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**The Ainu of Northern Japan**  
Revitalizing a dying Culture

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## Abstract

This thesis discusses the strained relationship between the nation of Japan and the Ainu, the indigenous people of northern Japan as well as the Sakhalin and Kurile Isles. Historically a hunter-gatherer society that places great importance on living in harmony with the natural world, the Ainu faced increasing hardships due to the growing influence of the Japanese government in their homelands from the 1600s onward. Centuries of changing policies regarding the Ainu brought their culture to the brink of extinction. While the Ainu still face societal issues and prejudice, their situation has improved greatly. Public awareness and increased legal recognition has invigorated cultural preservation efforts as well as changing the popular views on the Ainu.

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## Introduction

The Ainu are an ethnic group which is indigenous to northern Japan and various nearby Russian territories. They are recognized as the native people of the Japanese island of Hokkaido as well as the Russian Sakhalin and Kuril Islands. The Ainu have their own language and distinct cultural practices (Cheung, 2003). The relationships between the Ainu and the other cultures surrounding them have varied through the centuries. Possibly the most precarious and long-lasting relationship is between the Ainu and the Japanese, seeing as it was only in April 2019, that the Japanese government finally, officially and legally recognized the Ainu as an indigenous people after decades of pressure and centuries of oppression.

For the purposes of this essay non-Ainu Japanese will be referred to as *wajin*, a common feature in academic texts discussing the Ainu (Hiwasaki, 2000, p.394). The lives of the Ainu have been influenced by the *wajin* for centuries, as trade between the two groups was common long before the assimilation of the Ainu into Japanese society (Howell, 1999, p.69). However, the expansion of Japan into the homelands of the Ainu is what has had the most impact on the Ainu way of life. From loss of land to forced assimilation, the Ainu have faced multiple forms of oppression from Japan throughout the years. These methods of subjugation have led to various issues that can still be seen in Ainu communities today.

After centuries of subjugation, Ainu life began to change for the better in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Popular interest in Ainu culture and identity began to grow, and while the attention was at first mainly concentrated on ethnic tourism, this resurgence of visibility for the Ainu would eventually lead to increased indigenous rights. Ainu groups have been working with central and local governments in order to preserve Ainu culture and language as well as creating opportunities for non-Ainu people to learn about the Ainu. Not only have new laws regarding the protection of Ainu culture been introduced but there are also multiple museums where visitors can learn about their culture and society. The largest of these cultural education sites is called Upopoy, meaning the 'Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony'. Its opening followed the introduction of The Ainu Measures Promotion Act in 2019 and it aims to introduce Japanese schoolchildren to Ainu culture, both past and present (Takamura, 2020). The key difference

between previous attempts of preservation and those being made in recent times is that now the Ainu themselves have a say in the matter and are not merely treated as research specimens (Cheung, 2003). These preservation efforts have elevated Ainu culture from being nearly extinct to being celebrated as a special feature at the marathon and race-walk events of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (Oba, 2021).

Each distinctive period in Japanese history has had its own approach for communication with and the treatment of the Ainu. This essay aims to explore how the social status and rights of the Ainu have fluctuated throughout their coexistence with Japanese society at large as well as how this strained relationship has evolved throughout the past centuries and into the present day.



# 1. The Misconceptions of Japanese Homogeneity

It is a commonly presented idea that Japan is an almost entirely homogenous nation made up of one ethnic and cultural group, the Japanese. While the Japanese people do make up the vast majority of the population, or circa 98%, that still means that approximately 2% of the population consists of various other ethnicities. As it is estimated that 124,687,293 people currently live in Japan in 2021, 2% would consequently account for 2,493,745 people that are not *wajin* (Japan, The World Factbook). Among these people are Japan's indigenous peoples.

## 1.1 Indigenous Peoples

Approximately 6% of the world's population is comprised of indigenous peoples, or over 476 million people (United Nations, n.d.). The definition of what constitutes indigenous peoples has fluctuated throughout the centuries, being influenced by a wide variety of sociocultural factors and border concerns. Currently, The United Nations and international law do not strictly define indigenous people so that indigenous communities can have the possibility of deciding what it means to be indigenous themselves (UN Human Rights, n.d.). James Anaya, former UN Special Rapporteur on the indigenous people's rights 2008-2014, describes indigenous peoples as "the living descendants of preinvasion inhabitants of lands now dominated by others" (Anaya, 2004, p.3). Indigenous peoples are dispersed around the globe and are an important part of their countries' cultural identity. Some examples are the Inuit of Greenland, the Australian Aborigines, the Sámi of .., and the Maori of ...

Sadly, indigenous peoples around the world face considerable hardships. When comparing indigenous communities against the majority population around them it becomes apparent that these groups face disproportionately high levels of poverty as well as a wide variety of other systemic issues. Not only do they typically face lower life expectancies and poorer health, but they are often discriminated against by the societies they live in. Historically, indigenous cultures have been systematically oppressed by those in power. Their cultures were systematically eradicated and those who did not comply faced abuse and death (Thornberry,

2002, p.18-19). However, to focus exclusively on the negatives of indigenous history would be unfair.

Indigenous rights have been gradually improving in a number of countries and have become clearer and more focused after the creation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 (United Nations). The preservation of indigenous cultures and languages holds cultural significance for all cultures as it helps strengthen cultural diversity. Indigenous communities also often originate in some of the most biodiverse areas on the planet and therefore play a crucial role in their preservation as well. Many vulnerable regions were historically inhabited by indigenous groups and with increased indigenous rights comes more awareness of their causes. Even though indigenous peoples remain some of the most disadvantaged groups of people in the world there are many promising changes on the horizon.

