

JAPAN'S VANISHING MINORITY

The social, economic and cultural status of the Ainu since 1945

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A brief history of the Ainu

The Ainu are the indigenous people of Japan. They live primarily on the island of Hokkaido in Japan's north, though at one time they had settled in other parts of the country, such as the main island of Honshu and also the small islands of Sakhalin and Kurile. For centuries they have waged a continuing battle against the expansionist invasion of the Japanese state while desperately trying to preserve their traditional language, culture, and way of life. In this sense, they are not unlike indigenous groups in other parts of the world.

The struggles of the Ainu are reflected in their low standard of living and social problems such as discrimination and prejudice; clear signs that they are a disadvantaged group within Japanese society. Previous government legislation has often hindered, rather than helped their cause; a cause that the average Japanese person seems to know very little about.

This paper will give some historical background to the Ainu, explain how the government's mentality and legislation has shaped and controlled their fate but also attempt to show that the Ainu nation have, since 1945, made some visible gains in terms of their social, economic and cultural status, largely due to a combination of welfare policies, rising prosperity and

their own efforts.

The Ainu Before 1945

Hokkaido, the last frontier, is colonized

In the late 1800s, the Meiji government's desire for expansion took them to Hokkaido, Japan's last remaining frontier. Here, the Ainu, who had been the sole inhabitants up until this time, fell victim to a rigorous government plan to organize settlements and develop the region's economy. As Young notes, the establishment of the Hokkaido Colonization Board (*kaitakushi*) in 1869, forever changed the fortunes of the Ainu community.¹ The Ainu were forcibly moved off their own land to accommodate the droves of incoming Japanese, and deprived of their traditional hunting and fishing rights all in the name of economic development.

The Ainu, essentially gatherers, fishermen and hunters, had lived a simple lifestyle but this all changed with the arrival of the *wajin* (Japanese). An Ainu elder recalls with sadness how her son was arrested by the police for salmon poaching. It was her belief that the Ainu always respected the natural cycles of nature and only took enough salmon to feed their families, yet various rules created by the Japanese sought to disrupt their centuries-old way of life.

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Sisam kar pe cep new a he, kupoho uk wa kamuy eparoyki koeturenno, poho utar ere pakopak hawe ta an, wen sisam utar ukhi anak somo apak hawe ta an.

It's not as if *sisam* (Japanese) created salmon. My son caught salmon, offered some to the gods, and at the same time fed his children. Why is he being punished for this? The wicked *sisam* are not punished for their catch – I cannot understand this.ⁱⁱ

As the Japanese migrated north to establish settlements, they brought with them disease and social problems which ravaged the local Ainu population. ‘The precipitous fall in Ainu population...along with the steady increase in Japanese immigrants, meant that the Ainu fell from a 95 percent majority to a minority of 22 percent between 1873 and 1897’.ⁱⁱⁱ

The ongoing colonization of Hokkaido was seen by the Japanese as an integral part of their country's economic development and any stories about the plight and suffering of the Ainu seemed to garner very little in the way of public attention. As Siddle has noted, even decades later in 1968, though various parties and events were held throughout Hokkaido to celebrate its 100 year anniversary, notably absent was any mention of Ainu history or their role in the colonization of Hokkaido.

This was not mere oversight; such historical amnesia was integral to the legitimizing narrative of Hokkaido *kaitaku* (development) that served to

mask the violence of the colonial enterprise by casting it in terms of the application of the beneficial effects of ‘progress’ to a natural extension of Japanese territory.^{iv}

The notion of Japan as a homogenous state

The notion of Japan as a homogenous state, is a longstanding one, and has often been used to show the uniqueness or “Japaneseness” of the country. It is a myth that has been perpetuated by both government and intellectuals alike. In response to a United Nations call for the elimination of discrimination against minorities, the Japanese government publicly stated that they were opposed to any discrimination against minorities, but boldly proclaimed that because minorities don't exist in Japan, neither does discrimination.^v ‘The belief that Japan is a homogenous, mono-racial state is deep-rooted and, as Ivan Hall notes, has long been ‘openly sanctioned by the intellectual establishment, public consensus, and government policy.’^{vi}

In doing so, this notion fails to see Japan as a nation with cultural and regional diversity. As a result, the Ainu, much like the Koreans and Burakumin^{vii †}

[†] The Burakumin are a marginalized group within Japanese society. Despite being Japanese, historically they were considered ‘impure’ because of their occupations involving animal skin (leather makers, shoe makers, butchers and so on). Today discrimination against the Burakumin persists, particularly within the spheres of employment, education and marriage.

also living on the fringe of society, have all but been forgotten and effectively excluded from the narratives on Japan. The historian, Kita Sadakichi (1871-1939) explained that taking differences and transforming them so that they are the same, is the hallmark of 'Japaneseness' and so that '...the Japanese Minzoku, ...speak the same language, cherish the same ideas and beliefs...this vision... came eventually to provide support for the Japanese government's assimilationist policies towards its colonies...' ^{viii} So by assimilating the Ainu into the general population, the Japanese state could maintain its image of a totally homogenous country.

