
DOI: 10.24411/2658-6789-2019-10006

**CREATING A MINORITY: THE VIEWS OF JAPANESE
INTELLECTUALS AND JAPAN'S POLICY TOWARDS
AINU IN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES**

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Abstract: The article traces how the image of the Ainu formed by Japanese intellectuals in 18th and early 19th centuries influenced the formation of Japan's policy towards this ethnic minority in the Meiji period (1868-1912).

Keywords: Ainu, Japan, colonization, Meiji period, nation state, ethnic minorities

Introduction

Ainu, an ethnic minority of Japan (about 25 thousand people), are living in the country's northernmost island, Hokkaido, as well as in the Capital Region. As all institutions of the state began to be reformed following Western patterns in the 1860s, the Japanese government, on the one hand, undertook the construction of the nation-state by starting the assimilation of ethnic minorities of the country, while, on the other hand, proclaimed itself an empire and, as a consequence, increasingly felt the need for colonies and subordinate population ethnically distinct from the Japanese people. In such an ambiguous situation, the "Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Law" was adopted in 1899. Nominally an act of positive discrimination granting Ainu rights equal to those of ethnic Japanese, the law in fact turned out to be the legal basis

for a nearly century-long oppression¹. In our opinion, such ambiguous consequences of the law were attributable, to begin with, to the politicized role of ethnicity deeply rooted in Japanese political culture. Since the early stages of the formation of the Japanese state in the 8th and 9th centuries, the ruling elite took measures to limit the political rights of Chinese and Korean immigrants. However, what was even more significant was the situation that had formed by late 19th century and under which the Ainu were perceived as the main ethnic minority in the territory of the Japanese archipelago to whom the civilizing activities of the central government were directed. In this article, we would like to show how the perception of the Ainu by the Japanese authorities and among intellectuals in the 18th and 19th centuries was changing, and to find out what impact it had on the adoption of the “Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Law”.

Japan’s policy towards Ainu from the 17th to the middle of the 19th centuries

Politically independent, the Ainu of Hokkaido, the Kuril Islands, and Sakhalin maintained trade relations during the 14th – 19th centuries among themselves and with other peoples of the Okhotsk Sea region: Sakhalin Ainu with Nivkhs, Oroch, and Nanai, Ainu of Hokkaido with Japanese, and Kuril Ainu with Kamchadals and, since the beginning of the 18th century, with Russians.

By the 16th century the southern tip of Hokkaido was put under control by a Japanese warrior house of Kakizaki. In 1599, the head of the house came into direct vassal relationship with Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), who was completing the unification of the country, and received a new clan name of Matsumae. The newly formed domain was ordered to provide the security of the northern boundaries of Japan, as an attack from the north by the Jurchen tribes, who at that time waged

¹ It was only in 1997, when the “Law for the Promotion of the Ainu Culture” was enacted, that the legal status of the Ainu began to change, which culminated in their official recognition as an ethnic minority of Japan in 2008.

unification wars on the continent, was considered possible. In exchange, the Matsumae clan was granted a monopoly right to control trade with the Ainu. It was then when the Ainu of Hokkaido first became an object of legal regulation by the Japanese government. Tokugawa Ieyasu's license with a black seal reaffirmed their right to freedom of movement.

After some time, as a part of policies aimed at strengthening control, the so-called “lands of Japanese people” (*wajinchi* 和人地), to which the Japanese laws extended, were designated in the southern part of Hokkaido. The rest of the territory, mainly inhabited by Ainu, became known as the “Ainu lands” (*ezochi* 蝦夷地). Besides, the coastline of the Ainu lands was divided into trade districts which were given to vassals of the Matsumae clan as a payment for their service. Each vassal had the right to send ships to his district for trade with local population. The Ainu, meanwhile, were forbidden to leave their places of residence (before then, the Ainu came to trade to the city of Matsumae). These changes were stipulated in the text of a new license with a black seal issued by the 4th shogun, Tokugawa Ietsuna, which did not provide for freedom of travel for Ainu any more [Kamiya 1994, pp. 49-68].

