Physical Anthropology in Japan

The Ainu and the Search for the Origins of the Japanese

by Morris Low

In this paper I examine the quest by physical anthropologists in Japan for the origins of the Japanese. A major focus of this research has been the Ainu people of the northern island of Hokkaidō, who have recently been declared an indigenous people of Japan. The relationship between mainstream Japanese and the very much living community of the Ainu has been the subject of over 100 years of research. Integral to research has been the collection of Ainu skulls, skeletons, and artefacts that have provided a critical if controversial resource for physical anthropologists. This has all been against the backdrop of changing political ideologies about the so-called purity of the Japanese. In the post–World War II period, with the loss of empire, the idea of Japan as a homogeneous nation took hold, and it was only in the last two decades that this notion has been discredited.

There has been a long-standing myth of a monolithic Japan bound together by a “unique” identity, culture, and language (Denoon et al. 1996). Other peoples residing in Japan have been forced to assimilate into this dominant culture or risk not being considered “Japanese.” For over 100 years, physical anthropologists have been at the forefront of the quest to find the origins of the Japanese. A key argument of this paper is that physical anthropology in Japan has been part of a nationalist project that has sought to understand the nature of the Japanese people (Yamashita 2006b). But as we shall see, there have been multiple strands of nationalism within Japan. There were tensions between the dominant majority of the population known as “the Japanese” and the Ainu, one of the indigenous peoples of Japan. The struggle of the Ainu can be considered a type of indigenous nationalism (Siddle 2006). Other examples of nationalism can be found within Japan, most notably that of the people of Okinawa as well as Zainichi (Koreans in Japan) nationalism (Lie 2008). These ethnic minorities have increasingly sought to assert their rights, and their voices have provided a counternarrative to the notion of a mono-ethnic state.

In Japan, two terms in particular have been used to refer to biologically integrated groups of people, and they have become linked to nationalism. The term jinshu connotes “human breed” or “human race,” and minzoku refers to “lineage of people,” “nationality,” and “race.” Jinshu tends to refer more to people with shared physical attributes, whereas minzoku is closer to “ethnicity” or “ethnos” (Dikötter 1997:3; Weiner 1997:98). In the late nineteenth century, Japanese anthropologists were interested in the jinshuteki (racial) origins of the Japanese and relationships to the Ainu jinshu (race).

The establishment of Japan as a modern nation-state in the late nineteenth century saw the colonization of the northern island where the Ainu people largely resided and the renaming of it as Hokkaidō (fig. 1) in 1869. The Ainu also lived in adjacent territories known as North Honshū, South Sakhalin, and the Kurile Islands. In 1875, the Treaty of St. Petersbourg resulted in the drawing of borders between Russia and Japan right through Ainu territory (Hasegawa 2010:209). Kuril Ainu and Sakhalin Ainu were forced to relocate to Hokkaidō, give up hunting, and become farmers. They were required to adopt Japanese names and be recorded in the national registry. From 1899 to 1997, the Ainu were dealt with by the Hokkaidō Kyūdojin Hogoho, sometimes translated as the Hokkaidō Aboriginal Protection Act. Under this law, the Ainu were no longer aborigines once they were assimilated. The law reinforced the notion of a mono-ethnic Japanese people (Creighton 2003:126).

Anatomists and archaeologists, who have been key figures in the development of physical anthropology in Japan, studied the Ainu, and this work constituted a major focus of their research. The historical connection between the Ainu and the modern populations living in Japan has and continues to be a much-discussed problem. Because of differences in physical appearance, mainstream Japanese have considered the Ainu to be racially distinct. Some scholars even considered them Caucasian (Low 1999).

The debate about the origins of the Japanese has thrown light on the fact that Japan is a multicultural society. In the aftermath of World War II and the loss of empire, Japanese...
physical anthropologists looked to ethnic minorities within Japan, such as the Ainu and Koreans, as the objects of research. These groups, along with Okinawans, Burakumin (descendants of a former outcaste group), and the Chinese were estimated in the 1990s to make up 4–6 million of a total population in Japan of 125 million (Lie 2001:3–4). Although only 23,782 people identified themselves as Ainu in a survey conducted in 2006, it is estimated that the total population of Ainu consists of some 200,000 people (McGrogan 2010:358). Many of these live in the cities, do not live “authentic” lifestyles, are of mixed descent, and have suffered considerable discrimination. Many now live outside of the island of Hokkaido in and around cities such as Tokyo (Watson 2010).

