

## THE NOBLE MINORITY. THE RENAISSANCE OF AINU CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

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The Ainu is a small group of indigenous people now living mainly in Hokkaido. From the sixteenth century, they were in constant contact with the Japanese, often fighting with them. In the Meiji period, beginning in 1868, the Japanese settlement on Hokkaido intensified. The Ainu were discriminated against and pushed to the margins, resulting in poverty following suit. As a consequence, Ainu culture began to regress and their language disappeared. This, however, did not result in the complete detachment of the community from tradition. Currently, although the Ainu do not lead a traditional way of life, they try to cultivate their culture based on ancestral rituals. The traditional culture of the Ainu people is known mainly due to the work of scientists, such as Bronisław Piłsudski. In the second half of the 20th century the renaissance of Ainuan culture flourished and the social activist and Ainu culture expert, Shigeru Kayano, played a major role in this. This article was prepared on the basis of available literature and interviews with the Ainu people as well as with Japanese authorities, researchers and museologists in 2015.

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Ajnowie to niewielka grupa autochtonów zamieszkująca dziś głównie Hokkaido. Od XVI w. byli w stałym kontakcie z Japończykami, często prowadząc z nimi walki. W epoce Meiji, począwszy od 1868 r., nastąpiła intensyfikacja osadnictwa japońskiego na Hokkaido. Ajnowie byli dyskryminowani; zostali zepchnięci na margines, co skutkowało ubóstwem. W konsekwencji, kultura Ajnów zaczęła ulegać regresowi, a ich język zanikł. Nie spowodowało to jednak całkowitego oderwania się społeczności od tradycji. Obecnie, chociaż Ajnowie nie prowadzą tradycyjnego stylu życia, to starają się pielęgnować swoją kulturę opartą na tradycjach przodków. Kulturę Ajnów znamy głównie dzięki pracy wielu naukowców, m.in. Bronisława Piłsudskiego. W II poł. XX w. nastąpił renesans kultury ajnuskiej. Dużą rolę w tym odegrał działacz społeczny i znawca Ajnów, Shigeru Kayano. Artykuł został przygotowany na podstawie literatury oraz wywiadów przeprowadzonych z Ajnami, a także z japońskimi urzędnikami, badaczami i muzealnikami w 2015 r.

**Key words:** Ainu, Bronisław Piłsudski, Shigeru Kayano, discrimination, Japanization, assimilation, culture and ethnic issue.

INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Until the 18th century, the Ainu were the indigenous inhabitants of the northern parts of Japan's Honshu and Hokkaido islands, Sakhalin and Kuril Islands and the southern end of the Kamchatka Peninsula (Russian Federation) (Majewicz 1991, 17). They lived by hunting and gathering and by trade with Japanese merchants. The Ainu formed a segmentary society in which each *kotan* (village) had its own leader. There was not a single chief of all the Ainu people in Hokkaido, nor was there any central authority; they would unite only in the face of external threat. They spoke the Ainu language, considered to be a language isolate, which had 19 dialects (Internet 1). Unlike their mongoloid neighbors, the non-oriental appearance of the Ainu, particularly their luxuriant hair, attracted the attention of the first travelers. At the turn of the 20th century they primarily aroused the interest of the anthropologists<sup>2</sup>. The Ainu used to be portrayed as Stone Age people seated in front of poor cottages "manually making clay pots, or on forest bogs, or in the fields, wearing hides and bast fiber clothes, weeding with an antler instead of a metal tool" (Radliński 1901, 180). At the turn of the 20th century they were marginalized and dominated by the Japanese in Hokkaido and after 1945 they were almost completely displaced from Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands (once these were taken over by the Soviet Union). Today the Ainu claim that in the past their culture was destroyed as the result of assimilation policy imposed by the Japanese. Many Ainu people were discriminated against, which caused poverty, among other things.

This article presents the process of rebirth of the culture and ethnic identity of the Ainu, as seen by an ethnologist. The author had an opportunity to study the problem of domination of larger ethnic groups over smaller ones using the example of the

<sup>1</sup> This article is written on the basis of literature, and interviews conducted with the local Ainu in Hokkaido, members of Ainu associations, self-government authorities, museologists and scientists. During my stay (June 2015) I visited the following places: the Ainu Museum „Porotokotan” in Shiraoi, Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum in Nibutani, Shigeru Kayano Nibutani Ainu Museum, Ainu Culture Promotion Center „Sapporo Pirka Kotan” ([www.city.sapporo.jp/shimin/pirka-kotan](http://www.city.sapporo.jp/shimin/pirka-kotan)), the Former Hokkaido Government Office in Sapporo, Botanic Garden Hokkaido University in Sapporo (Museum and National Treasures, Ainu Museum), Hokkaido Museum in Sapporo, the Hokkaido University Museum, Hokkaido University, Sapporo University. I met with folk groups in Nibutani-Biratori, Sapporo, Shiraoi, with craftsmen in Biratori-Nibutani, with representatives of the self-government for the Ainu in Sapporo, associations: the Ainu Association of Hokkaido ([www.ainu-assn.or.jp](http://www.ainu-assn.or.jp)), Sapporo Univ. Urespa Club ([www.facebook.com/urespaclub](http://www.facebook.com/urespaclub)), Sapporo Ainu Culture Promotion Center ([www.city.sapporo.jp/shimin/pirka-kotan](http://www.city.sapporo.jp/shimin/pirka-kotan)), The Ainu Museum Foundation ([www.ainu-museum.or.jp](http://www.ainu-museum.or.jp)), Hokkaido Poland Cultural Association (<http://hokkaido-poland.com>).

