Ryūzō Torii and Kunio Yanagita: Two Discourses on the Theory of the Ainu being an Indigenous People of Japan

YAMADA Yasuhiro

Ryūzō Torii was a great archaeologist and ethnologist who played a prominent role, mainly before the Second World War. Until his death in 1953, he accomplished various research projects, covering a wide range of areas from northern and northeastern Asia, such as Mongolia, Manchuria, and Siberia, to southern China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. On the other hand, Kunio Yanagita was the well-known founder of and leading authority on Japanese folklore studies.

Although it has not proved that these two scholars had a close friendship or that they influenced each other’s research, they both paid attention to each other’s academic activities, and both of them argued for a time that in the Japanese archipelago there had been indigenous inhabitants, from whom the Ainu people were descendant. Later on, however, they opposed each other on this matter. When most physical anthropologists denied the theory of aboriginal Japanese being Stone Age people from whom the Ainu originated, Yanagita stopped supporting the theory of the Ainu being indigenous people of Japan, seemingly based on careful considerations. He also ceased to refer to the Sanjin, highlanders as native inhabitants. On the other hand, despite the above-mentioned anthropological argument, Torii continued to uphold the theory of aboriginal Japanese being Stone Age people from whom the Ainu originated.

Thus, the arguments of the two leading scholars on Japanese ethnicity went in opposite directions to each other as to whether or not the Ainu were indigenous people of Japan. This is symbolic of the then dispute on aboriginal Japanese in archaeological and anthropological societies. Foreign specialists, Yoshikiyo Koganei, and others believed that there had been indigenous inhabitants, from whom the Ainu originated, while Kotondo Hasebe, Kenji Kiyono, and others contradicted this theory based on physical anthropological evidence. This can be considered to reflect the conflict between the old legends recorded in “Kojiki (Records of Ancient Matters)” and “Nihonshoki (Chronicles of Japan)” and the modern scientific evidence, with Torii and Yanagita as proxies. In other words, this controversy was embodied in the discourses of these two eminent scholars on the theory of the Ainu being indigenous people of Japan.

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