, there is another artisan whose interest is the fusion of tradition and creativity. Based on traditional woodcarving, he has produced various creative artworks for the exhibition in the art museum. Therefore, he identifies himself not as an ‘artisan’ but as an ‘indigenous artist’ who conveys the Ainu’s voices to mainstream society. Through the learning experience the museum offers, tourists come to understand these varied orientations and identities of each person.

In addition to the craft workshop, the museum offers visitors a program to watch traditional dance performed by local Ainu. Traditional Ainu dance was designated as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO in 2009 and has been one of the popular tourist attractions of ethnic tourism in Hokkaido. In some touristic areas such as Lake Akan and Shiraoi, various kinds of Ainu dances are performed for tourists every day. While there are no daily performances for tourists in Nibutani, the members of the Ainu Cultural Preservation Society in Biratori town have worked hard to revive their traditional dances and have performed for ceremonial events both within and outside the community. The museum sometimes invites the performers to show their dances to visitors, especially to group tourists such as students, which provides the guests with an opportunity not only to see the performance but also to understand the local Ainu’s struggle to revitalize their intangible heritage.

Apart from the learning program the museum offers, there are several other ways for tourists to encounter local Ainu in Nibutani. For instance, the project of takumi no michi (trail of skillful artisans) to promote the Ainu craft production was started in 2011. Through the project, a map to introduce the heritage trail around Nibutani was prepared for tourists, including museums, craft shops, and places related to local myths. The local artisans and their works were also introduced on a website. These efforts have encouraged tourists to visit their craft shop and to encounter the local Ainu.

Around the museum, several traditional Ainu huts were rebuilt to revitalize their cultural heritage; the restoration was started in 2008 as part of the Iwor Project mentioned above. The members of the artisans’ cooperative give demonstrations of handicraft production at several cise during the high season. Moreover, some
local Ainu who have learned the traditional lyrics, *yukar*, at the Ainu language class gather at the *cise* every Saturday during the summer and give a reading of the traditional epic to the locals as well as tourists. These programs also offer tourists an opportunity for face-to-face communication with the locals.

As the Japanese government had colonized and developed the northernmost province since the end of nineteenth century, the tourist image of Hokkaido as a “wilderness” land began to spread widely. Soon after that, the Ainu began to play an essential role as part of the “scenery” of Hokkaido in the tourism discourse (Ohtsuka 1999, p. 92). Just as people from the American East regarded with admiration the landscape and Native Americans of the southwest United States, Hokkaido and the Ainu were perceived as exotic and fascinating for the southern Japanese (Ohtsuka 1999, p. 92).

However, in parallel with the prevalence of the touristic image of the Ainu, their traditional way of life was drastically changed due to the government’s assimilation policy. As a result, the gap between image and reality has expanded. Although the image of “living with nature” is still a strong stereotype associated with the Ainu, the growing gap between image and reality has led to the perception that the Ainu have been assimilated into Japanese society totally and the Ainu culture is no longer a living heritage but preserved only in museums.

Tourists visiting Nibutani can be divided into two types. One is a kind of ‘traveler’ type (Cohen 1979), seeking more authentic experiences. In Hokkaido, there are several mass tourist destinations for ethnic tourism, such as Lake Akhan (Cheung 2005) and Shiraoi (Uchida 2015). However, visitors to Nibutani tend to avoid the contrived attractions in tourist settings and expect to see the ordinary lives of the Ainu. The other type of tourist in Nibutani is represented by groups of students or social activists who come to study the history and culture of the Ainu as part of a field trip. Both types of tourist are eager to learn about the history and cultural heritage of the Ainu. However, the perception that most aspects of Ainu culture have vanished is strong, even among these enthusiastic tourists.

To counter to such perceptions, indigenous tourism in Nibutani could be an occasion for tourists to come to understand the current struggle of Ainu to revitalize their culture, and to perceive Ainu culture as a living heritage transmitted and reinvented in contemporary Japan.
Conclusion

As I mentioned earlier, the collaboration between the museum and local community members in Nibutani enables tourists to understand the struggle of the Ainu to recover their traditions in depth and to deconstruct the stereotypical tourist view of them. These efforts can be described as a kind of ecomuseum (Fuller 1992; Arai 1995).

According to Fuller (1992), ecomuseums can be defined as museums based on the belief that museums and communities should be related to the whole life. Similar to the concept of community museums (Camarena and Morales 2006), the mission is to develop community autonomy and identity, which can help with the empowerment of local communities (Fuller 1992, p. 328).

Significant differences exist between eco-museums and traditional museums in their physical forms and collection philosophies. An eco-museum is identified by the geographic area and is not confined to a single building. Collections are viewed from much broader perspectives. They are organized around the community’s interrelationship with its culture and physical environment. In addition to objects, collections can consist of audiovisual materials, paper documentation, physical sites, traditional ceremonies, oral histories, and social relationships (Fuller 1992, p. 330).

Arai (1995) also argues that the ecomuseum consists of three functions: a ‘core museum’ acting as a knowledge center, a ‘satellite museum’ exhibiting living cultural heritage neighboring the core museum, and a ‘discovery trail’ connecting each heritage site. Applying his argument to the case study of Nibutani, the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum can be considered as a ‘core museum’. ‘Satellite museums’ include reconstructed cise where their intangible cultural heritage, such as oral histories and handicraft skills are presented, local artisans’ studios, casi or archeological sites, and sites related to local myths. Moreover, a heritage trail prepared for the project of takumi no michi (trail of skillful artisans) can be regarded as a ‘discovery trail’.

In Nibutani, these functions relate to each other, which has provided tourists with an opportunity to learn about the cultural heritage of the Ainu from multiple points of view. Besides that, the eco-museum is a tool for face-to-face communications between hosts and guests. This experience encourages
tourists to gain an understanding of the contemporary and diverse ways of life and culture of the Ainu beyond the stereotypical image and prejudice that is rooted in Japanese society. In this sense, the eco-museum in Nibutani should be considered as a vehicle for indigenous culture to legitimize its presence in the contemporary world.

However, the situation of the Ainu is so varied regionally that it would be difficult to develop an ideal model of indigenous tourism in Hokkaido. As argued above, the majority of the population in Nibutani is Ainu, and this social environment has enabled the locals to maintain various aspects of Ainu culture for generations in spite of the pressure towards national integration. However, considering the situation of the Ainu broadly, the case of Nibutani seems to be unusual. The majority of Ainu in Hokkaido live in their communities as an ethnic minority and some of them hide their ethnic background for fear of racial discrimination and prejudice. Therefore, it would be difficult in some communities to introduce indigenous tourism.

The tourists in Nibutani tend to be of the ‘traveler’ type (Cohen 1979), seeking more authentic experiences, and the number of visitors in Nibutani is still limited, confined mainly to students who visit on school excursions. Such small-scale tourism has allowed the local Ainu to contact guests without feeling stress or a sense of burden. On the other hand, other popular destinations for indigenous tourism in Hokkaido such as Lake Akan (Cheung 2005) and Shiraoi (Uchida 2015) are more oriented towards mass tourism, and the host communities provide more ‘staged’ attractions for tourists to protect the ‘back region’ (MacCannell 1999). That makes it more difficult for tourists to have an opportunity for face-to-face communication with local hosts. In other words, the hosts in such mass tourism destinations need to adopt different strategies and develop a different model from that in Nibutani. Therefore, in future, more ethnographic case studies in different communities should be conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of indigenous tourism among the indigenous Ainu.

Notes

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