Review of “From Crafts to Agency: The legacy and challenging of colonial discourses

regarding the Ainu in Japanese National Museums between 1977 and 2017” for ***Museums***

***and Society*** by three reviewers. Comments have been made by the author Edwin Pietersma to show how these comments have been incorporated in the revised version of the paper.

**Reviewer 1**

Review of “From Crafts to Agency: The legacy and challenging of colonial discourses

regarding the Ainu in Japanese National Museums between 1977 and 2017” for ***Museums***

***and Society***

The objective of this article is to identify the lingering effects of “colonial discourse” on

museum exhibitions of Ainu artifacts. It argues that, despite efforts by some Japanese

museums (especially O"saka’s Minpaku) to move beyond primitivist tropes in their treatment

of the Ainu, in many ways they have failed to acknowledge the negative effects of

government policies to assimilate Ainu people and eradicate their cultural lifestyles; nor

have they treated Ainu as *living people* whose lives have changed substantially both through

their own active survival strategies and colonial policies and attitudes.

Although the findings of the article seem generally sound—even intuitive, if not

completely obvious—there is an unfortunate tendency to make the institutions themselves

seem like agents devoid of personnel who make these decisions. There is occasional

mention of Ainu advocacy and activism as being a factor in Minpaku’s decisions to curate

more sophisticated representations, but neither individual activists or groups, nor specific

events or causes are mentioned. Who were the (presumably Wajin/Shisam) curators or

museum directors who initiated these changes? Does the inadequacy of the changes indicate

a continuing lack of interest and lingering prejudice, or simply a failure to investigate and

implement best practices in museology with regard to displaying indigenous objects and

their creators?

IIt is implied throughout (and I think the article would benefit tremendously by

emphasizing) that curation of Ainu objects is not simply a Japanese matter but takes place

within a global museological network and broader discourse on indigenous curation

generally and Ainu curation specifically. As noted here, several European and North

American institutions have substantial Ainu collections. Do Ainu specialists consult on the

ethical issues and colonial legacies when curating their exhibits? Or do Japanese curators

have the attitude that because the Ainu live in Japan, they don’t need to do that? Frankly,

this would surprise me if it were true in the era this article covers.

I think it also needs to be mentioned that Ainu themselves created the first museum

devoted to Ainu artifacts and ethnography in the early 1930s. Like many other peoples who

have been proactive in curating and representing themselves and their own ancestral

cultures, the founders of this institution had to make decisions about what was

“representative,” how much attention (if any) to give to Ainu diversity (it’d be interesting to

know if some Ainu populations felt short-changed), and how much to emphasize Ainu

“development” toward the standard of “ingenuity and civilization” of Wajin/Shisam

Japanese. How much did they exoticize themselves, or conversely make themselves appear

as fellow “children of the emperor,” a common discursive tactic among Okinawans and

Ainu (cf. Kirsten Ziomek, *Lost Histories*)?

The article *describes* changes in curatorial practices but does not *explain* them. I

understand that this is a study in its early stages and for some *M&S* readers this kind of

overview may be of sufficient interest. I will leave that to the editors to decide. It’s not a bad

article and we need to know this information. But I think it’s a fairly superficial treatment at

this stage, mostly because there are very few named actors (museum officials, Ainu

consultants or activists, etc.) involved, and their evolving thoughts on Ainu curation are not

analyzed. The author notes that the various laws that the government has passed in the last

few decades to address and redress Ainu concerns have been deemed mostly unsatisfactory.

I would like to think that museum officials would be better at this sort of thing than

politicians, but the article implies this is not necessarily the case. If so, I think there’s more

to account for that than simply “colonial discourse.”

**Reviewer 2**

This article presents a much needed critical approach to the representation of Ainu culture in Japanese museums. It contains insightful observations like a comment on the ways of cataloguing and labelling Ainu artefacts and the ideological implications that the usage of terminology has (e,g, crafts instead of art). It also brings crucial commentaries on how the exhibitions have evolved through time, particularly Minpaku, and demonstrates how it has changed the focus from traditional culture to resistance.

