Hello, my name is Hiroshi Oda. I’m working at Hokkaido University in Sapporo. I’m very pleased to take part in this very important conference even through video. Today unfortunately I cannot come to Berlin and directly meet you because of events in Sapporo. The distance between both cities is quite long. It takes about 20 hours by air plane in total. 138 years ago, a skull of an Ainu man was taken from Sapporo to Berlin. Story I want to tell you from now on is about the skull. It is an Odyssey, to a place far away from home and the laborious, long journey to return home again.

Hokkaido and Ainu people
At first I will explain to you about basic information about the Ainu and Hokkaido. Ainu means “human being”. The Ainu are an indigenous people of Ainu Mosir, “the land of the Ainu”, which covered the island of Hokkaido, the southern half of Sakhalin and the Kuril islands. The Ainu language is different from Japanese. They developed a unique life style adapted to the ecological environment of the Northern Pacific area with much snow in winter. They have mainly practiced hunting deer or bear, fishing salmon as well as gathering wild plants, but also used to farm millets. They have been, however, trading people, too; with ocean-going ships of wood, they traded fish, sea weed or fur for iron products, rice or cotton cloth with Japanese, various peoples in Sakhalin and north-east Eurasia. Ainu men are famous for fine wood carving and women for embroidery. They offer prayers to Kamuy, spirits of nature and things. They are people of story-telling; epic verse, Yukar, is an outstanding Ainu oral tradition.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, most Ainu people continued to speak their own language and maintain their own spiritual and material traditions.

The situation dramatically changed during the imperialistic period in the second half of nineteenth century. 1868 began the so called Meiji Restoration. Thereafter Japan strived to join the western “civilized” countries. Hokkaido originally didn’t belong to Japan. It had been a country of the Ainu. In 1869 Japanese government annexed this island to its territory, named it “Hokkaido” and set up a governmental office in Sapporo. So it became the capital of Hokkaido. This is the beginning of colonization of Hokkaido and its indigenous people, the Ainu.

Robbery of an Ainu skull
In June 1879 a German traveler, George Schlesinger, visited Sapporo. That was in the 12th year of the Meiji period. To facilitate the colonization of Hokkaido, several western scholars and experts were employed in those days. One of them was Louis Boehmer (1843-1896), German-American agronomist. Schlesinger met Boehmer in Sapporo. Boehmer helped Schlesinger to obtain an Ainu-skull. Schlesinger himself reported about his behavior during the meeting of BGAEU in 1880:

This skull of an Ainu was excavated by me together with a German, Mr. Böhmer, living in Sapporo, in
June near Sapporo. The site is located about 10 minutes from Sapporo, on the so-called experimental fields which now serve agricultural attempts by the Japanese government and on which, about 15 years ago, a large Ainu village had existed.

The grave site as such was known as an Ainu grave by the Ainu people who are still living in Sapporo. You may distinguish it as such by a wooden spear, about five feet high, which had been set into the ground. Its upper shaft was carved like a crest and it was wrapped with a few narrow lines of canvas or bast.

The tomb itself, according to our sources, should be the common grave of a man and a woman; we also found in the latter, about 1.5 feet below the surface, bone masses, which indicated two corpses. But in the darkness of the night, and in a hurry because of the danger being viewed as a sacrilegious behavior, we succeeded in obtaining only this skull. (Schlesinger 1880: 207)

Schlesinger confessed his grave robbing. It was documented and published in the Zeitschrift für Ethnologie. This became an undeniable evidence of “unjust” acquisition of human remains and BGAEU decided to restitute the skull to the Japanese side this year.

Where exactly was the excavation site? In the Zeitschrift für Ethnologie in 1882 Rudolf Virchow mentioned „experimental fields (Kairakuyen)” (Virchow 1882: 224). Kairakuyen is the first city park of Hokkaido established in 1871.

Racist anthropology and global-skull-trafficking networks

Schlesinger, however, shows neither regret nor sense of guilt in his report. What is much more crucial was the attitude of Rudolf Virchow, founder and head of BGAEU. He measured the skull and wrote a report about its result. And he closed as follows:

I am therefore grateful to Mr. Schlesinger for his gift, and I can not suppress the desire that he might soon find successors. Because for a more exact determination of the racial type much larger materials will be necessary. We would like to insist the German colony in Japan help us with the acquisition of these materials. (Virchow 1880: 209)

Rudolf Virchow, as a representative of the organization, didn’t reprove Schlesinger for the violation of the Ainu grave; on the contrary, Virchow praised Schlesinger’s behavior and appealed for further excavation of Ainu skulls. It was the third Ainu-skull added to the Rudolf-Virchow-Collection. In 1912 the skull was given a number “RV33”. “RV” are not initials of the Ainu man, but of Rudolf Virchow.

