

The Conflict between Indigenous Traditional Knowledge and Modern Colonial Knowledge: The Case of the Repatriation of Lew Chewans' Bones to their Own Islands

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1. The modern knowledge of researcher on Lew Chewans' bones

Takeo Kanaseki (金関丈夫) who was an associate professor in Kyoto Imperial University had taken off bones of Lew Chewans from 1928 to 1929. He had taken off those bones from Momojyana tomb (百按司墓) in Nakijin village (今帰仁村) on Okinawa Island without the agreement of their families, relatives and villagers. He gave those bones of 26 bodies to Kyoto Imperial University and those bones of 33 bodies to Taipei Imperial University in which he had worked as a professor.



Figure 1. From the homepage of Nakijin Village Office (<http://www.nakijin.jp/nakijin.nsf/doc/44?>)



Figure 2. Momojyana tomb (百按司墓). Photo by



Figure 3. The Academic Exhibition of Human Races in March 1903②. Source: *Ryubun 21* (琉文 21) Jan. 31 (<http://ryubun21.net/?itemid=8024>).

There had been several cases of robbery of Lew Chewans' bones by Japanese anthropologists, and Kanaseki is one of them who took away those bones from Lew Chew. The Japanese government took over and colonized the Kingdom of Lew Chew with its military forces in 1879, and Lew Chew was annexed as Okinawa prefecture. The administration and education system in Lew Chew has been controlled not by Lew Chewans, but put under the Japan's assimilation policy. There have been countless cases of discrimination against Lew Chewans by Japanese since then. One of the well-known example is the Exhibition of Human Races (人類館) in the 5th National Industrial Exhibition held at Tennoji, Osaka, in 1903 that showcased actual persons of Lew Chewan, Ainu, indigenous Taiwanese, Chinese, Korean, Indians and other non-Japanese people residing within the Japanese Empire. They had their own dresses in their ethnic houses for displaying which appeared strange in the eyes of Japanese audience.

Kanaseki's mentor, the professor of Kyoto Imperial University, Buntarou Adachi (足立文太郎) had persuaded him the necessity for the research of physical anthropology for Lew Chewans and ordered him to collect those bones with the research grants from the Imperial Academy. The grave robbery had occurred by initiative of the Kyoto Imperial University, not individually by Kanaseki.



Figure 4. Amami islands (奄美群島). Source: Wikipedia (<https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki>)

The students of Kenji Kiyono (清野謙次) who was the professor in Kyoto Imperial University had taken away bones of 80 bodies from Amamiohshima (奄美大島), 80 bodies and 70 bodies from Kikaijima (喜界島) and 80 bodies from Tokunoshima (徳之島) between 1933 and 1935. Those bones had become a part of the collection of Prof. Kiyono. Among more than 1400 bodies of his collection, the bones of 72 bodies from Okinawashima (沖縄島), 263 bodies from Amamiohshima had been included and recorded there.

In May 2017, I sent a request of examination of those bones in person with several questions to the Kyoto University Museum where the bones of Lew Chewan in Momojyana tomb were kept. But the museum rejected my request and to answer all questions. The museum also refused any interviews about these bones by the local newspapers - Ryukyu Shimpo, Okinawa Times and Tokyo Shimbun.

In August 2017, as the representative of the Society for Repatriation of Lew Chewan Ancestors' Bones (琉球民族遺骨返還研究会), I sent an official letter to Hisakazu Yamagiwa (山極壽一), the president of Kyoto University with few questions about repatriation of these bones. But again the staff of Kyoto University responded that they won't make any information open to individual inquiries and won't meet with me at Kyoto University for this matter in the future.

I then requested a member of the House of Representative, Kantoku Teruya (照屋寛徳) to perform the parliamentary investigation rights for the information about the these bones in Kyoto University. In September 2017, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and

Technology had disclosed a part of information about them through Kyoto University.

Kyoto University recognized the existence of these bones in its museum officially for the first time as follows: they put these bones in the plastic boxes, they don't know the results of any research conducted about these, they don't make any lists of bones, they won't have any working team such as the working team for the research on the situation of bones of Ainu peoples in Kyoto University.

Such an attitude of Kyoto University violates the Article 21 of the Constitution of Japan, the right to know and freedom of expression. Kyoto University is a national university which has been managed with the taxes of Japanese citizen. Lew Chewans who are Japanese citizen and colonized people have been denied their 'right to know' by Kyoto University, and that tells the fact that the colonialism of Kyoto University against Lew Chewans is still alive today.

Kyoto University has rejected to answer any questions and to accept examination by Lew Chewans because they insist on the technical standards of physical anthropology for examination. What is incomprehensible is that they are claiming the absolute ownership of these bones even though these bones aren't their belongings originally. We can recognize here that the Kyoto University's logic is based on such modern concepts as technical standard, absolute ownership, the priority of academic knowledge, and these concepts are essentially inseparable from the history of colonialism. However, grave robbery is nothing but criminal act and the storage of stolen bones is complicity in the modern norms.

2. Traditional knowledge of Lew Chewan on its bones

Traditionally, Lew Chewans have buried ancestors' bones into big clan's tomb called Kamekou-baka (亀甲墓), hafu-baka (破風墓). They believe that the spirits of ancestors will come from Niraikanai which has been imagined as the place of eternal paradise across the ocean to their tombs and homes for watching over their offspring.

Lew Chewans have several traditional festivals like Seimeisai (清明祭), Jyurokunichisai (十六日祭) for welcoming the spirits of ancestors to their tombs and homes. At these occasions, they pray for the bones in the tombs and eat traditional foods with the spirits of ancestors. This tradition is based on their belief in ancestors protecting these offspring. The bones have been the symbol for the spirits of their ancestors to return to. If researchers can take bones of Lew Chewans and keep them in their museum without any restrictions, traditional believes, customs and lives of Lew Chewans should be ruined.

