

Japan



Mark J. Hudson, Ann-elise Lewallen, and Mark K. Watson, eds., *Beyond Ainu Studies: Changing Academic and Public Perspectives*

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THE AINU ARE an indigenous people of northern Japan. Historically, they inhabited the northern part of Honshu, the whole of the island of Hokkaido and now what are the Russian-controlled Kurile Islands and Sakhalin. More recently their civilization has centered on rural sections of Hokkaido although there are scattered groups of ethnic Ainu in urban areas across Japan and some Ainu living abroad. Estimates of the number of Ainu residing in Japan vary greatly depending on how one defines an ethnic Ainu. Estimates range from 25,000 to 200,000. The Ainu language, though experiencing a revival in schools and in some Ainu families, is virtually extinct as a primary language of daily speech.

The purpose of this slender yet rich volume is not to analyze current trends in Ainu culture per se. Rather, anthropologists Mark J. Hudson, Anne-elise Lewallen, and Mark K. Watson, the editors of *Beyond Ainu Studies*, have collected thirteen essays by scholars and activists working in the field of anthropology and indigenous studies. They write that their intent here is to “reinvigorate discussion of the possibility and significance of Ainu research. In doing so, we are not arguing for the resurrection of earlier Ainu Studies. Instead ... we want to endorse the need to move beyond its legacy at a time of historic change within the Ainu political movement.... Our position is ... [to] initiate a new conversation and point of departure on the subject of Ainu research” (10).

Speaking in broad terms, traditional Ainu Studies held a rather contemptuous view of the Ainu. Western travelers in the late Meiji period (1868–1912) as well as prewar Japanese writers and government officials described the Ainu in very patronizing terms as less intelligent beings at a far lower level on the evolutionary scale than themselves. A few Western and Japanese visitors to Ainu villages pillaged Ainu graveyards to steal

recently buried skeletons in order to demonstrate their supposed lack of civilized peoples' brain capacity.

Early Western and later some Japanese writers evoked the image of the Ainu as having the intelligence and capacity of a child. "As a whole, the Ainu race and its culture is representative of the earliest stages of human evolution; the individual Ainu has not evolved to adulthood but is still a child. Although the Ainu is described as 'shaggy' and of 'wild appearance,' he is also characterized by 'large soft brown eyes,' a trait often associated with dogs or children" (36).

The image of the Ainu as a stereotypical handsome yet fierce primitive being became an object of intense tourist curiosity throughout the twentieth century. I remember my first trip to Hokkaido in the late 1960s, being sent by JTB to visit the Ainu "settlement" of Shiraoi to meet "authentic" Ainu natives in traditional garb and to buy small carved statues of "typical Ainu men" which sit by my office desk even today. Tourism brought badly needed revenue to Ainu families, but being eyed as if they were creatures in a zoo and having gawking tourists either enter or stare blankly into their homes could be humiliating. Ainu political activist and writer Kayano Shigeru (1926–2006) wrote in the 1990s how he hated the so-called Japanese "scholars" of Ainu culture:

There were a number of reasons why I hated them. Each time they came to Nibutani [Kayano's home village], they left with folk utensils. They dug up our sacred tombs and carried away ancestral bones. Under the pretext of research, they took blood from villagers and in order to examine how hairy we were, rolled up our sleeves, then lowered our collars to check our backs, and so on. My mother once staggered home after I don't know how much blood had been taken.... Among the photographs of my mother is one in which a number plate hangs from her neck, and being photographed while wearing this label, how much money did she receive, I wonder? My mother's pained expression in the photograph always stings me to the quick. (56)

In 2008, 140 years after it had annexed Ainu lands, the Japanese Diet surprised many in Japan and abroad by formally recognizing the Ainu as an indigenous people. A strong movement led by young Ainu activists has brought them both full citizenship and all the rights accorded to ethnic Japanese. The Ainu are today regarded as fully competent citizens in a heterogeneous Japanese state and their old image of primitive folks who were the objects of tourist fascination is dying.

The editors of *Beyond Ainu Studies* give the reader some valuable insights into how the Ainu are being studied today by outsiders as well as the manner in which Ainu writers are describing their contemporary society. They include chapters by both scholars in the field as well as Ainu activists and practitioners on a broad range of topics including history, ethnography, linguistics, tourism, legal mobilization, hunter-gatherer studies, the Ainu diaspora throughout Japan and abroad, and gender and clothwork. Each chapter gives in-depth coverage to its subject matter.

I found Mark K. Watson's chapter, "Tokyo and the Urban Indigenous Experience," to be of special interest. The traditional view of the Ainu is a rural population living in general poverty in northern Japan, particularly in Hokkaido. Watson reminds us that "For too long, the ignorance of Ainu life in Japan's mainland cities

has hidden from public view the important social, cultural, and political history of Ainu migration to the capital of Tokyo and other major mainland cities since at least the 1950s” (69). It is quite possible that there are more Ainu living outside of Hokkaido than within. No one knows the exact number of Ainu living in Tokyo, Kyoto, or Osaka because there have been few successful efforts to establish community ties among the urban Ainu. Nevertheless, modern Ainu studies must include those living in urban areas outside of Hokkaido.

Kirsten Refsing’s chapter on Ainu linguistics, “From Collecting Words to Writing Grammars,” suggests that while Ainu culture and selfhood are very much alive, their traditional language has evaporated. All Ainu are now educated in Japanese and Ainu as a language is no longer “used as a means of daily communication and few people can speak it at all. There is no longer any person alive who has had Ainu as his first and only language at home.... In terms of being an active speech community, Ainu has been dead for decades” (198–99).

While all the chapters provide sufficient information on their individual topics, the reader with little or no background in Ainu history and culture might have a difficult time with the book because the editors have not really provided a very necessary introductory background chapter that gives basic information about who the Ainu are, how many of them are living where, and what would pass as at least an outline of their history. A map or two pinpointing traditional Ainu population centers would be helpful.

But despite these minor complaints, I can highly recommend *Beyond Ainu Studies* as a means of understanding the dynamic changes the Ainu are experiencing today as well as the rapidly accelerating alterations in the field of Ainu Studies. The book is carefully crafted and edited and each chapter is wellwritten and researched. This work is a good start at introducing a more modern look at Ainu culture, but there is ample room for far more in-depth writing and research.

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