Since the beginning of the 18th century, vassals of the Matsumae clan began to lease the rights to trade with Ainu to merchants for a fixed payment. This gave rise to a system of trade districts farming. Pursuing profit, merchants began to diversify their activities in the Ainu lands, proceeding from trade to organizing fisheries. The Ainu were hired as seasonal workers, receiving rice, wine, tobacco, and other Japanese goods as payment. By the second half of the 18th century this system had extended to all territory of the island of Hokkaido [Kamiya 1994, pp. 49–68].

By this time Russian pioneers, moving ahead from Kamchatka along the chain of the Kuril Islands, had brought the population of the archipelago — the Kuril Ainu — up to the island of Urup under Russian control. In 1778–1779, Russians encountered Japanese for the first time in the northeastern area of Hokkaido. The Russian proposal to establish direct trade relations with the Japanese was rejected, though officials of the Matsumae clan permitted to trade through the Kuril Ainu, who could

come from the island of Urup to Hokkaido and trade with local Ainu. The Matsumae domain tried to keep the visit by Russians a secret, but by the early 1780s rumors about it had reached intellectuals and officials of the central government in Edo.

The visit of the Russian embassy of A. Laxman in 1792–1793 and entries to the harbors of Hokkaido of the ships of the British expedition of W. Broughton in 1796–1797 pushed the central government of Japan to transfer the Ainu lands under its direct control. The transfer was conducted gradually: the eastern lands of Ainu (the Pacific coast of Hokkaido, as well as Kunashir and Iturup) were put in 1799 under temporary, and in 1802 under permanent control; in 1807 direct control was extended to the western lands of Ainu (the west of Hokkaido) and Sakhalin. The lands of the Matsumae domain in the south of Hokkaido were also appropriated, and the domain itself was transferred to the northeast of the island of Honshu. Such situation remained till 1821, when, as the threat from the Western powers decreased, the territories of Hokkaido and adjacent islands were returned to the Matsumae domain.

As far as the policies aimed at indigenous population during the period of direct control of the territories by the central government are concerned, at the first stage, measures aiming at Japanization of Ainu and encouragement of agriculture among them were undertaken. However, facing unrest of the population, the Japanese government quickly abandoned these measures and essentially returned to the system of leasing trade districts to wealthy merchants. An increasingly large number of Ainu were employed in the fisheries, becoming unable to maintain their traditional way of life. This was aggravated by increased environmental stress that broke the fragile balance between nature and humans that had been forming for centuries.

Nevertheless, up to the middle of the 19th century, the Japanese government did not consider Ainu its subjects, until the question of demarcation of lands to the north of Japan arose during the negotiations with the Russian envoy Yevfimiy Putyatin. Despite a large number of regulatory acts concerning Ainu, during the first half of the 19th century,

for the Japanese government, the primary question was control over territories where representatives of Russia and other European countries could potentially arrive, while Ainu were seen as an integral part of these territories. Partly this was reflected in the name of Ainu that had become established by this time — the ‘indigenous’, or ‘local’ population (*dojin* 土人), instead of the heretofore widespread words *ezo* (蝦夷) or *ijin* (夷人).

During the 18th and 19th centuries, as the northern frontiers of Japan and their population were gradually brought under the attention of the central government, Ainu also began to draw the interest of many Edo and provincial intellectuals. Some of them devoted separate essays to Ainu and their lands, while others mentioned them in texts not touching upon the problem of development of northern lands directly.

