What Will the Munro Text “Repatriate”? : Present-Day Significance of the Project for Digitizing Materials Related to Neil Gordon Munro

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One of the anthropologic issues that has been discussed for nearly twenty years in North America and Australian regions is the politically controversial movement to repatriate materials that have been collected from native people and preserved by museums. There is also a move to include textual records and photos in the materials to be repatriated as “Knowledge repatriation” [Krupnik 2002].

In this paper, the framework of materials is expanded photos, documents and movies including ethnographic information that have been stored at facilities such as museums and archives are discussed, and the repatriation of the recorded contents to the ethnic groups to which the contents are directly related are studied.

The materials I would like to deal with are the letters written to Dr. Seligman during the period from 1931 to 1940, among the correspondence of Neil G. Munro stored by the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI). When Munro sent them to Dr. Seligman, who was a professor of London University at that time, Munro had a plan to publish his work on Ainu ethnography. He wrote about not only his latest news in the letters but also about problems and worries related to his studies as well as events of daily life.

The information included in the correspondence is naturally significant as Ainu ethnographical studies, and it is also important as a description of the processes and background of Munro’s work “Ainu Creed and Cult” and of his movies and image records. In addition, the materials give us useful information on the daily life of Biratori at that time and the relationship between Munro and the people there, not just of traditional Ainu culture.

In this research project, we transcribed and translated Munro’s handwritten or typewritten letters that were difficult to make out, and then we read them carefully with people representative of Ainus living in Nibutani for preparation toward publication.

I joined the above work. In this article, however, apart from that position, I tried to objectively observe the work. As a result, I conclude that the work is valuable knowledge repatriation through cooperative work between the Ainu people and people from the museums. The work also allows inter-access of the texts and the descendant of the people who are described in them. And that it opens the road of collaboratively conducting and sharing the work, which has been unquestioningly conducted
by the museums so far.

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Access to Ethnological Materials, Ethnological Co-operation, Royal Anthropological Institute,
National Museum of Japanese History, Historical Museum of Hokkaido