## 2. The Ainu of Northern Japan

The Ainu language endonym for their people, ‘Ainu’, directly translates to ‘human’ (Tamura, 1999, p.57). This is not such an uncommon feature in the names of indigenous peoples. Groups such as the Inuit, the Quechua peoples, and the many African peoples who speak the Khoekhoe language, are known by their peoples’ local endonyms which all translate as ‘human’. There is no official census data regarding present day numbers of Ainu and the population statistics that exist are not entirely accurate as many Ainu either choose to hide their Ainu heritage out of fear of discrimination or are entirely unaware of it. While official numbers state that there are approximately 24,000 Ainu living in Hokkaido it has been estimated that the real number of Ainu in Japan is closer to 200,000 (Sugimoto,



Figure 1 Map of Japan

2014, pp.216-217). More recently, the Ainu have been officially recognized as the indigenous people of Northern Japan with a new act that came into effect on May 24<sup>th</sup> 2019 (Murakami, 2019). This official recognition from the Japanese government did not come easily, as the Ainu's indigenous status has been disputed for centuries. For instance in 1911 the Encyclopædia Britannica refutes Ainu indigenous status, yet already in 1930 Thomas Edson Ennis refers to them as such, still, despite this, denial of Ainu indigenous status continues into the present (Winchester, 2019). This newfound legal acknowledgment is a great achievement for Ainu rights and is also supported by centuries of archeological discoveries, making denial of their status increasingly difficult.

## 2.1 Origins of the Ainu

The origins of the Ainu can be traced to ancient groups such as the Othosk and Satsumon cultures that lived in the area centuries ago. According to archeological findings, the Okhotsk culture first appeared in southern Sakhalin around 400-500 A.D and they are thought to have been the first permanent inhabitants of the Kurile islands. The Othosk culture was mainly a maritime-hunting society which engaged in Sea-mammal hunting, shallow- and deep-water fishing. These groups also hunted animals on land and, unusually for a maritime-hunting society, raised pigs. The Othosk culture's hunting techniques derived from the prehistoric Epi-Jomon culture of Hokkaido. Around 600-700 A.D. the Othosk culture moved into Japan's northern territories which were already inhabited by the Satsumon and Epi-Jomon cultures. Animal husbandry became less common among the Othosk groups that moved to Japan as sea mammal hunting was found to be more advantageous in most areas. By approximately 1000 A.D. the Othosk culture had faded away after being replaced by, or integrating with, the Satsumon culture (Yamaura & Ushiro, 1999, pp. 43-44).

The Satsumon culture had been present in northern Honshu before advancing into Hokkaido around 700-800 A.D. However, it is unclear what caused the decline of the Okhotsk culture in Sakhalin as no remnants of the Satsumon culture have been found there (Ohyi, 1975, pp. 147-148). The Satsumon culture underwent considerable changes around 900-1000 A.D. as agricultural productivity increased, people became free to hone various skills such as

woodcarving, blacksmithing and pottery. The creation of lacquerware and various other artistic endeavors became possible as well. These crafts were no longer exclusively for personal use but were meant to be sold. Trade with Japan became more regulated as the Japanese samurai class became more influential in the area. The production of goods increased to meet the demand for exported Hokkaido products. The most drastic changes happened circa 1200 A.D. When the traditional Satsumon pithouses were substituted with above-ground homes which closely resembled the housing of historical Ainu groups. As these changes in living arrangements were taking place the Satsumon culture also stopped creating ceramics (Yamaura & Ushiro, 1999, p. 45). This period of change can be considered the transition period from Satsumon to Ainu culture in Hokkaido. Ainu culture is considered to have completely taken over the Okhotsk and Satsumon cultures by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Siddle, 1999, p. 68). However they would not remain isolated in Hokkaido for long as Japan's political sphere slowly stretched northward.

## 2.2 The Traditional Ainu Lifestyle

Though there is no clear line that separates Ainu culture from the local peoples that came before them, Ainu culture is still distinct and recognizable. The traditional Ainu lifestyle was spread across Hokkaido and its surrounding islands for centuries until the Ainu assimilated into Japanese society. Traditional Ainu settlements were small, consisting of a small number of households which formed a community where everyone contributed to the group. These communities, known as *kotan*, settled along the rivers of inland Hokkaido but were not particularly involved with each other apart from kinship ties and annual religious ceremonies. There was not much political organization between the *kotan* until increased *wajin* presence in Hokkaido necessitated a more unified front to protect Ainu interests (Howell, 1994, p.70). Traditional Ainu houses are called *chise* and they could differ between geographical locations. In colder areas the *chise* resemble Satsumon pithouses while in other areas the *chise* were constructed on the surface. *Chise* traditionally consist of a large rectangular space with no

separated rooms apart from an entrance area and storage room. The exterior is quite recognizable with a large, tripod shaped thatch roof (Nomoto, 1999, pp.228-229).

Historically the Ainu were mostly a hunter-gatherer society. As *kotan* were always located in forested areas by rivers, hunting and fishing provided salmon, bear and deer, staples of the historic Ainu diet. In addition to this they ate a wide variety of roots, mushrooms, berries, and other vegetative foods which they foraged from the surrounding forests. Rice later became a part of the Ainu diet through trade, but it was not a staple food source until hunting restrictions were placed on the Ainu later on (Ono, 1999, p.36).