Ainu people were considered as a “racially isolated island” in those days, looked at with curiosity and made an object of physical anthropological study. Physical anthropologists had once made a typical error of “begging the question”; they started their study with the premise of racism and tried to verify the premise through measuring of human skulls. It was pseudo-science. But it gave scientific backing to racism which justified colonialism, and later became the ideology of the Holocaust.
How many Ainu-skulls are in Berlin? According to the most recent inquiry, 6, including “RV33”, have been stored in the Rudolf-Virchow-Collection and 10 in the other two collections which are in the charge of Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz.

Meiji Japan imported modern medicine from Germany. Elite medical students went to the University of Berlin. Anatomist Koganei (1859-1944) was one of them. He stayed 5 years, worked under Prof. Waldeyer as an assistant and got acquainted with Prof. Virchow. He got interested in physical anthropology using human skulls in Berlin. After his return to Japan, Koganei took up the post of Professor at the University of Tokyo, two years later he conducted research trips to Hokkaido and the Kuril islands to collect Ainu human remains and cultural items. He obtained 166 skulls of Ainu people without ethical procedure. Most of them have been stored at the University of Tokyo, but partially donated or exchanged with foreign scholars or institutions; for example one of the Ainu skeletons was donated to Prof. Waldeyer of Germany and measured by Dr. Paul Bartels (Makino 2015: 172). Furthermore Prof. Koganei exchanged skulls of the Ainu for skulls of the Aborigines with Australian museums. Successors of bone collectors appeared at our Hokkaido University, too. Prof. Kodama, an anatomist who studied in Zurich, began collecting of Ainu human remains and cultural items in the 1930s. The amount of the Kodama collection of Ainu human remains is estimated at over 1000 in total. It has been stored in the charnel house built on the campus of Hokkaido University.

Tracing the trajectory of the Ainu skull “RV33”, I have an impression that networks of scholars, travelers or navies as well as Universities, Museums, governmental authorities or hospitals, on which indigenous human remains and cultural objects were moved, sold or exchanged, had once existed. These could be named global-skull-trafficking networks. Larissa Förster suggested “the social networks along which the heads were trafficked”¹, in relation to the provenance of the Herero and Nama skulls which have been restituted in 2011 from the Charite to the Namibian delegation. An important hub of the networks was certainly Berlin and BGAEU had played a very influential role in these networks. Holger Stoecker pointed out as follows: “this society of scholars and experts formed a common field of action for collectors and research travelers as well as scientists and curators. The society networked them with museums, universities, the Charite and publishers” (Stoecker 2012: 32). The case of the stolen Ainu skull and the other case of exploited Herero and Nama bodies are not separate incidents. They are connected with each other through the global trafficking networks. While the networks came into existence against the background of colonialism, they and “scientific study” strengthened colonial and racist ideology.

From bone to human being
I met with the Ainu skull “RV33” in the February this year in Berlin. Honestly speaking, I felt he has been deprived of human dignity. On his forehead and left side, the number “RV33” is written with black marker. “RV” is not the name of this person, but the initials of “Rudolf Virchow”, who had tacitly permitted the plundering of the indigenous human remains. I have no intention of accusing the present executives of

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BGAEU. They have not caused the injustice, but they are colleagues in recovering the dignity of this skull with responsibility.

But how can we recover dignity? What is a genuine repatriation for this skull?

We need imagination. Let us imagine: About one-hundred-forty years ago, there was a village (Kotan in the Ainu language) of the Ainu in Sapporo. The region was called Koton, an Ainu word which means hollow where abundant water sprang and several rivers flowed from the springs. In autumn, salmon came back through the rivers. Ainu people call salmon Shipe true food, or Kamuy Chep god-fish, and their life was dependent on salmon. It was found according to historical materials that the home village of “RV33” was located between two rivers, the Sakush-Kotoni and the Seronpetsy. There was a rich forest of elms, willows, white birches as well as edible wild plants and herbs. Residents of the village didn’t neglect prayers for Kamuy, gods and spirits around them, nor for their ancestral spirits. One male villager died and was buried in the traditional way. The human body is borrowed from the mother earth. After death the body should be returned to the earth and cycle of living nature. And the spirit of the deceased goes to Kamuy Mosir, the land of the gods, to protect his descendants.