Origins of Anthropology in Japan

Peter Bleed (1986) and others (Sakano 1999) have suggested that the interest in archaeology (and indeed physical anthropology) has its roots in the tradition of collecting and antiquarianism that can be traced back to the Tokugawa period (ca. 1603–1868), a time when the Japanese showed a regular interest in prehistoric remains. Michael Hoffman (1974) has drawn parallels between this interest in archaeology and antiquarianism in Japan and Western Europe during this time. In Japan, key figures were government official and historian Arai Hakuseki (1656–1725) and the scholar Tō Teikan (1731–1798).¹

Tō examined how ancient Japanese haniwa figurines from burial mounds were dressed and argued that similarities with Korean clothing suggested that the founders of the Japanese imperial line were Korean. This controversial claim was an early attempt to use archaeological data to help solve historical problems, something that we see in the fascination of Japanese physical anthropologists with the Ainu and the search for the origins of the Japanese.

On December 9, 1872, it was reported that Japan would shift from a lunar calendar to a solar (Gregorian) calendar as of January 1, 1873. The solar calendar, it was argued, lent itself to greater accuracy. The new Japanese government also saw this as a civilizing measure that would facilitate exchange with the West (Tanaka 2004:5). Despite this belated “synchronization” with the West and the introduction of Western-style archaeology only in the Meiji period, the Japanese were not slow in appreciating the importance of the archaeological record in understanding the “past.” As early as May 1872, the Ministry of Education sent out a team led by Machida Hisanari (1839–1897) to the Kansai region of Japan, where they visited Kyoto, Osaka, Nara, and elsewhere and conducted a 4-month search and survey of valuable old artefacts. The team of five included Uchida Masao (1842–1876; Ministry of Education) and Ninagawa Noritane (1835–1882), who worked for the Museum Bureau (Hakubutsukyoku) of the ministry (McDermott 2006:348–349). Ninagawa’s diary and notes (Ninagawa 2005 [1872]) have recently been published. These documents are evidence of an early recognition by the government of the need to retain the past in order to secure Japan’s future. As Stefan Tanaka (2004) eloquently puts it, “old things became a symbol of stability that grounds a changing society” (36).

It was not open-ended or curiosity-driven research but rather a quest for old things that could be used as evidence of the ancient origins of the imperial line (Tanaka 2004:33). After the Meiji restoration of 1868, the nation had come together with the Meiji emperor as symbolic head, so support for the idea of an unbroken imperial line only served to strengthen support for the new government and stabilize the country in response to the threat posed by Western powers (Edwards 2003:12). Also, there was a need to locate historical items that could be displayed at the 1873 Vienna International Exposition and that might also serve as models to inspire craftsmen wanting to create products for export (Guth 1996). In this way, tradition helped shape Japan’s path to modernity.

In the late 1870s, Ninagawa befriended and taught a number of foreigners, including the American zoologist Edward S. Morse (1838–1923; Coolidge Rousmaniere 2002; Imai

¹ Throughout the body of this paper, Japanese names are given in the normal Japanese order of family name followed by given name. All names in the list of references follow the normal order of family name first.
2004). Their friendship and diverse interests reflect how the divisions between antiquarianism, art, archaeology, and anthropology were at this time yet to be clearly defined. As Fumiko Ikawa-Smith (1982) has noted, those working in prehistoric archaeology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often had trained in zoology, geology, and medicine. What is more, they also had an interest in the biological identity of the people whose remains they excavated. It is clear that there was a tradition of constructing the past through antiquities and artefacts.

Morse was one of the key figures in the introduction of anthropology. He had studied under Louis R. Agassiz (1807–1873) at Harvard and was important in the development of not only zoology but also archaeology, physical anthropology, and ethnology through his teaching at Tokyo Imperial University in the years 1877–1879. Despite Morse’s significant contribution, Tsuboi Shōgorō (1863–1913) is often credited with establishing anthropology in Japan.

