

Spirituality and Materiality among Human Remains

——Reflection from repatriation activism of the Ainu and the Ryukyu——

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1 Aim

This paper examines the ethical, legal, and social aspects of the debates on the repatriation of the human remains and burial materials of the Ainu and the Ryukyuan-Okinawan. From an anthropological point of view, we describe this as post-colonial condition of the indigenous collective rights after the enactment of the United Nations Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples, UNDRIP (2007). Sociologically, it is worth discussing contesting distinction between idealistic spiritualism among indigenous people and modern scientific materialism in “rational-institution;” that may refer to “spirituality vs. materiality.”

2 Methods

For these purposes, the bibliographical work have been conducted during the period from July, 2018 to date. Interviews and meetings with activists and academics, who are both pro-indigenous and pro-official, have been conducted. Each discourse will be positioned in spectrum between so-called “plaintiffs as activists” and “defendants as officials” activities.

3 Results

The debates between scholars, lawyers, and civil activists (so-called “plaintiffs”), who requested the repatriation, and the scientists in physical anthropology and archaeology led by Japanese government (so-called “defendants”), who were supposed to negotiate with indigenous people, came to a deadlock. The plaintiffs wanted to establish the collective entitlement of indigenous rights for the repatriation of remains and materials that have not been enacted in Japan. Both the government and universities rejected activist's demands in conformity with current Japanese civil law, which indicates “successors of family rituals”. After the establishment of the third generation of genome sequencing from 2010s, remains have been playing an important role both for human genome analysis of prehistoric migration of the people of “origin of Japanese,” or Proto-Japanese and for detecting “their” ancestral origin in the identification of their family. The activists accuse researchers of historical misconduct as they believe that researchers are stealing remains and burial materials without informed consent in their pamphlets and web-sites.

4 Conclusion

Indigenous people insist on the importance of hearkening to ancestral voices, and that their remains deserve to be treated not only spiritually but also appropriately. Financial compensation (as “material aspect”) should be considered for the damage caused. From these findings, the author proposes academic intervention by social scientists to facilitate open dialogue between “plaintiffs” and “defendants,” by reorganizing these agendas