

**Torn Between Two Kingdoms: How the Ainu People Were Erased Over Time**

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The Ainu<sup>1</sup> people and their ancestors have been inhabiting the northern Japanese archipelago and the surrounding islands for thousands of years. Today they primarily inhabit the northernmost major island of Japan, Hokkaido. The current number of ethnic Ainu is unknown and highly dependent on the census source but is estimated in the hundreds of thousands by non-governmental sources. Despite this discrepancy, it is generally accepted that the Ainu count in Hokkaido is relatively stable (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2022).

This cannot be said, however, for the Ainu people's other native lands: Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands, with the population estimate of the two combined being less than a thousand, with no information on the number of Kurils (Federal State Statistics Service, 2021). This significant gap despite their having historically been a larger Ainu population in these islands is no coincidence, there is a much more sinister reason behind it. The sole cause of this concentration of Ainu people in Hokkaido is due to their historical struggle to survive against not only a society that discriminates against them, but a second, equally discriminatory society fighting the first. This leads to both forcing the Ainu to be concentrated in one area because Hokkaido is “out of the way”. From forced migration, discrimination, and forced assimilation, the Ainu's existence has faced these threats for hundreds of years.

I will be examining the conflict between and actions of what are today the Russian Federation and Japan that have led to not only this decrease in the Ainu population, but the near extinction of the Ainu community. By examining the past oppression of this group, we can learn how to avoid the total extinction of Ainu culture in the event of similar conflicts. After all, many cases of historical oppression and assimilation tend to follow quite similar trends. However, to

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<sup>1</sup> Ainu translates literally as “man” or “person”, though “Utari” is also an appropriate term used by the Ainu (Batchelor, 1926).

examine the cause and reason behind such acts, we must first investigate the parties involved. I will first discuss the Ainu culture, then I will individually discuss the 3 main subgroups among the Ainu and their interactions with both empires, the discrimination they suffered, what led to their decline, and their status up to the Russo-Japanese War. I will then examine the state of the Ainu following the several wars between Russia and Japan and beyond, including their contemporary political status.

### **The Ainu**

To answer the question of why the Ainu have seen their culture become virtually nonexistent, it is important to acquire a baseline understanding of what it was to begin with. The Ainu people once encompassed a large swathe of northern Japan and what are now the eastern Russian islands. Their largest extent is believed to have been from northern Honshu, specifically the Tohoku region, to Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands (Tahara, 2019). Also, according to UNESCO, the Ainu, or at least their ancestors, inhabited the region for approximately 10,000 years. This generational chain, mostly unbroken from foreign interference, had allowed a diverse culture to form, notably for our purposes a unique religion and language, both different from any other known religion and language.

### **The Language Family**

This language and religion spread to the entire domain of the Ainu, with the language seeing the most change to our knowledge. There are at minimum 3 distinct varieties of Ainu, which are considered to be anything from dialects to languages: Hokkaido, Kuril, and Sakhalin (Mosley & Nicholas, 2010). Scholars debate the level of difference level between them; however, most agree that these three can be considered distinct enough to be their own

languages. Despite being seemingly a relatively diverse language tree for such an isolated one, the latter two languages have died out completely as of 1994, with the death of Sakhalin Ainu speaker Take Asai. These two languages have both been considered extinct since at least the past three decades, though there are remnants of materials from both (Mosley & Nicholas, 2010).

Despite those two languages dying, the Hokkaido language is alive. While alive, it is in just about as critical a condition as a language can be. There is not a completely accurate metric of its speaker count, with new ones popping up due to recent efforts but old speakers also dying at a consistent rate. This last bastion of Ainu language encompasses the bulk of our current literature for teaching any part of the language family. Due to these factors, there are currently no conservation efforts for the other languages of the Ainu people. The same fortunately cannot be said for the religion of these subgroups of the Ainu people, with religious practices such as dance continuing their revitalization efforts in full force (Isabella, 2017).

## **The Religion**

Before I can talk about the cause of the Ainu's decline, I feel it is also important to mention the other factor most associated with the assimilation of not just the Ainu, but many other indigenous peoples: namely, their religion. According to Sakurai in a survey with Hokkaido University, most of the Ainu have been made to assimilate into Buddhism or Christianity. This has caused a decrease in, if not eradication of modern adherents of Ainu religion (Sakurai, 2012).