Government action to "protect" a dying race

Among the Japanese population there is a 'widespread view that the Ainu are a virtually vanished and vanquished people.' ^{ix} Lie notes that many people he interviewed regarded the Ainu as being nearly extinct. 'When I asked people to estimate their population, no one gave a figure higher than 1,000. Not surprisingly, they are frequently described as a "vanishing people."' ^x However, in fact, a government survey in 1999 revealed the population in Hokkaido to be around 24,000. ^{xi}

By the late 1800s, pamphlets and newspapers in Hokkaido had started to draw attention to this 'dying' race; reports of their dwindling population, their levels of poverty and stories of them being swindled and cheated by Japanese people and government officials alike became widely known. Many scholars and intellectuals in

Hokkaido, convinced that an 'Ainu problem' existed, demanded that the government step in and take some action. ^{xii}

The government's response to these outcries was the creation of the Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act in 1899. Ainu who were interested in farming were allotted parcels of land, special native schools (*Kyudojin gakko*) were built and welfare assistance, especially in the area of medical care, was made available. ^{xiii} However, there was a catch to all of this. For example, poor soil conditions and various restrictions on the land made it difficult for the Ainu to squeak out a living and more often than not, the land ended up being repossessed and returned to the government. ^{xiv} Also, the native schools offered a 'special' curriculum; one that forbid the speaking of the Ainu language and promoted all things "Japanese". ^{xv} 'Under the rule of the survival of the fittest they were doomed to extinction, ...the only path left was to abandon their customs and culture, to assimilate with the Japanese...' ^{xvi}

In short, this Protection Act, by attempting to eradicate Ainu language and customs, enabled the government to subdue, control and assimilate the Ainu minority, under the guise of economic and social assistance.

The Ainu After 1945

A new self-identity begins to emerge

The late 1960s and early 1970s, for several reasons, marked a turning point for the Ainu, who began to take on a new self-identity. Influences such as the student movement, Burakumin activism and the

activities of other indigenous groups, encouraged the Ainu to take a more active role in political and cultural activities.^{xvii}

Starting in the 1970s a proliferation of literature on the Ainu was being published; both the Japanese and the outside world were taking an interest in Ainu language, customs and culture. However, much to the chagrin of the Ainu, the information and viewpoints presented were often inaccurate and stereotypical. This was not a new problem, but in fact was something that had plagued the Ainu ever since they had come into contact with the Japanese and had long been supported by the government. In the 1930s, in a bid to boost tourism in Hokkaido, the government promoted “tourist” villages, where Ainu, dressed in their traditional clothes, were put on display and performed traditional ceremonies for curious onlookers.^{xviii} Though they were paid for these ‘shows’, many Ainu felt that the villages simply reinforced stereotypical images of themselves. ‘In this way, commercial tourism contributed to the perpetuation of images of primitive barbarians’.^{xix}

Shigeru Kayano laments how many Ainu, including himself, were torn between the financial opportunity offered by the tourist villages and having respect for what it truly meant to be an Ainu. ‘...an Ainu-style house had been built and...we presented half-hour shows of “bear-sending” songs and dances. What in real life took place once in five or ten years was repeated there three or four times a day. It is beyond words for me to explain how miserable it made us...’.^{xx}

Their indignation at Ainu misrepresentation galvanized and motivated them to analyze more critically how they were being portrayed to the outside world and what was written about them by others. They forged alliances with other minority groups such as the Buraku Liberation movement and the Korean movement, all in an effort to share ideas and solidify their own movement.^{xxi} Organizations were also set up in order for them to study about their own culture.

In addition to the links they had with groups on the domestic front, they also began to look outside Japan for support and inspiration. Ainu elders at the invitation of other countries, began attending international conferences on indigenous peoples. At these conferences they came to the realization that minorities in other parts of the globe faced challenges similar to their own, which gave them the impetus to learn from these other groups and start creating a brighter future for themselves. With the sharing of common experiences and hardships, came a feeling that they were an important part of the global indigenous village.

Attempts to preserve language, customs and a traditional way of life

As the Ainu began to develop pride in their uniqueness as a people, a movement to preserve their language, customs and traditional lifestyle gained momentum. Several individuals spearheaded this drive, but one of the most respected and influential of these was an activist by the name of Shigeru Kayano (June 15, 1926-

May 6, 2006), who in his later years, upon realizing how precious the Ainu culture was, became a passionate advocate for preserving it.