Tsuboi and other Japanese had been affronted by the suggestion by Morse (1879) that the early Japanese had practiced cannibalism during the Jōmon period (ca. 11,000–ca. 300 BCE). Tsuboi felt that the origins of the Japanese should be studied by the Japanese themselves (Yamashita 2006b), and the overemphasis of Morse’s contribution may have been felt keenly given the realization that there had been Japanese scholars doing relevant work even before Morse had arrived. In 1884, while only a graduate student in the Faculty of Science at Tokyo Imperial University, Tsuboi founded the Anthropological Society of Tokyo (renamed the Anthropological Society of Japan in 1941). The society’s activities have been described as being similar in “spirit of camaraderie and scientific curiosity to earlier European gentry antiquarian societies” (Pai 2009:268). Such was the interest that within 2 years, membership grew to over 200 people. It drew on pre-existing intellectual networks of people with interests in antiquarianism and archaeology that previously had no specific disciplinary focus (Sakano 1999). The rapid growth in membership supported the publication of a journal that first appeared in 1886 as the 東京人間学會雑誌 (Report of the Tokyo Anthropological Society) and later as the 東京人文學會雑誌 (Bulletin of the Tokyo Anthropological Society). In 1893, Tsuboi established the Institute of Anthropology at Tokyo. The work of the institute included physical anthropology, archaeology, and other areas. We can thus view Tsuboi as representing a transition from antiquarian curiosity to a type of anthropological archaeology (Kaner 2009:83).

Tsuboi argued that the origins of Japanese culture should be explored by the Japanese themselves rather than foreigners such as Morse. The 1880s were a time when the Japanese increasingly asserted their Japaneseess in what is considered the first expression of modern nationalism in Japan (Lie 2001:39). Tsuboi helped set the nationalistic agenda of anthropology to one focussing on the origins of the Japanese rather than the entirety of humankind (Yamashita 2006b:177).

Despite attempts by conservative thinkers to promote a myth of Japanese homogeneity centering on the role of the emperor, there was a diversity of views among scholars regarding the origins of the Japanese. A central debate has been whether or not the Ainu are living vestiges of the Neolithic Jōmon people, the earliest Japanese. In the early nineteenth century, the German physician Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796–1866) wrote about the Ainu while working at the Dutch settlement at Dejima, in Nagasaki (Siebold 1828). He argued that the Ainu could be traced back to Japan’s Neolithic people. His work and that of his son Heinrich von Siebold (1852–1908), who lived in Japan after his father’s death and served as an Austrian diplomat there, helped to spread knowledge of the Ainu in the West (Askew 2004:71; Refsing 2000:16–18, 44–47; Siebold 1881).

Ainu Studies

Tsuboi saw the Japanese as a mixture of races. In the Report of the Tokyo Anthropological Society, he suggested that the Koropokguru (also known as the Korobokkuru or Koropokgru) people were the Jōmon people and were unrelated to the Ainu (Tsuboi 1887). “Koropokguru” was a term used by the Ainu to refer to an earlier people of short stature who had lived in Hokkaidō. Over the next 25 years, over 200 articles on Ainu-related topics would appear in the Tokyo Anthropological Society’s journal (Siddle 1997).

Tsuboi and his colleague Koganei Yoshikiyo (1859–1944), who had previously studied anatomy in Germany between 1880 and 1885 and had subsequently been appointed professor of anatomy at the Tokyo Imperial University Medical School, went to Hokkaidō for two months in 1888. Tsuboi found further evidence to support his Koropokguru theory, and Koganei found evidence to support his Ainu theory (Hamada 2006:54). In 1889, Koganei returned to spend a further 3 months conducting research. After excavating and collecting Ainu skeletal remains (166 skulls and 92 skeletons) and carefully examining them, Koganei (1894) published one of the most comprehensive studies of the Ainu. He went on to compare Jōmon skeletal remains with that of the Ainu and challenged Tsuboi’s hypothesis, pointing out similarities between the Ainu and Jōmon people. He argued that the Ainu had previously lived throughout Japan but had been forced on to the northern island of Hokkaidō by the Japanese (Hanihara 1991; Yamaguchi 1997).

Around this time, the Reverend John Batchelor (1854–1944), a missionary who had lived in Hokkaidō for 64 years and befriended many Ainu, was publishing his work on the Ainu. As the title of his book The Ainu of Japan: The Religion, Superstitions, and General History of the Hairy Aborigines of Japan (1892) suggests, a feature of their physical appearance is considered to be the relative abundance of hair compared with the culturally recognized category of “the Japanese” who have lived on the main island of Honshū (see figs. 2, 3 for
images of Ainu from Batchelor 1892). While sympathetic to the plight of the Ainu, he nevertheless wrote:

The chief thing that strikes one on meeting an Ainu for the first time is his fine beard, moppy hair, and sparkling eyes; next, his dirty appearance, poor clothing, and, should he be near at hand, his odour, The Ainu certainly do not, upon first acquaintance, produce a very favourable impression; in fact, to many people, they quickly become repulsive, especially on account of their filth. (Batchelor 1892:18)

Attesting to the belief in their possible Caucasian origins, he noted that “the skin is whiter than that of the Japanese, for they do not possess the bilious-looking complexion so prevalent in the latter race” (Batchelor 1892:20).