That said, it is important to note that Ainu religious beliefs are currently well-documented and still practiced with relative regularity. The most common practice currently ongoing, the bear ceremony, dates back years to the original Ainu religion, though altered so as to not kill any bears. Despite the religion having its practices more intact than the language, the Ainu had a very

extensive oral mythology, which has likely not been fully written down (Foundation for Ainu Culture, 2024). Additionally, due to the various languages and long history of the Ainu, we may be lacking information that the Sakhalin or Kuril Ainu could have given us about the difference in religion between the regions.

As such, while I will talk about the religious persecution aspect, we can also look at how exactly the religion has remained decently well preserved. Unfortunately, until recently the religious preservation was incredibly difficult due to Japan's general opposition to differences in said religion (Isabella, 2017), and the Soviets' assimilation of any peoples in their path (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984). So, we must first establish what exactly these two giants did to stomp out Ainu culture. Perhaps then we can find both the exact reason for the oppression, and how we still have the remains of the culture that we do. We will do this through an examination of the Japanese and Russians' separate interactions with the Ainu, then the destruction of culture caused by their clashing. Due to the Russian interactions with the Ainu being mostly recorded starting around the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one must look at their interactions with the Japanese first.

### **The Japanese**

The Ezo<sup>2</sup> Ainu are the most often talked about group within the race, at least within the Western world. This is likely due to their extensive history with the Japanese, starting in the Kamakura period with the first contact between the two groups. According to the Foundation for Ainu Culture, the Japanese government had an uneasy compromise with the Ainu, though it later soured heavily due to trade issues and racial discrimination from the shogunate and Meiji

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<sup>2</sup> Hokkaido was known as "Ezo" or "Ezochi", or "land of barbarians" at the time. As such, while various works reference Ezo, Hokkaido carries much less prejudiced implications (Isabella, 2017). "Ainu Mosir" was a term more often used by the Ainu themselves.

government (FFAC, 2024). Before we get into that however, we must first examine the initial stages of Japanese-Ainu relations.

### **The Early Years and First Contact with the Japanese**

The Ainu, or at least their predecessors, are believed to have migrated to Japan 20,000 years ago from a Russian land bridge. Their identity developed from there, becoming what we know it as today some 1,500 years ago. Following their establishment in their current culture is the point in which they had gained prominence in the region as traders, especially as middlemen in trading between nations (Isabella, 2017). During this era, they found prosperity and good fortune, trading between mainland Asia and Japan.

Unfortunately, that did not last. With the expansion of the central Japanese government came a slow expansion into the neighboring island of Ezo. While the expansion was slow, and the Shogunate only claimed a few small settlements, the tension nonetheless grew. Various disputes had broken out, notably Shakushain's revolt. The Ainu had grown tired of the Japanese<sup>3</sup> slowly taking over trade in Ezo, and battled the Matsumae clan, a group who had started a fiefdom in what is now Matsumae, Hokkaido (Walker, 2001).

Due to the disputes over the fiefdom, the Ainu took arms to prevent further oppression. Shakushain was a chieftain at the time who had risen to become a leader capable of uniting the Ainu tribes to defend themselves from the Japanese. Of course, the Matsumae clan did not like that very much, so the two groups went to war. While this was not the first conflict between the Ainu and the Japanese (in fact it was the second), this was the first to scale beyond a village or two. Unfortunately for the natives of Ezo, they were unable to push back against the Japanese

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<sup>3</sup> Referred to in some texts as "Wajin", the contemporary name for the Japanese (FFAC, 2024).



colonizers, leading to the surrender of the Ainu forces. The Japanese executed Shakushain following this surrender, essentially solidifying the Japanese control over the Ainu (Walker, 2001).

The Foundation for Ainu Culture details what followed this battle, the Ainu were put to work as fishers and subjected to abuse from the people running these fiefdoms in Ezo. The Ainu would also be subject to severe trade abuse and unfairness, essentially being slaves in many capacities. This chain of abuses went on for over 200 years before another revolt happened (FFAC, 2024). Unfortunately for the Ainu, this would be their last chance to gain their independence and preserve their way of life, as the samurai tightened their grasp on Ezo.

