

University of Edinburgh repatriates ancestral skulls to Japan

A Scottish university has repatriated the skulls of three Indigenous Ainu people back to their community in Japan.

The skulls were in the possession of the University of Edinburgh's Anatomical Museum for more than one hundred years. ON Wednesday the Ainu Association of Hokkaido welcomed the return of their ancestors' remains during a formal ceremony in Edinburgh.

Before the formal transfer, members of the Ainu community, an indigenous group who predominantly inhabit the island of Hokkaido, held a traditional ceremony

For centuries the Ainu lived in self-governing villages across northern Japan, maintaining a separate language and distinctive culture from the rest of the Japanese population.

Once returned to Japan, the ancestral remains will be interred at the Memorial Site that has been established in the Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park, Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony – UPOPOY – in accordance with the Japanese Government's guidelines for the repatriation of Ainu remains.

The Ainu remains were donated to the University in 1913 by anthropologist, Dr Neil Gordon Munro, a Scottish-born physician and Edinburgh graduate.

Dr Munro worked as director of the General Hospital in Yokohama for much of his career and lived in Japan until his death in 1942.

He was said to be one of the first Westerners to extensively write and make records of Ainu culture. In the years before his death, Dr Munro stayed and lived in Hokkaido, providing free medical care to the Ainu community.

In 2001, the late Japanese senator Kayano Shigeru – a prominent Ainu activist – visited the home of the Munro clan in Scotland and posthumously thanked Dr Munro for his support of the Ainu people.

The Ainu were marginalised and subjected to studies in the late 19th and early 20th Century, with remains and cultural artifacts taken from Ainu land and displayed or used for research in Japan and further afield.

Often, remains taken from ethnic groups, such as the Ainu, were used to explore anatomy and anthropology, including the now discredited idea of phrenology – a theory of inferiority based on the shape and dimensions of skulls.

The traditional language spoken by the Ainu is now recognised by UNESCO as a ‘critically endangered’ language, with only a small number of Ainu remaining fluent.

After years of lobbying by Ainu leaders, in 2007 Japan supported the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. A year later, the Ainu were officially recognised by the government as an indigenous group in Japan.

As an institution significantly influenced by the colonial era, the University of Edinburgh continues to examine ways to address its legacy and the contemporary impact of its past.

The University has a long history of repatriating remains and items from its anatomical collections, with the first

repatriation taking place more than 75 years ago. This is widely considered to represent the first such activity in Scotland.

Most recently, in 2023, the skulls of four Mudan warriors were returned to Taiwan.

Alongside repatriations, the University is undertaking a range of activities to review its past associations with the Transatlantic slave trade, colonialism and other aspects of race.

Masaru Okawa, Executive Director of the Hokkaido Ainu Association, said: "Since it became clear that Ainu remains were taken both domestically and internationally for research purposes, our Association has been advocating for the return of these remains to their respective regions and for respectful memorialization. We can only imagine the feelings of our ancestors who spent many years in foreign lands, but we believe they are pleased to return home. We are committed to continuing to honour the spirits of our ancestors with dignity, following the traditions handed down through generations."

Professor Tom Gillingwater, Chair of Anatomy at the University of Edinburgh, said: "Repatriations are an important part of the University's efforts to care for, and address, its historical collections. Rather than being viewed as a diminishment of the University's collections, they represent an important opportunity for the University to work with communities across the world in order to build new relationships and friendships. We are honoured to have been able to play a part in returning these remains to the Ainu community."

University of Edinburgh Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sir Peter Mathieson said: "It has been a privilege to welcome representatives from the Ainu community and to work

with them during this process. Repatriations are part of the University's important ongoing work to review its colonial past and we are committed to returning remains in our care to their rightful descendants."



Mr Matsuura Katsumi, Director General and Head of Comprehensive Ainu Policy Office, Cabinet Secretariat, Mr Okawa Masaru, Executive Director, Ainu Association of Hokkaido and Professor Sir Peter Mathieson signed the formal repatriation certificates before the skulls were officially returned to their community. Pic Neil Hanna



Mr Okawa Masaru, Executive Director, Ainu Association of Hokkaido with Tetsuya Ogawa and Yoshiyuki Uji holding the skulls during the formal repatriation ceremony. Pic Neil Hanna



Professor Sir Peter Mathieson and Mr Okawa Masaru, Executive Director, Ainu Association of Hokkaido during the formal

repatriation ceremony before the skulls were officially returned to their community. Pic Neil Hanna