Anthropology and Empire

The work of Tsuboi, Koganei, and Batchelor helped construct an image of the Ainu as a primitive race that was considered racially immature. Their studies of the Ainu helped to define the mainstream Japanese as a modern and civilized race that was entitled not only to colonize Hokkaido but also to expand its empire to Korea and Taiwan. Tsuboi designed a Hall of Mankind (Jinruikan) for the Fifth National Industrial Exposition held in Osaka in 1903 that aimed to show the races of the world in their “natural” settings, but not surprisingly, Chinese, Koreans, and Ryūkyūans (Okinawans) objected to the representation of their cultures as “primitive” (Weiner 1997:112–114). Their opposition to Tsuboi’s proposal was partially successful in that only five Ainu, four Taiwanese aboriginals, and two Ryūkyūans were put on display. Visitors contrasted the lives of these indigenous people with those of modern “civilized” Japanese (Yamaji 2008:49).

“Native villages” were also a feature of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. In August 1903, W. J. McGee, chief of the Department of Anthropology at the exposition, contacted Frederick Starr (1858–1933), professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago. Starr was requested to go to Japan and secure the voluntary participation of eight to 10 Ainu in native villages at the exposition to be held at St. Louis in 1904. Starr duly agreed and arrived in Japan in February 1904. While in Tokyo, Tsuboi showed Starr the large collection of Ainu skeletons that Koganei had amassed. With Batchelor’s help, Starr was able to recruit nine Ainu for what became a popular feature of the exposition (Medak-Saltzman 2008; Oppenheim 2005:681; Starr 1904:4; Vanstone 1993). There were also Ainu on display at the Anglo-Japanese Exhibition held in London in 1910, but not all Japanese were comfortable with such representations.

A member of the Tokyo municipal council complained in the Japan Chronicle on July 24, 1910, that the exhibition of Ainu and Taiwanese natives in their humble hut dwellings could be regarded as infringing on their personal rights. The historian Ayako Hotta-Lister (1999:133–134) suggests that rather than being troubled by concerns regarding their welfare, the official and other members of the Japanese elite feared that they would be accused of ill treatment of the indigenous people and that such representations might backfire on the Japanese.

Populations seen as prehistoric or living history—suitable for display—were a resource for an imperial nation and for anthropological scientists. In an essay written in November
1906 entitled "Primitive Life and Presiding Death in Korea," the Japanese intellectual Nitobe Inazo (1862–1933) lamented the racial decline of the Koreans in the following way: "The very physiognomy and living of this people are so bland, unsophisticated and primitive that they belong not to the twentieth or the tenth—nor indeed to the first century. They belong to a prehistoric age" (Nitobe 1909:214).

The idea of the Japanese as being of mixed racial origins was used to help justify the annexation of Korea in 1910. Common ancestral origins were used as a pretext for colonial expansion. The rise of the Japanese empire, in turn, provided fieldwork opportunities for Japanese physical anthropologists and enabled them to further explore the origins of the Japanese through comparative body measurements of different ethnic groups. In 1912, a Colonial Exposition (Takushoku Hakurankai) was held in Ueno Park, Tokyo, to show how far Japan and its colonial subjects had come. Included in the displays were a traditional Ainu home complete with Ainu family (Yamaji 2008:51–52).

Torii Ryuzō (1870–1953), who had studied under Tsuboi, went to Manchuria and the Liaotong Peninsula in 1895 after the Sino-Japanese War, to Taiwan in 1897 after annexation by Japan, to Manchuria in 1905 during the Russo-Japanese War, and to Korea in 1910 and 1912 after it, too, was annexed by Japan and made a formal colony (Askew 2004:60). Torii claimed that both the Ainu and the Japanese had coexisted in the Neolithic period and that the Ainu were racially inferior. This was used to bolster the idea of Japanese racial superiority and to justify colonial expansion into East Asia.