Perhaps, the most typical image of Ainu which was widespread in Japanese society in the Edo period is to be found in the *Ezoshi* (蝦夷志, Description of Ezo), written by a statesman and thinker Arai Hakuseki (1657–1725) [Shchepkin 2013, pp. 281–289]. He systematized the information about Ainu and their lands which was available to him from neo-Confucian positions, having placed emphasis on the differences in customs and culture. The way to understand distinct culture by determining the meaning and functions of Ainu customs in terms of the way of life of Ainu society wasn’t essential for Hakuseki. He tried to fit them inside the established system of values to which he subscribed as a Confucian. The fact that his work was written in Chinese with a large number of cliches (for example, 左衽 ‘are wrapped up from right to left’, 被髮長鬚 ‘hair that randomly hang down, and long beards’) left a clear imprint too. Willing or not, these cliches put the Ainu customs to the category of the barbarious within the dichotomy of the civilized center and the barbarians (Ch. *huayi zhibian* 華夷之辨).

The *kokugaku* scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), who adhered to different doctrinal positions, in his commentary on one of the oldest Japanese texts, *Kojiki*, correlated *emishi* mentioned in it with the Ainu of his time, insisting on their radical ethnic difference from the Japanese people. In this sense, he hardly differed from the Confucian Hakuseki. At the same time, Norinaga admitted that Ainu were able to become

subjects of the Japanese emperor, like it had happened in the ancient times [Kojima 2009, pp. 149–150].

The above-described views are contrasted by the perception of Ainu by an original Japanese thinker Ando Shoeki (1703–1762). Describing the society and life of Ainu, he makes them an example for his historical concept, according to which all societies initially live in the world of nature, and only later some of them enter the world of law. Being critical towards the Japanese society of his time, an obvious example of the ‘world of law’, Shoeki idealizes the simple and more human ‘world of nature’ of Ainu in which there is no place for greed, luxury, and insidiousness [Kikuchi 1999, pp. 219–221].

In the 1780s, when the question of Ainu began to be associated with the problem of relations with Russia and possible development of Hokkaido, the Japanese intellectuals addressed the European experience of colonization of new lands and conquest of the ‘wild’ peoples. Kudo Heisuke (1734–1801) in his work *Kamusakatsutoka koku fusetsuko* (加摸西葛杜加国風説考 Studying of Rumors about Kamchatka, better known as *Akaezo fusetsuko* 赤蝦夷風説考) proceeded from Dutch sources and covered in detail the nature of colonial policy of the Russian Empire, bringing up the question of development of Hokkaido, of opening trade with Russians, and of the importance of subordinating the Ainu of Hokkaido in order to prevent Russians from entering the island [Shchepkin 2015, pp. 297–310]. Hayashi Shihei (1738–1793), who studied colonial experience of European countries and was inspired by the activities of the Russian empress Catherine II, suggested to revise the treatment of the lands inhabited by Ainu and to consider them a part of the Japanese state, and to pursue a peaceful policy of enlightenment in relation to Ainu [Shchepkin 2011].

Mogami Tokunai (1754–1836), a well-known explorer of northern lands and a participant of several government-sponsored expeditions, went further than others who dealt with the policy towards Ainu. He declared that Ainu were not a distinct people and that they had common roots with the Japanese, while the reasons for the differences lied in the fact that in ancient times they had not been affected by the teaching of

sages, did not observe laws and kept their wild customs. Thus, he believed them to be inhabitants of remote reaches of Japan whom the beneficial influence of civilization had not reached, and therefore considered it necessary to correct this situation. Such a position served as a kind of ideological basis for incorporation of Ainu lands in the Japanese state, of which Mogami Tokunai was a supporter [Kikuchi 1999, pp. 227–230].

Apparently, the common ground for all intellectuals was the recognition, in a varying degree, of distinctiveness of Ainu from Japanese, and their situation in the dichotomy of civilization and wildness being lower (in the European understanding) or further from the center (in the traditional Chinese understanding). Along with Ainu, inhabitants of the Kingdom of Ryukyu and Koreans were also often mentioned in the Edo period discourse concerning ethnic differences, and both were also located below Japanese in the imagined hierarchy of civilization. However, Ainu, probably owing to their greatest dissimilarity, took the predominant place in this discourse. It is remarkable that Hayashi Shihei, who described all the three mentioned peoples in his work *Sangoku Tsuran* (三国通覽 The General Review of Three Countries), devoted its largest part to Ainu. It is therefore no accident that the first foreign policy steps of the new Meiji government were aimed at Ainu and their lands.

