A Statement from The Anthropological Society of Nippon Concerning the Remains of Ainu People

The Anthropological Society of Nippon, as an academic organization composed of researchers in fields related to biological (formerly physical) anthropology, has conducted its activities with the aim of advancing anthropological knowledge and promoting scholarly exchange. One of the principal research themes within biological anthropology involves reconstructing humanity's history through the analysis of human remains excavated from archaeological sites. However, in recent years, serious ethical concerns have been recognized regarding certain aspects of this research, particularly past practices involving the collection, storage, and use of the remains of Ainu people by some anthropologists, as well as the dissemination of related research findings. The Anthropological Society of Nippon has been addressing these concerns over approximately the past two decades, and this statement serves to present the Society's views on this important matter, to express sincere apologies to the Ainu people, to acknowledge and reflect upon the history of research conducted on the remains of Ainu people, and to reaffirm the responsibilities of the Society and its members as researchers today.

Research into the origins of the peoples of the Japanese archipelago by Japanese biological anthropologists began during the Meiji era. The primary materials for this research were human remains obtained through archaeological excavations and related means, collected from various locations across the Japanese islands. As part of this effort, some researchers also collected the remains of Ainu people. However, in certain cases, these were taken without appropriate procedures, in a manner comparable to grave robbing. In recent years, ethical concerns have been raised regarding such collection practices.

Since 2005, this Society has engaged in sustained discussions with the Hokkaido Utari Association (now the Hokkaido Ainu Association) to consider how to address this issue. In 2010, the Society established an "Indigenous Human Remains Committee." This committee independently investigated the storage conditions of the remains of Ainu people held at various universities across Japan and reported its findings to the Association. In 2015, as the Japanese government began addressing the issue of the remains of Ainu people, the "Roundtable on the Future Approach to Research Involving the Remains of Ainu People and Grave Goods" was established, comprising the Hokkaido Ainu Association, the Japanese Archaeological Association,

and this Society. Following extensive discussions on the core issues and matters requiring reflection by researchers, a report summarising these deliberations was published in April 2017. The report not only highlighted the issues concerning the collection of remains and deficiencies in their preservation and management but also confirmed that research had been conducted without sufficient consideration for the Ainu people, that the results had not been adequately shared with them, and that there had been a lack of awareness regarding indigenous peoples' issues and discrimination. It stated that these criticisms must be taken seriously, and that rigorous and sincere action should be undertaken.

In 2018, the Japanese Society of Cultural Anthropology joined the aforementioned three organizations. Within the preparatory committee for the "Research Ethics Review Committee" attached to the "Roundtable", discussions continue regarding the appropriate framework for future Ainu research. Subsequently, in 2021, a Research Ethics Committee was established within this Society to consider ethics in anthropological research, including issues concerning the remains of Ainu people.

It is a positive development that academic organizations and individual researchers, including this Society, are sincerely addressing the ethical issues surrounding the remains of Ainu people and that progress is being made toward resolving these issues, including the return of remains. However, the path to this point has been long, and it must be acknowledged that these practices caused suffering to the Ainu people. While some individual researchers who engaged in Ainu studies conducted their work with consideration for the Ainu people, as outlined below, it cannot be denied that, overall, both this Society and individual researchers were, for a prolonged period, insufficiently aware of these issues and did not demonstrate adequate consideration toward the subjects of their research.

Research on the origins of the peoples of the Japanese archipelago began with Western scholars who came to Japan in the late Edo and Meiji periods and was subsequently continued by Japanese biological anthropologists influenced by their work. From the outset, scholars focused on the relationship between the Stone Age peoples (now referred to as those of the Jōmon period) found across the Japanese islands, and the Ainu people and Yamato people (non-Ainu majority Japanese). One of the representative early theories was the "Korpokkur theory," which was based primarily on legends and regarded the Stone Age people as an earlier population unrelated to either the Ainu people or the Yamato people. As morphological analyses of human remains

progressed and research became increasingly scientific, a strong connection between the Jōmon people and the Ainu people gradually became evident. In Kyushu, Shikoku, and Honshu, immigrant groups arriving from the continent during the Yayoi period intermingled with local Jōmon populations, generally with the immigrants becoming dominant. In contrast, evidence from Hokkaido indicates that the Jōmon populations there generally became the ancestors of the Ainu people, demonstrating continuity in their presence. This scenario is also supported by recent genetic studies. Overall, research in anthropology and related fields substantiates the current view of the Japanese government that the Ainu are the indigenous people of the northern part of the Japanese archipelago, particularly Hokkaido.

Regrettably, biological anthropologists have shown limited awareness of the ethical issues surrounding the acquisition of the remains of Ainu people and have not sufficiently considered the perspectives and feelings of the Ainu people themselves. Moreover, with regard to whether research findings have been shared with the Ainu community while taking their voices into account, the situation has remained highly precarious. Findings in biological anthropology inherently have the potential to foster understanding of human diversity, reduce misunderstandings and prejudice toward other groups, and address discrimination. It is deeply disappointing that this potential has not been fully realized or returned to society.

As an academic organization that has contributed to the development of anthropology, The Anthropological Society of Nippon takes both this history and the current reality seriously. We offer our sincere apologies to the Ainu people, who have been profoundly affected by these circumstances. Moving forward, we will continually seek appropriate forms of research based on mutual understanding between researchers and the subjects of study, taking fully into account the reflections outlined above.

15 December 2025

The Anthropological Society of Nippon