

## Ainu

ETHNONYMS: Aino, Emischi, Ezo, Hokkaidō Ainu, Kurile Ainu, Sakhalin Ainu

### Orientation

The Ainu are a group of people in northern Japan whose traditional life was based on a hunting, fishing, and plant-gathering economy; the word *ainu* means "man." Only about 18,000 Ainu now live on Hokkaidō, the northernmost island of Japan, but the population was much larger in the past and their homeland included at least southern Sakhalin, the Kurile Islands, northern parts of Honshū (the main island of Japan), and adjacent areas.

Not only was their hunting-gathering economy vastly different from that of the neighboring Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese, who had been agriculturalists for several millennia, but they spoke a language of their own, and certain physical characteristics distinguished them from their neighbors.

Far from being monolithic, Ainu culture has been rich in intracultural variation. This article introduces only some of the major differences and similarities among the three major Ainu groups: the Kurile, Sakhalin, and Hokkaidō Ainu. The Hokkaidō Ainu and the Sakhalin Ainu reside on the island of Hokkaidō and the southern half of the island of Sakhalin, respectively. Some use the term "Kurile Ainu" to refer only to the Ainu who occupied the central and northern Kurile Islands, excluding the Ainu on the southern Kuriles, whose way of life was similar to that of the Hokkaidō Ainu. Others use the label "Kurile Ainu" to refer to the Ainu on all the Kurile Islands, which is the practice followed in this article. The island of Sakhalin south of 50° N had always been the homeland of the Sakhalin Ainu, while the territory north of 50° N belonged to the Gilyaks and other peoples.

### History and Cultural Relations

The Sakhalin Ainu, with an estimated population between 1,200 and 2,400 in the first half of the twentieth century, most likely migrated from Hokkaidō, possibly as early as the first millennium A.D., but definitely by the thirteenth century. They had extensive contacts with native populations on Sakhalin and along the Amur, including the Gilyaks, Oroks, and Nanais. It is likely that Chinese influence reached the island by the first millennium A.D. and intensified during the thirteenth century when northern Sakhalin submitted to Mongol suzerainty subsequent to the Mongol conquest of China. The period between 1263 and 1320 saw the Mongol colonization and "pacification" of the Gilyaks and the Ainu. The Sakhalin Ainu fought valiantly until 1308, finally submitting to the suzerainty of the Yuan dynasty, the Mongolian dynasty that ruled China and to whom the Ainu were forced to pay tribute. The tribute system, together with trade with other peoples along the way, merged with the Japanese-Hokkaidō Ainu trade during the fifteenth century. As a result, Japanese ironware reached the Manchus while Chinese brocade and cotton made their way to Osaka in western Japan. With the weakening of Manchu control over Sakhalin, the tribute system was abandoned at the beginning of the nineteenth century. By then, the Japanese and Russians were

racing to take political control of the island and exploit its rich natural resources.

The impact of the Japanese government on the Sakhalin Ainu intensified under the Meiji government established in 1868. Many Japanese were sent to southern Sakhalin to exploit its resources. The Sakhalin Ainu came under Russian control in 1875 when southern Sakhalin came under Russian control, but Japan regained the area in 1905; the territory north of 50° N remained under Russian control throughout history. Between 1912 and 1914, the Japanese government placed the Sakhalin Ainu, except those on the remote northwest coast, on reservations, drastically altering their way of life. With the conclusion of World War II, southern Sakhalin again was reclaimed by the USSR and most of the Ainu were resettled on Hokkaidō.

The history of contact with outsiders is equally important for the Hokkaidō Ainu, whose territory once extended to northeastern Honshū. As the Japanese central government expanded its control toward the northeast, the Ainu were gradually pushed north from their southernmost territory. Trade between the Ainu and the Japanese was established by the mid-fourteenth century. With the increased power of the Matsumae clan, which claimed the southwestern end of Hokkaidō and adjacent areas, the trade became a means for the Japanese to exploit the Ainu during the sixteenth century. Although there were numerous revolts by the Ainu against Japanese oppression, the revolt in the mid-seventeenth century by a famous Ainu political leader, Shakushain, was the most significant. Shakushain rose to the forefront of the Ainu resistance in the mid-1660s, but his forces were crushed when the Matsumae samurai broke the truce, slaying Shakushain and his retinue. This event marked the last large-scale resistance by the Hokkaidō Ainu.