Figure 2 Chise, an Ainu House

Traditional Ainu culture greatly respects the natural world as Ainu religious practices are based on the idea that everything is connected to *kamui*. *Kamui* are divine, spiritual beings and are the basis of Ainu religion and mythology. The concept of *kamui* has often been simplified as animism but this is not an entirely accurate description of the spiritual concept of *kamui*. They are not only gods, but they also exist in animals, plants, and rivers to name a few examples. Much of traditional Ainu life is based around *kamui*, including everyday tasks as well as religious ceremonies and rituals (Yamada, 2001). Traditional patterns on Ainu clothing as well as traditional Ainu tattoos are also connected to the *kamui* as they are meant to protect the person from evil spirits (Godefroy, 2018, p.4).

### 3. Cultures Collide

An unavoidable shortcoming of historical records about the Ainu is that it is almost exclusively written by non-Ainu writers. As there is no written Ainu language, Ainu history was traditionally preserved orally and passed down through the generations. This means that virtually all premodern records of the Ainu are written by *wajin* and are therefore written from the perspective of a colonizing nation. Transcribers might deem some details unimportant to non-Ainu readers and thus omit them as these texts were not necessarily aiming to preserve the

history but rather to study the Ainu as a cultural ‘other’. Japanese ideas of indigenous groups during this time were molded by Chinese theories of civilization and barbarism, meaning texts from the era typically view these groups quite negatively. The *wajin* considered the Ainu to be barbarians which quite simply meant that they were a group that did not fall under Japanese political influence. However, this also meant that they were considered by some to be some form of demon and were therefore not always treated with the same respect as other people (Siddle, 1999, pp. 67-68).

The earliest mention of the Ainu in written texts can be found in China. This text was written during the 12<sup>th</sup> century and is a documentation of the population of northern Sakhalin. The Ainu of this area were ruled by the Yuan Dynasty from 1308 into the 16<sup>th</sup> century. During this period the Sakhalin Ainu engaged in trade with various groups across Japan. However, they did not have direct contact with these Japanese groups as trade in the area was managed by the Yuan Dynasty (Okada, 2012, p. 3). The earliest mention of the Ainu in a Japanese document is in a 14<sup>th</sup> century set of illustrated handscrolls named *The Suwa Daimyōjin Ekotoba*, which equates the Ainu with the mythical *oni*, or demonic creatures. This is notable as these handscrolls were created around the same time as *wajin* were settling in the southern regions of Ezogashima (Okada, 2012, p. 3). The term *Emishi* was often used by Japanese historians to describe people who were not part of the dominant Japanese population and the land where they lived, and it was used by the Japanese aristocracy to describe those they found to be primitive and barbaric (Walker, 2001, p. 20). The use of this term was eventually discontinued and the name Ezogashima, often shortened to simply Ezo, appears during the medieval period (1185-1568) and was used through the coming centuries. Meaning ‘barbarian islands’, Ezogashima was used to refer to the foreign lands inhabited by the Ainu who were not yet under the control of the Japanese government (Walker, 2001, p. 26).

### 3.1 Early Interactions

Throughout most of the early history of *wajin* and the Ainu, the two groups coexisted peacefully aside from occasional minor incidents. The two groups traded goods that were only available through trade such as iron tools and furs. Slowly some *wajin* began to settle in Ezogashima, at first these settlers were mostly criminals in exile or people fleeing after defeat in

one of the multiple wars raging in Japan at the time. It however was not until the Kamakura period (1185–1333) that Japan governing bodies began official attempts of exerting some kind of control over *Ainu Mosir*, the homelands of the Ainu. During this period the government designated the Tsugaru region, the most northern part of Japan's territory, as the responsibility of the Andō family. The Andō family used this opportunity to stretch their sphere of influence across the sea, into *Ainu Mosir*. Their territory included a port city important to Ainu trade, adding to their influence in the area. The Andō family even fled temporarily to Ezogashima in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century after fighting broke out with another clan in the area. Despite the seemingly positive interactions between the Ainu and *wajin* during this time, the common perception of Ezogashima and the Ainu remained negative. The Ainu were still viewed as vicious barbarians, not to be crossed, while Ezogashima was said to be 'haunted by demons' (Siddle, 2005, p. 29).

However, this negative image did not stop *wajin* settlements from appearing on the southern border of Ezogashima. *Wajin* settlers would trade various iron goods and weaponry for Ainu products which were valued by *wajin* and brought prosperity to the Ainu leaders who controlled Ainu trade in the area. This arrangement was mostly peaceful until warfare broke out in 1456 after a *wajin* blacksmith murdered an Ainu youth. This led to a century of unrest where the Ainu destroyed almost all *wajin* settlements, causing nearly all the settlers to leave the island. Peace was eventually reestablished when the Kakizaki family became the leaders of the *wajin* in the area in 1514. The Kakizaki family made a trading agreement with the local Ainu leaders, ending warfare in the area. This agreement represented the first step of Japanese political control of Ezogashima as it granted Japan control of a small area in Ezogashima (Legassie, 2013, p.2).

