

## **Far-Right Politics and Indigenous Ainu Activism in Japan**

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### **Introduction**

The Ainu are an indigenous ethnic group native to Japan and have strong roots in the northernmost island of Hokkaidō and the Russian-administered Kuril and Sakhalin islands. They are believed to be the descendants of the prehistoric Jomon people who inhabited the Japanese archipelago between 16,000 and 3,000 years ago. Long before the Japanese nation-state, Ainu inhabitants spoke a distinct language and passed down unique spiritual and cultural practices independent of Japanese culture. They hunted and fished in harmony with nature according to the Ainu belief system that nature is the physical manifestation of the gods.

However, Japan's multi-ethnic history was actively repressed after 1868, when Emperor Meiji dismantled the feudal order in favor of a central modernizing Japanese state that could rival technologically advanced Western powers. From 1899, the Meiji government rolled out aggressive assimilation policies that banned traditional hunting and fishing and forced Ainu relocation. Ainu assimilation was an important part of the Meiji government's effort to construct a nation state, as it paved the way to one racial, cultural, and national identity. Despite efforts to silence the Ainu in the Meiji era, they defended their culture and lifeways from the margins of society through passive resistance, increased consciousness raising, and collective organization. Amidst varying manifestations of far-right and ultranationalist ideology in mainstream Japanese politics, Ainu collective strength has evolved alongside their changing position in public discourse.

### **History of Colonial Hokkaidō**

Although Hokkaidō is Japan's second largest island, it has the lowest population density in the country. It is a popular ski destination, and is also famous for dairy, seafood, and hot springs. Unbeknownst to most outsiders, however, is the fact that Hokkaidō is a relatively recent addition to Japan – colonized by the expanding Japanese empire in 1872.

Before the arrival of Japanese settlers, Ainu families hunted deer and bear, fished salmon and trout, and gathered wild plants.<sup>1</sup> Before Meiji era leadership, the island was called “Ezoch,” which can be translated as “land of barbarians” or “the land for people who did not obey the government.”<sup>2</sup> It was renamed “Hokkaidō” in 1869, meaning “northern sea route.”

Japan’s political revolution through the Meiji Restoration fueled the country’s rapid modernization under a new centralized government. Although the “state” and rule of law had been established, the “nation” in “nation-state” had not. The elite class of the Meiji era took vigorous steps to construct an “imagined community” or racial unity—one that did not include the Ainu identity.

The Meiji period handed down a powerful conservative tradition in line with British imperial attitudes.<sup>3</sup> The Census Registration Act of 1871 forced Ainu communities to adopt the same Japanese surname regardless of kinship. Ainu customs such as ritual facial tattoos, earrings, and burning dwellings of the deceased were considered offensive and “backward” to Japanese sensibilities. These customs were banned in 1876, representing early manifestations of anti-Ainu policy.

The Japanese Empire hoped that the “untamed” island of Hokkaidō could be developed as a prosperous agricultural region to help fuel Japan’s rapid industrialization. They pursued large-scale immigration policies facilitated by the Colonization Board for Hokkaido (*Kaitakushi*) which encouraged mainland Japanese settlers (*wajin*) to cultivate the land as pioneers on a new frontier. The first group of 500 settlers arrived in 1869, and the population catapulted to 1.5 million between 1890 and 1936.<sup>4</sup>

Japan’s colonial policies included the Former Aborigines Protection Act in 1899, which led to the systematic pauperization of the Ainu. The act mandated “welfare measures” such as forced relocation to government designated farmland, the provision of farm tools and seeds, livelihood and funeral assistance, medicine, and compulsory elementary schooling. Ainu children were given a rudimentary education in the Japanese language that focused on “national” ethics. They were also forbidden to speak their native language. The aim of these policies was to “civilize” and “Japanize” the Ainu from “barbarians” to “primitive Japanese.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Siddle, “Indigenous People of Japan,” in *Japan’s Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity*, ed. Michael Weiner (London: Routledge, 2009), 343, 358.

<sup>2</sup> Michele M. Mason, *Dominant Narratives of Colonial Hokkaido and Imperial Japan: Envisioning the Periphery and the Modern Nation-State* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2012), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth B. Pyle, “Meiji Conservatism,” in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, ed. Marius B. Jansen, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 674.

