



Aynu Language and Museum Exhibitions

FUJITA Mamoru

Keio University at Shonan Fujisawa (Fujisawa, Japan)
Taller de Historia Oral Andina (Andean Oral History Workshop, La Paz,
Bolivia))

14 September 2025

Kyoto University (online participation)



Some Genreal Facts about the Aynu Language

- Aynu language is an indigenous language of Japan, spoken in Hokkaido island, in the recent past in the disputed territories between Japan and Russia, and in the more distant past in the northern part of the Honshu island.
- There is an important number of Aynu people also in the Kanto metropolitan area.
- The last generation of intra-familiar transmission of the Aynu language occurred in the 1900s and 1910s. (although later generations do possess memories of the language)
- This was due to the colonial policies of the Japanese government not recognizing the communal lands and prohibiting Aynu traditional livelihood measures (bear-hunting, salmon-fishing etc.).
- There has been continuous efforts by the later generations to recover their language. This is supported by the wealth of recorded materials in the 20th century and consistent efforts to make them accessible, e.g. through digital archives.



Aynu Language and Museum Exhibitions: Some General Observations

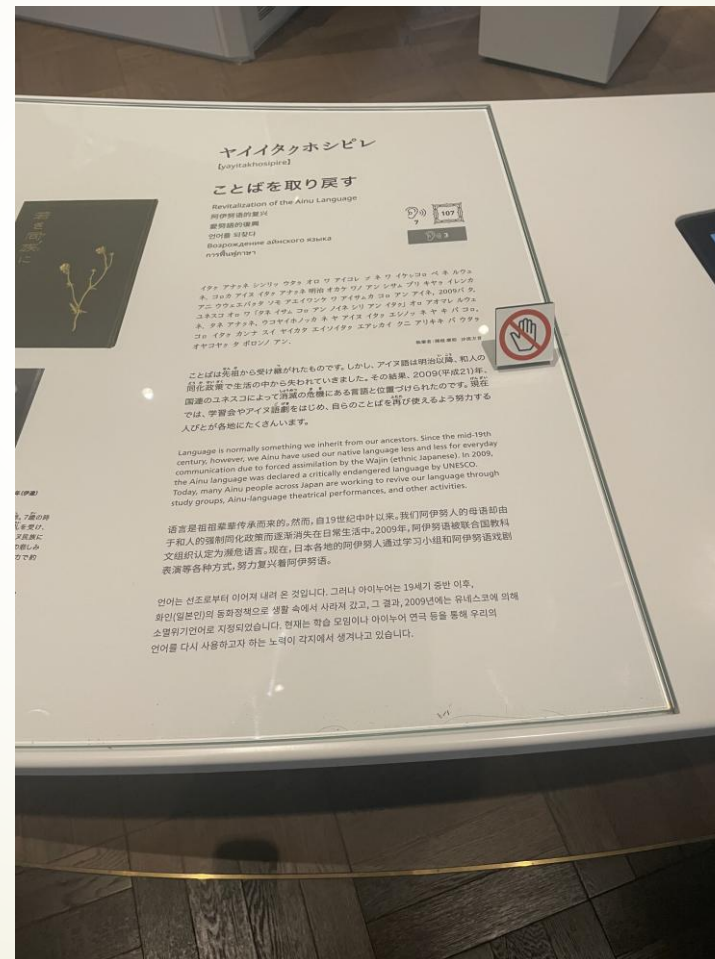
- ▶ Consistent limitation (and critique) of Japanese museum exhibitions on Aynu peoples has been the rupture between modern and pre-modern (normally pre-Meiji) era.
- ▶ Aynu peoples and their cultures were relegated to the realm of tradition =pre-modern, and had made almost no appearance after the Meiji period. (本多・葉月2006)
- ▶ Recent exhibitons took this critique seriously (Hokkaido Museum, National Aynu Museum), and makes efforts to show how Aynu peoples live in the contemporary era.
- ▶ However, there is still very little exhibition content on the adaptation and coping strategies of Aynu peoples to the modernization process. (An important exception might be the Obihiro Centenary Museum.)
- ▶ Another “divide” resides in the separation of written Japanese/Aynu literature and oral Aynu literature. In the literary museums (Bungakukan), there is insufficient information about the interactions between the oral narrators and writers of novels and poems. (藤田2025)

New Attempts at Museum Exhibitions of Aynu Language

- ▶ National Aynu Museum (国立アイヌ民族博物館) 2020~
 - Policy of Aynu language as the “first” (principal) language: Aynu language terms and explanations come above in the museum signs and the exhibition contents.
 - Collaboration of different generations of Aynu peoples and professional linguists to write the exhibition explanations in the Aynu language.
 - Forum discussions on creation of new terms in Aynu language (museum, meeting rooms, etc.)

