

“We Need Open-Mindedness to Accept and Know Others”

– Interview with Maya Sekine

The series, Intersectional Feminism, started this year. It was initiated with the idea that there are differences, diversity and various aspects in ‘women’ The series, Intersectional Feminism, started this year. It was initiated with the idea that women cannot be summed up to one because people have multiple identities and true gender equality can only be achieved when it is equal for ‘ALL women’.

The fifth person we interviewed is Maya Sekine who was born and raised in Nibutani, Hokkaido.

What was the memorable thing during your childhood?

“In retrospect, my family enjoys eating very much. It involves processes from hunting or gathering ingredients to eating and has certain rules, but we have meals that cannot be gotten from a supermarket. And, many people gather at night to eat together. I feel that enjoying eating while valuing conversation is one of the ways that my hometown or family is. Personally speaking, I vividly remember words I received from people around me. For example, my grandmother always told me to ‘study until dying’ or ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’.”

Are those words the basis of your activity?

“Yes, I think so. I can continue my activities, not necessarily related to Ainu, thanks to interpersonal relationships. I think my confidence in such relationships comes from my family’s words. Also, how they live influences me. For example, my father always told me to ‘know the pains’ while my mother taught me how to enjoy life by truly enjoying her own life. All these things make who I am right now as well as my activity.”

Maya-san grew up connected to Ainu culture with a father who teaches the Ainu language, a mother who is an Ainu craft artist, and a grandmother who is a leading person of Ainu traditional fabric and runs an Ainu restaurant.

Did you join the activities of your family when you were a child?

“Yes, rather than participation, it was more like a way of life. I gathered wild vegetables daily. I danced when a dance performance was held at a preservation society. I also sang songs in the classes. I ate and cooked Ainu cuisine. So, from when I was a child, I had the language, culture and spirit of the Ainu scattered around me, so much so that I didn’t even have a moment to separate them. After beginning to study Ainu again, I started to categorise them

in my mind like this is Ainu, this is Ainu language, this is Ainu food, and so on.”

Maya-san was born and raised at 12 years old in Nibutani and went to junior high school in Naboribetsu, high school in Sapporo and university in Kanagawa.

Did you notice any difference or discover anything while moving to different places?

“In terms of snacks or daily things, I did not feel any difference. This is because, despite its scale, Nibutani is where diverse people come in and out and trendy snacks can be found. However, I did observe differences in worldviews. I felt that how I see the world might be a bit wider than usual. For example, ‘protecting nature’ comes from a thought process where nature is perceived, distancing from oneself. That is why the sense of ‘protecting’ comes up. Yet, for me, nature cannot be distant from me. I often questioned these slogans, words that teachers use and among other things. It is not about which is correct but about the difference I felt. Among different justice, I sometimes feel what I saw was different from others.”

Have you ever felt any dilemma when you encountered different worldviews?

“No, I did not. As I mentioned before, I grew up in a place where diverse people come in and out, I got to know that people have various senses. To be understood by someone else, it is necessary to accept other views although you do not need to agree. Otherwise, we cannot communicate. I am ignorant and cannot fully understand others, no matter how hard I try. But due to that, we need openness to accept and know others. My roots and my childhood environment have made me acutely aware of that. It is not perfectly done but I come to be more aware of it as I went out of my comfort zone.”

Were you open-minded when you were a child too?

“I think so. My family saw Ainu culture in that way. At the root, there may be dissatisfaction or hatred towards society or someone else, but my family transmitted information and first got people to like them, and then those people wanted to work with my family, and so on. In these ways, my family got an increasing number of allies. I have seen that, so I want to build a relationship in a way that they want to work with me, not as Maya belonging to the Ainu community, but as Maya Sekine. Then, I hope the people's voice will bring change to the administration.”

Maya-san told us that she went to university with the idea that it might get her closer to establishing her ideal society.

How do you envision a rich and ideal society?

“The world has become more convenient than ever while more people suffer from stress or lose sight of their self-worth. We live in an age where people not only live but also worry about various things such as their position, their status, their power, and how they are seen by others. No one knows which society is rich. No one decides the definition of happiness. However, I think there is a way of making happiness that people can learn from Ainu culture. That may be the power to live with just a knife, which goes against the current capital economy. Every culture has such richness. Speaking of Ainu, recognised as Indigenous

Peoples in Japan, I think Ainu might give a new perspective to embrace a different way of thinking or living. Moreover, in the case of the Ainu people, it's sometimes seen only as an aspect of the Ainu language being at risk or of their land being taken away from the outside. However, in my hometown, Nibutani, some things definitely have been passed down from my ancestors, like a sense that things can be managed, and various spiritual teachings are rooted in the Ainu people. I feel that. Even if our ethnicity as a name categorised from the outside doesn't remain, in my opinion, it is okay as long as important core values that our ancestors had as human beings have been passed on, no matter how the language changes, how we look or where we live. Then I think it will be lucky if the Ainu teachings are finally understood by the people and the government changes, recognising the Ainu way of thinking. Therefore, I envision a future where such diversity and colourfulness in thinking and living are naturally passed on to the next generation."

Maya-san has been involved in various activities such as YouTube, delivering lectures and radio. Recently, she started an Ainu craft company, [katak](#), with her mother to promote the current fascination with Ainu crafts that can be used daily.

What motivated you to start katak?

"To add values. Recently, awareness of the Ainu has been spreading, and there are more and more young people who want to study the Ainu and make a career out of it. However, in reality, as might be the case with traditional Japanese crafts and linguistics, it is difficult to build a career or make ends meet by it. So I would like to mediate and add value to that. At the same time, I want to disseminate the knowledge and richness Ainu have. In a part of the world, the art or traditional patterns created by Indigenous Peoples are not just folk art or souvenirs but are traded as art at high prices. Despite such a world trend, Japan experiences a lack of successors or demands although it has so many beautiful handicrafts that, I think, built up the Japanese economy. So, for me, it is Ainu crafts, I want to increase the number of people who can make ends meet by it."

Do you often work with people at your age?

"I work with a variety of people from grandparents' and parents' generations to children. I work with people who share goals with me regardless of age, positionality or roots. It does not matter if the person is Ainu, but rather if the person shares the same aims or if I intuitively want to work with that person."

Among the activities you have been involved in so far, which one has left a good impression on you?

"There are many things, but I think the radio I recently started is interesting. This is because, on the radio, I, as an Ainu, talk about my interviews with other people having Ainu roots. Until now, most of the media used to make programmes by having people who didn't know much about the Ainu interview the Ainu. However, in this sense, I feel that this radio is a place where Ainu people can speak their voices in the way they want to tell their stories, even if there are some restrictions. Through our activities, we have reaffirmed the importance of the involvement of all parties involved. I think that the media, which only seeks clarity for the majority, should be changed little by little. In that sense, I think the approach of

breaking things down from scratch and communicating in an easy-to-understand way is a bit old-fashioned. Instead, there are more personal stories, funny stories and more interesting parts of conversations. I think it would be good if those stories could be conveyed.”

What do you value the most in your activities?

“Enjoying myself is important to me. Through learning, listening to stories, reading books, meeting new people and among other things, I come to like myself including my roots or how I grew up. Thus, what is significant is to continue to like myself and the environment around me.”