In the two decades that followed, there was a diversity of opinions. In the 1910s, Koganei came to support the idea of hybridization between the Japanese and other ethnic groups. In the late 1920s, Kiyono Kenji (1885–1955) of Kyoto Imperial University excavated Ainu remains in Sakhalin (fig. 1) and surmised that the Neolithic people were ancestors of both the Ainu and the Japanese (Hamada 2006:66). Kiyono was important for applying statistics to biometric data, and his collection of more than 1,000 skeletal remains was an important resource (Hanihara 1992:135).

Japanese physical anthropologists sometimes engaged in public debates about Japanese imperialism. Although Kiyono’s writing was nationalistic and supported it, Torii opposed it, and Koganei was wary. This did not, however, prevent their work from being appropriated by others. There were Japanese who were working elsewhere in the Japanese empire who found that their research supported colonial policy. Ueda Tsunekichi was a professor in the Department of Anatomy at Keijō Imperial University in Seoul, Korea. The department was founded in 1924 and became a center for physical anthropology in Korea and part of a Japanese physical anthropology network. Ueda helped to introduce statistical techniques. He and his colleagues conducted a major survey of living Koreans from 1930 to the end of World War II. They argued that there were fewer physical differences between Koreans from middle Korea and Japanese in the Kinki area than there were among Japanese found in different areas in Japan. Such findings helped bolster Japan’s assimilation policy that was promoted in Korea (Nobayashi 2003:145–146).
Japan as a Homogeneous Nation

In 1936, Hasebe Kotondo (1882–1969) was appointed to the chair of anthropology at Tokyo Imperial University. As we have seen, the university had been the leading center for anthropology in Japan. Hasebe established the Department of Anthropology there in 1939. The department was important in training physical anthropologists in Japan, many of whom would go on to publish in what became known as the *Jinruigaku Zasshi* (Journal of the Anthropological Society of Nippon), or *Anthropological Science* in English. The journal became an outlet for many papers on Korean physical anthropology written by Japanese anthropologists who taught at Keiō Imperial University, which had been established in Seoul in 1927 (Nakao 2008 [2005]:22).

Hasebe’s appointment marked a significant shift to more of a biometric approach that included not only minorities such as the Ainu and colonized people but also the majority Japanese people themselves (Morris-Suzuki 1999:362–363). Kiyono and Hasebe used physical anthropology to argue that the Japanese had evolved from the Jōmon people with very little mixing from outside. In this way, they challenged the idea of the mixed-nation view of the Japanese that had been dominant (Oguma 1995, 2002).

Postwar Studies

The origins of the Japanese continued to be an important topic in Japanese physical anthropology even after World War II. The emperor’s renunciation of previous claims to divinity was followed by revision of school history textbooks, where the mythic origins of Japan were replaced with material on archaeological findings about the Jōmon period (Edwards 2008 [2005]). But the loss of empire and restrictions on overseas travel by Japanese meant that Japaneseanthropologists conducting fieldwork in more distant lands in parallel with Japan’s economic expansion (Yamashita 2006a). The 1960s also saw the introduction of computers, which assisted in statistical analysis. The development of molecular biology gave rise to genetic studies of Ainu and other populations. The combination of genetic and morphological studies suggested that the ancestors of the Ainu were likely to have been the Jōmon people (Hanihara 1992).

What other research did physical anthropologists conduct in postwar Japan? If we examine volume 67 of the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Nippon*, published in 1959, we can gain a sense of their priorities and the major issues at that time. In the first issue of volume 67, Shima Goro (Shima 1959) from the Osaka City University Medical School wrote on the toes and finger prints of living Sakhalin Ainu and mixed Ainu who were evacuated from Sakhalin to Hokkaidō after the war. Karafuto (Southern Sakhalin) had been a Japanese colony, but with Japan’s defeat, the whole of Sakhalin came under Soviet control.

Shima examined the frequency of certain configurations on the toes and fingers of Ainu and the majority Japanese. The study found that Sakhalin Ainu showed no difference when compared with Sakhalin Ainu-Japanese "hybrids." He concluded that even the data “belonging to the so called Ainu may be constitutionally classified as those of hybrids” because “they are not so different from those of Ainu hybrids and they are far short of being Ainu-like” (Shima 1959:10). In other words, Shima found that the Sakhalin Ainu in his study were far from being the “pure” native Sakhalin that he had hoped for. Shima’s realization of the racial mixing of the people of the Japanese islands contrasts nevertheless with attempts by other scholars to portray the Japanese as homogeneous.