国立アイヌ民族博物館、立石、佐々木、田村編(2023)、小坂田(2022)
- ▶ Possible critiques
 - The status of the Aynu language remains largely symbolic (Santalahti 2025)
 - Insufficient emphasis on what “indigenous” means and the historical processes of the Aynu peoples (坂田2021)

Aynu Language Exhibited in the National Aynu Museum



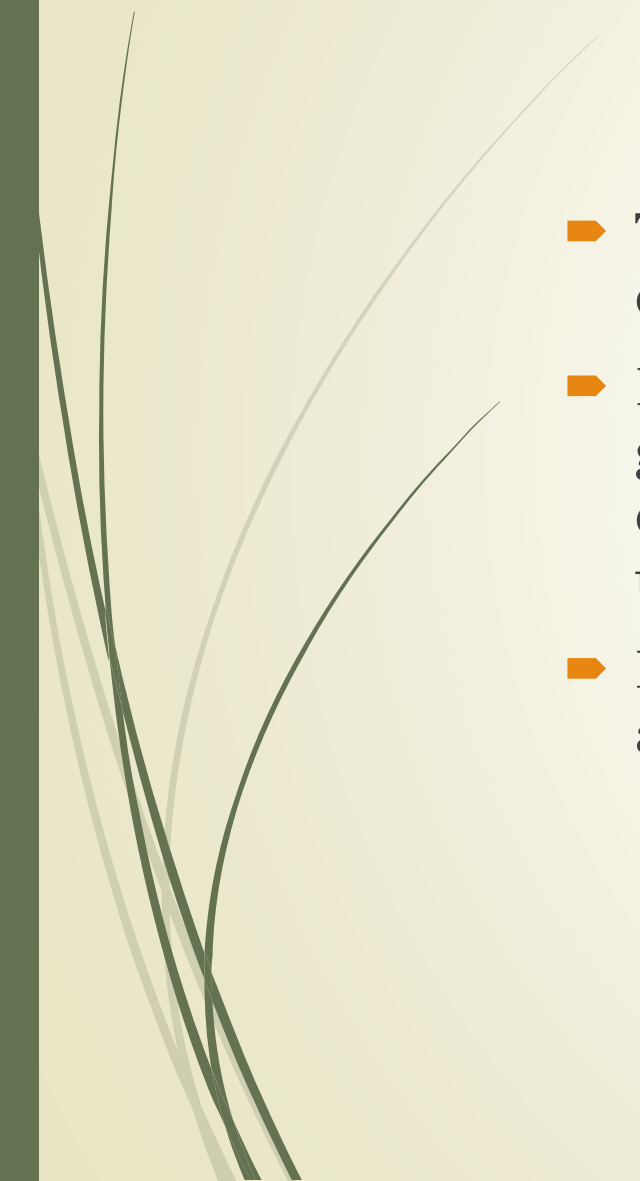
yayitakhosipire
< yay-itak-hosipi-re
(own – language- return –
make (causative))
To make your language
come back

The language section
occupies the central part of
the permanent exhibition.

The names of the present
generation of Aynu who took
part in the display
explanation are shown with
the regional variant of the
Aynu language used.
(photos taken by the
presenter)



What is the Question?

- ▶ The critiques mentioned in the previous slide are certainly all valid critiques, which indicates the way forward.
 - ▶ However, the previous critical studies do not focus on the present generation(s) of Aynu people who took part in the elaboration of exhibition texts, nor the words and language (text, discourse) created by them.
 - ▶ Is it not possible a more fruitful academic engagement that does not lay aside the actual peoples and their words?
- 

Exhibition “Where My Words Belong” (1)

- ▶ Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 18 April to 7 July, 2024
(東京都現代美術館)
- ▶ Exhibitions by five artists: Yuni Hong Charpe, Mayunkiki, Mai Nagumo, Hideo ARAI, KIM Insook
- ▶ Following observations are based on a personal visit and the exhibition catalogue (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo 2024)
on Mayunkiki's trajectory see also: 谷地田 (2024)
- ▶ About the exhibition title:
English: Where My Words Belong
Japanese: 翻訳できないわたしの言葉 (My Own Words, which Cannot Be Translated)
- ▶ English title emphasizes belonging, hence (safe/safer) space
Japanese title emphasizes the untranslatability, hence individuality



Exhibition “Where My Words Belong” (2)

Mayunkiki “Itak=as”

- ▶ About the title “Itak=as”
- ▶ “itak” is an intransitive verb meaning “to talk, to speak”
- ▶ Aynu language distinguishes two forms of “we”, one that excludes the interlocutor (1st person plural), and another that includes the interlocutor (4th person)
 - The intransitive verb subject marker for 1st person plural is =as
 - The intransitive verb subject marker for 4th person is =an
 - (cf. The annual Aynu language speech contest is entitled “itak=an ro!” (let’s speak!))
- ▶ The visitors are not included as interlocutors in the conversation/communication process of the exhibition
 - We are **allowed** to enter, albeit **intrusively**, into a conversation/communication process not destined for us.
 - We visitors are inevitably pushed to become self-conscious: who am I who is listening to this conversation/communication?