I would especially like to thank Prof. A. Majewicz, T. Matsumoto and T. Kodama.

<sup>2</sup> There appeared demand for their bone material. Shocking practices, from a contemporary point of view, took place: Ainu cemeteries were pillaged in search of the skeletons of buried Ainu people. Polish people also took part in those activities. The skulls of the Ainu were brought to Poland by B. Dybowski (Radliński 1901, 186).

Kurumba people gobbled up by the more numerous Mossi in Burkina Faso in West Africa<sup>3</sup>. A trip to Hokkaido enabled observation of the same phenomenon in a different cultural context.

#### JAPANESE MIGRATIONS TO THE ISLAND OF EZO

The first records of fighting on the island of Ezo (the former name of Hokkaido) date back to the 7th and 8th centuries, i.e. the time when Japanese settlers entered into conflicts with the Emishi (indigenous people). In the chronicles there are also records of diplomatic contacts between the two populations (Totman 2009, 82, 86). Until the 16th century Ezo was inhabited almost exclusively by the Ainu. Already at that time the migration of the Japanese from Honshu had begun (Majewicz 1991, 27). Their surge into Ezo caused economic and political feuds between the two communities<sup>4</sup>. The Japanese Matsumae clan which colonized Ezo exerted pressure on the Ainu, imposed fiscal obligations and limitations on their trade.

“Tensions between the merchants settling in Wajinchi and indigenous Ainu groups led to a series of clashes, and in the 1660s Shukashain, the leader of the Ainu, attained dominant position among the Ainu of the Hidaka region, east of the Oshima Peninsula” (Totman 2009, 286).

It was one of numerous armed uprisings of the Ainu against the Japanese<sup>5</sup>. From the brochure issued by The Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture (FRPAC) it may be concluded that their ancestors were treacherously defeated.

“During the banquet celebrating the reconciliation, Shakushain was murdered in a surprise attack, thus bringing the war of the Ainu to an end<sup>6</sup>” (Majewicz 1991, 30).

The source reads that many conflicts ended with a treacherous attack. Usually the Wajin suggested settling a dispute by way of negotiation. The Ainu would not reject

<sup>3</sup> An interesting analysis of this phenomenon has been provided by two French ethnologists: J.-L. Amselle (1999) and M. Izard (1985); the former divided West African societies into encompassing societies (*sociétés englobantes*) and encompassed ones (*sociétés englobées*). The latter, based on his research in Burkina Faso, presented the tribes in a certain juxtaposition: autochthons on the one hand, and on the other the people in power who exert pressure on the autochthons. The combination of these two concepts illustrates the relations between dominating and dominated groups.

<sup>4</sup> Japanese colonization advanced from the Oshima Peninsula in the south; the area was later called Wajinchi meaning the Land of the Japanese. In literature the term often denotes the Japanese who settled in the Ainu territories in the south of Hokkaido island.

<sup>5</sup> The uprising in 1456 led by Koshamain was the first spectacular protest of the Ainu against the Japanese. Allegedly, it was triggered by the murder of one of the Ainu by a Japanese blacksmith (Majewicz 1991, 29; no author, 2013, 4).

<sup>6</sup> Once Ezo was pacified by the Japanese, the name of Shakushain was doomed to oblivion, yet with time it became the symbol of the Ainu's opposition against the Japanese (Majewicz 1991, 30).

such solutions and they would sit down to talks with utmost solemnity. When formal discussions with their recent enemy were coming to an end and the tension lessened, the Wajin would mount a sudden attack (no author, 2013, 6). As Alfred Majewicz notes, the Ainu won battles and the Japanese won wars (1991, 30). As a result of lost wars the Ainu were forced to work hard for the benefit of their new lords. Furthermore, the inflow of a large number of settlers caused depletion of fauna which acutely affected the Ainu. All that combined brought on the deterioration of their economic situation and, as a consequence, the reduction of population.

Subsequent discriminatory actions against the Ainu took place in the first half of the 19th century.