In a later issue of the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Nippon* that year, Watanabe Saburō and Yamazaki Fusao (1959) from the Department of Anatomy at Sapporo Medical College, Hokkaidō, managed to gain access to Ainu corpses, although how they did so remains unstated in their paper. They examined tattooed skin taken from the upper lip of an elderly Ainu woman and compared it with the tattooed skin taken from the upper arm of a middle-aged Japanese man.
They attributed histological differences to the differences in tattooing method. The Ainu used incision whereas the Japanese used puncturing.

In the April 1959 issue of the journal, Kōhara Yukinari of the Anatomical Institute, School of Medicine, Shinshū University, reported on research that had been funded by a Ministry of Education Grant in Aid for Scientific Research. He examined the motor performance of 480 males and females in the two mountain villages of Kawakami and Kawashima in Nagano prefecture. All were aged 20 years or over. The inhabitants of both villages performed alike apart from males aged 20–34 years in Kawakami who were particularly agile. Kōhara (1959:72) suggested that the villagers of Kawakami were “more adaptive to [the] natural environment” and were not only smarter and more intellectual but were quicker to adopt new modes of life and industry, especially in agriculture and forestry. In this way, Kōhara drew a link between overall motor skills and responsiveness to modernization. The tendency for Kawashima villagers to be “passive and conventional” had resulted in the younger generation leaving the village for life and employment elsewhere. For a Japan that was rebuilding after the war and intent on pursuing rapid economic growth, this was a reminder not to be complacent.

Many of the two million Korean colonial subjects in Japan returned home at the end of the Pacific war. In the years from 1959 to 1961, some 70,000 Koreans left. Despite this, some 600,000 chose to remain behind. What is more, it returned home at the end of the Pacific war. In the years following the war, much agricultural produce from both Korea and Japan may have been a factor. During the colonial period and in wartime, much agricultural produce from both Korea and Taiwan was sent to Japan. Both countries accounted for the bulk of the rice that was imported into Japan. In a way, the paper by Kohama et al. (1959) measured the cost of empire on colonial subjects who were deprived of adequate nutrition in order to feed Japan. In this way, the Japanese sought to examine social problems through physical anthropology and biometrics.

It is not surprising that anatomists based at medical schools dominate the pages of the journal. This was the case for authors of the third paper in the April 1959 issue on “Japanese-American hybrids” written by Hoshi Hiroshi from the Department of Anatomy, Faculty of Medicine, University of Tokyo. In the final months of the Allied occupation of Japan in 1951, a longitudinal growth study of Japanese-American mixed-race children was begun by a research team led by Suda Akiyoshi, who was based in the Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Science, at the same university. Hoshi was one of the experts who participated in the project, which examined more than 130 boys and girls from the Elizabeth Sanders Home in Kanagawa prefecture and an additional 40 boys from Boys Town, also in Kanagawa. The children had been born in the wake of Japan’s defeat and because of fraternization between American servicemen and Japanese women during the occupation (Burkhardt 1983).

Hoshi’s study involved 14 girls who had been measured twice a year for 5 or 6 years and were at the time aged between 10 and 11-and-a-half years of age. Half were of Japanese and white American parentage, and the other half were of Japanese and African-American parentage. It was noticeable that the growth rate of the mixed-race children exceeded that of the Japanese. The two groups of mixed-race children were compared, and differences in face and head measurements were observed with the conclusion that “racial characteristics appear first of all in the nose and mouth region in the infantile period” (Hoshi 1959:30).

The final scientific paper was by Kimura Kunihiko, Hagiya Shukuko, and Kitano Shinsei of the Department of Anatomy, School of Medicine, Tohō University. In their paper they examined the physique and growth of Japanese children during and after World War II. A major concern had been the incidence of malnutrition among children and youths. The study focussed on height. They found that wartime deprivation, especially in infancy and childhood, had the effect of slowing down growth before adolescence and retarding adolescence. The effect was more pronounced in males than females. Females, they concluded, seemed to have stronger “resisting power to the war privation and bad living conditions” (Kimura, Hagiya, and Kitano 1959:39).

In 1961, Sofue Takao speculated as to the reasons for why the Anthropological Society of Nippon and the Department of Anthropology at the University of Tokyo, two key institutions, focussed on physical anthropology and prehistory for so long. He attributed this partly to how the term “anthropology” came to be understood in the German sense of the word, that is, more along the lines of physical anthropology in the United States. Also, what is striking is that many of the graduates of the Department of Anthropology at Tokyo, the authors of the articles published on physical anthropology,
and members of the society were anatomists at medical schools. The authorship of the papers referred to above reflect this tendency. As Sofue (1961) explained, the Department of Anthropology was well into the twentieth century “essentially an institute for physical anthropology” (174).