### **The Shogunate's Conquest**

The Ainu on Kunashir Island had enough and attempted to advance on the Japanese that were creeping into their land. They promptly got killed by the shogunate forces. That was the last battle ever fought by the Ainu against the Japanese and was the beginning of their total downfall. Within the next 15 years following this defeat, the Japanese took over southern Ezo and Kuye<sup>4</sup> with complete control. And that is when the fullest extent of the atrocities committed by the colonizers began (Lewallen, 2016).

Lewallen (2016) details an immensely grim picture, though one heard in nearly all stories of atrocities done to indigenous peoples. Women were raped or forcibly married to Japanese men. The men were arguably more well off, being sent into brutally unfair working conditions that can comfortably be called slavery. The shogunate had attained total control over the Ainu

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<sup>4</sup> Sakhalin has gone by many names, though "Kuye", based off the word for the Sakhalin Ainu, and "Emishi", or "shrimp barbarians" were the most common between Qingn China and Japan respectively (Hudson, 1999).

they had conquered and even went so far as to rip apart already existing families and ship them away from each other. The separation of families, effects of assimilation due to forced migration and the forced marriage, and disease spread from the shogunate caused the Ainu population to dwindle to less than a quarter of its number just a century prior. These atrocities are what has crippled the Ainu people to this day, leading to many not knowing their ethnicity as Ainu (Sakurai, 2012).

Following these events, another entity came into the picture. I have mentioned Kuye a few times, and the astute reader would note that Kuye is part of modern-day Russia. All things considered, Russia and the USSR are historically speaking relatively good at refraining from killing other cultures, so one would assume that the Ainu would not be an exception. Let us examine whether that is the case.

### **The Russians**

The Ainu are not just native to Japan, but a large number of islands currently owned by the Russian Federation as well, namely Kuye and the Kuril<sup>5</sup> Islands. Though less often talked about than their relatives in Ezo, they nonetheless played an important role in the history of the Ainu as a people, including the previously mentioned revolt on Kunashir Island. While this event is particularly important to the eventual downfall of the Ainu, there were other early attempts to suppress them in Russia as there were in Japan. So, how specifically did their oppression differ? Let us examine the two main groups of Ainu that lived in what is now Russia to find out.

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<sup>5</sup> The name “Kuril” is authentically Ainu, based off another word for man: “Kur”, and as such has always been called that (Batchelor, 1926).

## **The Kuyi<sup>6</sup>**

The Kuyi had a culture like that of the Ezo Ainu. Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) describes their society as having similar beliefs, customs, and trading practices, mostly with a larger emphasis on ice fishing in winter. Despite having an extensive knowledge of their culture, their history is less known than that of the Ezo Ainu. That said, prior to Japanese intervention, there are certain things we do know.

The Kuyi have been inhabiting Kuye for possibly about as long as the Ezo Ainu, with theories suggesting they migrated from Ezo shortly after Ainu culture started being formed, likely around the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Their language and culture were able to develop distinct differences from that of Ezo, though unfortunately much of the language has been lost (FFAC, 2024). Other than these scattered bits of information, their history mirrors that of the Ezo Ainu: fishing and trading (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984).

Though their history independent from Japan is quite similar, their history after being discovered is quite different. They lived relatively isolated from the other Ainu groups, and much less affected by Japanese imperialism. However, there is a group of Ainu who were heavily entangled in said imperialism (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984). While this may have been the case, there is a group of Ainu that was much more directly affected by Japanese control in this era, the Kuril Ainu.

## **The Kuril Ainu**

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<sup>6</sup> The name given to the Sakhalin Ainu, therefore making the Chinese word for Sakhalin more authentically Ainu (Hudson, 1999).

We finally have the Kuril Ainu, the least studied group in the literature. As stated, the Kunashir Ainu were from the Kuril Islands, which are ambiguously part of Russia. They spearheaded a revolt against the Japanese. Their presence in the Kurils is argued to be shorter than that of the other two, with the Foundation for Ainu Culture mentioning them to a lesser extent than the other groups, however, Stephan (1974) states there is some record of them inhabiting the islands for several centuries before Japanese and Russian discovery. Due to it being colonized last, there are fewer written accounts. The information we have is assumed to be gathered from the Ainu living there giving an oral history to later Japanese settlers. From this oral history, there have been records gathered of the Kuril Ainu trading around the archipelago for centuries before being discovered by the Japanese or Russians (Stephan, 1974).