“Furthermore, the ban on wearing bamboo hats, straw raincoats and Japanese sandals, which had been imposed by the Matsumae clan, was lifted. The shogunate forced the Ainu to change their hairstyles, garments and names and the like to those of Honshu and outlawed traditional Ainu customs and manners, including earrings, tattoos<sup>7</sup>, and the ceremony to avert the spirits of bears. During the second ruling of the shogunate, the aforementioned measures were reinforced, provoking the antipathy of the Ainu” (no author, 2013, 7).

Yet the real problems of the Ainu began only in the second half of the 19th century. In the aftermath of the process of extinction of the Ainu language, which had already started at the beginning of the 19th century (Majewicz 1991, 15), only 10 people could speak the language at the beginning of the 21st century (Bradley 2007).

#### CHANGES DURING THE MEIJI ERA

According to M. Nomoto, the director of the Ainu Museum in Shiraoi: “it is impossible to understand contemporary Ainu without regard to the impact of the Meiji Era”. That is why the changes of that time will be discussed in a greater detail. In 1868 the new government incorporated Ezo into Japan and changed the name of the island to Hokkaido. According to Majewicz (1984, 16) this marked the beginning of effective Japanization of the Ainu in Hokkaido. In the Kuril Islands the process started in 1875 and in Sakhalin in 1905.

“Government took administrative and judicial power over Ainu villages into its own hands. This process, together with the advance of capitalism and the deterioration of the old ecology, deprived Ainu villages of the unique nature of their community life and destroyed the integrity of their social

<sup>7</sup> Tattoos on the arms (from hand to ankle) and around the mouth were characteristic elements of the Ainu culture. Only women were tattooed. Once tattooing was banned, the Ainu were afraid that they would anger their goddess and be befallen by a disaster. Many, despite the ban, practiced their old rituals. The last fully tattooed woman died in 1998. At the end of the 20th century some women applied temporary tattoos over their body during holidays and celebrations (Internet 6).

life. As a result, an Ainu village became just a hamlet where the inhabitants were Ainu, not a community where the Ainu lived as they used to live” (Takakura 1966, 19).

The Ainu were integrated into the rest of society and identified as “ordinary” in people censuses. However, discrimination did not stop. In the same year the Development Commission that ruled in Hokkaido delegalized the language, culture and lifestyle of the Ainu and initiated their intensive Japanization.

“It took away the land and resources of the Ainu, making these national property. This property was then sold to the private sector. Salmon fishing and deer hunting were banned.<sup>8</sup> (...) As a result of the policy that gave priority to development advantageous to *Wajin*, the situation of the Ainu worsened, even to the point that they did not have enough food. Although agriculture was encouraged, in many cases it was difficult to change lifestyles overnight. For this reason, the Ainu were mistakenly defined as being deficient in property management skills, resulting in restrictions on their rights to own land and other property” (no author, 2013, 8).

The abovementioned M. Namoto highlights that

“after the revolution (Meiji), fishing and hunting for animals living in the mountains, all of these activities were controlled by the government, state. There were restrictions in this area. However, later on, regardless of whether you were Ainu or not, inhabitants of a given district had to receive a concession to be able to perform their usual activities”.

Since 1876 the Ainu started to be treated as Japanese citizens. The annotation *kyudojin* meaning aborigine that was made in their documents was an imprint which hindered access to education and careers. Those discriminatory notes were eliminated only after the Second World War. They were forced to cultivate land but forced farming was ineffective and did not compensate for losses caused by government bans on hunting and fishing. What is worse, it contributed to the disintegration of the traditional social system connected with the economy that had been in place so far (Majewicz 1991, 32–33).

The poor economic situation of the Ainu was acknowledged by decision-making bodies. To address the issue, in 1899 the Former Aborigines Protection Act was enacted. The law provided for the granting of land for cultivation to the Ainu, instructing them on farming and assimilating with the rest of society by way of teaching Japanese, among other things. Some Ainu learned to farm, but many failed. It was because a part of the land given to them had never been fit for cultivation. Another issue was the amount of land they were given. The Ainu received less land than the *Wajin* who came from the south. Such actions reflect ethnic discrimination of the Ainu. Public

<sup>8</sup> According to J. Batchelor (1901, 17–18), the change in diet was one of the reasons for the decrease in the population of the Ainu. B. Piłsudski held a different view and claimed that Batchelor overgeneralized and drew conclusions from the example of a limited number of villages. “In the majority of cases the Ainu live on sea or river fish” (1913, 90).

schools completely ignored the culture and language of the Ainu. Children had to learn Japanese customs and language. They were separated from the Wajin and this resulted in even greater discrimination (no author, 2013, 8–9).

In our times, the difference in the economic situation of the Ainu and Japanese people living in Hokkaido is still visible. It is highlighted by members of the Ainu Association M. Isikawa and K. Kaisawa who state that the Ainu receive social welfare benefits more often than Japanese people. “The basic problem is to improve the standard of living to help the Ainu; the other one is to promote Ainu culture.”