### 3.2 Tokugawa Era (1603-1867)

The Kakizaki family's domain was integrated into the Tokugawa shogunate in 1604. The family changed their name to Matsumae in 1599 and the shogunate granted their fief increased power in the area. The Matsumae clan held a monopoly over trade with the Ainu as well as control over all *wajin* travel in the area. The new borders of their territory now reached across most of Ezogashima, which was now called Ezochi. The Matsumae clan viewed the cooperation of the local Ainu as being of great importance as trade was vital to the fief's economy (Siddle,



2005, p. 32). The Matsumae clan's political influence within the Tokugawa state was dependent on their relationship with the local Ainu. As the Ezochi region was not particularly suited for agriculture the clan needed to secure their rule in the area through other routes, such as the trading of Ainu goods. As the Matsumae clan did not officially receive land from the shogunate their status was based on their rule over the Ainu and trade with them. This meant that it was in their best interests to keep the Ainu separate from *wajin* society and avoiding assimilation in order to maintain the exotic image of Ainu goods.

In order to enforce this separation, the Matsumae clan introduced various laws aiming to exclude the Ainu from Japanese society. Examples of this can be seen not only in laws regarding where Ainu could live but laws dictating their appearances and practices. Ainu were prohibited from speaking Japanese, wearing Japanese style clothing and practicing Japanese customs (Howell, 1994, p.85). These measures were taken not only to maintain the Ainu societal exclusion but also to strengthen Ainu dependence on goods and services from *wajin* traders. At this point the Ainu had developed a great economic dependency on Japanese trade as they had no alternative ways to acquire products such as cloth, sake, rice and iron goods. Especially rare Japanese goods were viewed as *ikor*, or treasures. These items displayed a person's wealth and could be used as reparations in feuds or other altercations (Howell, 1994, p. 75). As the Ainu relied more on *wajin* goods than the *wajin* depended on Ainu goods, trade tended to be unbalanced in favor of the *wajin*. This caused various economic disagreements between the two groups, sometimes leading to violence. The most notable of these Ainu uprisings is known as Shakushain's revolt.

Shakushain's revolt lasted from 1669-1672 and was caused by a combination of economic issues. Tension had been rising between the two groups in Ezochi for decades and many disagreements eventually led to the revolt in 1669. The main trigger event was the increasing disparities in trade with Japanese merchants, Ainu traders were gradually receiving less for their goods, a matter in which they had no say. The revolt consisted of approximately 30,000 Ainu and was led by an Ainu chieftain by the name of Shakushain. The revolt was doomed from the start as the Ainu were vastly outnumbered and the Japanese had far more advanced weaponry leading to Shakushain being assassinated by *wajin* after signing a peace



treaty with *wajin* representatives to end the revolt. While the Ainu maintained some formal autonomy in the region, trade issues continued to be a major concern with reports of multiple Ainu settlements experiencing starvation due to unfair trading (Dash, 2013). While Shakushain remains an inspirational figure for modern Ainu nationalists, his death essentially marked the end of Ainu political independence as Japan's power in Ezochi would only continue to grow.

## 4. Forced Assimilation

Japan's expansion into Ezochi gradually became more of a governmental priority around the dawn of the Meiji period. This new era began with the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and is mainly defined by the major changes in Japanese society that took place during this period. The Meiji Restoration aimed to end the Tokugawa shogunate and restore Emperor Meiji to the throne, whilst focusing on modernizing and westernizing Japan (Maruyama, 2014). Included in this new policy was the expansion of Japan's territory and defining what it meant to be Japanese. This idea of a homogenous Japanese identity would come to cause many hardships for the Ainu as the Japanese government set its eyes on integrating the Ainu into Japanese society.

### 4.1 Annexation of Ainu Mosir

As Ainu Mosir shared borders with Russia, the Meiji government viewed the territory both as a convenient way to gain power in the north as well as an advantageous barrier between Japan and Russia. The area is also rich with various natural resources and was a practical location for new developments since the island was mostly rural at the time. These many benefits led to Japan's formal annexation of Ezochi during the Meiji Restoration and its final change of name, being renamed Hokkaido by the Japanese government in 1869. The Hokkaido Land Regulation of 1872 designated Hokkaido as belonging to no one and the land was therefore allotted to Japanese settlers. The Japanese government also introduced its Ainu assimilation policies during this period, further destabilizing Ainu society. These policies aimed to absorb the Ainu into Japanese society and have them assimilate to Japanese culture and yet these policies did not consider the Ainu equal to *wajin*. Even though both groups were classified as 'common people', the official legal term for the Ainu became *kyûdojin*, or "former aborigine", (Godefroy, 2018, pp. 2-3) a term considered somewhat harmful by many. Noemi Godefroy interprets it as:

This denomination constitutes a constant reminder of their past as rightful occupants of Hokkaidô, - a status that is now denied to them-, while preventing them from envisioning a future as Japanese imperial subjects and a place in Japanese society. They are defined by what they were, but are no longer allowed to be, and not by what they must become (Godefroy, 2018, p.3).

The Ainu were further distanced from their land in the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the Japanese government's Hokkaidô Development Agency changed the majority of Hokkaido's location names from the original Ainu language over to Japanese ones (Godefroy, 2018, p.4). This agency managed the incorporation of the Ainu into the Japanese majority on top of its various other governmental assignments in the area. The methods used not only designated the Ainu as lesser than their *wajin* neighbors, they also sought to end their cultural practices and erase any and all Ainu identity.