Collection and Return of Ainu Skeletons

The remainder of the rather remarkable April 1959 issue of the Journal of the Anthropological Society of Nippon was devoted to the proceedings of a meeting to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Koganei Yoshikiyo. Even for anthropologists wishing to study living Ainu communities, the collection of Ainu remains and artefacts in the past has been a source of controversy because it encouraged Ainu to refuse to cooperate. It is not surprising, given the actions of researchers such as Koganei.

In the decades following Japan’s colonization of the northern island of Hokkaido in 1869, a considerable traffic emerged in skulls as commodities, and local networks emerged to support this activity. Related artefacts, oral histories, and language data were also gathered, sometimes surreptitiously. The anatomist Koganei offered medical treatment to the Ainu despite having no clinical experience. Researchers masqueraded as medical men to obtain blood samples to “solve” smallpox epidemics. Koganei (1935) remissised how he had secretly collected Ainu skulls by excavating graves at night in Hokkaido and washing away flesh and skin in nearby streams (Bogdanowicz 2002). Kiyono, too, became a little too zealous in his collection of artifacts and was arrested in 1937 for stealing items from temples and shrines, after which he left Kyoto Imperial University.

In the 1930s, a major project on ethnobiology was conducted under the auspices of the newly established eugenic lobby group known as the Ethnic Hygiene Association of Japan (Nihon Minzoku Eisei Gakkai, later known as Nihon Minzoku Eisei Kyo¯kai). The association sought to improve Japan (Nihon Minzoku Eisei Gakkai). The association aimed to cooperate. It is not surprising, given the actions of researchers such as Koganei.

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The last few decades have seen a rise in indigenous nationalism against the backdrop of increased activism by minority groups in Japan. There have been Ainu liberation campaigns against Ainu scholars as a form of retribution for having extracted Ainu blood and excavated skeletons (Siddle 1999). Ultimately, the skeletons have been used by scholars for what can be regarded as nationalist purposes, and the Ainu have increasingly refused to cooperate. Today, the skeletal remains and artefacts discussed in this paper are housed at universities and museums throughout Japan along with collections of skeletons assembled from cadavers used to teach medical students. The Ainu skeletons that Koganei collected continue to be a useful resource at the University Museum, University of Tokyo (Ossenberg et al. 2006), but such collections continue to court controversy. In 1987, the fate of remains collected by Kodama was the subject of negotiation between Hokkaido University and the Ainu Association of Hokkaido. To apologize for past wrongs, the university built a charnel house on university grounds to store the remains that are now technically owned by the association. A small number of remains have been returned (Bogdanowicz 2002). Japan’s colonial expansion into Asia also facilitated the collection of specimens and artefacts from other cultures, but their repatriation is a problem that Japan has yet to adequately deal with.

Physical anthropology was a tool that conveniently provided metaphors of mixed origin at the time of the growth of the Japanese empire. Ironically, continuing debate regarding the origins of the Japanese has contributed to a neglect of the significance of the Ainu and any claims that they might have to land rights (Stevens 2001). Recent evidence suggests that the Ainu are closely related to the Neolithic Jōmon people (Tajima et al. 2004). This corresponds to some of the early Ainu theories proposed by pioneers of Japanese anthropology such as Philipp Franz von Siebold and Koganei Yoshikiyo (Imamura 1996:160).

Japan and Southeast Asia

The major question driving research has been whether most Japanese today have descended from the Jōmon people or from later immigrants around the time of the Yayoi period (Kumar 2009:74–75). Modern Japanese appear to be descendants of both the Jōmon and Yayoi populations, but the relative genetic contribution of each and their geographic origins are still hotly debated (Hammer et al. 2006; Hanihara and Ishida 2009). Recent research points in the direction of origins in Southeast Asia. Hanihara Kazuo’s paper on his "Dual Structure Model for the Population History of the Japanese" (1991) argued that the ancestors of the Jōmon people came from Southeast Asia and that a second wave of immigrants came from Northeast Asia beginning in the Yayoi period.

In contrast, a paper by Yongyi Li et al. (1991) published that same year in the American Journal of Physical Anthropology was surprised to find evidence that the Yayoi people originated in Southeast Asia. This was backed up by Hammer et al. (2006), whose research has found that the ancestors of the Yayoi people are of Southeast Asian origin. Some physical anthropologists have claimed that more than three quarters of the Japanese gene pool can be traced to the Korean peninsula (Edwards 2000:380).