The Japanese had a very unfavorable opinion of the Ainu, they called them *ebisu* meaning “wild” or “barbarians” (Majewicz 1984, 15). They thought them to be dirty, greedy, cunning and keen on alcohol and they believed that “they descend from dogs and resemble dogs from the waist down; they even have tails” (Sieroszewski 1957, 30, 39, 19). The Ainu did not think well of the Japanese either. They considered them to be the plunderers of their land and hunting grounds and complained about being disliked and ridiculed by the Japanese (Sieroszewski 1957, 21, 52, 27).

This was the situation in which Piłsudski and Sieroszewski found themselves upon their arrival in Hokkaido at the beginning of the 20th century. Both scientists recognized the tragic fate of the Ainu and Piłsudski had witnessed that problem in Sakhalin. It seems that the Polish scientists stayed among the Ainu in Hokkaido during their most difficult time. They were not indifferent to their fate. In 1909 in *Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* Piłsudski lectured on the indigenous peoples of Sakhalin. In his closing words he said: “They are dying out, they are fading... Already at this moment they are rapidly losing their identity due to destructive contact with the invaders” (Zawistowicz 1930, 31).

Sieroszewski noted that “the influence of the Japanese does not only threaten the customs, beliefs, pottery and clothing of the Ainu but also their physical type” (Sieroszewski 1957, 24). He gave one example of a Japanized Ainu man who had married a Japanese woman and spoke only Japanese to his children at home (Sieroszewski 1957, 54–55). This was not an isolated case; such behaviors contributed greatly to the extinction of the Ainu language and culture.

Later, the situation of the Ainu started to improve. However, as a result of the changes that had begun in the Meiji Era in the first half of the 20th-century, specialists started to consider the Ainu as extinct people. In the mid-1960s professor S. Takakura wrote:

“An anthropological tragedy of World War II was the destruction of the last Chance to study firsthand the primitive culture of the Ainu people before it totally disappeared. The remaining Ainu live on Hokkaido, the northernmost Island of the Japanese archipelago. Perhaps about a hundred ‘pure’ Ainu are left, but only in the sense that each retains pure Ainu blood. Culturally every Ainu of today is ‘diluted’. As a race that had its own language, religion, method of house building, and other cultural traits and institutions, the Ainu are a thing of the past. There are what people call ‘Ainu villages’, but

this is just a name. Any distinctively traditional way of life is preserved only as a tourist attraction. Today, the Ainu live as the Japanese live—except that many are poorer than ordinary Japanese workers and farmers” (Takakura 1966, 16–17).

In this context the words from the already cited FRPAC brochure take on an interesting meaning:

“Since the Meiji era, the Ainu have walked down a rocky road and have faced groundless discrimination and the denial of their unique culture. The Ainu were considered a dying ethnic group, their culture a dying culture. It was from this perspective that Kyosuke Kindaichi<sup>9</sup> and other Wajin researchers conducted research on Ainu culture. The Ainu, however, never succumbed to social prejudice and strove to protect their culture and hand it down to the next generation” (no author 2013, 26).

It seems that the Ainu nurtured their culture in secret, away from the strangers. They preserved it for future generations as their most precious treasure. Still, it was hardly feasible for the Ainu to hide their culture from many scientists from different countries. The above quote is more of an emotional statement by its authors about their own people with whom they identify, rather than a balanced scientific assessment.

Discrimination of the Ainu by a dominant group mobilized them to strive to get rid of their Ainu character and adapt to the Japanese society in Hokkaido. They thought it to be the only way to fight poverty. H. Hiramura from the Biratori Museum says that

„after the Meiji Revolution in 1868, there was an enforced assimilation, Japanization of the Ainu and thus there was less and less Ainu culture in our society.”

Sieroszewski (1957, 61) has already pointed out that many among the Ainu “were proud of their Japanese descent”. In conversation with the author Majewicz said “The Ainu wanted to vanish at all cost; they forbade their children to speak the language and were determined to become Japanized”. If someone suggested: “You are Ainu”, people would immediately reply “No, I’m not. Absolutely not!” This has been affirmed by the already mentioned director M. Nomoto who says: “still, despite all the changes in the attitude towards the Ainu, they are ashamed to admit to being Ainu”. Questions about ethnic origin are considered racist and therefore it is not officially allowed to ask: “Are you Ainu?”, which significantly hinders estimations of the number of Ainu inhabitants in Hokkaido.

#### THE RENAISSANCE OF AINU CULTURE

The first improvement took place in the democracy of the Taishō period (1910–20) – the time of liberal movements in Japan. The Ainu people, who had been protesting against discrimination and prejudice, became very active. In this period, the first

<sup>9</sup> K. Kindaichi (1882–1971), Japanese linguist, researcher of the language and oral literature of the Ainu.