Traditional Ainu family ties and practices were further disrupted in 1872 when Japan's first modern population census took place. The officials in charge of the census used this opportunity to give the Ainu new, Japanese surnames. Some of these names were Japanese versions of the Ainu names while others were seemingly chosen at random. Actual family ties were not considered in this process and often many families in the same area were given the same surname regardless of relation (Godefroy, 2018, p.4). The Ainu were not the only group to undergo surname changes during this time period. Prior to the Meiji restoration, the only people who typically had surnames were those of a higher societal class while most of the public were prohibited from having surnames. In 1875, all Japanese citizens were required to register a surname, and like the Ainu, a considerable portion of these new surnames were largely arbitrary and were not indicative of familial relation (Lasker, 1985, p.9). These name changes not only held great personal significance for the Ainu, they also left sacred family symbols effectively useless. Ainu family lineage was traced back through family heirlooms that were passed down through generations. Each family had their own unique designs and symbols that were kept secret within the family circle. These items held significance in the afterlife as well as they were seen as conduits for the deceased to connect with their family, living and dead (Godefroy, 2018, p.4). This haphazard naming of Ainu families therefore affected the Ainu into the afterlife. These changes in terminology were only the beginning as the Meiji government endeavored to create a homogenous society in Hokkaido.

Following Japan's annexation of Hokkaido, a large influx of *wajin* began to settle across the territory. Up until this point, the Ainu had mostly lived apart from *wajin* settlements, in areas considered to be undeveloped wilderness by *wajin* (Siddle, 2005, p. 61). As Japanese influence in Hokkaido became gradually stronger, so did the power of the Japanese State. While the relationship between the two groups was originally based on mutual trade, it slowly became increasingly imbalanced in favor of the Japanese State, which exerted increasing control over the Ainu. The Ainu eventually fell under the complete control of the Japanese state by 1869 with the establishment of the Colonization Office. The Colonization Office, or *kaitakushi*, oversaw the documentation of the Ainu and their addition to the Japanese *koseki* system (Siddle, 2003, p.451). The *koseki* is a family registration system that is still used in Japan today, defined by the Ministry of Justice as "the system for recording the kinship of individuals from birth until death. The registration is made for every Japanese national and is the only public document to certify that he or she has Japanese nationality" ("Family Registration," n.d.). This system is where the use of the term *kyûdojin* when referring to the Ainu formally originates. The *kaitakushi* hired 76 foreign advisors to assist in the organization of the region's new economy and how to best use their newly acquired land. Prioritizing agriculture, capitalist development and the industrialization of Hokkaido, these developments were originally intended to generate exports and to supply food for the rest of the country, rather than to strengthen Hokkaido's infrastructure or improve the inhabitants' quality of life (Siddle, 2005, p.55).

## 4.2 Dissolution of an Ancient Way of Life

The public image of what it meant to be Japanese underwent many changes during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This period, known as the Meiji Period, is largely defined by the drastic changes experienced by Japanese society. Japan was rapidly modernizing and becoming more involved in international politics after more than two centuries of virtual isolation. The creation of a cohesive national identity was prioritized by the government in order to legitimize their claim on areas outside of the main Japanese archipelago as well as a method of strengthening the image of Japan internationally. These policies had a massive impact on the Ainu as their way of life did not fit in with this new unified image. Consequently, drastic measures were taken in order to forcibly assimilate the Ainu communities into the wider

Japanese society and to strengthen this new image of what it meant to be Japanese (Maruyama, 2014). These changes were not enacted suddenly, but rather slowly introduced over the course of a few decades. These new assimilation policies essentially aimed to erase Ainu identity by banning a multitude of culturally important practices as well as limiting hunting and other important aspects of Ainu life.

In 1876 the Hokkaidô Development Agency banned important Ainu traditions regarding their appearance. It was seen as a necessary measure as these were easily identifiable signs of a separate culture and were therefore not acceptable under this new image that Japan was creating for itself. This ban on practices such as male earrings and women's ritual tattoos caused considerable consternation as well as feelings of loss for the Ainu communities as these often held religious significance. Japanese views on tattooing were overall negative as the practice seen as mutilation reserved for criminals and consequently by extension the Ainu tattoos were seen as a mark of barbarity. Ainu women had long practiced distinct ritual tattooing around their mouth and on their arms that held great cultural significance. The traditional tattooing around the mouth would begin when they were children and was completed around the time when the woman got married. These tattoos as well as the patterns on their clothing were said to prevent evil spirits and other misfortune from entering their bodies (Kodama, 1999, p.325). Accordingly this ban was highly distressing for the Ainu as they were concerned that this would anger their gods and prevent Ainu women from getting married.

Another spiritually distressing ban that was introduced in 1871 was the ritual burning of a house after the death of its owner, known as *chise gomori*. This was done so that the deceased person's spirit would not return to the house and bring misfortune to the community. However, the Ainu are quite adept at adjusting to and overcoming adversity and this can be observed in the aftermath following this ban. Instead of destroying the house itself, they resorted to confusing the ghost. They would remove the body through a hole in the wall and then taken to the graveyard via a long and complicated route so that they would be unable to find their way home. The interior of the house would also be rearranged, and the deceased person's private property destroyed so that the house would be unrecognizable (Godefroy, 2018, p.4). These bans essentially ended many cultural practices for good and most have yet to be reintroduced into modern Ainu culture.