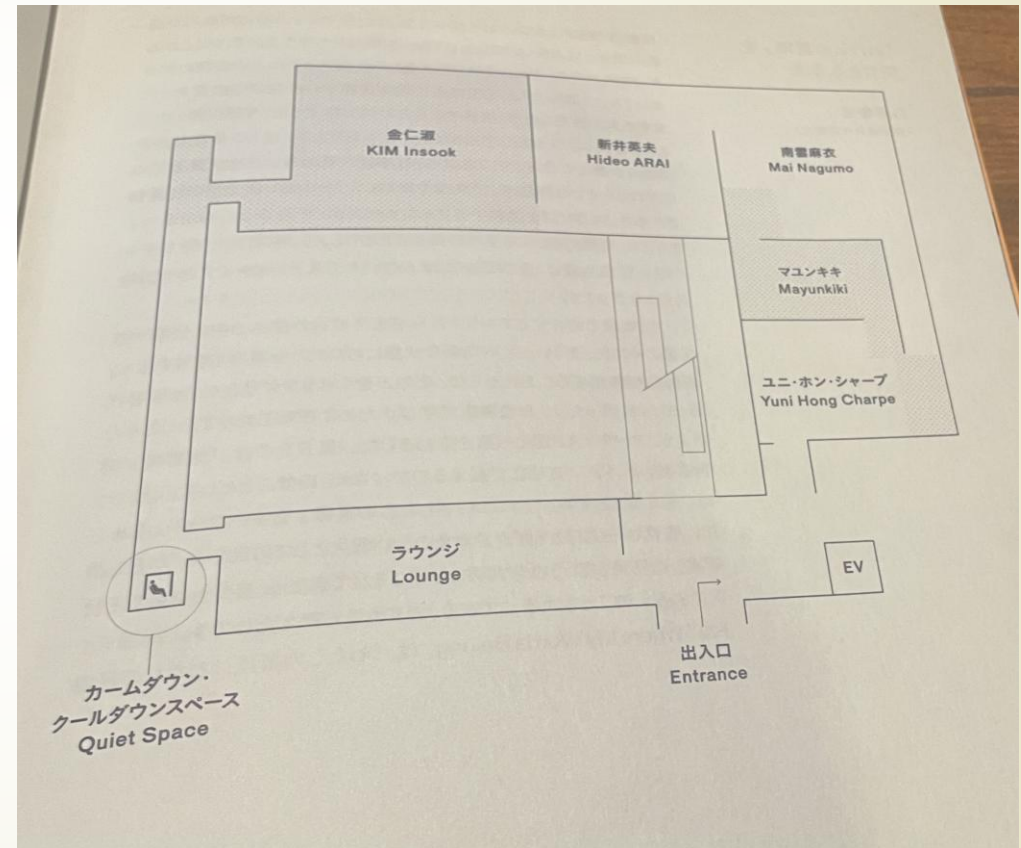
Exhibition “Where My Words Belong” (3)

Mayunkiki “Itak=as”

- ▶ Structure of the exhibition: passport (signing), dialogue video with Saji (Korean diaspora), private safe space, dialogue video with Tamura Kanako (English translator)
- ▶ Passport signing process creates a border, which **takes time to cross-over**.
The passport includes questions about your knowledge and attitudes on the Aynu people
 - You can mark “yes” and enter, but you can also **not** mark “yes” and enter: at least the questions leaves you thinking about the topic (you can also **not** enter: this possibility is allowed only for Mayunkiki’s exhibition)

Exhibition “Where My Words Belong” (3)

Mayunkiki “Itak=as”



