

Origins of the Ainu Religious Conversion at Hokkaido in Japan

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Abstract: The Ainus in Japan were the indigenous people who lived in Northern Japan and Russia. Before the Russian and Japanese arrived in Japan, the Ainu people had their own culture, rituals and values. In their culture, natural spirits exist everywhere. This view is often referred to as Kamui. However, recent studies have shown that the majority of the Ainu community nowadays do not believe in their native religion. Instead, they are mostly believers of Shintoism and Buddhism. This paper traces the origin of the Ainu religion and how the primary religion of the Ainu community has changed to today's situation. The study relies mainly on existing literature. By analyzing interviews, journal articles, and books, the paper seeks to provide a new perspective in understanding the Ainu religion and the influence of religion among indigenous people.

Keywords: indigenous people, Japan, religion, Buddhism

1. Introduction

The Ainus were the indigenous people who lived in regions of Northern Japan and Russia, primarily in Hokkaido. Before the arrival of both Russians and Japanese, the Ainu people developed their own culture, rituals and values. In their weltanschauungs, natural spirits exist everywhere. This view is often referred to as Kamui.

However, recent studies conclude that the majority of the Ainu community today do not believe in their native religion, but rather to rely on Shintoism and Buddhism. This paper reveals the origin of the Ainu religion and how it changed from the primary religion for the Ainu community to today's situation. This study relies mainly on existing literature and analyzes interviews, journal articles, and books. It seeks to provide a new perspective in understanding the Ainu religion and the influence of religion among indigenous people in general.

According to the current studies, despite having their own ritual practices and religion on カムイ (Their spirited gods), the Ainu people experienced a religious change in their community. A study by Sakuri of Hokkaido University shows that more than 46.2 percent of the 5702 Ainu study participants identified themselves as Buddhist [1]. This may be a result of the Japanese empire's expansion towards Hokkaido. In the paper, Sakurai discusses the current religious preference of Ainu communities in Japan. He demonstrates the proportion of religious composition among Ainu communities and describes the interviews with the Ainu people to understand their opinions. He also

investigates the traditional and contemporary religion and weltanschauungs of the Ainu people, including their ritual practices and indigenous cultures.

2. The History of Ainu

The Ainu people are the indigenous people who lived in Northern Japan and Russia, primarily located in Hokkaido, Japan. They have a distinctly different lifestyle from Japanese people in history, having their own language and culture. Their culture has strong connections with nature. According to the Ainu Museum, Ainu people believe that gods and their incarnations exist everywhere in the world [2]. This includes natural phenomena like the sun, moon, water and soil. The divine spirits embed in these phenomena or objects. Pray is one important ritual practice for the Ainu community. In their worldview, there is God. They pray to the God for protection and food. Unlike other religions that put gods in the supreme position, the Ainu believe that the God and human mutually assist each other. Ritual ceremonies occur several times a year with different purposes.

During the Edo period, the Ainu people in Northern Hokkaido started more comprehensive interaction with the Japanese empire that expanded to the North. The majority of the activities was trading. However, conflicts did occur during this period of time between Ainu and the Japanese. Starting from the late 19th century, as a result of the expansion, the Japanese government developed Hokkaido [3]. A large number of Japanese Wajin, which was the name the Japanese used to refer to their racial group, immigrated to Hokkaido. Such expansion brought a significant impact on Ainu societies in many aspects, such as on culture and lifestyle. Such interaction also intensified conflicts between the Ainu people and Wajin. Later, the Japanese empire took control of the entire Hokkaido, and a series of assimilation policies were enforced. Their language was forbidden, and they were forced to adapt to the Japanese way of lifestyle as well as their religious choices. The government intentionally assimilated them into a separate category other than Wajin, which consisted of the majority of the Japanese population.

The government estimated that the Ainu population today is around 25,000, accounting for only 0.02% of the Japanese population [3]. Due to the assimilation process, they have a similar lifestyle to Japanese people in language and culture. Many of these Ainu people have been assimilated into Japanese society and isolated. These isolated people have become unaware of their culture and history, and some of them might not even know that they are of Ainu descent. Struggles continue to happen between Ainu and the Japanese government today regarding land reclaim, repatriation, and indigenous rights.

To understand the current situation of the Ainu people, it is necessary to trace back to the history of them being colonized. Since the expansion of Hokkaido by the Japanese government, the Ainu people lost nearly everything, such as language, land, traditional practices, and culture. Their connection with the homeland was taken away, yet is still not being reclaimed to this day. The journey of claiming their social status is extremely difficult for the Ainu people. The Japanese government did not want to recognize such groups as the indigenous people in Japan, because this will otherwise indicate that Japan becomes a heterogeneous country instead homogeneous as the government claims.