<sup>4</sup> Akemi Nakamura, “Japan’s Last Frontier Took Time to Tame, Cultivate Image,” *Japan Times*, July 8, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Justin P. Jacobson, “Time and the Ainu: Japanese Nation-Building and the Conceptualization of Difference,” *Historical Geography* 36 (2008): 166.

Forced relocation was justified as a “benevolent” welfare measure to improve Ainu living standards. The distribution of small plots of land encouraged “former natives” to make a living through farming. However, most of the fertile land had been acquired by Japanese immigrants, leaving land unsuitable for farming to the Ainu. Moreover, they were not given any farming instruction.<sup>6</sup> As a result of forced relocation, the Ainu were scattered into artificial communities that ignored traditional kin groupings, communal loyalties, and settlement patterns, which led to the breakdown of social cohesion. Ainu households were ultimately forced to work for the state or Japanese merchants for a menial wage and in some cases, they were only paid in *sake* rice liquor.<sup>7</sup> The law also stripped the Ainu of customary land rights that had enabled subsistence practices such as hunting and fishing. Although Ainu were imperial subjects, they were second-class citizens, valued as a source of cheap manual labor. Discriminatory assimilation policies reinforced an inferior otherness and exacerbated poverty and disease among Ainu communities.

### **Pre-War Nationalism and Ainu Resistance**

The Ainu were not docile victims. Ainu resistance persevered through waves of armed warfare, social awareness, and collective organization. Ainu self-identification and collective organization as a distinct ethnic group emerged amidst the chaos of Shinto ultra-nationalism in the 1920s. Before this period, a collective consciousness under a common Ainu identity had not yet formed, as Ainu communities were culturally diverse and had been historically isolated and scattered across Hokkaidō.

In the early Meiji period, Japanese-Ainu relations turned violent as forced dislocation sparked territorial conflicts. Previously, the feudal shogunate had tried and failed to assimilate the Ainu through Japanization policies. The Ainu opposed changing the ways of their ancestors because they believed that doing so would anger their gods. However, the Former Aborigines Protection Act of 1899 prompted young Ainu men and women to speak out. After failed attempts to revolt, some Ainu youth turned to collective organizing. They ventured out to forge a shared sense of identity centered on escaping poverty. Whether it was active campaigning or through passive resistance, the Ainu attempted to assert control over their lives.<sup>8</sup>

The death of Emperor Meiji in 1912 ushered in the Taishō era, which saw a brief flowering of democracy and Western liberal thought that opened avenues for Ainu to challenge prejudice in everyday life. Compulsory education teamed with Western-style cafes and mass media activated a political awakening in the Japanese masses, planting ideas of universal male suffrage. Early Ainu activist Takekuma Tokusaburō is widely recognized for being the first native Ainu to publish a book about the customs of his race.

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<sup>6</sup> Kenichi Ochiai and Teruki Tsunemoto, “On Policy Measures for the Socio-economic Betterment of the Ainu People” in *Hokkaido University Collection of Scholarly and Academic Papers* 64.2 (2013): 304.

<sup>7</sup> Mason, *Dominant Narratives of Colonial Hokkaido and Imperial Japan*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Siddle, *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 3, 4, 34, 35, 114, 172, 159, 160, 169, 188, 224.

Takekuma and other young educated Ainu challenged preconceptions that the Ainu were an “innate inferior race”<sup>9</sup> and fought for educational reform, which they saw as a direct means to improve Ainu sanitation and economic conditions. As an early Ainu activist, he appealed for more funding for Ainu students pursuing higher education and fought to remove discriminatory “Ainu customs” lessons at elementary schools, which he believed divided Ainu students from their Japanese counterparts. In 1922, a young educated Ainu woman from Hokkaidō, Chiri Yukie, put together a collection of traditional Ainu songs and poetry that sparked a series of Ainu poetry publications by educated Ainu seeking to restore pride in their identity. By 1920, a range of community-level Ainu groups spread throughout Hokkaidō, and a left-wing group called Kaiheisha, translated as “Ainu Liberation,” emerged on the scene. However, there are no official records of its membership size and dissolution. The most well-known community organization was the non-radical Kyokumeisha. Established in 1927, Kyokumeisha was funded by donations and income from the group’s agricultural programs that were geared toward Ainu self-cultivation. It concentrated on efforts to increase living standards through agricultural guidance, the provision of small loans, and help in seeking employment.<sup>10</sup>