Not only were the Ainu prohibited from practicing their culture, they were no longer allowed to speak their own language either. The 1899 Law for the Protection of Native Hokkaido Aborigines formally restricted the use of the Ainu language in an effort to assimilate the Ainu and to strengthen Japanese as ‘the national language’. As there is no Ainu writing system, Ainu history had been preserved orally for centuries, consequently oral tradition and historical knowledge was endangered as they could no longer speak about it in their own language (Cheung, 2003). The deterioration of the Ainu language and culture quickened over the next few decades as many parents discouraged their children from learning the Ainu language in favor of Japanese. They did this hoping that their children could avoid general prejudice and so that they could reach a higher socioeconomic status than their parents (Stevens, 2001, p.183). Today the Ainu language is considered an endangered language with only a few speakers left, none of whom learned it as their first language. Those who can still speak Ainu today were taught by older generations, yet it is no longer used in everyday life (Fukazawa, 2019, p.3). The damage done to Ainu culture by the banning of the Ainu language has been immeasurable, as a consequence its effects can be sorely felt to this day.

### 4.3 Forced Social Integration

The new regulations placed on the Ainu were largely meant to forcibly integrate them into modern Japanese society not solely on stifling their cultural heritage. Some of these new laws that were gradually implemented, limited the Ainu ability to hunt or to live on their ancestral lands in order to use them for Japanese farming or industrial purposes. The new *wajin* immigrants were not required to follow the same laws as the Ainu and were therefore able to fish, hunt and cut down trees where Ainu were not allowed. Private ownership of ancestral Ainu lands prevented the Ainu from utilizing the natural resources that their way of life relied on (Maruyama, 2014). As Hokkaido was viewed as so called ‘virgin land’, actions were taken to divide the land mass into smaller areas that could be sold to *wajin* settlers or used for industrial projects. As this was an easy way for people who were struggling in other parts of Japan to acquire land, this led to a massive influx of immigrants into Hokkaido, so already by 1873 the Ainu accounted for only 14.63% of Hokkaido’s total population (Siddle, 2005, p. 60).

This alienation from their lands was one of the many factors that led to increased poverty among the Ainu. It was a popular view among the *wajin* immigrants as well as among officials that this breakdown of Ainu society was due to some innate inferiority of the Ainu. The image of the Ainu being a ‘dying race’ became popularized during this era, an idea that unfortunately persists in modern times. Social Darwinism and ideas of race and superiority were growing massively in popularity across the world at the time and Japan was no exception. Many people believed that these ideas and accordingly the impoverishment of the Ainu, were merely proof of *wajin*, or ‘the Japanese race’, being naturally superior, therefore justifying the subjugation of the Ainu and other minority groups in Japan. This is easily found in documents from the time, an example of this is the Encyclopædia Britannica which describes the Ainu thusly:

...the doom of unfitness appears to have begun to overtake the race long ago. History indicates that in ancient times they were fierce fighters, able to offer a stout resistance to the incomparably better armed and more civilized Japanese. To-day they are drunken, dirty, spiritless folk, whom it is difficult to suppose capable of the warlike role they once played (Encyclopædia Britannica, 1911, p.441).

Fortunately, this idea has become outdated within academic studies and is no longer accepted.

One policy that could have potentially been a form of relief was the distribution of plots of lands to the Ainu with the goal of them becoming farmers and thus abandoning their old way of life. However, when these policies are carefully observed, there are glaring flaws in the planned implementation of these policies. On average, these plots were small and were mostly located around Sapporo. Few households received these lands and those who did were unable to be sustainably productive as these lands were typically less fertile than the lands they had originally lived on. Ainu communities were torn apart and moved to marshy, inferior lands that others would not buy. The relocation of the Ainu to these less desirable portions of Hokkaido also effectively segregated them from the new *wajin* majority (Siddle, 2005, pp. 64-65). As these new settlements were created without regard to previous communities, a sense of isolation within the community grew among the people living there. This isolation and ever increasing destitution meant that depression was common in these rural Ainu communities and alcoholism became a widespread problem during this time. However, this was not an entirely natural progression. Many Ainu fell into debt and lost property to immoral *wajin* who used alcohol as a sort of

weapon against these already disenfranchised people (Siddle, 2005, p. 67). These issues recur throughout modern Ainu history, such as during Ainu migrations to more densely populated areas during the 1960s. Many urban Ainu communities faced these same problems as well as homelessness and violence, leading to many Ainu choosing to hide their Ainu heritage (Watson, 2014, p.2). This shift was not entirely voluntary though as many regulations and laws were put on the Ainu regarding cultural practices and their way of living, bringing their culture to the brink of extinction.

#### 4.4 Ainu Studies

Ainu studies are a field of academia which encompasses anthropologic, ethnographic, historical, and other studies on the Ainu people. The term is generally only used for studies done in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and earlier, as the term has become outdated. Ainu studies treated the Ainu as research subjects rather than individuals, making the field outdated. These studies were generally influenced by colonial ideals and social Darwinism and are therefore viewed less favorably in modern times (Schumann, 2018). While Ainu studies did exist in some form earlier, the field started to noticeably gain more popularity both within and outside Japan in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially in Europe. European scholars found the racial identity of the Ainu particularly interesting due to the antiquated theory of biological race that was popular at the time. It was thought that, unlike other peoples in Asia, the Ainu were a so-called ‘Caucasoid population’. This misconception was largely based on their general appearance as they supposedly had ‘Caucasoid’ racial features, such as generally having more hair than the average *wajin*. European researchers were also particularly interested in the Ainu bear festival because prehistoric Europeans celebrated bears as well. It was thought that this cultural and religious similarity meant that they could learn more about the lives of prehistoric Europeans by studying the Ainu. *Wajin* researchers on the other hand were interested in studying the Ainu from an anthropological and archeological viewpoint in an effort to discover the origins of the *wajin* (Yamada, 2003, pp.77-78). However this research, both on the European front as well as the Japanese, had significant ethical controversies in its history that continue to affect present day Ainu.