Ainu organizations were created and Ainu people themselves had their representatives in district councils. During World War II, the peak of Japanese nationalism and chauvinism, studies concerning Ainu people as a group different from the Japanese were not welcomed by official factors. An excellent Japanese expert on Ainu people – professor S. Takakura – believes that “the last world war destroyed our last chance to save Ainu people” (Majewicz 1983, 33). The degeneration of Ainu culture is also noted Majewicz. He states that Ainu people have undergone a total acculturation and an absolute Japanization but also explains that “Ainu elements are not cultivated seriously anymore and everything which is presented to us as Ainu is only a display” (Majewicz 1983, 63). In the Meiji period, even their surnames were changed and they were written only in Japanese. An excellent example of such Japanization is the very popular surname Kazaiwa – in Japanese it means ‘valley of shells’ (*kai* – shell, *zawa* – valley) – characteristic of Ainu people in the Biratori region. In the original, Ainu version this surname was Pipauszi (*pipa* – shell, *uszi* – valley) but nowadays there it is no longer possible to find people with this surname.

In order to protect the remains of Ainu culture, the Ainu Association of Hokkaido was established in 1961. Its main goal was to represent the interests of Ainu people. The agricultural reform took place in the same time and its objective was to take land away from owners and sell it to small farmers at a low price. The Association objected to this reform and pointed out that the pillage of Ainu lands in the past had been completely forgotten in these circumstances. In the 20th century, Ainu people owned only 15% of their rightful lands. In the 1960s, there were aspirations to improve the living conditions of Ainu people – community halls were established and new jobs created in the vicinity of Ainu people settlements. All of the efforts were aimed at the improvement of their living standards.

“In 1984, the Ainu Association of Hokkaido (formerly the Hokkaido Ainu Association) drafted and proposed Legislation Concerning the Ainu People, which called for the recovery of the basic human rights of the Ainu, the elimination of discrimination against them, the introduction of special legislative seats in politics aimed at enabling the direct reflection of the views of Ainu representatives. The implementation of comprehensive educational and cultural measures, and the improvement of some conditions including agriculture, fishery, forestry, commerce, and industry to allow them to achieve economic independence. The Association lobbied for the enactment of this new law at the Hokkaido Government, the central government, the Diet and other organizations. In 1986 when the Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone stated that «Japan is a racially homogeneous nation and there is no discrimination against ethnic minorities with Japanese citizenship», discussions and campaigns related to the Ainu became brisk. In addition, the Ainu began to pay attention to global trends in the rights of indigenous people, accelerating exchanges with other countries. With the aforementioned trends as background, the first Ainu took a seat in the Diet” (no author, 2013, 10).

Predictions made by Takakura in the 1960s and later also by Majewicz concerning the disappearance of Ainu culture would probably have come true had it not been for



the impressive growth of the Ainu's ethnic consciousness, which took place at the end of the 20th century. This growth was greatly influenced by the first and, so far, the only member of parliament of Ainu descent, social activist Shigeru Kayano (1926–2006) from Biratori. He inspired the creation of the Ainu Culture Museum in Nibutani in 1972. H. Hiramura from the Biratori Museum says that “after the Meiji Revolution in 1868, there was an enforced assimilation, Japanization of the Ainu and thus there was less and less Ainu culture in our society.” Thanks to his efforts 15 schools of the Ainu language were established (Internet 2). At first, authorities opposed claiming that learning in language other than Japanese was forbidden by law. In 1977, on his initiative, and for the first time in many years, *iomante* (the holiday which celebrates sending a bear's spirit to the supernatural world) was organized and it was not meant for tourists<sup>10</sup> (Majewicz 1991, 234, 153). From an ethnological point of view, his biggest accomplishment was writing a book describing the material culture of Ainu people in the middle of the 20th century (Kayano 2014). He was a member of the parliament from 1994 to 1998. He became famous for the fact that during sessions of the National Diet he spoke in the Ainu language which caused consternation among his Japanese colleagues. As noted by Majewicz, he forced Japanese people to change their attitude towards the Ainu. Thanks to his efforts, an act aimed at the promotion of Ainu culture (Law for the Promotion of the Ainu Culture and for the Dissemination and Advocacy for the Traditions of the Ainu and the Ainu Culture) was passed in 1997. The first article states that

“This law aims to realize the society in which the ethnic pride of the Ainu people is respected and to contribute to the development of diverse cultures in our country (...).”

All of these legal actions constituted an inherent part of a greater context of international activities. A decade later, the UN took care of the problem of autochthons, modern ethnic minorities: In September 2007, the United Nations General Assembly passed „United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”. In addition, in June 2007, the Japanese National Diet, on the basis of the aforementioned Declaration, passed “a resolution that recognized the Ainu as indigenous peoples of Japan”. These actions caused Japanese society to start showing an interest in the Ainu and their culture. However, according to the authors of the quoted brochure published by FRPAC, “unfortunately we still experience discrimination and an unstable life situation” (no author 2013, 11).