During the subsequent Shōwa era, between 1926 and 1989, Ainu activism encountered spurts of success, but fell short of a large-scale movement. The Hokkaidō Ainu Kyōkai (Hokkaido Ainu Association) co-founded in 1930 by local officials, served as a body to speed up assimilation.<sup>11</sup> Campaigning for reforms was tightly controlled by the group to ensure that it did not stray from the state’s welfare agenda. It claimed to represent all the Ainu in Hokkaidō and eventually co-opted the Kyokumeisha by absorbing its Ainu leaders. But the government and the Ainu did not share the same agenda in that the government viewed growing Ainu activism as a threat and used the body to monitor and curb “radical” change. On the other hand, while the Ainu were skeptical of a government-controlled Ainu group, many members decided to work within the parameters of the structures controlling them in order to improve their circumstances. In addition, many leaders of Ainu Kyōkai viewed Ainu assimilation into mainstream society as progress, having themselves succeeded in becoming influential and occasionally, wealthy.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, the Ainu Kyōkai was kept busy lobbying for straightforward revisions to end discriminatory education and address social welfare issues stemming from the Former Aborigines Protection Act. By 1937, the Ainu Kyōkai had achieved its core aims of abolishing segregated Ainu schools and allowing Ainu to sell their land without the Hokkaidō Governor’s permission. Ainu could also now qualify for government assistance even if they left jobs as farmers and pursued other occupations. However, by tying assimilation to livelihood and everyday life, the survival of Ainu identities was relegated to the private sphere of household and community life.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Siddle, *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Siddle, *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Katarina Sjoberg, *The Return of Ainu: Cultural Mobilization and the Practice of Ethnicity in Japan*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993): 129.

<sup>12</sup> Siddle, *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Simon Cotterill, “Ainu Success: the Political and Cultural Achievements of Japan’s Indigenous Minority,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 9, no. 12 (2011): 4-5.

Although the early Ainu movement did not oppose the state, it sought to challenge stereotypes held by the Japanese majority of the Ainu being submissive, uneducated, and barbaric. Ainu-led self-help reforms laid the foundations for Ainu unity and identity under a common purpose that offered some respite from the economic hardships of daily life.

### **Post-World War II Nationalism and Ainu Activism**

The Ainu Kyokai fell dormant after 1937, until it resurfaced in the immediate post-war period to counter the abolishment of land allotments and tax exemptions provided by the Former Aborigines Protection Act. The elimination of these land allotments and tax exemptions threatened the livelihoods of Ainu landowners in Hokkaidō. In 1947, under the Allied occupation of Japan, the Ainu lost forty percent of their arable land in sweeping land reforms that sought to decentralize Hokkaidō land ownership. In particular, the goal was to redistribute large landholdings (124 acres and above) that were concentrated in the hands of 1,118 landowners and accounted for 20.5 percent of Hokkaidō's total cultivated area.<sup>14</sup>

Despite a desperate campaign for special consideration to keep Ainu farm allotments, 1,271 Ainu lost ownership to farmland they rented to *wajin* tenants in a painful defeat. The Ainu Kyokai organized almost no further group activity until 1960.

A newly organized Ainu movement for human rights and identity took off in the 1960s and peaked in 1997 when the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act replaced the century-old Former Aborigines Protection Act of 1899. Ainu political consciousness centered around expressing “ethnicity” rather than assimilation. The shift to expressing pride in Ainu culture was heavily influenced by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and by increased contact with indigenous peoples outside Japan.<sup>15</sup>

The Ainu played an active role in redefining their own culture in opposition to entrenched colonial representations. Despite growing calls for collective indigenous rights and the recognition of the right to culture in the 1980s, the Japanese government insisted that the Ainu were fully assimilated Japanese citizens. Prime Minister Miki Takeo exemplified the government tone in 1975, stating that “Japan was a homogeneous nation without the racial problems like the rest of the world.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1992, Ainu activist, Nomura Giichi, addressed the General Assembly at the United Nations (UN) in New York, drawing attention to the suffering of the Ainu people as a result of Japan's forced assimilation policies. He called for the Japanese government to enter into a “new partnership” with the Ainu for the “development and realization of a

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<sup>14</sup> Siddle, *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Robert H. Sayers, “Ainu: Spirit of a Northern People,” *American Anthropologist* 102, no. 4 (2000): 879.

