

# Movement for the Return of Remains through the Right of Nations to Self-Determination—Aiming for Decolonization of Ryukyu

2023/6/30 at the Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies, Hokkaido University

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This report is part of the research results of Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research "Construction of a Theory Linking Anthropology and Critical Social Movements for the Formation of Indigenous Studies" (Project No. 20H00048, Representative: Yoshinobu Ota).

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## 1 Anthropologists as Colonizers

Since the invasion and annexation by the Japanese government in 1879, Ryukyu has been a Japanese colony to the present day. With the annexation of Ryukyu, Ryukyu became a colony of the Japanese Empire and its inhabitants became indigenous peoples. The colonial Japanese government and researchers deprived the Ryukyuan people of their remains, Zushigame (Ryukyuan funerary urn), Ryukyuan languages, land, original copies of the Treaty of Amity between the United States, France, and the Netherlands and the Ryukyu Kingdom, and Ryukyuan government's official documents. To date, the Japanese government has never apologized or made compensation for the annexation of Ryukyu.

A symbolic case of discrimination against the Ryukyuan people was the "Academic Anthropology Museum Incident"<sup>1</sup> that occurred in Osaka in 1903, in which anthropologists such as Shogoro Tsuboi were deeply involved. The Ryukyuan people, along with the Ainu, Koreans, and Taiwanese aborigines, were displayed like a zoo and made the object of study. Anthropologists

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the direct and indirect involvement of anthropologists in the Academic Anthropology Museum Incident, see my article "Why Okinawa Prefecture Did Not Save Ryukyuan Women from the Academic Anthropology Museum: Examining the Origin of the Contemporary Discrimination Against Ryukyuan" [Matsushima (2022) pp. 99-115].

have academically justified the "Japan-Ryukyu Common Ancestry Theory," a hypothesis to assimilate the Ryukyuan people into the "Japanese" based on their bones, language, blood, etc. The theory is based on the idea that the Ryukyuan people are the same as the Japanese. This theory is a hypothesis that the Ryukyuan people are "Japanese," "proto-Japanese," or "Yaponesian," and that they are academically positioned as "Japanese" based on their "large amount of Jomon blood," "mandibular skull," "Ryukyuan languages as Japanese dialects," Mitochondrial DNA, etc., and enclosed as "Japanese". This led to the assumption that the Ryukyu Islands were "inherent territory of Japan," and in the Pacific War, it became a battlefield and after the war, the U.S. military bases have been built upon the islands.

The imposition of 70% of the U.S. military bases in Japan on Okinawa Prefecture, which accounts for only 0.6% of the total land area of Japan, and the neglect of various problems caused by the U.S. military bases is discrimination against the Ryukyuan people by the Japanese government and "Japanese". Despite the opposition of the Ryukyuan Nation, a new U.S. military base is being built at Henoko in Nago city, in anticipation of a "Taiwan Contingency," and Japanese Self Defense Forces bases are being established in the Miyako and Yaeyama Islands, again using the Ryukyu Islands as a battlefield.

From 1929 to 1935, Takeo Kanaseki, Muneyoshi Miyake, Eiji Nakayama, and others at Kyoto Imperial University had taken advantage of the unequal relationship between Japanese and Ryukyuan Nation under colonial rule to steal remains from the Ryukyu Islands and the Amami Islands for their research. Kyoto University, which has refused to return the remains of the Ryukyuan and Amamian, has not liquidated its imperialism and colonialism to this day.

What is the problem with the theft of remains and the refusal to return them? By taking away the remains, which are the foundation and evidence of genealogy ("memory of the great bloodline")<sup>2</sup> linking ancestors and descendants, imperialism seeks to erase their identity as indigenous peoples, their right to self-determination and indigenous rights, strengthen its colonial rule, impose military bases on them, and make them a battlefield again. Universities and researchers are complicit in the machinations of the Neo-Imperialism.