Upon being discovered and reached by the Japanese, the islands were immediately exploited for their resources, notably taking control of fisheries away from the local Ainu (Mosley & Nicholas, 2010). Though Russians had recorded landings in the Kurils earlier, there is little record of what they did. There is, however, record that they received word of the actions of the Japanese on the islands through Ainu informants. The only other notable landings before the conflicts between Russia and Japan are a few American crash landings during whaling expeditions. That is, the only notable landings until the two nations clashed.

### **The War of Empires**

The Russo-Japanese War saw the exchange of Sakhalin<sup>7</sup> to the Empire of Japan. And yet, the exact condition of the Ainu during the war has little to no literature on it. Despite this, the aftereffects of the war had massive implications for the fate of the Ainu. Some who had taken

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<sup>7</sup>Kuye had at this point been renamed to Sakhalin (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984).

refuge in Hokkaido<sup>8</sup> following Russia's takeover of Sakhalin were able to return to their homeland (Tahara, 2019). This era following the conflict led to the first time in a while that the Ainu were able to tackle prejudice during the Taisho Democracy.

### **The Taisho Democracy**

Siripala (2020) details the Taisho Era following the death of Meiji being a time of hope for the Ainu. With liberal thought now flowing through Japan, the first text on Ainu culture written by an Ainu individual was published by Takekuma Tokusaburo. This led to a rise in pro-Ainu activism to challenge the notion that the Ainu were an "inferior race", campaigned for many new laws to protect the Ainu, and an unprecedented level of awareness towards their culture and way of life (Siripala, 2020).

This movement was continued by the Kyokumeisha, a group focused on the improvement of conditions for the Ainu. They made strides in raising awareness for Ainu problems and helping with employment, even getting elected to some areas of Japanese politics (FFAC, 2024). Unfortunately, the Japanese government saw this movement as a threat, and though they made progress in things such as desegregating schools, there was a growing acceptance of assimilation in the Ainu activist communities (Siripala, 2020).

With the Ainu being considered a threat, and assimilation increasing at a faster pace, the Ainu would have to fight the Japanese government for any continuance of their goals. These goals could likely be achieved, assuming Japan did not have bigger issues to deal with. But, with Japan's empire growing, all seemed like it could go well.

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<sup>8</sup> Ezo had at this point been fully colonized and renamed to Hokkaido (Siripala, 2020).

## **The Second World War and Beyond**

The rest of the world was generally unhappy with the rapid growth of the Empire of Japan, leading to hostilities in the Pacific theater in World War 2. However, mainland Japan, or at least what it considered to be its mainland, was not invaded until the end. This invasion led to several outcomes that were detrimental to the survival of the Ainu, with the Soviet Union taking Sakhalin. Despite their general willingness to absorb cultures, the USSR had considered the Ainu to be more Japanese, leading to the expulsion of many (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984). Those who were not expelled were assimilated into Russian culture, thus effectively destroying their language and customs (Mosley & Nicholas, 2010).

The Ainu remaining in Japan fared slightly better. Their language is still known, with its speakers remaining small but consistently having new learners (Tahara, 2019). While there was activist activity following the war, it has remained rather minimal other than a speech about the suffering of the Ainu to the UN in 1992. Following that, the Ainu language and culture have fallen into relative obscurity as the activists who once fought were stamped out by Japan's ambitions of ethnic homogeneity (Siripala, 2020).

## **Literature Review**

Ainu culture has, as the above reading has demonstrated, experienced significant hardships. With the Sakhalin Ainu being constantly traded between Japan and Russia, the Kuril Ainu barely having any historical record, and the Hokkaido Ainu being completely assimilated to the point of the near eradication of their culture, it is easy to have a grim outlook on matters. In fact, many do have quite a grim outlook on the future of the language and culture.

However, an interesting trend has been happening that has been made clear throughout the literature: Ainu culture is far from dead. We have extensive record of Hokkaido Ainu as a language, with supplemental materials in Sakhalin Ainu. New books are being released consistently, with possibly the most extensive book on grammar of the various dialects being released in October in the year of this writing by Yu Nakagawa (2024). We have also seen a spike in the Japanese government acknowledging the Ainu as an indigenous group and starting efforts to protect their culture, with laws being passed as recently as 2019.