<sup>16</sup> Siddle, *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan*, 8.

society in which all peoples can live together in dignity.”<sup>17</sup>

In postwar democratic Japan, participation in the political arena made room for diverse viewpoints among the Ainu people, who believed in varying degrees of self-determination. For example, the 1993 Nibutani Dam legal case represented a groundbreaking legal victory that triggered an increased awareness of the Ainu people’s existence. A Sapporo District Court ruled the government illegally seized land for the development of a dam in violation of Ainu land rights. Until this point, the government had refused to acknowledge the Ainu as Japan’s original inhabitants.

In 2008, the Diet approved a non-binding, bipartisan resolution urging the government to recognize the Ainu as indigenous people. It was replaced last year with an updated Ainu Promotion Act, which not only recognizes the Ainu as an indigenous group, but also aims to “realize a society that will respect the pride of the Ainu people.”

Moreover, Ainu collective organizing has been able to indirectly influence government policy by mobilizing alongside international diplomatic channels.<sup>18</sup> The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007 detailed the importance of minority and collective rights. However, the Japanese government’s transition towards Ainu cultural promotion happened largely on paper and was motivated by Japan’s desire to preserve its relationship with the international community. Domestic political leaders’ attitudes combined with indifferent societal attitudes on minority issues mean that Ainu protections are largely symbolic. Thus, the Ainu Kotan Association condemned the new Ainu Promotion Act for falling short of granting land rights found in UNDRIP and accused the government of “taking advantage of the Ainu as a tourist draw.”<sup>19</sup>

### **The Rise of The Far Right**

Since the early 2000s, the influence of the right-wing conservative lobby group, Nippon Kaigi, or “Japan Conference,” in mainstream politics has presented a daunting ideological and political challenge for Ainu indigenous rights and cultural promotion. Nippon Kaigi envisions a new chapter of nation-building centered around a mix of Shinto religious values, patriotism, and pride in the ancient imperial line, ultimately advocating for blood-based unity as the basis for the Japanese nation-state.<sup>20</sup> The similarities in the organizational goals of Nippon Kaigi and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) became evident when in 2015, 289 LDP parliamentarians were Nippon Kaigi members, including the current Prime Minister Shinzō Abe.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Siddle, *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan*, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Cotterill, “Ainu Success,” 14.

<sup>19</sup> Fumiko Yoshigaki, “Ainu Leaders Bash Bill for Absence of their Aboriginal Rights,” *Asahi Shimbun*, March 3, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Linda Sieg, “Japan PM Abe’s Base Aims to Restore Past Religious, Patriotic Values,” *Reuters*, December 12, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Daiki Shibuichi, “The Japan Conference (Nippon Kaigi): An Elusive Conglomerate,” *East Asia* 34.3 (September 2017): 183.

In 2006, the newly elected Abe administration went straight to work on education reforms by way of “moral education,” which included patriotism as an official subject. Education guidelines encourage virtues such as “love the nation with pride as a Japanese.”<sup>22</sup> In this climate, the Ainu face new political hurdles when advocating for group-differentiated rights as an ethnic minority.

In September 2019, Nippon Kaigi stirred controversy when the Hokkaidō branch held a lecture questioning the Ainu peoples’ claim as an indigenous people. The event was prompted by the new Ainu Promotion Act enacted in April, which offered subsidies to regional projects promoting Ainu culture. Since Ainu people were not defined in the specified ruling, Nippon Kaigi mocked the Ainu through hosting a lecture discussion titled “Can anyone become an Ainu?”<sup>23</sup>

Momentum to raise the status of Ainu people in contemporary Japan has also been frequently stymied by government rhetoric. Over the years, a long sequence of official statements either denying Ainu discrimination or dismissing the Ainu as an indigenous ethnic group demonstrates how far removed Japanese politicians are from history and Ainu politics.

