

Lesson 10 – Resource Sheet 4

Indigenous languages

The Ainu people of Japan

The **Ainu** are the indigenous peoples of the northern island of Japan (Hokkaido). Some Ainu are also found on the Kuril Islands which form part of Russia. While many of those with Ainu ancestry have been assimilated into Japanese society, some 25,000 Ainu are still officially recognised as indigenous by Japanese authorities.



Ainu People of Japan c. 1900

As the Japanese colonised the island of Hokkaido from the mid-1400s they oppressed and exploited the Ainu. Over time, this was replaced with discrimination. During the mid-late 1800s and the early 1900s, for example, the Ainu were prevented from observing their traditional customs and forced to adopt Japanese practices.

In traditional Ainu culture both men and women kept their hair at shoulder length and wore traditional Ainu garb. Men, stopped shaving at a certain age, so typically had full beards.

Ainu women underwent mouth tattooing to signify their coming to adulthood. From the age of 12, women began the process of tattooing, marking the lips, hands and

arms over a three-year period. When the process was complete, usually around age 15 or 16, the girl was eligible for marriage. Tattooing was a woman's domain and only women tattooed each other. The government banned the practice during the mid-1800s.

The Ainu respected nature and believed that gods descended to earth disguised as animals, plants or other objects in order to provide for humans.

The Hokkaido Ainu language is now rarely spoken. There was no written language. Today, there are only a handful of native speakers and most of these are well into their eighties. Despite this, attempts are being made to revive the language. The Japanese government is, for example, developing a facility dedicated to preserving the Ainu culture, including its language.

In an effort to preserve Ainu oral literature for future generations, it has been documented. Ainu language classes are now being conducted using this documentation. There is now even an Ainu language textbook. As a result, there are now an increasing number of second-language learners, especially in Hokkaido.



Elderly Ainu woman and man