## **2 Movement for the Return of Remains through the Right of Nations to Self-Determination**

I reported to the "UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples" in 1996, the "UN Special Committee on Decolonization" in 2011, and the "UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [EMRIP]" in 2020 and 2022, and interacted with indigenous peoples around the world to expand the circle of movement for decolonization. 1996 to 2022 More

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<sup>2</sup> Trask (1999,) p. 118. For a discussion of the formation of the concept of "genealogy" and its relationship to Hawaiian archaeological research, see Kawelu (2015).

than 80 Ryukyuan participants in and reported to various UN committees, including the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples, which was the drafting body for the "UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples(2007)".<sup>3</sup> Among them are former Okinawa Governor Takeshi Onaga. This September, Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki is scheduled to appeal for the "right to peace" at the UN Human Rights Council. And the UN system for the restoration of indigenous peoples' rights through the "Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," the "Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues," and the "Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" has been formed.

As a result, the UN Committee on Civil Liberties in 2008, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2018, the UN Committee on Civil Liberties in 2022, and the UN Human Rights Council in 2023 recommended that the Japanese government recognize the Ryukyuan as indigenous peoples. <sup>4</sup>However, the Japanese government refuses to recognize the Ryukyuan as indigenous peoples. It is believed that the Japanese government refuses to recognize them as indigenous peoples because it would violate Article 30 (prohibition of military activities) of the "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" and would be unable to implement its colonial policy of "imposing US and Japanese military bases" on them. However, whether the Japanese government recognizes them or not, based on ILO Convention 169, the Ryukyuan could become indigenous peoples and are subject to the "UN Declaration".

In January 2017, I learned that the remains of the Ryukyuan were stored at Kyoto University, and in April of the same year I began a campaign to return the remains to Kyoto University. However, Kyoto University refused to have a dialogue with me and did not answer any questions about the remains. Therefore, in December 2018, I filed a lawsuit against Kyoto University in the Kyoto District Court demanding the return of the remains.

In July 2019, Kenichi Shinoda, President of the Anthropological Society of Nippon, sent a letter of request to President Hisakazu Yamagiwa of Kyoto University, which included the following statement. "The ancient human skeletons collected and stored from archaeological

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<sup>3</sup> See Matsushima (2022) pp. 381~403. for the motivation, background, and progress of the UN activities by the Ryukyuan, as well as the report documents in EMRIP.

<sup>4</sup> It is not only the various UN committees that recognize the Ryukyuan as indigenous peoples and support the restoration of their indigenous rights, but also the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), an international non-profit organization that promotes the collective rights of indigenous peoples. Matsushima (2023), a report of the movement to return the remains of the Ryukyuan, is posted on the organization's website (Debates Indigenas).

sites and old tombs in Japan should be preserved, passed on, and provided for research in the future as cultural assets shared by the nation that have academic value in clarifying the appearance and lifestyle of the region's predecessors.”

“Although various movements may occur in the future with regard to the management of ancient human skeletal remains, we hope that you will take actions based on the recognition that they are cultural properties shared by the people of Japan, looking 100, 200 years into the future, or even further into the distant future.”

This "Written Request" clearly demonstrates the colonialism and imperialism of this Society, which believes that the remains of the Ryukyans, as "property shared by the people of Japan," should be the subject of research regardless of what kind of movement may be made to return the remains.

In April 2022, the Kyoto District Court ruled in favor of the defendants, and we are currently fighting an appeal in the Osaka High Court. The presiding judge of the Osaka High Court requested to visit the museum where the remains were kept to check the situation, but Kyoto Univ. stubbornly refused. During the proceedings in this court, Kyoto Univ. finally presented photographs of the 26 remains. However, all the skulls were upside down, and only the back of the head was photographed.

