

# Ainu People: Indigenous People of Japan

*Emi Yamaguchi*



*A group of Ainu people, 1904. Photo: <commons.wikimedia.org>.*

The Ainu people are Indigenous people living in Hokkaido, the northern island of Japan. They were good hunters. They traded their products such as fish, meat, and fur with the Wajin (Japanese people from the main island).

## **Laws Did Not Protect Them**

In the 1870s, many Wajin people moved to Hokkaido to cultivate and develop the island. In 1899, according to the scholar, Matthew Michaud, the Japanese government established the “Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act.” By this law,

the Ainu people got Japanese names and were obliged to learn the Japanese language. The Japanese government took control of the Ainu people’s properties and prohibited them from engaging in their cultural activities, such as hunting and tattooing. Although this law says “protect the aborigines,” it actually destroyed the Ainu culture, according to Michaud. It drove them into poverty and encouraged discrimination against them. Many Ainu people started to hide their identity to avoid the discrimination. The Ainu culture and language were almost completely destroyed.

## Prejudice Against Ainu People

My mother told me that when she was younger, the Wajin were biased against the Ainu. She said that many people thought that the Ainu were descendants of savage people. She told me that

**When they hunted or picked wild vegetables, they always made sure to get the minimum amount they needed.**

people made fun of anyone who looked Ainu, and it was an insult to say, "He/she must be Ainu."

This situation changed as Indigenous people fought for their rights all over the world. In

1997, the Japanese government established the "Act for the Promotion of the Ainu Culture."

## A Respectable Culture

When I was a student, I visited the Shiraoi Ainu Culture Museum with my family. We learned about how the Ainu lived in harmony with nature. According to the Ainu people's religion, "gods" are in everything all around us. According to the Ainu Museum website, these gods include fire gods, water gods, animal gods, plant gods, and even gods in objects, such as boats and tools. The Ainu people feel respect and awe for nature. Therefore, when they hunted or picked



*At the Shiraoi Ainu Culture Museum, a man demonstrates how to catch a fish using a traditional Ainu tool.*

wild vegetables, they always made sure to get the minimum amount they needed. The Ainu used storytelling to pass down their knowledge and important rules. I was glad I could learn about such a respectable culture with my parents.

Nowadays, more Ainu people, including the youth, are



*Map showing Japan and the Island of Hokkaido, where the Ainu people are from.*

working to preserve their language and culture. I hope more people will get to learn Ainu culture and history. In our modern society, we consume so much. We could learn a lot from the Ainu's knowledge, and that can help us make better decisions.

**Sources:** Matthew Michaud, "Settlement into Hokkaido and its Effect on the Environment and the Ainu People," <academia.edu>; <www.ainu-museum.or.jp>.

### AFTER YOU READ:

1. What are three details you learned about the Ainu people in this article?
2. What do the Ainu have in common with the Incas (p. 45), the Lakota (p. 28), and the Wampanoag (p. 14)?
3. What is Yamaguchi's method for citing sources? How does it compare with the methods that writers use on pp. 7 and 44?

*Emi Yamaguchi is from Hokkaido, Japan. She is a student at New London Adult and Continuing Education in CT, where she takes an ESOL class. She loves to read stories to her three little girls.*