Taken from: *Exhibition Catalogue*, p.21 and p.3

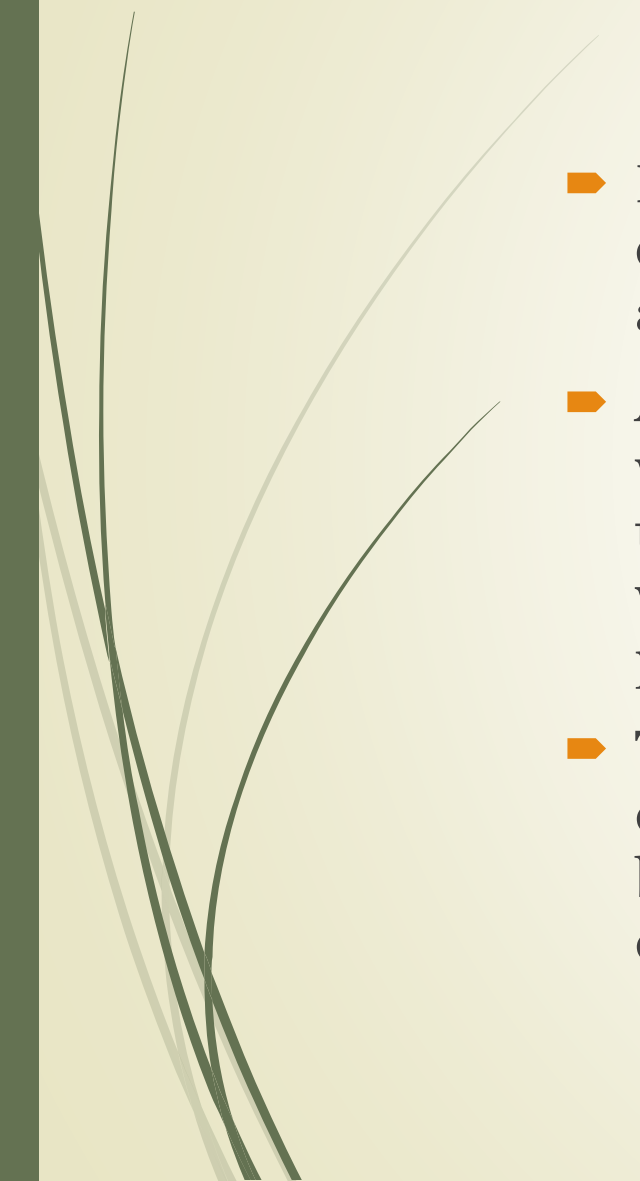
Exhibition “Where My Words Belong” (4)

Mayunkiki “Itak=as”

- ▶ A fragment of the transcript from the dialogue between Mayunkiki and Saji (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo 2024, p.30)
「カジュアルに学ぶのもいいと思うの、ぜんぜん。いいけど、苦しくて学びが止まっちゃう人のことを怠慢だと思ってほしくないなって思う。得られたはずの言語だって考え続けるのって超トラウマだからさ。トラウマを抱えている人たちがたくさんいて、自分たちと学びの速度が違うことが共有できているといいなっと思う。言語の習得にカジュアルさも必要なのはわかる。ただ、できないよ（笑）。考えちゃうもん」（Mayunkiki's words）
- ▶ Learning what is supposed to have been your language is in itself a traumatic process, which takes time.
 - We (outsider Aynu learners) are shared a different reality and emotions
 - This makes us reflect on our individual language learning processes, motivations, and positionalities.



Concluding Reflections

- 
- Reflections on the personal (learning) process of a minoritized language enables to shed light on the lived experiences of language learning, and allows us to approach museum language exhibitions from a different angle.
 - Although the critiques to the National Aynu Museum exhibitions are valid, we are also led to pose the question: for the Aynu people who took part in the creation of the exhibition and wrote the Aynu language explanation, what might have been their experiences? ←This question was not posed/imagined in the critical reviews.
 - This might be a difficult question to answer. Asking these questions directly in an interview may be too direct and insensitive. But there should be reflective safe/safer spaces to be able to discuss such topics (even if it does not get published as an academic article).

References

- 本多利和(スチュアート・ヘンリ)、葉月浩林(2006)「アイヌ民族の表象に関する考察－博物館展示を事例に」『放送大学研究年報』第24号、pp.57-68。
- 国立アイヌ民族博物館、立石信一、佐々木史郎、田村将人編(2023)『ウアイヌコロコタン アカラウポポイのことばと歴史』国書刊行会。
- 小坂田裕子(2022)「博物館展示における先住民族との協働－国立アイヌ民族博物館と国立アメリカ・インディアン博物館の比較」『境界研究』第12号、pp.93-106。
- 坂田美奈子(2021)「日本のアイヌ政策の矛盾－国立アイヌ民族博物館の基本展示が伝えること」『同時代史研究』第14集、pp.76-81。
- Santalahti, Saana (2025) “Ainu Language Use and Display in the National Ainu Museum.” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. Issue 291: pp.177-202.
- 東京都現代美術館 (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo) (2024)『「翻訳できないわたしの言葉」記録集』東京都現代美術館。
- 谷地田未緒(2024)「2020年以降のマユンキキの現代的芸術表現－シドニー・ビエンナーレ「NIRIN」から東京都現代美術館「翻訳できないわたしの言葉」展まで」『国立アイヌ民族博物館研究紀要』第3号、pp.34-78。