How to Transmit Ainu Culture in the Context of Tourism: Case Studies of Shiraoi and Nibutani Districts

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The National Museum of Japanese History conducted the Basic Research “Preservation and Utilization of Culture in Regional Development” including the study of Ainu culture, whose results were reflected in the museum’s permanent exhibition in Gallery 4 (Folklore) when it was remodeled and reopened in March 19, 2013. The exhibition of Ainu culture at the new Folklore Gallery has focused on the topic “Traditional and Contemporary Life of the Ainu” as consisting of two themes: “Contemporary Ainu Art” and “Utilization of Resources and Transmission of Culture.” The question underlying the exhibition is the Ainu’s use of culture as a resource: how have they objectified their culture and found it to be a resource that should be preserved against the background of tourism and other large-scale development projects? This paper examines the cases of Shiraoi and Nibutani Districts, both of which are included in the exhibition, from the viewpoint of their use of culture as a resource in the context of tourism.

Shiraoi District has been one of the most famous sightseeing places related to the Ainu since the modern times. The district is also where a problem of Ainu tourism by Japanese people typically arose. The Ainu Museum (founded in 1984) established a system for the Ainu to research their own culture and put the results into practice by themselves. However, this does not mean that a typical structure in a sightseeing city, such as an asymmetrical relationship between those who observe and those who are observed, has disappeared. Within this structure, the staff of the Ainu Museum aims to change the position of the Ainu from those who are exploited unilaterally by tourists to those who can act independently in showing their culture, and makes everyday efforts to achieve the goal.

With regard to Nibutani District, this article reviews the relationship between tourism and craftwork production and then describes a change in the identity of Toru Kaizawa, a leading woodcraft artisan of the district. Nibutani District shifted their industrial focus to folk art production at the time of the folkcraft boom from the late 1950s to the early 1960s and the subsequent increase of tourists. In this environment, Toru Kaizawa started his career as a woodcraftsman, but he felt reluctant at first to make traditional Ainu woodcraft articles. Later, he was gradually accepting traditional culture and changing his mindset to produce folkcraft articles that can be also valued as art. The question of how to regard the woodcraft of the Ainu—whether it is craftwork, folkcraft, or art—is a matter of viewpoint. It