For instance, Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro of the LDP infamously declared Japan a homogeneous nation in 1986, stating there were “no racial minorities” in Japan.<sup>24</sup> In November 2014, Hokkaidō LDP prefectural legislator Onodera Masaru tweeted whether the Ainu were the indigenous peoples of Hokkaido. Onodera added, “our ancestors have not done reckless, unreasonable things to the Ainu.”<sup>25</sup> The statement came after the UN held the first World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in New York. Meanwhile, Sapporo parliamentarian Kaneko Yasuyuki of the LDP tweeted in 2014 that “there is really no such ethnic group called the Ainu anymore.”<sup>26</sup> In 2019, Japan’s Deputy Prime Minister Asō Tarō of the ruling LDP apologized after publicly stating, “no other country but this one has lasted as long as 2,000 years with one language, one ethnic group and one dynasty.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Hoffman, “Confronting The Definition of A ‘Moral Education,’” *Japan Times*, April 28, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Fumiko Yoshigaki, “Protests Against Lecture ‘Let’s all become Ainu,’” *Asahi Shimbun*, September 21, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Siddle, *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> The Japan Times, “A Shameful Statement On Ainu,” November 17, 2014

<sup>26</sup> Yasuyuki Kaneko (@kaneko\_yasuyuki) “The Ainu race no longer exist. At most it is a good thing that there are Japanese people with Ainu ancestry but it’s absurd to exercise Ainu rights. This is impossible to explain to taxpayers” [There is really no such ethnic group called the Ainu anymore...], Twitter, August 11, 2014. [www.twitter.com/kaneko\\_yasuyuki/status/498816070531031041](https://www.twitter.com/kaneko_yasuyuki/status/498816070531031041).

<sup>27</sup> Kyodo News, “Aso Apologizes For Remarks About Japan’s Historical Unity,” January 14, 2020.

More recently, the Ainu's efforts to promote Ainu culture to the world suffered a setback after the Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee announced a traditional Ainu dance would be cut from the Tokyo 2020 Olympics Opening Ceremony. The Cabinet Secretary's Ainu Policy Office broke the news to the Hokkaidō Ainu Association in late January after the group convinced the government to allow an Ainu showcase three years ago. Organizers cited difficulties with "time constraints" and "stage production inconveniences" as rehearsals were undertaken in various parts of Hokkaidō. With a string of indigenous performances showcased at the 1994 Lillehammer Winter Olympics as well as the 2000 Sydney Olympics, international and local media outlets picked up the cancellation. The Hokkaido Ainu Association Chairperson Kato Tadashi called the decision disappointing since immense effort had gone into rehearsals.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Ainu policy in contemporary Japan has been shaped by the global indigenous peoples' movement. However, despite government efforts to recognize Ainu cultural differences, there are a number of lingering issues. Statements made by LDP assemblymen illustrate a disconnect between official pronouncements and politicians' attitudes toward the Ainu identity. The Ainu have emphasized the importance of educating officials and politicians, including those in most regular contact with the Ainu.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, the Ainu must also be more politically savvy in terms of forging stronger domestic political and institutional relationships in order to directly influence policy that impacts their daily lives.

Historically, Ainu resistance developed in reaction to the Meiji nationalist agenda, but it was simultaneously ignored by Meiji institutions and carefully moderated in the following Shōwa era. The resurgence of well-resourced nationalist lobby groups such as Nippon Kaigi suggest the narrative of an "Ainu problem" could make a comeback. Future Ainu policy could backslide without the flexibility and resilience to adapt to adversarial domestic pressures. Therefore, the latest Ainu Promotion Act is not the end of the struggle. The Ainu must return to the drawing board to devise a multi-tiered approach to address the sociopolitical preconditions that give way to domestic oppression. At the same time, advancing Ainu minority interests requires an improved bilateral relationship between the Ainu and the government. For that reason, Ainu organizations could formulate side-by-side initiatives that instill values such as equality, tolerance, and mutual acceptance. For example, policy instruments could entail encouraging Ainu descendants to explore their heritage, as well as increased Ainu political participation, compulsory education on Ainu history, and special instruction on Ainu sensitivities for political leaders as part of their government responsibility. Against all odds, the Ainu have fought for their survival. Instead of emphasizing Ainu activism as separate "victories" and "failures", Ainu-Japanese relations are an ever-evolving process. Ainu activism that is in tune with domestic politics will ensure progressive Ainu policy and that modern Ainu identities not only remain relevant, but also climb up the national agenda.

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<sup>28</sup> Kim Kyung-Hoon, "Japan's Indigenous Ainu Dance Dropped From Opening Ceremony," February 21, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Cotterill, "Ainu Success," 14.



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