In the eyes of physical anthropologists, these bones may mean only specimen. But in terms of the traditional knowledge of Lew Chewans, bones of their ancestors are the essential part of their believes, customs and lives. We see here the conflict between modern knowledge and traditional knowledge around the bones of Lew Chewans.

In Lew Chew, the repatriation movement for their bones has begun to recover the spiritual

give-and-take relationship between ancestors and offspring. Ancestors will keep the health, peace and wealth of offspring and offspring will worship for ancestors through their bones as a symbol. This movement of repatriation of bones I think is not only the matter for Lew Chewans but is seen as the exercise of the rights of self-determination by indigenous peoples.

From February 2017, in fact, there appeared many articles about this problem in local newspapers. Many Lew Chewan activists of anti-US military bases have been interested in this matter of continuing colonialism in Lew Chew. The Association of Comprehensive Studies for Independence of the Lew Chewans (琉球民族独立総合研究学会) also asked the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to officially recognize and consider this case as a human right problem.

The bones of Lew Chewans had been taken off from the tombs by Japanese colonialism. In the process, the human rights and dignities of Lew Chewans was ignored and significantly violated. Thus the repatriation of the bones for Lew Chewans is the exercise of their rights of self-determination as an indigenous minority and to get rid of continuing colonialism of Japan since the annexation of the Lew Chew Kingdom in 1879. In that sense, what this movement is fighting for are traditions, memories and history of the Kingdom.

3. The rights of self-determination by indigenous peoples and the integration of traditional and modern knowledge of indigenous peoples against colonization

In 1990, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act was enacted in the US Federal Law. It states that collected bones and burial items of indigenous peoples must be returned to them by officers and museums of the US Federal Government. Similarly, the introduction in ‘Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums’ by the British Government (2005) says that “because of their origin, human remains should hold a unique status within collections, this puts particular responsibilities on the museums in the way they are acquired, curated and displayed. It is recognized that some human remains were obtained in circumstances that are considered unacceptable. For example, some were acquired between 100 and 200 years ago from Indigenous peoples in colonial circumstances, where there was a very uneven divide of power.” In this Guidance, bones should be returned to not only genealogical descendants but also cultural community of origin because these bones had been deprived under the uneven social relationship that is colonialism. Following this Guidance, the British Museum agreed on the repatriation of Aboriginal bones in 2006.

In the Article 12 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), we can also recognize the rights of indigenous peoples for its bones as following;



Figure 5. Photo of the author speaking at the UN Special Committee of Decolonization as a member of the Guam Government delegate in 2011 (Asahi Shimbun, 2011/6/22).

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains.
2. States shall seek to enable the access and/or repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains in their possession through fair, transparent and effective mechanisms developed in conjunction with indigenous peoples concerned.

From 1996 until now, Lew Chewans have participated to several committees in UN to speak about their situation, and some of these committees from 2008 have started recognizing Lew Chewans as indigenous peoples in Japan. They made recommendations to the Japanese Government to resolve the concentration of US military bases in Lew Chew admitting it as racial discrimination and to introduce the education of Lew Chewan history and culture in the curriculum of every schools in Lew Chew. Currently, there are several civil organizations working for the recovery of rights of indigenous peoples in Lew Chew, and they consider the grave robbery of their bones and the storage of them in Kyoto University are the violation on the international law.

The grave robbery and storage of stolen bones by researchers are unethical acts and blasphemy against the traditional belief and lives of Lew Chewans. Not only the daily life of Lew Chewans have been colonized by the Japanese Government as represented in the concentration of US military bases, their spirits are also subjugated by the colonizers even after their death.



Figure 6. Scenes from Ainu ceremonies to rebury bones. Photos by Matsushima.

The bones of 1676 bodies of Ainu peoples are now kept in 12 universities in Japan. Among them, Hokkaido University has bones of 1015 Ainu peoples. In 2008, Ryukichi Ogawa (小川隆吉) and other Ainu peoples requested Hokkaido University to disclose information about their ancestors' bones and they filed a suit against Hokkaido University in 2012 for repatriation of the bones. There have been other law suits by Ainu peoples in 2014 and 2017 for the repatriation of bones to their Kotan (traditional village of Ainu). After the settlement of law suit, bones of 12 bodies were reburied in the Kineusu (杵臼) cemetery in Urakawa (浦河) Town in 2016, and bones of 63 bodies were reburied in Urahoro (浦幌) Town in August 2017. On these occasions I had an opportunity to observe traditional ceremonies of Ainu called Kamuinomi Icharupa. Although the vice-president of Hokkaido University came there, there was no comment of apology for unlawful, unethical acts committed by researchers of his University. In addition, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan Government sent a message in August 2017 that they would return the bones of 63 Lew Chewans kept in Taiwan University to the Okinawa Prefectural Government.

Just like the case of Ainu, Lew Chewan lands had been colonized by the Japanese government and their ancestors' bones were robbed by Japanese researchers which have not yet returned to their offspring. The grave robbery is a prime example of discrimination against Lew Chew. But what lies behind is the deep-rooted discrimination and colonialism by Japanese against them continuing even today that become visible in such an instance as when the Japanese police in October 2016 scared off one Lew Chewan protesting against making a new US military base in Takae (高江) of Okinawa Island by insulting him with a word 'Savage (土人)'.

As a result of their continuing fighting for repatriation of their bones, Ainu people could bring back them to the right place and now they can pray for their ancestor' spirits in traditional ways. Ainu peoples got the pride back as human beings through the repatriation of their bones, and I'm sure Lew Chewans can go the same path.

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