Some bits could be a bit more elaborated to make it perfect, see below:

-on some cases, please try to make research more explicit and add references, e.g. :

*Japanese governments intended to erase the Ainu as a distinct group, but policies and* *discourses also reveal that Ainu communities were not accepted as falling into the category of Japanese* what “policies and discourses*”?*This needs to be more specific

The first part of the text goes through the history of assimilation of the Ainu, which spans from Meiji period until today. This is helpful for the reader but some bits may be more nuanced:

*Prior to 1869, the Ainu lived independently and separated from the Japanese, with historians arguing for an imaginary cultural border that was only crossed for the sake of trade* This could be more nuanced by e.g. mentioning the role of Matsumae clan in Southern/Easterm Hokkaido before Meiji period

*There have been records of protests that support this claim, such as Ainu communities arguing for Ainu representation in the 1930s* Reference needed

*Looking at this first permanent exhibition, the* ***Ainu are represented via two tropes****. First, it focuses on the traditional* ***and pre-Japanese lifestyle of the Ainu*** what about the second one?

*However****, it acknowledges that the construction of the Meiji government had a direct influence on the Ainu since 1986*** I guess it should say 1896? Or it means Meiji fabrications had an impact on the Museum since 1986?

*This influence is classified under the notion of integrating* ***the Ainu into the world system*** This sentence should work expression.

Some reference are missing in the bibliography , e.g. Ohtsuka 1996, Minapku 2000, Minpaku 2016, Minpaku 1993, Minpaku 2011

Finally, the text could also add a comment on how museums fail to depict the nature of the Ainu community today, acknowledging the complexity of their assimilation and cultural blending: few people identified as Ainu in 2008 were Ainu descendants from both maternal and paternal grandparents while many other people who were self-identified Ainu said that their biological parents were not Ainu (Onai 2010: 23). See Onai, Toru, 2010. *Living Conditions and Consciousness of Present-Day Ainu.* Report on the 2008 Hokkaido Ainu Living Conditions Survey, Centre for Ainu & Indigenous Studies, Hokkaido University

**Reviewer 3**

Reader’s report on ‘From Crafts to Agency: The legacy and challenging of colonial discourses regarding the Ainu in Japanese National Museums between 1977 and 2017’

The topic of this article is an interesting and important one. The representation of Ainu history in Japanese museums is an issue of considerable contemporary controversy, and has the potential to shed light on wider questions both of indigenous history and of the impact of colonialism in shaping museum history.

The article’s critique of the representation of Ainu culture in the Tokyo National Museum is persuasive, and the discussion of the possibilities and limitations of changes in the displays of Ainu culture in Minpaku is a useful contribution to the field.

Unfortunately, though, I do not feel that the article is ready for publication in its present form, and think that it needs further research and rewriting to make it ready for publication.

There are a number of issues which should be addressed. First, the only Japanese language materials used are the museum catalogues analysed by the author, and no works by Ainu writers themselves are cited. There are a large number of Japanese-language works on Ainu history which could deepen and strengthen the discussion of the historical background to the article (for example, the work of Katō Fumio, Ogawa Masato, Ueki Tetsuya and others) and there are also numerous works by Ainu writers relevant to the topic – some of them also available in English translation (particularly, for example, the work of Kayano Shigeru and the essays by Shimizu Yūji, Tsuda Nobuko, Tahara Ryōko and others contained in the book *Indigenous Efflorescence: beyond Revitalisation in Sapmi and Ainu Mosir*). It’s important to make Ainu voices heard in this discussion.