How do we resolve this? A recent study published in Science on December 11, 2009, by members of the Human Genome Organization’s Pan-Asian SNP Consortium suggests that Asians probably originated from Southeast Asia and then migrated northward, with the Japanese arriving via the Korean peninsula (An 2009; Normile 2009). Furthermore, the study shows that genetic ancestry is strongly correlated with linguistic affiliations and geography (HUGO Pan-Asian SNP Consortium 2009). Ann Kumar (2009:2) has also recently argued that scientific evidence in the form of DNA, rice genetics, and historical linguistics point to immigrants from Indonesia rather than Korea or China as having been responsible for the transformation of Japan from a hunter-gatherer society in the Jōmon period to one more dependent on agriculture in the Yayoi period. Research continues, but it is clear that through the combined study of DNA and older methods of physical anthropology such as craniofacial metrics, we will come closer to understanding the origins of the Japanese.

The nationalistic Japanese preoccupation with the Ainu and the detailed description of the physical characteristics of the population according to region or district has been seen as contributing to a general lack of international recognition for Japanese anthropology in the past (Frisch 1963:223; Yamashita 2006a:29). This has served to reinforce the semiperipheral position of the field vis-à-vis the center.

The Ainu as an Indigenous People

The idea that the roots of Japanese people can be found in the Jōmon period and in Ainu culture has been promoted by the nationalistic intellectuals Umehara Takeshi and Umesao Tadao (Habu and Fawcett 1999:591) as well as the physical anthropologist Hanihara. The Ainu are seen as remnants of a proto-Japanese culture that failed to evolve over the last 1,500 years (Howell 1996:175; Siddle 2003:461; Sleebboom 2004:55–56; Umehara and Hanihara 1982) and are thus subsumed under the broad banner of “the Japanese.” Ainu culture thus becomes part of Japanese culture. This has worked against the efforts of Ainu activists to have the Ainu recognized as an indigenous people with their own history. In 1986, prime minister Nakasone Yasuhiro claimed that Japan had no racial minorities in the sense that Ainu had assimilated into...
the Japanese population. His own bushy eyebrows were cited as evidence of this, along with the work of Umehara Takeshi (Siddle 2003:449).

On March 27, 1997, some progress was made. The Sapporo District Court recognized that the Ainu fit the legal category of indigenous people. This landmark decision was the result of action taken by Ainu activists against the Hokkaido Development Agency’s attempts to forcibly resume their land, including burial sites and other sacred sites, in order to build the Nibutani Dam. Nibutani was one of the few villages in Hokkaido that was predominately Ainu. Meanwhile, the government enacted the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act. While initially welcomed, it has since been criticized for emphasizing a traditional version of Ainu culture as being authentic (Siddle 2002, 2003:455–459, 2009:33–34).

Epilogue

On Friday, June 6, 2008, the Japanese parliament belatedly passed a resolution that recognized the Ainu as one of the indigenous peoples of Japan (Ito 2008; Onishi 2008). Given the long-standing belief that the Japanese were an ethnically homogeneous nation, this was a historic moment in the history of the search for the origins of the Japanese. The Japanese do not necessarily acknowledge that they are descended from the Ainu, but they do now see the Ainu as somehow being part of the racial mix even if scholars are not sure of the details. Reflecting this uncertainty, the Japanese parliament remains reluctant to support the rights of the Ainu as an indigenous people.

In contrast, the long-standing interest in Japanese physical anthropology in Japan can be seen in popular science publications (Newton Graphic Science Magazine, Shinoda, and Ötsuka 2009) and among the Japanese public who have avidly taken to the idea that Japanese can be divided into two physical types. In several museums in Japan, visitors can use a computer game to determine whether they are more a Jōmon- or physical types. In several museums in Japan, visitors can use a computer game to determine whether they are more a Jōmon- or physical types. This landmark was the result of action taken by Ainu activists against the Hokkaido Development Agency’s attempts to forcibly resume their land, including burial sites and other sacred sites, in order to build the Nibutani Dam. Nibutani was one of the few villages in Hokkaido that was predominately Ainu. Meanwhile, the government enacted the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act. While initially welcomed, it has since been criticized for emphasizing a traditional version of Ainu culture as being authentic (Siddle 2002, 2003:455–459, 2009:33–34).

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