“In the decade from 1975 to 1984, the restoration of ceremonies was called for, and the ceremony to send back bear spirits was carried out in Biratori, Shiraoi, Asahikawa and elsewhere. In 1983, the ceremony to send back the spirit of Blakiston's fish owls was performed at Lake Kussharo. At the Toyohira River in Sapporo, the ceremony to receive new salmon has been carried out since 1982 and

<sup>10</sup> Killing a bear during *iomante* was considered very cruel by the Japanese (the animal was smothered with two logs) and thus it was forbidden (Majewicz 1991, 160).

this ceremony has recently come to be carried out in many other places as well. The practice of offering prayers for the repose of departed Ainu is flourishing anew in various areas” (no author 2013, 26).

As a result of the progressing assimilation, these ceremonies were abandoned. According to the aforementioned M. Isikawa and K. Kaisawa „the renewal of the *yomante* custom is an important element for the renaissance of Ainu culture”. However, it is worth mentioning that *yomante* (the ceremony to send back bear spirits) used to have a religious character, whereas nowadays, it is more of a folk festival nature.

This new interest in Ainu people can be mostly observed in the number of publications in the press regarding them. The bibliography of works about Ainu people in Japanese from 1978 allows us to conclude that until the middle of the 1970s they were not a very popular subject of press publications (Matsushita and Kimi 1978). In the 1980s, the situation drastically changed which has been noted Majewicz during his stay in Japan (1991, 245). At the beginning of the 21st century, Ainu people are still a focus of media attention. There are movies promoting Ainu culture, the number of scientific and popular-scientific books, as well as books for children which can be purchased in bookstores, museum shops or via the Internet increased (Internet 3). Other manifestations of this renaissance are museums providing treasuries of knowledge and tradition. Before the time when the abovementioned museum in Nibutani was created in 1967, the municipal authorities had built a folklore museum in Shiraoi which nowadays is called the Ainu Museum (*Shiraoi Minzoku Shiryōkan*). The museum located on the lake shore also comprises an open-air ethnographic museum, where educational classes take place, as well as an exhibition pavilion. The museum is run by a foundation whose goal is to cultivate Ainu traditions. In 2020, it is supposed to become a national museum.

A spectacular event in the Ainu-Japanese relations was an incident related to the Ainu tradition of launching the first boat of the season on the river. According to the tradition, this event should take place on the Saru River near Nibutani. In 1997, despite the objections of Ainu people, a dam was built. An artificial lake was created and it flooded the land where the described ceremony was supposed to take place. Two Ainu men (T. Kaizawa and S. Kayano) accused the government of the illegal seizure of lands for dam building which disturbed their cultural legacy and holy places where ceremonies important to them take place. The case was examined by the Sapporo District Court. K. Ichimiya, who was the main judge, stated that Ainu people have an original culture and that they had inhabited Hokkaido before the Japanese came there. In this situation their rights should be protected according to Article 13 of Japan's Constitution, which protects the rights of the individual, and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It should be mentioned, that by this time the government in Tokyo had refused to acknowledge the Ainu people as an indigenous population (Internet 4). As a consequence of the process, the water from the lake was drained and Ainu people could perform their traditional, spring ceremonies. Later,

the authorities came to an agreement with the Ainu and in the consecutive years water was not drained from the lake (an interview with A. Majewicz).

The renaissance of Ainu consciousness – as a new phenomenon – was a great surprise and challenge for Japanese people themselves because they had to overcome centuries-old prejudices. Aggressive statements about Ainu people appeared in the public domain. One of the authors wrote:

“Ainu people, it is said that even dogs do not forget kindness and the Japanese have shown you so much kindness (...) you should be careful. As you do not have your own writing you cannot possibly have any idea where your ancestors came from. (...) If you still want to live in Japan you should be only thankful to Japanese people that they let you live on Hokkaido” (Majewicz 1991, 233).

An immediate improvement of the Ainu’s living situation did not take place along with their cultural renaissance. Until now, inhabitants of Hokkaido of Ainu descent are poorer, they require financial support, they are less educated and thus the beginning of their professional careers is harder. The Sapporo district Social Welfare Center more often helps Ainu families than Japanese ones. Ainu people have problems with managing their affairs, they are less ingenious. “Inequalities should be equaled. Ainu culture has to be respected, they are primeval inhabitants of this land”. According to the global trend, minority cultures should be referred to with respect, which is especially reflected in the two sentences above. Some do not admit that they are Ainu because they fear discrimination. The main cause of Ainu people’s poverty is a lack of education. A child’s school attendance is not essential for uneducated parents. Money is more important than school, people need to earn money. M. Isikawa from the Ainu Association of Hokkaido believes that this situation is improving: “the difference in the standard of living is decreasing and an increasing number of Ainu people are starting to attend universities”.