With this rise in Ainu preservation attempts following the turn of the millennia, one must wonder how the Ainu were able to survive all of this. Some entire subgroups were wiped out, they were forced to migrate constantly, and they were almost assimilated out of existence. So, I will be adding to the literature above the answer to one question: how did their culture survive? Perhaps if we can get a good grasp on that, we can not only propose how to keep it alive in the future, but also tackle the slow death of other indigenous cultures in the Japanese archipelago, namely the Ryukyuan.

### **Analysis**

The Ainu have survived all these hardships despite being anywhere from suppressed to actively attacked by two significant empires. While many indigenous peoples do face hardships from multiple fronts, their ability to survive the constant relocations with even some of their culture still intact is almost miraculous. Despite the near loss of the Sakhalin Ainu and the loss of the debated Kuril Ainu languages, we still have a wealth of resources on Hokkaido Ainu, with an amount of info on that of Sakhalin. Because of this, despite Russia's seeming ambivalence, the government of Hokkaido has been making strides in preserving the language. There are also still ongoing religious ceremonies preserving the Ainu way of life for many generations to come.

For them to have these resources, however, there must have been a way it was preserved through these attempts to eradicate Ainu culture. The belief for many has long been that the Ainu are dead or assimilated, and while this may be the case for the Russian Ainu, the Japanese Ainu have never left. Despite the hardship, a select few remain aware of and active in their Ainu cultural heritage. So why do people think that they are gone, and how do they remain?

### **The Voice of the Ainu**

As seen in many situations of oppressed cultures, the Ainu have survived through all challenges to their existence. It is not easy to eradicate an entire group of people; that has been made very clear throughout history. And yet this is a situation that got closer than most. I would not exactly call the death of all but one of their languages to be surviving unscathed, they truly did almost die out as a culture. But, as their history shows, they have always had a resilient spirit.

Even under the rule of the shogun, the Ainu revolted when forced into slavery. They revolted multiple times, not giving up until their near eradication. Despite their forced migration, they always returned home when they could. Even after being kicked out of Sakhalin for generations by the Russian government, they still came back (Tahara, 2019). Even when their people have been beaten down and there are few people even trying to keep their culture alive, they continue to fight to this day. This remembrance of tradition and fight for their own survival has been inherent in their culture for centuries, be it rebuilding families after forced migration (Lewallen, 2016), protesting, and revolting again even after the suppression of Shakushain (Walker, 2001; FFAC, 2024), or their more modern efforts to revitalize their language through textbooks such as that written by Yu Nakagawa (2024).



This is one of the reasons their extensive oral tradition is so valuable. Many other cultures that have survived atrocities of this variety have done so through oral tradition. After all, it is much easier to burn a few books than to kill everyone capable of telling a story. This has led to their unique mythos being preserved over time, with some of their most extensive religious texts being written down by scribes starting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This use of their oral tradition to keep their culture alive is a double-edged sword, since while it did keep their culture alive, some of it could be lost forever if the language goes fully extinct. If the Ainu culture were to thrive while this oral mythology survives, we could keep it alive indefinitely.

However, the main problem lies within the language in which these myths are narrated. While there are efforts to keep the language alive, those who are native speakers have been decreasing in number. As stated previously, the last Sakhalin speaker died only 30 years ago as of this writing. It is unnerving to think that a language still containing so many stories could just die out like that, which makes a main contributing factor to the survival of Ainu culture exactly what may cause it to die out.

This is not, however, the only way the Ainu were able to survive. While they could have simply died out during the Meiji era, where their oppression very well could have reached its height, they were able to protest and campaign for their rights (Siripala, 2020). While this left much to be desired, after all their struggles to even have their own language or race recognized as distinct, they did succeed in many parts. Their campaigning and election to various offices was a contributing factor to their continued survival in that not only did they manage to preserve an amount of their culture due to their newfound increased status in Japan, but some of their campaigning paved the way for Ainu preservation acts that are being passed to this day (IWGIA, 2022). They were able to get laws passed in the modern era with groundwork set by these

campaigns, in addition to obtaining UN recognition as an indigenous people in 2007 along with other indigenous groups (UN, 2007). This resolution, created to solve various disputes on how nations should handle their indigenous groups, has not only encouraged Ainu activists to speak at the UN, but a wider global recognition of their culture and history because of the attention drawn from said speeches (Siripala, 2020).

