

Remarks by H.E. Mr. HAYASHI Hajime,
Ambassador of Japan to the UK,
At Private View of ‘Ainu Stories: Contemporary Lives by the Saru River’
on 15 Nov 2023

Distinguished Guests,

It is a great pleasure for me to take part in the opening of *Ainu Stories*, which I am proud to say is an unprecedented opportunity here in the UK to cast a fresh light on the Ainu as a living and evolving culture. I am also delighted that we have with us this evening some prominent people who are continuously working for the development of Ainu culture, namely Mr Keiichi Endo, the Mayor of Biratori-cho in Hokkaido Prefecture, Ms Hiromi Kimura, Secretary General of the Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Association, and Professor Hirofumi Kato of Hokkaido University. I would like to welcome all of you.

The Ainu culture is as indispensable a part of Japan’s heritage as are the cultures of other regions of the country. It is the responsibility of our generation to support the current efforts to sustain and promote it. The Government of Japan is also committed to such endeavours, including through the establishment of the National Ainu Museum and Park, known as Upopoy, in 2020.

The *Ainu Stories* exhibition getting under way at Japan House London from today will bring you closer to the culture, language, lifestyle, beliefs and outlook of the Ainu people. I hope this experience leads you to find out more about Ainu heritage and the Ainu people and to engage with our efforts to facilitate the unfettered evolution of Ainu culture.

If you would allow me to touch upon a personal experience, it was during the summer of 1975 that I first encountered the Ainu people and their culture. When I was travelling from the Erimo Promontory on a train on the Hidaka Line, all of a sudden four Ainu family members boarded the train. They seemed to be a grandmother, a mother and two children. They were all in Ainu costumes and my attention was focused on them until they subsequently left the train. This was a significant moment for a then-16-year-old boy full of curiosity.

I was truly fascinated by coming face to face with a different culture, which these four people represented. And as I stand before you today in my official capacity, it is clear that this encounter literally paved the way for me to seek out and appreciate other cultures and eventually led me to work with foreign countries as a diplomat.

Meanwhile, you who are gathered here with me today are far from being the first people in the UK to encounter the Ainu. In this regard, it is instructive to reflect on some British people who had significant interaction with them as long as a century and a half ago.

A good example is Isabella Bird, who was certainly a well-known British traveller and the first woman to be made a special fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in England. She chose Biratori-cho in Hokkaido as her destination on a visit to Japan in 1878. The trip was supported by Sir Harry Parkes, the then-Minister in the British Legation in Japan, and Sir Ernest Satow, a diplomat and well-known scholar on Japan. During her stay in Biratori, Isabella Bird made enthusiastic observations and left extremely detailed records of Ainu life and culture.

In the course of our long history of exchange, we have sensed and made the most of the appeal of each other's culture, which has resulted in mutual learning. It is important to remember that the vibrant cultural ties we currently enjoy owe much to instances of fruitful engagement in the past such as I have just described, and such ties will be strengthened through this exhibition.

Some of the guests here today may have participated in the cultural events related to Okinawa and Toyama which have recently taken place here at JHL. I am very pleased that JHL has become a source of discovery and inspiration about a variety of regions, thereby demonstrating the cultural diversity and richness of Japan.

Now it is perhaps the right moment to ask you to join me in a toast. To the enduring success of *Ainu Stories*, the health and happiness of everyone here, and the further strengthening of friendship and cooperation between Japan and the UK. Please raise your glasses. Cheers! *Kampai!*