#### AINU CULTURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

“Since the enactment of the 1997 Law for the Promotion of the Ainu Culture and for the Dissemination and Advocacy for the Traditions of the Ainu and the Ainu Culture, cultural oral tradition and conversation activities by the Ainu have become more significant. In addition to restoration of the aforementioned spiritual culture, the restoration of lifestyle and culture, such as construction of houses, building of boats and sewing of clothes, have been carried out by Ainu throughout Hokkaido as well as by those living on Honshu, centering on the Kanto area. The ‘points’ of conventional oral tradition and conversation activities have been joined to form a ‘surface’. We must not forget the efforts of *ekas* and *fuci* (elder men and women) who faithfully inherited traditional culture despite the adversity they faced” (no author 2013, 27).

H. Hiramura states that “100 years after the Meiji Revolution, there appeared new ideas to promote primeval inhabitants. (...) We have to respect culture and traditions of

those who used to live here”. Thanks to this tendency, there appeared museums, groups and people who want to appreciate Ainu culture here and in other places. Museums, folk groups and institutions promoting Ainu culture were created. The last group may include the Ainu Culture Promotion Center in Sapporo Pirka Kotan. M. Tanaka who works in the Center says that „its main goal is to promote Ainu culture, a mutual understanding between the Ainu and Japanese people; it is also a place of meetings between the Ainu and the rest of the society.”

In 2013, the municipal authorities estimated that 13 000 people who identify themselves as Ainu live on Hokkaido. It is believed that 10 times as many people do not admit to their Ainu descent, usually they are people from mixed, Ainu-Japanese marriages. Hiding one’s descent is an effect of the state’s policy against the Ainu and their poor social status. This policy has changed and now more and more people admit to their Ainu origins. However, it is still a very delicate matter.

K. Sekine, who teaches the Ainu language in Biratori, believes that in today’s Japan no one speaks the Ainu language fluently. On Hokkaido, there is about 10–20 people who know the language better than he does but this level of fluency does not give opportunities for free conversation. In their conversations, Ainu people use the Japanese language. The data quoted above are not precise because, as stated above, a direct question about ethnicity is impossible and numerous descendants of mixed marriages hide their origin. H. Hiramura, in the Ainu Museum in Biratori-Nibutani, points out that despite organized oratory competitions the Ainu language is not commonly used:

“There are about 5 300 inhabitants in Biratori, only a few of them speak Ainu and only several dozens of them can converse in this language at a basic level. This is a very small number. We are trying to extend the knowledge of this language. The biggest problem is that the Ainu language is not written, it is only spoken”.

This disappearance of the Ainu language is an effect of assimilation policy, Japanization: “You were not allowed to speak Ainu, it was some kind of discrimination which still exists to a certain degree. You are Ainu so you are treated in a worse way”. Young people choose the Japanese language because this is a language of social advancement. The Ainu language is a synonym of backwardness, poverty.

W. Nakamura, who is the assistant manager in the Hokkaido Museum, observes that:

“even on Hokkaido knowledge about the Ainu is not so extensive. Of course it is better than in other regions of the country. That is why, among other things, posters and a statue were placed at Sapporo station – and this is only the beginning. People will be more aware of Ainu culture and tradition.”

Nakamura speaks about a campaign started in 2013 which is supposed to promote Ainu culture on Hokkaido using the motto – *Irankarapte*. The campaign was supposed to remind people that on the June 6th, 2008 the Japanese Parliament passed

a resolution to recognize the Ainu as an indigenous population of Japan. The phrase *Irankarapte* means “let me gently touch your heart (soul)”. It symbolizes Hokkaido’s hospitality, it enables people to get acquainted with the culture and spirit of the Ainu, it speaks about the symbiosis with nature, the coexistence of different cultures and the creation of an affluent society (Internet 5). As part of this campaign, traditional Ainu motifs were and still are placed in busy passageways in Sapporo and the most important element of this campaign is a wooden statue of an Ainu man with a bow.

Ainu people have noticed a change in the attitude of society and of the authorities towards their culture. T. Kaizawa, a dancer from the Biratori folk group and a member of the Ainu Association of Hokkaido, states:

“Twenty years ago, knowledge of Ainu culture was poor. Since that time there has been the UN convention on primeval inhabitants and it changed a lot. For 20 years, we have been speaking about the existence of the Ainu and their culture. The interest of local and central authorities has escalated. Meaningful changes have taken place especially in the last 10 years and I personally believe that, in comparison with the interest shown when I was a teenager, it is completely different”.

The renaissance of Ainu culture is so noticeable and common that it is mentioned even by well-known tourist guides which present it as a kind of tourist attraction (Rowthorn 2013, 569). At first, only the Japanese used the tourist potential of Ainu culture. In the second half of the 20th century – even before “the Ainu renaissance” – the Ainu started to use their culture for commercial purposes<sup>11</sup>. The authorities gave their permission as they tended “to tolerate the Ainu only to an extent that assured income from Hokkaido tourism” (Majewicz 1991, 234). The Ainu tried to hand down the knowledge of their traditions to visitors but usually they did it to “attract tourists, to earn money” (Majewicz 1983, 21). It quickly turned out that the biggest profits from this developing tourism are drawn by Japanese companies and the Ainu still live in poverty<sup>12</sup>.