The Ryukyuan nation regard the remains as "bone gods" and are respectful to their ancestors. They make offerings of flowers and fruits at altars and graves and make Uchato (tea offerings). Kyoto Univ. not only does not offer offerings to the remains, but also keeps all skulls upside down. Researchers write in ink on the skulls to identify where the remains were stolen from: "Ryukyu" and "Unten" are also written in ink on 63 skulls stolen by Takeo Kanaseki, which were transferred from National Taiwan University to the Okinawa Prefectural Archaeological Center in March 2019. However, the photographs produced by Kyoto Univ. were taken at an angle such that ink writing could not be seen. We suspect that Kyoto Univ.'s refusal to allow a judge to conduct an on-site inspection at its museum is because they are storing the remains in an unethical manner that may upset the feelings of the bereaved families.

Kyoto Univ. also stated in its brief for the defendant in the appeal of the "Lawsuit for the Return of the Remains of the Ryukyans" that the plaintiffs, Masako Kameya and Tsuyoshi Tamagushiku, are not descendants of the first Sho clan who had united the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1429. The Ryukyans have formed their identity by confirming their relationship to and memories of their ancestors through family histories and ink inscriptions on the cover of Zushigame (Ryukyuan funeral urn). Ryukyuan "customary law" is ignored by Kyoto Univ. as "unscientific" and privileges the study of "stolen artifacts" without explicitly stating the legal basis for keeping these remains. Kyoto Univ. denies the process of "ethnic consciousness" formation, in which Ryukyans inherit their history, memories, and culture through the

relationship to their ancestors and become aware of their roots. Kyoto Univ. would like to say, "Our researchers can determine the ancestry of Mrs. Kameya and Mr. Tamagushiku through genome research and measurement research. That is why we will not return them." "We, the researchers of Kyoto Univ. can clarify the history of Ryukyu"

In a documentary program titled "Whose Bones Are These?" aired on MBS "Image 22" on July 31, 2022, Masato Nakatsukasa, the president of Anthropological Society of Nippon and a Professor of Kyoto Univ., stated that he conducts research on human bones based on "intellectual curiosity. He has put his own "intellectual curiosity" above the reverence, beliefs, and customs of the Ryukyuan ancestors. He is determined to continue his research on remains on a semi-permanent basis, refusing to engage in dialogue with the bereaved families who question the ethics of research.

### **3 Decolonization of Japanese Universities and Research Museums**

"Recently, grave robbing has been continuing on Miyako, Ishigaki, Kudaka, and Iriomote Islands, which are said to be a treasure house of folklore materials. The rare lifestyles and cultural heritage of the islands have become valuable research materials one by one. (omission) As recently as August, the grave of the late Mr. Fuyu Iha, the father of Okinawan folklore, in the ruins of Urasoe Castle was uncovered, and the late Mr. Iha must be lamenting the recent boom in folk art and folk tools. His bones were dumped in the grass and the urn was stolen."<sup>5</sup>

In 1904, Iha served as a guide for Ryuzo Torii, an anthropologist at Tokyo Imperial University, when he conducted a survey of Ryukyu. Torii took photographs in Ryukyu, recorded Ryukyuan languages on a gramophone, and stole dozens of remains from the ruins of Nakagusuku Castle.

Before Takeo Kanazeki went to Ryukyu in 1928, Iha responded to Kanazeki's inquiry about collecting remains. It is believed that he felt no pain that the remains of his compatriots were stolen by Japanese researchers. He was more concerned about his own research, intellectual curiosity, and researcher network than beliefs, customs and life of Ryukyuan.

Grave robbing by researchers was not only a prewar problem for Ryuzo Torii, Kenji Kiyono, Takeo Kanaseki, Muneyoshi Miyake<sup>6</sup>, and others, but also became a problem before and after the "reversion to the Japan" in 1972. In 2019, two sarcophagi were stolen from the Toguchi

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<sup>5</sup> "Rampant Grave Robbing," in *Sunday Okinawa*, November 20, 1971.

<sup>6</sup> See Matsushima (2018), Matsushima and Kimura (2019), Matsushima (2020), Matsushima and Yamauchi (2020), and Matsushima (2022) for discussions of the "grave robbing" problem by Torii, Kiyono, Kanaseki, Miyake, and other anthropologists.

old tombs in Motobu Town on Okinawa Island, and in 2021, remains were stolen from the ruins of Ikei Castle on Ikei Island. It indicates that grave robbing, or "cultural exploitation from Ryukyu," is still ongoing.