One day a German traveler violates his grave and steals the skull in the name of “science” without any permission by the family members. What was violated was not only the grave, but also the heart, grief and respect of his family. The skull was abducted to land very unfamiliar to him, Berlin. He was exposed to members of the BGAEU as well as touched, measured and classified. After the anthropometric study of skulls went out of fashion, the vast collection had been forgotten for a century in the depository. Nobody took care to bring them back home. Finally now, calls for repatriation are rising from source communities. But for “RV33” it was too late. His home village had already vanished. During the early period of the colonization of Hokkaido, the Japanese government unilaterally banned the Ainu people from fishing salmon and hunting deer and confiscated their land, Japanese immigrants rushed to the "terra nullius". Through this process of colonization, the home Kotan of “RV33” and other Ainu-Kotans in Sapporo had disappeared entirely, and on the grounds of these former living places of the Ainu people the fifth largest city of Japan, Sapporo, developed. On the place where the Koton-Kotan had once existed, a city park and Hokkaido University where I am now working have been built. Nowhere is there any memorial to the the Kotan. It has vanished not only geographically, but also from the memory.

BGAEU decided to return “RV33” to Japan and it was handed over to the Japanese delegation on July 31st this year. But was it true repatriation? I think, not yet. The skull has been laid in the charnel house of Hokkaido University on August 2nd together with the other thousand Ainu human remains which were excavated by Japanese anatomists Prof. Kodama and his colleagues. If nobody demands repatriation of “RV33”, it will be sent to Shiraoi, a rural town in southern Hokkaido, where the Japanese government is planning to build a national museum of Ainu culture in 2020 when the Olympic Games will take place in Tokyo. Attached to the national museum, memorial facilities will be established in which one-thousand-six-hundred human remains of the Ainu will be gathered together from 13 Japanese universities.

A serious concern about this Shiraoi-plan is that the Ainu human remains including “RV33” could be made to serve as “materials” for study by physical anthropologists again, this time for DNA study. This would be
nothing other than a repetition of sacrilegious behavior. Most of the Ainu human remains were acquired without permission by members of their families or Kotan. Conducting study using such “materials” is ethically intolerable. The Japanese government decided that study using Ainu human remains should not be conducted in the memorial facilities (June 13th, 2017). But the executive director of the Ainu Association of Hokkaido wrote to the Cabinet Secretary that “study should be conducted out of the memorial facilities” (January 1st, 2016). The Japanese government treats the Association as if it were the only representative of the Ainu people. The Ainu Association of Hokkaido is indeed the biggest organization of the Ainu people with about 3000 members, but it doesn’t represent the entire Ainu population legally and it covers just ten percent of the Ainu in Hokkaido. However, if the Ainu Association agrees to the study using the Ainu human remains, research on the remains will become possible, without the permission of the direct descendants of each individual.

I don’t deny the importance of the Ainu Association. But the above-stated ethno-political structure and its top-down decision-making produces divisions and conflicts amongst the Ainu people. Under this ossified structure, various voices of Ainu people, for example of those opposing to the Shiraoi-plan, have continually been suppressed. To open up space for listening to such voices a sincere dialog is necessary. Recently repatriations from Hokkaido University to home Kotans were realized only through lawsuits.

What is really dignified repatriation for “RV33”? The word “repatriation” means originally “return home”. The most important thing is to recognize that he is neither a “specimen” nor “material”, he is a human being. He had his own name, his own home village and his own family as well as neighbors who had lived with him. Return home as such a concrete person, return to the earth where his body had laid by family members and neighbors. Rehumanizing imagination is indispensable for true repatriation of ancestral human remains. Recent investigation of historical documents indicates that the real name of “RV33” could probably be Shitorente, an Ainu man who had once lived in Kotoniki-Koton and died in 1875, about three and half years before the excavation by Schlesinger.

The odyssey of this Ainu man is not finished. He is yet remaining in limbo. This is just one story. Thousands, ten of thousands of human remains are waiting to be rehumanized. What is to be questioned is our imagination. His story is calling for postcolonial responsibility, responsibility in which the historical context is also taken into account. BGAEU decided to return the Ainu-skull, because “Unrechtskontext” (Empfehlungen des deutschen Museumsbundes), unjust context, namely grave robbing is concretely obvious. But how about other human remains in Berlin? I have an impression the term “Unrechtskontext” is narrowly defined. But what should be recognized is that colonialism itself was and is unjust. Colonialism is a system to control and exploit the other who are defined as a “primitive people”. Under the colonial context, racial and asymmetrical divisions between „Kulturvölker/Naturvölker” or civilized us/primitive them, colonized peoples were deprived of their land, resources, language, cultural items, human rights and ancestral human remains, one-sidedly, without any consultation or permission. It is an entirely unjust and inhuman system.

To be human is relational. If you treat others inhumanly, you will be inhuman, as the physical anthropologists were in the past. But if you respect others as human beings, you will be human. Repatriation of “colonial
“Prussian Colonial Heritage: Sacred Objects and Human Remains in Berlin Collections”
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“heritage” is a big challenge for us, but it must be a good chance to be rehumanized to each other. Thank you.

Literature