In 1779, the Matsumae territory on Hokkaidō came under the direct control of the Tokugawa shogunate in order to protect Japanese interests against Russian expansion southward. The administrative hands changed again in 1821 to the Matsumae and then back to the shogunate in 1854. Drastic changes took place shortly after the establishment of the Meiji government in 1868, as the new government abolished residential restrictions for the Ainu and the Japanese, allowing them to live anywhere on Hokkaidō. The Japanese were encouraged to emigrate to Hokkaidō to take advantage of the natural resources. Most significant, the new government issued the Hokkaidō Aboriginal Protection Act. The Ainu on Hokkaidō were forced to attend Japanese schools established by the government and to register in the Japanese census. Beginning in 1883, the Ainu were granted plots of land and encouraged to take up agriculture. They were removed from their settlements and resettled on land more suited to agriculture, causing drastic changes in Ainu society and culture.

The long history of Ainu contact with outsiders, especially the Japanese, has undermined the Ainu way of life. The Ainu have long been a minority population in Japanese society, suffering prejudice, discrimination, and economic impoverishment. In recent years, the Ainu have made positive efforts to improve their social and political position in Japanese society as well as to establish their own cultural identity.

In addition to ecological factors, the history of contact with outsiders is responsible to a large degree for the major differences in the way of life among these groups of Ainu. For

example, because of a lack of contact with metal-using populations, the Kurile Ainu continued to use stone and bone implements and to manufacture pottery long after the Hokkaidō and Sakhalin Ainu had started to use metal goods obtained in trade with their neighbors. The Ainu on the central and northern Kuriles had long been in contact with the Aleuts and Kamchadals. From the end of the eighteenth century, Russians and Japanese, who were hunting sea otters in the area for their furs, exploited the Ainu and transmitted diseases, causing a decline in the population. In 1875 the central and northern Kuriles came under the political control of the Japanese government, which made several attempts to "protect" the Ainu, but the last survivor in this area died in 1941.

### *Settlements*

There was considerable variation in the permanency of Ainu settlements. Until the turn of the century, the basic pattern of the Sakhalin Ainu was a seasonal alternation of settlement between a summer settlement on the shore and a winter settlement farther inland. In the winter settlement, they built semisubterranean pit-houses. Ainu settlements were usually located along the shore, with houses in a single line parallel to the shore. The Kurile Ainu migrated even more frequently. In contrast, on Hokkaidō, permanent settlements were located along the rivers, which were rich in fish from mouth to source—an unusual situation for hunter-gatherers.

Most Ainu settlements, regardless of region, were small, usually consisting of fewer than five families. An exception was the Hidaka-Tokachi District on Hokkaidō, which enjoyed the most abundant natural resources and the densest population of all the Ainu lands. Here, especially along the Saru River, a few settlements housed about thirty families, and more than half the settlements in the valley exceeded five families.

### *Economy*

The Ainu were basically a hunting-gathering population but fish from the sea, rivers, and lakes was an important source of food for most Ainu. Ainu men fished and hunted sea and land mammals, while women were responsible for gathering plants and storing food for the cold season. Large animals such as bear, deer (in Hokkaidō), musk deer, and reindeer (in Sakhalin) were usually caught using individual techniques of hunting, although cooperation among individuals sometimes took place, especially among the Hokkaidō Ainu. They used the bow and arrow, the set-trap bow, the spear, and various kinds of traps for hunting land mammals, often combining different methods. The hunting techniques of the Hokkaidō Ainu were on the whole technologically more developed than those of other Ainu. They used trained dogs for hunting, and, in some areas, even for fishing. In addition, they used aconite and stingray poison for hunting, which ensured that wounded animals would fall to the ground within a short distance. Large fish such as trout and salmon were important foods, obtained by means of detachable spearheads. The Ainu also used nets, various traps, weirs, and the line and fishhook.

Animal domestication was most highly developed among the Sakhalin Ainu, who engaged in selective breeding to create strong and intelligent male sled dogs and in castration of the dogs to preserve their strength for pulling the sleds, which were an important means of transportation dur-

ing the harsh winters. The Hokkaidō Ainu alone engaged in small-scale plant domestication prior to the introduction of agriculture by the Japanese government.

### *Kinship, Marriage, and Family*

There are some basic features of sociopolitical organization that are shared by most of the Ainu groups, although their finer workings vary from region to region. Among most Ainu groups, the nuclear family is the basic social unit, although some extended families are present. In most Ainu settlements, males related through a common male ancestor comprise the core members who collectively own a hunting ground or a river with good fish runs. Although some scholars emphasize that among the Ainu along the Saru River in Hokkaidō women related through females comprise a corporate group, the exact nature of the group is unclear. Among these Hokkaidō Ainu, an individual is prohibited from marrying a cousin on his or her mother's side. Among most Ainu groups, a few prominent males in the community practice polygyny.