A large portion of Ainu studies involved physical anthropology, based on the examination and study of both living and dead Ainu people for various purposes. From those studying the origins of Japanese society to eugenics, many researchers were highly interested in Ainu biology. Researchers would use deceit and unethical tactics in order to obtain blood samples, anthropometric measurements, and other data, without the informed consent of the Ainu people who were being examined (Low, 2012). While some pretended to be doctors in order to obtain their samples, acting as if they were searching for disease treatments, others were able to gain access to Ainu patients with help from local clinics and hospitals. Eugenics lobby groups were involved in these studies as well through their connections to respected universities. These researchers rarely treated the Ainu as people but rather as research subjects, often being disrespectful and inhumane towards them (Low, 2012). This unfair treatment was also present in the study of Ainu human remains.

Ainu skeletal remains were popular research specimens for those involved in Ainu studies. These human remains were obtained without permission from the Ainu, with remains being stolen or obtained using other unethical methods. A famous case of the theft of Ainu remains occurred in 1864 and 1865 which caused a serious diplomatic incident. A group of foreigners, which included a British consul and a Russian doctor, traveled between multiple Ainu villages during this time period where they would sneak into the villages' cemeteries during the night and steal Ainu remains. While the people involved in this incident were punished, these kinds of unethical collecting methods would still be used for at least a century afterwards (Watson et al., 2014, pp.3-4). Despite vehement opposition from the Ainu, researchers continued to rob Ainu graves of human remains as well as burial accessories to add to vast research collections. Some of these collections contained over a thousand Ainu skulls and other remains. Local law enforcement agencies often supervised and assisted in the collection of human remains, against the wishes of the local Ainu. Ogawa Ryūkichi, an Ainu elder, has described an incident that took place in the 1930s where Ainu elderwomen desperately tried to protect the graves of their ancestors by covering them with their own bodies. The village's police force brusquely removed the elderwomen and assisted the researchers as they worked (Watson et al., 2014, pp.3-4).



The excavation of Ainu burial grounds by Japanese universities would continue until the 1970s. Many of these collections still exist and remain a controversial issue to this day as despite persistent efforts only a small portion of the stolen Ainu remains have been returned from these collections. Respected universities such as Hokkaido University have been sued by Ainu plaintiffs demanding the return of the university's large collection of Ainu remains and yet the vast majority remains housed on university grounds. These collections were often poorly preserved and documented. Bones from different sites were mixed together without proper documentation, making their return to the correct burial sites virtually impossible (Nakamura, 2019, pp.363-364). Even though the return of these stolen remains continues to cause controversy there are also positive developments in this area. In July 2017 a stolen Ainu skull that had been in Germany for 138 years was returned to Japan. This marked the first time that human remains had returned to Japan using diplomatic channels. This was done in accordance with the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and will hopefully be the first of many more (Nakanishi, 2017). The crimes and injustices surrounding Ainu studies are evident. However, this dark chapter in history would eventually inspire positive change as the unfairness encouraged the rise of Ainu activism.

## 5. A New Beginning for the Ainu

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century traditional Ainu culture and society had largely been erased. Ethnic tourism became the only way to see what traditional Ainu culture was like, with various tourism areas containing the only *chise* that were left. Public interest in the Ainu grew throughout the century and Ainu ethnic tourism became increasingly prevalent in Hokkaido. Ainu craftsmen sold wooden carvings of bears and other trinkets for tourists and Ainu people would perform dances as well as other cultural performances. Ainu culture became somewhat of a commodity and the image of the Ainu culture as being a primitive and outdated way of life was unfortunately becoming the popular image among the Japanese public (Cheung, 2003). However, this increased attention also meant that many Ainu started to consider their position within the Japanese social hierarchy and became inspired to fight for change.

## 5.1 Social Issues in Ainu Communities

The Ainu have suffered injustices throughout history that continue to affect modern Ainu society in modern times. Ainu frequently experienced prejudice based on their heritage during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in most aspects of society. The general attitude was that no matter how mixed a person was, if they had any Ainu ancestry then they were considered Ainu and thus inferior. This led to severe discrimination in schools, employment and marriage, causing many Ainu to hide their heritage in an effort to assimilate and avoid harassment (Siddle, 2003, p.453). This assimilation has progressed to the point that many people are not aware of their Ainu heritage and some even participate in the discrimination of other Ainu.

There are also systemic issues that affect modern Ainu communities. Ainu people are more likely to suffer from lower living and educational standards than the average Japanese citizen. Ainu communities also tend to have higher rates of poverty than the national average and they experience higher rates of unemployment. According to surveys done by the Ainu Association of Hokkaido in 2013, 44,8% of Ainu people living in Hokkaido were receiving welfare assistance, 11,7% more than other residents of Hokkaido. While it must be noted that these statistics are generally higher in Hokkaido than the national average, the difference remains clear. Over 77% of Ainu residents questioned, described their living situation as being at least ‘somehow difficult’, though this was an improvement from previous surveys.

