

Commitment Versus Convenience: Interpreting Ainu Culture in the Kuril Islands Dispute

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Ostensibly, the Kuril Islands conflict presents a well-worn narrative of a territorial dispute: two highly powerful states – in this case, Russia and Japan – embroiled in a series of intertwined disagreements over a prolonged period of time, with strong geo-strategic overtones. Scattered amongst this narrative has been the adoption of laws in Japan which condemned the “unlawful occupation” of the islands by Russia, followed by a controversial visit to the islands by Dmitry Medvedev, followed by the recall of the Japanese ambassador to Russia¹. Yet in a somewhat unexpected twist, Japan has recently drawn the culture card, arguing that its claims to the two southernmost Kuril Islands, Iturup and Kunashir, can be legitimised based on the previous existence of indigenous Ainu culture there. While this might appear to mark the beginning of Japan’s genuine acceptance of its minority groups, there is evidence to suggest that at least for now, summoning the cultural argument in the Kuril Islands dispute is merely a carefully chosen political motive.

To best understand Japan’s official stance on its relationship with the Ainu people, semantics provide a notable clue. The idea of “Nihonjinron” (or 日本人論) has consistently acted as a political, cultural and artistic directive to enable the Japanese

¹ Gorenburg, Dmitry. 'The Southern Kuril Islands Dispute'. PONARS Eurasia 226 (2012).

people to grasp the essence of the Japanese national and cultural identity. When used in isolation, however, the character 論, 'ron', can signify a theory or doctrine. This crucially draws on the idea of a single line of argument, or in the case of Japanese identity, the idea of homogeneity. Often grounded on assimilation and denial, Japan's historical approach to dealing with the Ainu population has therefore perpetuated the idea of Ainu culture as a rupture and even a threat to Japanese national identity, and particularly following World War Two, an ancient, stifling barrier to Japan's quest towards redemption and modernity.

In light of Japan's actions in the Kuril Islands dispute, it is also worth acknowledging that "Nihonjinron" has also been utilised as a mobilising tool when dealing with Russia's acute displays of aggression. According to Bukh², as far back as the late eighteenth century, Russia exerted dominance in East Asia through a brand of cultural competitiveness, in that it promoted Russian culture as a stronger and thus superior alternative to Japanese culture. The Kuril Ainu, inhabiting the islands scattered approximately 1300km between Russia and Japan, were naturally the group that was most susceptible to this coercion. Consequently, invoking "Nihonjinron" emerged to be as much a national standard as it was a war cry, as it not only sought to oppress the development of an independent Kuril identity, but also to match Russia's cultural belligerence.

Nowadays, as the Kuril Islands dispute continues to restrict Russo-Japanese cooperation, it makes sense to ask whether Japan's reference to Ainu culture means

² Bibliography: Bukh, Alexander. 'Ainu Identity And Japan's Identity: The Struggle For Subjectivity'. Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies 28.2 (2010).

that “Nihonjinron” is on its way out, or if it is here to stay. That the acceptance of the Ainu within Japanese society has mostly hinged on developments in the international sphere reveals that the latter still holds true. Certainly, Japan has scrambled to appease the expectations of Western states through the rapid drafting of the 2008 Diet Resolution³, a watershed moment in which the official stance towards the Ainu population shifted from blatant denial to the recognition of this group as a culturally distinct indigenous minority. This was, however, not without an external impetus. It in fact came hot on the heels of the Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples and was also prompted by the assertion of a UN investigator that Japan was guilty of “deep and profound” xenophobia towards its indigenous peoples⁴.

Another factor undermines the authenticity of Japan’s recent policy developments which have sought to embrace Ainu culture, this time on the part of the Ainu themselves: an apprehensive attitude towards self-determination. While recent statistics record the number of Ainu at between 30,000 to 50,000⁵, these results are skewed by the fact that a vast majority of Japanese citizens are reluctant to highlight their Ainu heritage for fear of being subjected to institutional racism. Shunwa Honda, a former professor at the Open University of Tokyo, has validated this fear, explaining that educational levels and socio-economic mobility among the Ainu are considerably lower than their homogenous Japanese counterparts which push them towards welfare benefits and stigma from the wider community⁶. In the eyes of those

³ McGrogan, David. 'A Shift In Japan's Stance On Indigenous Rights, And Its Implications'. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 17.2 (2010): 355-373. Web.

⁴ Hogg, Chris. 'Japan Racism 'Deep And Profound''. *News.bbc.co.uk*. N.p., 2005. Web. 29 July 2015.

⁵ Refworld,. 'Refworld | World Directory Of Minorities And Indigenous Peoples - Japan : Ainu'. N.p., 2015. Web. 29 July 2015.

⁶ Irvine, Dean. 'The Ainu: Japan's Little Known Ethnic Group - CNN.Com'. *CNN*. N.p., 2015. Web. 27 July 2015.

with Ainu blood, self-determination in Japan is much like an admission of weakness and fallibility, and based on this, indigenous identity proves to be little more than a tactic in Japan's political arsenal devoid of any tangible benefit.

In the Kuril Islands dispute, Russia has maintained a single line of argument defined mostly by the need to preserve national honour, but additionally, by issues of mineral deposits and defence planning. Taking into account Japan's dismissive approach to the Ainu people, the legitimisation of its claims to Iturup and Kunashir by means of culture is less of an indication of a path towards acceptance, as it is a means of



Figure 1 Ainu People circa 1900, Image Credit: conservapedia.com

distancing itself from its rival. As the West views Russia with growing suspicion and consternation, there is little doubt as to why Japan has seized the opportunity to appeal to the West and to

deploy cultural values, regardless of their intent or authenticity. For Japan, emphasising Ainu culture does not at all represent a commitment; it is just a renewed attempt to portray itself as the “good cop” in a dispute fraught with uninterrupted defiance and animosity.

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