Before 2008, the New Ainu Law was important to the Ainu culture. The law recognizes the Ainu people as individuals but not as an ethnic group [4]. “Ainu culture” was for the first time mentioned and defined. It was defined as music, dancing and artifacts of the Ainu people’s crafts. However, this law did not contain any indigenous rights that the United Nations declare the rights of indigenous people. The Japanese government denied to UN, stating there is not an indigenous minority group in Japan. Despite all the difficulties posed by the Japanese government, the Ainu people desire to revitalize their culture, language and pride. More and more associations were formed to fight for Ainu’s rights.

Eventually, in 2008, the Japanese government acknowledged the Ainu people are the Indigenous people in Hokkaido. Afterwards, various laws were passed to promote Ainu culture but all have little effect. The indigenous rights of the Ainu people are still ignored by the Japanese government to this day. Throughout the history of the Ainu people, the Japanese government had a passive attitude toward repatriation and reconciliation. This is an important takeaway in understanding the reformation of the religion for the Ainu community.

3. Buddhism and Shintoism in Japan

Shintonism, as the native religion in Japan, is the most ancient and all-pervasive religion in Japan. Hendry attributes the national identity of the Japanese to Shintonism. In Japanese, the word Shinto represents the way of God [5]. The origin of Shintonism is untraceable with information today, but it could be inferred that early Shintonism has characteristics borrowed from Korea and China. Although they do have similarities, Shintonism has different characteristics. For example, the sun is worshiped as masculine in early Chinese religion, while Shintonism considers it as feminine. Furthermore, some characteristics of Shinto were found in the Ainu religion, suggesting early interactions between Ainu and the Japanese.

Early Shintoism was considered the “pure” Shinto [5]. Aston concludes that the old Shinto owed little outer resources in constructing its religious beliefs. It is an independent development of Japanese thoughts. This period of Shinto was considered by today’s standards as the “pure Shinto”, to distinguish it from the Shinto today which has been influenced by Buddhism.

Buddhism, originating from India, came to Japan via the China Sea. Alongside Confucian, Daoist ideas and Chinese cultures (language, social structures languages etc.), it was introduced to Japan from the China sea, primarily via two different routes for the transmission of Buddhism in Japan: an imperial/royal route and a route of individual travelers [6]. The former was conducted by the government, usually sponsorship, in return for reinforcing its legitimate authority and power. A typical example would be the government providing financial aid and labor for temple construction. Thus, this route is sometimes referred to as “temple Buddhism” (Garan Bukkyo).

The latter route is sometimes referred to as household Buddhism (Shitaku Bukkyo). It centers on the private practice of Buddhism on a small scale [6]. Unlike the Royal route, such practice was informal and mostly conducted by immigrants or merchants that interact in the China sea region. This means that, although Buddhism was practiced both officially and unofficially, usually only the official ones were recorded on paper. Apparently, the introduction of Buddhism brought challenges to Shintoism. The struggle between the Soga and Mononobe represented the struggle between Buddhism and Shintonism. Such struggle determines not only the superior religion but also political struggles regarding the ideologies and ruling powers. At the end of the Soga-Mononobe struggle, the Soga family won the fight, assuring the indispensable status of Buddhism in Japan.

Later, the Asuka period, which was named after a region in Nara, highlighted the Buddhism and its connections with aristocracy and immigration. The aristocratic families had control over early Buddhism in Japan, particularly by sponsoring Buddhism and using its influence to reinforce their prestige and authority. As previously mentioned, building temples is the most common way for aristocracies to connect with Buddhism. Immigrants played a role in communication and interaction in the development during the Asuka period [6]. Evidence has shown that the early Japanese Buddhists relied on the knowledge of the Buddhist immigrants from China. Shotoku Prince’s study of Buddhism Korean Buddhists clearly demonstrates the immigrants’ contribution to the transmission of Buddhism during the Asuka period.

After the Asuka period, namely the Hakuho period, Buddhism in Japan further developed more influence on political structure and military. New Buddhism beliefs from China was introduced. Continuing to the Nara period, envoys were sent to China for gathering Buddhism principles and laws,

including Chinese thoughts on the capital construction. The new capital, Heijōjō, shared an identical structure and Fengshui with the Chinese capital Chang'an at the time. Buddhism and the government established an extremely close relationship. Emperor Shōmu, which was the Tenno during Nara, was a devout Buddhist [6]. This demonstrates the penetration of Buddhism toward Japanese society.

Moving to the medieval era, several sects started to emerge, including Tendai, Pure land, and Shingon. But in the Kamakura period, most Buddhist parties, particularly with Tendai, apparently received some training from the Tendai lineage. Buddhism became more popular among the population, which was only considered to be affiliated with aristocracies and royals. One transformation is the Yūzu Nenbutsu, which provided a more accessible means for the general public to practice Buddhism through the recitation of Buddhist names. Moving to the end of Kamakura, Pure land Buddhism became more powerful in this period of time. In Kyoto, Pure land lineage thrived. In Muromachi, this is the period referred as New Buddhism, as well as the incoming of the western religion [6].