The Ainu language has often been referred to by linguists as a “dying language”.^{xxiii} Since it has no writing system, it has had to rely on oral traditions to keep it alive. But as more and more elders pass away, preserving the language has become a race against time. It is difficult to ascertain exactly how many persons are fluent in the Ainu language because there are some who try to live out their lives as ‘Japanese’, a testament to the fact that discrimination is still prevalent in various sectors of society. ‘Many Ainu speakers even today hide their identity and their ability to speak the language, and the story is often told about parents who were fluent in Ainu but never spoke a word of it in front of their children’.^{xxiii}

In the Ainu culture there is a rich variety of oral traditions such as poetry, songs, and folk tales. *Upaskuma* (lessons), which told stories about societal events and the origins of the Ainu, were not only simple pleasures but many believed that their transmission helped children to understand Ainu beliefs and traditions.^{xxiv} Kayano recalls with fondness how ‘...stories like “The Sparrow Returns a Kindness” taught us morals such as the need to be kind, to remember to give thanks for every good happening and to treat every living thing with respect...’.^{xxv} Several individuals have undertaken the painstaking and laborious task of transcribing folktales (*yukar*) and other oral

traditions in romaji and Japanese, so that future generations can learn more about this culture.

In the 1980s, Ainu language schools were gradually being built throughout Hokkaido and at last count they numbered about fourteen.^{xxvi} Also due to Kayano’s tireless efforts, a uniquely Ainu museum that showcases a wide variety of traditional arts and crafts all under the same roof, opened in Nibutani in 1992.^{xxvii} There was a growing sense that the Ainu were finally beginning to reclaim their heritage and culture.

Government policies after 1945

In post-war Japan, there have been several organizations for the Ainu, but they often had conflicting agendas. The Utari Kyokai (formerly the Ainu Kyokai) was no exception. While the intent of this organization was to serve as a voice for the Ainu, in reality it had connections to government, so its effectiveness was completely dependent on the political will of Japanese bureaucrats.^{xxviii}

In the 1980s the Utari Kyokai, recognizing the shortcomings of the Former Aborigines Protection Act, pushed to have it abolished and drafted proposals for new legislation which eventually culminated in the passing of the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act .

The Ainu Cultural Promotion Act (CPA), which was passed in 1997, was the most significant government move since 1945, and therefore as expected, created much controversy and discussion among the Ainu. Support for, and opposition to

the new law, clearly showed the divisions that exist in the Ainu community and that their needs and desires are diverse. How successful was this act in addressing the needs of the Ainu nation?

The enactment of the CPA resulted in the ancient 1899 Protection Act being discarded and the establishment of the Foundation for the Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture, an organization run by both Ainu and Japanese staff, which serves to research and promote Ainu language, culture and customs.^{xxxix}

However, even though the Ainu language and culture are worth preserving, for many, especially younger generation Ainu, it lacks relevance to their everyday lives. By not addressing more serious issues such as human rights and discrimination, the CPA appears to have missed the mark. This legislation fails to deal with the present-day reality of the Ainu; an ethnic minority struggling to cope with prejudice, economic hardship and other 'real' problems. By simply focusing on the preservation of traditional culture and language, the CPA forces the Ainu to continue to exist as a people living in the past, rather than offering them a place in present-day Japanese society.^{xxx}

The biggest flaw of the CPA might be the fact that though this was legislation drafted specifically for the Ainu nation, there was a noticeable absence of Ainu input and consultation. Could this simply be another classic case of an insensitive government thinking it knows what is best for its own people?

The future of the Ainu: What challenges do they face?

Partly due to government legislation and to their own determination and activism, the social, economic, and cultural status of the Ainu have improved, albeit slightly, since 1945.

Firstly, there is an increased awareness and acceptance of the Ainu worldwide. Their attendance at United Nations events and '...participation in various activities during the International Year of Indigenous Peoples in 1993 brought international recognition...'.^{xxxxi} The United Nations officially recognized them as being an indigenous peoples. They have also been accepted in political circles. Though Ainu have been running for political office as early as the 1940s,^{xxxii} Shigeru Kayano was the first Ainu to be elected to the parliament in 1994.^{xxxiii}

Secondly, in terms of culture, there is renewed interest in Ainu language, oral traditions and music, not only among the Ainu themselves but also among Japanese people. As a result of the CPA, the Ainu language is also taught in several colleges and universities throughout Japan.^{xxxiv} Beginning in the 1980s members of a *Yukar* (epic poetry) theatre group from the small Hokkaido town of Akan, have been giving performances to enthusiastic audiences in Asia, North America and Europe.^{xxxv} Ainu musicians like Kano Oki, have played concerts in Japan and around the world with other indigenous groups, heralding a boom in world music.^{xxxvi} In short, the government has been funding programs to promote Ainu culture, some-

thing that did not happen prior to 1945.