### *Sociopolitical Organization*

Nowhere among the Ainu does political organization extend beyond the settlement, although occasionally a few extremely small settlements form a larger political unit, or a small settlement belongs politically to an adjacent larger settlement. Ainu political leaders are usually not autocratic; elders in the settlement are usually involved in decision making and executing the rules.

Although the formalized ideology prohibits women from participating in the major religious activities that provide the basis of sociopolitical powers for males, there are a number of culturally constituted ways for women to exercise nonformalized power, as discussed in the section on shamanism.

### *Religion and Expressive Culture*

Separation of religious dimensions of Ainu life from others distorts the way Ainu view their lives, since religion is the perspective that pervades their life. Thus, even the disposal of discarded items such as food remains and broken objects is guided by the spatial classification of the Ainu universe and its directions, which derive from religious and cosmological principles. What we call economic activities are religious activities to the Ainu, who regard land and sea animals as deities and fish and plants as products of deities.

**Religious Beliefs.** An important concept in the Ainu belief system is the soul, owned by most beings in the Ainu universe. According to tradition, the soul becomes perceptible when it leaves the owner's body. For example, when one dreams, one's soul frees itself from the sleeping body and travels, even to places where one has never been. Likewise, a deceased person may appear in one's dreams because the soul of the deceased can travel from the world of the dead to that of the living. During a shamanistic performance, the shaman's soul travels to the world of the dead to snatch back the soul of a dead person, thereby reviving the person nearing death.

This belief underlies the Ainu emphasis on proper treatment of the dead body of humans and all other soul owners in the universe, resulting in elaborate funeral customs ranging from the bear ceremony, discussed later, to the careful treat-

ment of fish bones, which represent the dead body of a fish. Without proper treatment of a dead body, its soul cannot rest in peace in the world of the dead and causes illness among the living to remind the Ainu of their misconduct. Shamans must be consulted to obtain diagnosis and treatment for these illnesses.

The soul has the power to punish only when it has been mistreated. Deities (*kamuy*), in contrast, possess the power to punish or reward at will. Some scholars believe that among the Ainu nature is equated with the deities. Others claim that only certain members of the universe are deified. The Ainu consider all animal deities to be exactly like humans in appearance and to live just like humans in their own divine country—an important point in Ainu religion. Animal deities disguise themselves when visiting the Ainu world to bring meat and fur as presents to the Ainu, just as Ainu guests always bring gifts. The bear thus is not itself the supreme deity but rather the mountain deity's disguise for bringing the gift of bear meat and hide.

In most regions, the goddess of the hearth (fire) was almost as important as the bear. Referred to as "Grandmother Hearth," she resides in the hearth, which symbolizes the Ainu universe. Other important deities include foxes, owls (the deity of the settlement), seals, and a number of other sea and land animals and birds. The importance of each varies from region to region. In addition, there are the goddess of the sun and moon (in some regions, the sun and moon represent two phases of one deity), the dragon deity in the sky, the deity of the house, the deity of the *nusa* (the altar with *inaw*, ritual wood shavings), the deity of the woods, the deity of water, and others.

Evil spirits and demons—called variously *oyasi*, *wen-kamuy* (evil deity), etc.—constitute another group of beings in the universe who are more powerful than humans. They exercise their destructive power by causing misfortunes such as epidemics. The smallpox deity is an example. Some of them are intrinsic or by definition *bona fide* demons, whereas others become demons. For example, if a soul is mistreated after the death of its owner, it turns into a demon. The Ainu devote a great deal of attention to evil spirits and demons by observing religious rules and performing exorcism rites. Human combat with demons is a major theme in Ainu epic poems, discussed later. Characteristically, the deities never deal directly with the demons; rather, they extend aid to the Ainu if the latter behave as directed.

**Religious Practitioners.** Shamanism is not an exclusively male role. Sakhalin Ainu shamanism differs considerably from Hokkaidō Ainu shamanism. Among the Sakhalin Ainu, with regard to the symbolic structure, the shamanistic ritual represents the process of cooking, a role assigned to women in Ainu society. Shamanism is highly valued among the Sakhalin Ainu, and highly regarded members of society of both sexes, including heads of settlements, may become shamans. Although shamans sometimes perform rites for divinations of various sorts and for miracles, most rites are performed to diagnose and cure illnesses. When shamans are possessed by spirits, they enter a trance and the spirit speaks through their mouths, providing the client with necessary information such as the diagnosis and cure of an illness or the location of a missing object.

Among the Hokkaidō Ainu, shamanism is not highly re-

garded and shamans are usually women, who collectively have lower social status than men. The Hokkaidō Ainu shaman also enters a possession trance, but she does so only if a male elder induces it in her by offering prayers to the deities. Although she too diagnoses illnesses, male elders take over the healing process. Male elders must consult a shaman before they make important decisions for the community. In other words, the politically powerful male cannot even declare a war without consulting the shaman—an intriguing cultural mechanism to balance formalized and nonformalized power.