### **The Spirit of the Ainu**

Ultimately, though there are many factors that led to the survival of the Ainu, one cannot ignore their spirit. Though they have always passed down their stories, their traditions endure even beyond their language. Some of their religious ceremonies are still practiced to this day, though sometimes in Japanese rather than their native language. The persistence of their religion can be seen even in their descendants, with the Matagi in Tohoku still maintaining a level of Ainu spiritual beliefs.

Religion can often bring people together in this manner, so it is not surprising that this is a factor. Time and again, be it groups as big as the Jewish people or as small as the many scattered native American tribes have been able to survive heavily due to the bond of shared religious practices. Even despite the hardships these groups have faced, the community ties caused by religion and in some cases converts to increase their mainstream recognition have helped every time. Though religion is often a main excuse for persecution, as seen with the Ainu, it has allowed many peoples over time to survive almost certain eradication.

Even the Japanese are currently involved in preserving Ainu religious culture, as evidenced by the Foundation for Ainu Culture being run by ethnic Japanese in collaboration with current Ainu inhabitants of Hokkaido. Hokkaido still hosts bear sacrifices (albeit with fake bears)

that are eponymous with Ainu culture, and thus work to bring it to the mainstream consciousness (FFAC 2024). This allows an officially sanctioned and protected outlet for the currently living Ainu to showcase and learn about their own culture, one they may not be able to practice on their own. This is one of the attempts by the Hokkaido government to get the Ainu culture out there into the general consciousness, and has succeeded in its goal, even if the knowledge has mostly been spread within Hokkaido and among academics.

This change did not, of course, occur overnight. One does not convince an entire country to stop suppressing a whole group of people after one conversation. While there has been a small amount of amicable exchange with the Ainu throughout history, with the main movements in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Ainu people's ability to hold public office did help substantially to change public opinion on them as a people. This ultimately culminated in the more recent events, such as the foundation of the FFAC, various laws passed to protect the Ainu, and international recognition of Ainu culture at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 (IWGIA, 2022).

### **The Start of Something New**

With this greater recognition of Ainu culture, the government has become more interested in preserving it. While there have been Ainu in positions of political power in the past, this worldwide recognition of the Ainu heavily influenced the Japanese in creating new resources and media about the Ainu. Japanese media tends to heavily influence the country. The same Olympics in which the Ainu were able to perform was opened with the prime minister coming out of a pipe from the Mario games. It therefore stands to reason that, should a popular piece of media choose to show Ainu culture, it would have a large impact on public perception of the Ainu.

There is a standout piece of media that fits this description: Golden Kamuy. Golden Kamuy is a series of novels and animations about the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War. It not only details many of the points described earlier but takes extreme care to integrate Ainu culture and language in addition to history. It has brought the discourse of the Ainu people back into the public spotlight and has sparked interest in the learning of the language. While it may not be a perfect adaptation of Ainu culture, it still sparked interest and is still a quality way to get the general idea of these historical and cultural events and has increased the appeal of Ainu culture across Japan (Ito, 2022).

After all this political lobbying, civilian protest, and pressuring Japan for the wider global community to recognize them, the Ainu have finally been given recognition through such avenues as the Olympics, recent laws, and representation in popular media such as Golden Kamuy. It was, as many indigenous tribes face, incredibly challenging, but the foundation for amicable relations in the centuries past, in addition to various laws being passed between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries helped pave the way for the Ainu to be better recognized in Japanese society (Siripala, 2020). While these atrocities did happen, so much progress has come from those willing to campaign for its end.

### **What We Can Learn**

A lot of tragedy has befallen the Ainu. For one reason or another, they were able to barely survive this series of tragedies with any of their culture intact. Luckily, against all odds, the Ainu defied those suppressing them and have survived to this day, with slow but steady revitalization efforts by the governments of mostly Hokkaido but the federal government of Japan as well. So, one would assume Japan has learned how to treat its other indigenous people. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

## The Ryukyuan

I have talked about many aspects of Ainu culture and its survival, but let us turn to another group for a moment: the Ryukyuan. Despite all the strife faced by the Ainu, the near disappearance of their culture, the extinction of several languages, the attempted erasure of them as an ethnicity, the Japanese government still fails to curb future mistakes of this nature. Despite a clear example of a tragedy of this nature, it is continuing in Okinawa.