During and after the war, Ryukyuan remains and "cultural property" were also stolen by U.S. military personnel as colonizers, and there have been administrative and private campaigns for their return. In 1854, Matthew Perry and his party brought the "Bell of Gokokuji" (cast by King Sho Taikyū in 1456) from Ryukyu to the United States. In 1987, Mr. Shizuo Kishaba returned the bell to Ryukyu. Omorosaushi (Sho Family-version) and "Bell of Bankoku Shinryo" which were taken by the U.S. soldiers, were also returned by the Ryukyuan after the war. In 2001, the Okinawa Churashima Foundation and the Okinawa Prefectural Board of Education had 13 "leaked cultural properties," including the crown of the King of Ryukyu, registered in the FBI's (Federal Bureau of Investigation) "International Stolen Art File.

Perry's group also took two crania of Ryukyuan, which are kept as part of the "Morton Collection" at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Currently, a campaign to return the remains is being conducted by the UkwanshiKabudan, Ryukyuan diaspora in Hawaii, Mr. Edward Halealoha Ayau, and the Nirai Kanai Nu kai.<sup>7</sup>

The University of Pennsylvania has discussed colonialism and racism by the university over the "Morton Collection" and has stated on its website that "Racism has no place in our Museum," "We reject scientific racism that was used to justify slavery and the unethical acquisition of the remains of enslaved people," "Actions towards repatriation and burial" "our Ongoing Commitment to Ethical Practices & Repair,"<sup>8</sup> and the University's specific efforts to decolonize themselves. Samuel George Morton was a racist who collected over 1,000 skulls from around the world and determined the superiority or inferiority of human beings according to the size of their skulls. In other words, Ryukyuan remains are also the subject of racist research.

Entering "Okinawa" in the National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) "Specimen Material

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<sup>7</sup> Nirai Kanai Nu Kai, an organization of indigenous Ryukyuan that conducts restitution and rituals of Ryukyuan remains, prepared a tomb to house the remains of Ryukyuan in the custody of the University of Pennsylvania and conducted a ritual service. See NiraiKanai nu Kai (2023) and Matsushima (2023) for more information on the movement to return the remains. At Community Forum Jikouen Honganji (Okinawa Temple) in Hawaii on February 26, 2026, Yasukatsu Matsushima presented "Why and how have I been doing the 'Going Home Movement' of Ryukyuan's Ancestors Remains?" The symposium was supported by Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (20H00048, representative:Yoshinobu Ota).

<sup>8</sup> PennMuseum "Morton Cranial Collection"

Catalog Database" yielded 1327 hits. Of the 14 specimen names "Containers for human remains," 11 were "Zushigame" (all with lids) and 3 were "cinerary urns," all of which were described as having been received in 1975. The "Ethnicity" classification entries for these Ryukyuan-derived cultural properties are listed as "Japan", as are those for other "Okinawa Prefecture" specimens. On the other hand, the "Ethnicity" classification entry for the Ainu is listed as "Ainu".<sup>9</sup>

Based on the above facts, the following can be said. Cultural anthropologists classify and define the Ryukyuan as "Japanese", which is a matter of "identity exploitation". The national institution of anthropology assigns ethnic attributes to the colonized Ryukyuan. In line with the Japanese government's national policy of "denial of Ryukyuan as indigenous peoples," the Minpaku functions as an implementing agency of the national policy. There is an international understanding by indigenous peoples, as in ILO Convention 169, that national identity is formed not by others, but on the basis of one's own consciousness. There is a social responsibility to explain on what cultural anthropological studies the Ryukyuan were classified and defined as "ethnic Japanese," but this is also not clearly stated.

As described in Kanaseki's book, the Ryukyuan value tombs, remains, and Zushigame so much that it is extremely difficult to collect them. In order to obtain them, they steal or purchase stolen objects.