In these times of globalization and overpowering unification ethnic minorities are threatened with extinction. A new, previously unknown phenomenon of grass-roots renaissance of small, endangered cultures has appeared as a reaction to this process. The formation of elite groups of ethnic minorities is a bid to save ancient traditions from oblivion. Groups reconstructing the old culture are starting to appear and assert their identity amidst a dominant group of people. In a way, the renaissance of each culture has to go back to its roots, however, a return to the traditional way of living should

<sup>11</sup> Previously, it was the Japanese who used the Ainu as a tourist attraction. Sieroszewski claims that Ainu people were exploited by some Japanese man. He took them to an exhibition in Osaka “where they were supposed to ‘pretend’ to be Ainu villagers and present ‘the bear holiday’ (Sieroszewski 1957, 26).

<sup>12</sup> I observed a similar phenomenon during my research conducted with J. Łapott amongst the Dogon (Mali) where the greatest profits were not drawn by Dogon people living in villages visited by tourists but by foreign tour operators. It rouses dissatisfaction among the Dogon and causes many misunderstandings.

not be expected. Kaizawa introduced the bow dance which he had seen in Sapporo to the group's repertoire. He says that

“some women remember their grandmothers dancing the crane dance or they have seen it somewhere else. Nowadays, groups like this one try to reconstruct Ainu culture.”

Life is changing and representatives of ethnic minorities want to live in the same way as members of majority groups. They do not want to be living fossils, walking museums. One of the interlocutors noticed that “museums are good for tourists, for autochthons it is a living, changing culture”. Ainu culture evolved over centuries and changed due to the influence of Japanese culture. The modern Ainu way of living is the same as that of other inhabitants of Japan.

The Ainu will probably not go back to using the Ainu language, it is too late to reconstruct it. Japanese has become and probably will stay their native language. According to Nakamura, “even without the preservation of their language the Ainu people will not disappear, their identity will not disappear even when their language does”. He is not the only person thinking this way, many interlocutors emphasize that “language is not the only element of culture, Ainu culture will exist without their language”. They will cultivate traditions which will not restrict their contemporary, modern life. Folk groups will present old traditions of their ancestors despite the fact that they may be a bit commercial. A huge opportunity to become more prominent in Japanese society is through the promotion of Ainu art which is gladly bought by tourists. It is not just a meaningless imitation. There is a group of modern, recognized artists who are continuators of their forefathers' art<sup>13</sup>. Mainly thanks to their contribution it was possible to create “Ainu Design” which is a line or series of functional items decorated with traditional Ainu motifs (t-shirts, shirts, bags, handbags, wallets, trays, cup mats, tablecloth etc.).

## CONCLUSIONS

During one of numerous meetings on Hokkaido there was a question to a young father with a Japanese wife, who was a member of a folk group. “What will your son be?” There was a very balanced answer.

“Will my son be Ainu? It depends on my wife whether my son will be raised in Ainu culture. When he learns about his father's descent, then he will be and Ainu and Japanese. My son has a good relationship with Ainu culture, and he will choose himself whether he wants to be Ainu or / and Japanese. I want to encourage him, not to force him. Young people have a different approach to Ainu culture.”

<sup>13</sup> Here we have the example of Kaizawa, who has a picture of his sculptor-grandfather in his studio from the beginning of the 20th century and he directly refers to his artistic works.

Will their interest in Ainu culture and their sense of belonging continue? How will future generations behave? Who will they consider themselves to be? To a great extent it depends on observation, if they will be proud of their ancestors' culture or if they will be ashamed of their Ainu origin. Will the Ainu limit themselves to only hanging *inaw* on their rear-view mirrors? Or will it be something more?

It is impossible to address all of the topics related to the renaissance of Ainu culture and identity in a short article. Undoubtedly, it is some kind of phenomenon worth researching continuously. This article only presents an outline of history showing the process of transformation starting with armed conflicts through assimilation processes (Japanization), acculturation, discrimination and finally the unexpected cultural renaissance. Differences in the interpretation of facts by scientists and Ainu people may constitute an interesting problem. Scientists carry out dispassionate analysis based on facts while Ainu people perceive their culture subjectively and emotionally. We are given the impression of an ongoing process rather than a realistic view of the situation.

*English proofreader Richard Daniel Rogers*

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The Shiraoi Museum. Photo: L. Buchalik 2015.



B. Piłsudski Monument in Shiraoi. Photo: L. Buchalik 2015.



Traditional Aynu farm at the Biratori-Nibutani Museum. Photo: L. Buchalik 2015.



Aynu motifs in an underground passage in Sapporo. Photo: L. Buchalik 2015.