Thirdly, there are some encouraging signs that their economic status is also slightly improving. In a post-war survey it was found that the number of households above the minimum income threshold for local tax was 24.6 percent in 1972, but that this figure increased to 53.1 percent in 1993. Also the number of Ainu receiving welfare per 1000 people, dropped from 115.7 in 1972 to 38.8 in 1993.^{xxxvii} However, their overall standard of living still lags far behind that of the average Japanese and there is nothing to indicate that this imbalance will change. Siddle mentions a 1993 survey that shows a mere

11.8 percent of Ainu advance to higher education compared to 27.5 percent of Japanese, and the number of Ainu on welfare is about double of that for Japanese.^{xxxviii}

The fact that the Ainu are still faced with many challenges and obstacles, and much remains to be done, is evidence of how previous government legislation has dealt with issues only on a superficial level, so that the day to day economic hardships for many Ainu continue unabated.

Ironically one of the biggest challenges facing the Ainu might come from within. There are deep divisions within the Ainu community with respect to how they, as a group, should proceed in the future. Some are preoccupied with their legal and political status and how they are perceived in official circles, some are focused on preserving their language and traditional culture, while many others who are living at the poverty level, are simply looking for

economic relief.

Also, as more and more young Ainu intermarry and or move to the cities looking for work and a new life, will their "Ainuness" be an integral part of their self-identity or will they simply assimilate into the mainstream culture? Unfortunately even for those who have assimilated, either consciously or unconsciously, problems in matters of education, work and marriage stubbornly refuse to disappear. 'Most Japanese have clung to the myth of Japan's supposed racial and cultural purity. They do not consider Ainu "pure" and still tend to look down on them.'^{xxxix}

Most Ainu want to be recognized as a separate ethnic entity within Japan, with all the same rights and opportunities afforded to the Japanese people. With these aims in mind, the Ainu nation looks ahead to the future. Though they have a newfound sense of confidence and renewed optimism, their very survival continues to remain tenuous and delicate.

End Notes

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Louise Young. *Japan's Total Empire* (University of California Press. 1999), p.311.
- ^{iv} Richard Siddle, "Ainu: Japan's indigenous people" in Michael Weiner, ed.,

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- v Millie Creighton, "Soto Others and Uchi Others: Imaging racial diversity, imagining homogeneous Japan" in Michael Weiner, ed., *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p.227.
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- vii Ian Neary, "Burakumin in contemporary Japan" in Michael Weiner, ed., *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.54, 71.
- viii Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "A descent into the Past: The Frontier in the Construction of Japanese Identity" in Donald Denoon, Mark Hudson, Gavan McCormack and Tessa Morris-Suzuki, ed., *Multicultural Japan: Palaeolithic to Postmodern* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.89.
- ix Mike Douglass and Glenda S. Roberts, ed. *Japan and Global Migration* (University of Hawaii Press, 2003), p.82.
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- xiii Ibid., p.70.
- xiv Ibid., p.71.
- xv Ibid., p.72.
- xvi Hanazaki Kohei, "Ainu Moshir and Yaponesia: Ainu and Okinawan Identities in Contemporary Japan," in Donald Denoon, Mark Hudson, Gavan McCormack and Tessa Morris-Suzuki, ed., *Multicultural Japan: Palaeolithic to Postmodern* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.120.
- xvii John Lie. *Multiethnic Japan* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2001), p.94.
- xviii Richard Siddle. *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p.105.
- xix Ibid., p.158.
- xx Shigeru Kayano. *Our Land Was a Forest: An Ainu Memoir* (Boulder, Colorado and Oxford: Westview Press, Inc., 1994), pp.118, 119.
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- xxii Hiroshi Nakagawa, "Ainu Language: Present and Future" in William W. Fitzhugh and Chisato O. Dubreuil, ed., *Ainu: Spirit of a Northern People* (University of Washington Press,

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- xxiii Ibid., p.372.
- xxiv Suzuko Tamura. *The Ainu Language* (Sanseido Company Ltd., 2000), p.275.
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- xxvii Shigeru Kayano. *Our Land Was a Forest: An Ainu Memoir* (Boulder, Colorado and Oxford: Westview Press, Inc., 1994), p.161.
- xxviii Richard Siddle. *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p.134.
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Summary

The Ainu, Japan's indigenous people, have long been a misunderstood and disadvantaged group within Japanese society. This is evidenced by the fact that they are largely unknown by the general Japanese population and also by their comparatively low standard of living and lingering social problems. At times their fate and very existence have been shaped and managed by forces beyond their control. The writer will explore what some of these forces are, analyze the social, economic and cultural status of the Ainu nation and show that while changes have occurred since 1945, not all have had a positive impact.