The remains and Zushigame are one and the same, and to separate them would be "academic violence" against Ryukyuan. On the lid of it, memories and history of the deceased are written as follows. "The bones of a young woman and newly born child were kept together. The bones are rather fragile, but the shape is perfect. On the back of the lid, there is an inscription that reads, "Doukou three years (AD1823: Matsushima Note), November, Father Higa". The bones were placed in a big bag and moved on. Perhaps it was the curse of the rain, but from this point on, the rain became heavier and the mountain path became slippery, making it quite difficult."<sup>10</sup> When the remains are separated from Zushigame, it is no longer possible to determine who, when, or where they died. In the Ryukyus, customs and beliefs continue to this day that the remains and the jar are one, and that the existence and memories of the Ryukyuan are passed on to the next generation, and that the relationship of mutual support between ancestors and descendants continues through rituals even after death.

Being separated from the remains of their ancestors means that the genealogy of the Ryukyuan is severed and their indigeneity is taken away. The act of separating the remains and Zushigame from the tombs in Ryukyu and storing and exhibiting them in a museum in

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<sup>9</sup> National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) "Specimen Material Catalog Database"

<sup>10</sup> Kanaseki(1978)p.255.

“Yamato(Japan)” means the disconnection of the Ryukyuan from their "birth island". In other words, by taking Zushigame and displaying them in “Yamato”, Minpaku is committing an act of "extermination" of Ryukyuan. The Ryukyuan's connection to their ancestors through their remains allows them to claim indigenous land rights and promote decolonization. Zushigame and urns, even if purchased from "grave robbers," should be returned to their original location, i.e., the tombs.

### **Conclusion.**

Anthropologists at Japanese universities and museums are as human as the Ryukyuan they study. How angry and sad would they be if the remains of their relatives were taken from their graves? I hope that through "dialogue," we can confirm each other's "humanity," consider the issue of the theft of Ryukyuan remains as "our own business," and return the remains, mabui (spirit), kitchen jars, etc., to their original graves.

Anthropologists have the aspect of colonialists who expose other cultures (especially those considered sacred), steal things, and provide academic justification for colonial rule. Research based on "spoils" obtained by grave robbing raids raises ethical issues. Bones, kitchen jars, and burial accessories taken from Ryukyu, a Japanese colony, are "spoils of war. How much have the results of anthropological research contributed to the resolution of a group of problems derived from colonialism that the Ryukyuan people are still suffering from, to the improvement of their lives, to peace on the islands, and to the improvement of their rights, dignity, and restoration of their sovereignty? Wasn't it only a place of deprivation for the sake of "intellectual curiosity" and "research achievement?"

The lawsuit for the return of the remains of the Ryukyuan people was the first in a Japanese court to demand that Kyodai return the remains of the Ryukyuan people, criticize the history of Japanese colonial rule over the Ryukyu Islands, and assert the right of the indigenous people to return their remains under international law. They made the government admit the fact that the stolen remains were kept in storage, and they made the remains and photos of the storage facility publicly available. On June 4 of this year, at a meeting of the Japanese Society of Cultural Anthropology, a researcher from the Minpaku promised me that he would return all the kitchen jars in his custody to the Ryukyu Islands.

The return of indigenous peoples' remains has become a global trend. However, Japanese academics (universities and museums) have taken a "closed-door" approach to this issue, wielding the privileges of researchers as if to say, "If you are a researcher, you are allowed to vandalize graves," and refusing to liquidate their own imperialism. The return of the remains, jars, and burial accessories of the Ryukyuan people, along with the campaign to stop the construction of the new base, is an exercise of the "right of self-determination of the people"



for the decolonization and de-imperialization of the Ryukyu Islands. Indigenous peoples around the world have also expanded and strengthened their domestic struggles through cooperation with the United Nations and international organizations. The time has come for the Ryukyuan people to break the "chains of imperialism" that bind their bodies and spirits, and reconnect with their ancestors.

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