**Ceremonies.** Among the rich and varied Ainu religious beliefs and practices, the bear ceremony is perhaps the most important religious ceremony among both the Sakhalin and Hokkaidō Ainu, for whom the bear represents the supreme deity in disguise. From the Ainu perspective, the bear ceremony is a "funeral ritual" for the bear. Its purpose is to send the soul of the bear back to the mountains through a proper ritual so the soul will be reborn as a bear and revisit the Ainu with gifts of meat and fur.

The process of the bear ceremonial takes at least two years. Among the Sakhalin Ainu another, less elaborate, "after ceremony" follows several months after the major ceremony, thereby further extending the process. A bear cub, captured alive either while still in a den or while walking with its mother upon emerging from the den, is usually raised by the Ainu for about a year and a half. Sometimes women nurse these cubs. Although the time of the ceremony differs according to region, usually it is held at the beginning of the cold season; for the Sakhalin Ainu, it takes place just before they move inland to their winter settlement.

The bear ceremony combines deeply religious elements with the merriment of eating, drinking, singing, and dancing. All participants don their finest clothing and adornments. Prayers are offered to the goddess of the hearth and the deity of the house, but the major focus of the ceremony is on the deity of the mountains, who is believed to have sent the bear as a gift to humans. After the bear is taken out of the "bear house," situated southwest of the house, the bear is killed. The Sakhalin Ainu kill the bear with two pointed arrows, while the Hokkaidō Ainu use blunt arrows before they fatally shoot the bear with pointed arrows, and then strangle the dead or dying bear between two logs. Male elders skin and dress the bear, which is placed in front of the altar hung with treasures. (Ainu treasures consist primarily of goods such as swords and lacquerware obtained in trade with the Japanese. They are considered offerings to the deities and serve as status symbols for the owner.) After preliminary feasting outside at the altar, the Ainu bring the dissected bear into the house through the sacred window and continue the feast.

Among the Hokkaidō Ainu, the ceremony ends when the head of the bear is placed at the altar on a pole decorated with ritual wood shavings (*inaw*). An elder offers a farewell prayer while shooting an arrow toward the eastern sky—an act signifying the safe departure of the deity. The Sakhalin Ainu bring the bear's skull, stuffed with ritual shavings, bones, eyes, and, if a male bear, the penis, to a sacred place in the mountains. They also sacrifice two carefully chosen dogs, whom they consider to be servant-messengers of the bear deities. Although often taken as a cruel act by outsiders, the bear ceremony expresses the Ainu's utmost respect for the deity.

The bear ceremonial is at once religious, political, and economic. The host of the bear ceremony is usually the political leader of the community. It is the only inter-settlement event, to which friends and relatives as well as the politically powerful from nearby and distant settlements may come to participate. Offerings of trade items, such as Japanese lacquerware or swords and Chinese brocades, are a display of wealth, which in turn signifies the political power of the leader and his settlement.

The bear ceremony expresses the formalized cosmology in which men are closer to the deities than are women. The officiants of the ceremony must be male elders and the women must leave the scene when the bear is shot and skinned.

**Arts.** While Ainu religion is expressed through rituals as well as in daily routines like the disposal of fish bones, nowhere is it better articulated than in their highly developed oral tradition, which is comparable to the Greek tradition. For the Ainu, the oral tradition is both a primary source of knowledge about the deities and a guide for conduct. There are at least twenty-seven native genres of oral tradition, each having a label in Ainu, that may be classified into two types: verses (epic or lyric) to be sung or chanted, and narrative prose. While the prose in some genres is in the third person, first-person narration is used in the rest: a protagonist tells his own story through the mouth of the narrator-singer. The mythic and heroic epics are long and complex; some heroic epics have as many as 15,000 verses. While the mythic epics relate the activities of deities, the heroic epics are about the culture hero who, with the aid of the deities, fought demons to save the Ainu and became the founder of the Ainu people. Among the Hokkaidō Ainu, the culture hero descended from the world of the deities in the sky and taught the Ainu their way of life, including fishing and hunting and the rituals and rules governing human society. Some scholars contend that the battles fought by the culture hero are battles that the Ainu once fought against invading peoples.

Ainu carving, weaving, embroidery, and music are of high aesthetic quality. Traditionally, these activities were a part of their daily lives rather than separate activities. While Hokkaidō Ainu relied most extensively on garments made of plant fibers, the Sakhalin Ainu wore garments made of fish skin and animal hides. The Kurile Ainu, who knew basketry but not weaving, used land- and sea-mammal hides and bird feathers for their clothing.

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