In the 16th century, the introduction of the Christian religion posed challenges to the native religion. Simultaneously, the leader, Nobunaga in order to suppress the Buddhist force in the nation, did not take action against the Christian religion. In the Edo period, Ieyasu posed further strict regulations on religion. While Nichiren, Pure land (True Pure land) and Zen became widespread among the rural areas. Eventually, in 1868, the Ieyasu government was overthrown, and the Meiji restoration began, which was also the start of the modern Buddhism. During this period of time, anti-Buddhism as a form of nationalism changed Buddhism in Japan. New Buddhist religion like Soka Kyoiku Gakkai, Reiyukai and Risshō Kōseikai emerged as the new Buddhism. Buddhism was influenced by nationalism and participated in the Russo-Japan war, the invasion of Manchuria, and WWII [6].

4. The Influence of Japanese Empires and Assimilation on the Ainu Community

In the time of Meiji, the government noticed the value of the Ainu people as well as their land. An investigation of Ainu's religious status shows that 46.2% of Ainu people who take Buddhism as their religion, followed by 34.5% of participants who defines themselves as non-religious. Only 2.9% of participants identify them in the Ainu religion. This investigation gathers survey results from 5703 participants [1]. It is obvious that compared to history, the Ainu community take the Ainu religion as their primary choice, such a shift is massive and thorough. By comparing the result to the Japanese people, Sakurai found that such a ratio is similar to the proportion of Japanese choice of religion today. Out of the 34.5% of the participant who believes in Buddhism, this might suggest that this shift could be the result of the assimilation from the Japanese government towards the Ainu community, as discussed previously. Since the expansion toward Hokkaido in the Meiji era, more interaction among Japanese and Ainu led to conflicts. After taking over Hokkaido, the Japanese government saw the Ainu community as uncivilized and inferior. In 1875, the Ainu people were expelled by the Russia empire from Sakhalin and Kuril Islands, relocating to Hokkaido. Its former name, Ezo, was replaced with Hokkaido. In 1899, the Law for the protection of native Hokkaido Aborigines, this is the policy by the officials to assimilate the Ainu people into the Japanese lifestyle [4].

A case study on the Kuril Island provides an insight into the process of such a shift in religion. Fumoto looked at the Kuril Island and the Ainu people who lived there in 1899 [7]. Okumura Enshin from Higashi Hongan Temple visited the Kuril Island in 1899 and received an order from Nemuro-Shichō, that he was assigned to educate the Ainu people. He proposed sets of solutions, including name-changing, adapting to the Wajin style of housing and costume, enforcing Japanese usage, and taking Ainu representatives to Tokyo for further attention in promoting such a civilization process. In 1900, Okumura requested a dispatch to another location, after 6 years, in 1907, when Okumura returns to Kuril, in a report by Seikyo Shinpo, despite all those measures being deployed on the Kuril Island, most Ainu people still holds a strong connection with the orthodox church while only seeing

a small increase in people who were Buddhist. Although Okumura's attempt failed, this case study provides an example of the assimilation process the Japanese empire proposed during the Meiji period.

Siddle states that the Yamato Minzoku (race) tied the language, culture and blood under the leadership of the emperor, which turned the entire nation into the form of family. This is a part of the Japanese empire's strategies against the western imperial powers [8]. Thus, there was a motivation for them to construct a racial identity to locate the Yamato race in the global grid, by constructing inferior races to prove their superiority. In this case, the Ainus and the Ryukyuans became the "backward" people in Japanese definition, while the Japanese defined their own race modern. By dispossessing their resources and culture, the Ainu community went into perpetual struggles due to the lost connection with culture and resources. Creating an ideology that all these struggle Ainu people encounters is because of their inferior race, corresponding to the social Darwinism during the Meiji era, after the Black ship the country considered science to be the truth.

To answer the question of why nearly half of the Ainu population is Buddhist today, the potential analysis is that, although the early interaction and land surrender does put Ainu under the Japanese empire's control, such an assimilation process lacks a motivation, thus in the early 1860s such process is not considered as important. In the 1880s, when such demand on the national identity became indispensable, the government decided to create a unified homogenous racial ethnicity by targeting Ainu people as inferior. Since Buddhism is considered to be the national religion in medieval Japan, it is reasonable to infer that such beliefs were transferred to the Ainu community during the assimilation process. Such eugenic thought thrived in the 1920s, as the thought on Ainu were inferior that even through marriage would pollute and violate the preservation of the national essence and purity. At this time, the assimilation process has been further accelerated. This explains the shift from the early Ainu religion to the medieval orthodox and to Buddhism in today's statistics.

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the Ainu history and the history of religion in Japan, it is reasonable to infer that the shift in the Ainu religion resulted from the Japanese empire's assimilation of the Ainu community. Such an assimilation process is considered to be part of their national identity construction. Throughout the assimilation process, the Ainu people were forced to accept the Japanese culture including an indispensable part, religion. Buddhism as one of the most closely connected with Japanese culture replaced the Ainu religion resulting in a high proportion of Ainu people who are Buddhist today.

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