The parallels here are clear: an indigenous people on some islands colonized by Japan a few hundred years ago are faced with discrimination and assimilation to a dangerous degree. The Ryukyuan languages are not an official language of Japan, despite thousands of speakers for each and constant pushes to make these languages official. The Ryukyuan are not counted as indigenous people, there are few measures to protect their culture, and their language is slowly thinning in numbers. Some of this could be chalked up to the relative newness of the Ryukyuan in Japan as compared to the Ainu, with their annexation by Japan happening at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There has not been as much time for the Japanese to think about the Ryukyuan, nor as much time for them to be influenced, thus it is considered a lesser problem to some extent (Tanji, 2007).

There are additional parallels to the treatment of the Ainu despite these differences. Though it is much farther from extinction than Ainu, the constant attempts to assimilate the languages, merely calling them “Japanese dialects” is detrimental to their survival, like the forced teaching of Japanese to Ainu children. There are consistent protests for the rights and recognition of the Ryukyuan, though nothing near the Ainu recognition has been achieved. (Tanji, 2007).

Though they are on opposite sides of the Japanese archipelago, their history and oppression can eerily mirror each other at points. It is clear from these interactions that Japan has not learned how to treat its indigenous peoples. It feels a bit disingenuous when they support one group only when it is nearly gone and still refuse to even acknowledge another. It feels like they are doing the bare minimum.

### **Conclusion**

We have seen the tragic near death of an indigenous group due to the malice and apathy towards them. All we are left with is a culture in shambles, a government that has only just started caring, and another government that does not. Despite Japan's current efforts to keep Ainu culture alive, they are turning a blind eye to the others that they are suppressing. It feels like an attitude of "we will not bother now because we do not have to." Russia is not much better; they are not exactly known for their proper treatment of indigenous groups either.

Russia has not learned anything meaningful from the strife of the Ainu. It will continue its crusade to control as much as it can. We have seen as much. They have no political incentive to revitalize their Ainu culture, so they will not. The Ainu in Russia will simply remain relatively obscure and locked to the island that was once theirs. They have much more to worry about right now than a culture with a dead language that barely exists in their eyes. I have seen throughout their history a large apathy for the Ainu, simply throwing them back to Japan whenever they got the chance. I do not see this changing when there are so few Ainu in one far-off corner of eastern Russia.

I know this may be depressing, but sometimes that is just how it is. As much as I would love to say that things are really changing and a lesson has been learned, I cannot. This is not

how it has to be; we can give more resources to revitalizing Ainu culture, we can make the Japanese government correct the mistakes it is still making, and we can force Russia to recognize the culture lying right under their noses. But while Russia probably will not do anything, Japan has just started caring. While the Ainu were seen as savages in the past, the Japanese government is slowly making new laws to preserve their culture. Additionally, despite the relative lack of movements for Ryukyuan culture, there are still people protesting for its protection and teaching the language to thousands of children. If Japan can continue this path, I do have a level of cautious optimism that Ainu culture can see a successful revitalization attempt.

Perhaps if Japan were to revitalize Ainu culture, it could set the groundwork for the preservation of the Ryukyuan and more. The Ainu, along with those supporting their cause, have managed to pull themselves out of obscurity in the eyes of Japan and the world. They have managed to cover some ground, though the government may still be very slow at applying wide scale solutions. They are funding some projects in Hokkaido, and should they invest in officially integrating Ainu as a language, we could see more widescale Ainu use and classes beyond the borders of Hokkaido (Siripala, 2020; FFAC, 2024). This would all, however, require yet more campaigning and protests for the government of Japan to listen to these simple demands for the voices of the Ainu to be heard and preserved throughout the future. Now that the Japanese government sees them as people more than “barbarians”, we may have a good shot at continuing what was started over a century ago when the first Ainu activist group’s formation.

We need to continue to make them remember what they have done, who they have harmed, and what they must do. There is just too much at stake not to; we cannot let them die out and we cannot let the same mistakes happen again. But the Ainu have survived, they always have fought to survive, and they always will fight to survive. We can help them though, be it learning

their language, donating to their cause, campaigning both Japan and the wider world to recognize and teach about the Ainu, or simply spreading the word.



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