Reference to some more of this work would help to strengthen the historical contextualisation of the article, which in places is rather weak. For example, the author writes that, prior to 1869, cultural contact between Ainu and Japanese was minimal, but this is not really correct. The Japanese presence began to exert a quite considerable impact on Ainu life from the 18th century onward, though varying from one decade and region to another (see for example the work of Hiwa Mizuki, Akizuki Toshiyuki, Deriha Kōji, and the 1994 article by Sandra Niessen cited in this article). It is also not correct to say that ‘the Meiji government designated the existing city of Sapporo as the provincial capital’ (p. 6): Sapporo was a completely new planned city created by the Meiji government after the annexation of Hokkaido. The article states that Ainu representatives participated in the World Council of Indigenous People in 1974 (p. 7) but my understanding is that they first participated in the Council in 1981 (see, for example, Maeda and Okano, ‘Connecting Indigenous Ainu, University and Local Industry in Japan’).

The statements about the recognition of Ainu by the Japanese government are also a bit confused. It is not correct to say that the government recognised the Ainu as ‘indigenous people of Hokkaido’ in 1997 (p. 2). At that time, the government recognized them as an *ethnic* minority, but recognition as an *indigenous* minority did not come until 2008, when both houses of the Japanese parliament acknowledged the Ainu as an indigenous people, and this was not enshrined in law until 2019. The 2019 law, however, did not make any specific recognition of the indigenous rights of Ainu to land or resources etc.

The article’s summaries of the arguments of cited works also seem a little cavalier in places. For example, the author writes that Sandra Niessen (1994) ‘analyzed the exhibitions at *Minpaku* as not achieving their goals of showcasing differentiation and criticized the museum for grinding a political axe in its permanent exhibition and being too involved in political representation in favor of the Japanese government’. But Niessen’s article makes no mention at all of the museum’s goal of showcasing differentiation between various Ainu communities. Her article also does not argue that the museum is engaged in ‘political representation in favour of the Japanese government’. Rather, it argues that the museum tries to subvert the Japanese government’s narrative of ethnic homogeneity, but in doing so creates a reified, static and nostalgic image of Ainu culture.

Similarly, the reference to Tai’s 2015 article on p. 12 is a bit confusing. The exhibition which Tai discusses in this article is one which focused on immigrant communities in Japan, and explicitly excluded the Ainu from its scope, and her reference to ambiguous terminology refers to Okinawans, not Ainu.

The sentence ‘the exhibition focuses on traditional religions and beliefs (*dentōteki*) by discussing the Ainu’s house (*kotan*) as a representation of the small, ordered world of the Ainu..’ (p. 11) also needs correction. ‘*Dentōteki’* means traditional, but does not specifically apply to religions or beliefs, and *kotan* means village, not house. So the sentence should be ‘the exhibition focuses on traditional (*dentōteki*) religions and beliefs by discussing the Ainu village (*kotan*) as a representation of the small, ordered world of the Ainu…’ The reference to the ‘indigenous leader Chaeom’ om p. 7 should be to ‘the indigenous leader Chaemon’.

The discussion of the National Ainu Museum (*Upopoy*) (p. 15) could do with some further development. Of course, this is not the main topic of the article, but the creation of the museum has been extremely significant and also highly controversial (see, for example, Zaman et al., ‘Critiquing the Colonialist Origins of the New National Museum Upopoy’), and some mention of this controversy would be very relevant to the article’s themes.

The referencing in the article is somewhat patchy. Some sections need more referencing (e.g. the discussion of Ainu protests in the prewar and postwar periods on p. 7, and of the collection of the first Ainu items by the Tokyo National Museum on pp. 9 to 10). Many of the references lack page numbers, and more pagination should be added, for example, to the references to the works of Siddle, Howell and Lewallen on p. 6, Fujitani on p. 8, Pai and Yoshida on p. 11 etc.

Hunter et al 2014 is cited in the text but not in the bibliography, and the work by Tseng is listed as being published in 2012 in the text, but in 2008 in the bibliography. Tony Bennett’s *The Birth of the Museum* appears in the bibliography but is not mentioned in the text. The reference ‘Komori 2012’ is incorrectly cited as ‘Yōichi 2012’.

There are also a number of places where some proofreading and stylistic revision are needed.