While these statistics might seem bleak, they are gradually improving. In 1972 only 41,6% of Hokkaido Ainu had a high school education while in 2013 the percentage was up to 92,6% , only 6% lower than the local average. Unfortunately, the ratio of university education among Hokkaido Ainu still remains 17,2% lower than the Hokkaido average of 43% (Ainu Association of Hokkaido). As education is often an important element in the improvement of economic situation, increased access to education is of high priority for Ainu activists.

## 5.2 The Fight for Ainu Rights

Resistance would often rise during times of particular hardship for the Ainu when they faced notably poor treatment. Ainu rights groups began to become prominent during the 20<sup>th</sup>

century as indigenous peoples around the world started to gain more rights. As general citizen movements and protests surged in popularity during the 1960s in Japan, so did Ainu movements. This time period marks a change in attitude in Ainu activism as the focus was no longer to assimilate but rather to fight for their rights as an indigenous people. Grassroots indigenous movements moved on from local policies to demanding national policies and that the Japanese government recognize their status and rights as indigenous people. The 1970's brought on increased cultural awareness among the Ainu and a newfound vigor was brought to cultural preservation efforts (Cheung, 2003).

Ainu rights groups would go on to advocate for Ainu interests, from legal action to social reform. The Ainu Association of Hokkaido continues to be the largest and most prominent of these groups. The group has used its influence and size to communicate with the Japanese government as well as in international forums, becoming the dominant Ainu organization. The Ainu Association of Hokkaido has put a lot of effort into strengthening Ainu identity among those who have lost touch with their culture and in teaching the Ainu language. Ainu language classes have been taught with the Association's assistance and they have drafted potential laws regarding the protection of Ainu culture (Maruyama, 2014). They have used their political influence to file lawsuits regarding the infringement of Ainu rights, most famously in the Nibutani dam case.

The Nibutani dam case was a landmark case regarding Ainu indigenous rights and it brought national attention to the plight of modern Ainu. Nibutani is a small town in Hokkaido with only 500 residents, 80% of which are Ainu. During the 1990s the government began purchasing lands that the Ainu had received through various protective laws after the annexation of Hokkaido, including the town of Nibutani, in order to build a dam. The government argued that the dam was necessary for flood control, energy generation and to provide water for the increasing population. The Ainu however argued that the land that would be flooded was sacred, vital land for various religious and cultural Ainu practices and rituals. The Saru River, on which the dam would be situated, is sacred in Ainu religion as it is where salmon come during spawning season and salmon are important *kamui*. Two Ainu landowners with considerable political influence refused to sell their land so the government seized it using the Land

Expropriation Act and began the construction of Nibutani dam. The landowners, Shigeru Kayano and Tadashi Kaizawa, sued the government but despite massive Ainu resistance the dam was completed in 1996. The Ainu received special permission to use the lake for traditional events, but the larger impact of the case was that it brought Ainu indigenous rights into public knowledge (Okada, 2012, pp.6-7). The Japanese Diet passed the Promotion of Ainu Culture act in July 1997 as a response to the Nibutani dam case only three months after the case ended.

### 5.3 Saving a Fading Culture

The Promotion of Ainu Culture Act from 1997 was created to replace the 98 year old Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act, thus replacing a long outdated legal act that had been put into law in 1899. The Promotion of Ainu Culture Act intends to hold governments, both local and national, accountable regarding the promotion and protection of Ainu culture as well as requiring governmental assistance in these endeavors. The national government is now required to promote Ainu culture and The Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture was created in order to oversee these new duties. The foundation is regulated by the Secretary of the Hokkaido Development Bureau and the Minister for Education. The foundation's many projects include Ainu language classes, the creation of texts about Ainu culture for use in schools, subsidizing and evaluating research on Ainu topics and sponsoring various Ainu events and festivals. While these measures have been helpful they have also been criticized. Activists and scholars argue that these policies do not explicitly address Ainu indigenous rights or Ainu political participation (Stevens, 2001, pp.194-195). Ainu policies are still being written and while Ainu political participation has not been guaranteed in law, their status as indigenous peoples finally has been (Murakami, 2019).

## Conclusion

The Ainu of northern Japan are an ancient people who have overcome many difficulties throughout their history. Despite active erasure efforts and prejudice, they have persevered and kept their culture alive. While the Ainu condition may not be too dissimilar to what other mistreated groups have endured, as many indigenous peoples around the world have face similar issues and persecution because of their heritage, it remains unique in its own way. Centuries of difficulties have not managed to eradicate the Ainu or their culture, they are still here.

The long awaited legal recognition of Ainu indigenous status marks a turning point in Ainu history and culture. Ainu policies can raise the dignity of the Ainu people and enhance pride in their heritage. This recognition brings sorely needed funds and awareness to public education in Ainu culture, history and language. The celebration of Ainu culture at the Olympics shows a distinct improvement in social recognition of Ainu rights and status. While these gestures may not erase a long history of oppression, they are definitely a step in the right direction. The Ainu way of life remains as relevant today as it did centuries ago. Ainu culture prioritizes respect for the natural world and that humans should coexist harmoniously with nature, in an ever-changing world this message remains pertinent.

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## Image Reference List

### Figure 1

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### Figure 2

Goodrich, Joseph King. (1888). Ainu Houses and their Furnishing. *Popular Science Monthly*, 33, pp. 497-508.