Policy of Japan towards Ainu in the Meiji period (1867–1912)

With the conclusion of treaties of trade and friendship with the USA, Russia, and other Western powers in the middle of the 1850s, Japan entered a new period of its historical development. As a result of an economic crisis, political instability, civil wars the military government of the Tokugawa fell, and in 1867–1868 it was succeeded by a new Meiji government which headed for modernization and establishment of a nation state modelled after the European powers. During this period, the question of the status of Ainu gained renewed relevance, while its perception underwent certain changes. Initially, the question of Ainu was closely intertwined with territorial delimitation with the Russian Empire,

but after the conclusion of the Treaty of Saint Petersburg in 1875, which removed mutual contradictions, it began to be seen as a domestic problem.

In 1871, the Meiji government adopted the law on the family registers. At the same time, the old system of division of Japanese subjects into estates had undergone changes: now only three estates were in existence: the highest aristocracy (*kazoku* 華族), untitled aristocracy (*shizoku* 士族) — representatives of the estate of warriors (*bushi* 武士) that had existed during the Tokugawa period, and commoners (*heimin* 平民). Ainu began to be ranked in family registers as the last of estates, along with common Japanese people. However, in 1878 the Bureau of Development of Hokkaido (*kaitakushi* 開拓使), the governmental body that managed Hokkaido and adjacent islands in 1869–1882, sent to its divisions a directive on the need to standardize the name for Ainu, suggesting to use the description ‘former natives’ (*kyudojin* 旧土人) for this purpose. Here is the text of the directive:

“As for the former *ezo* people, in family registers and other similar documents, certainly, it is necessary to treat them as representatives of the common people, however, in cases when authorities need to separate [Ainu from Japanese], as the name for them is not established [uniformly], they use such names as ‘ancient people’, ‘natives’, ‘former natives’, which seems inconvenient. Therefore, from now on, in cases of need to separate [Ainu from Japanese], the name ‘former natives’ shall be used. At the same time, in order to avoid obstacles to future inspections, the increase or reduction in the number of former natives shall be calculated separately” [Kaitakushi jigyo... 1885].

The word ‘former’ in this name did not mean that Ainu had lost the name ‘natives’ distinguishing them from citizens of Japan. It only indicated that they were called ‘natives’ by the ‘former’ government of bakufu (it was introduced officially in 1856 by the directive of the governor of Hakodate, which divided Ainu into the ‘official’ (*yakudojin* 役土人), i.e. those received a position from the Japanese government, and the ‘common’ (*heidoin* 平土人) natives [Hirotoni 1985, pp. 27–41]. Thus, despite the change of the official name, its separating aspect

remained. So why was the legislative separation of Ainu from the ethnic Japanese necessary? Let us address the contents of the new Meiji government's policy towards Ainu.

In 1869, in the island of Hokkaido, separation into the lands of Japanese and the lands of Ainu was abolished, the island received its modern name, and the Bureau of Development of Hokkaido was established. The policy of the Bureau regarding Ainu came down to the following points:

- 1) release from feudal limitations and debts;
- 2) 'Japanization' by means of inclusion into family registers, change of customs and names;
- 3) cancelling the right to use woods and fields, suspension of provision of private ownership on land;
- 4) restrictions on hunting and fishing [Sekiguchi, Tabata, Kuwabara, Takizawa 2015, pp. 144–150].

On the one hand, all of this was aimed at equating the rights of Ainu with those of Japanese settlers in Hokkaido. The entire territory of Hokkaido was declared state-owned property, and now both Japanese settlers and native Ainu had to receive lands under common conditions. However, the development of Hokkaido meant, first and foremost, the development of agriculture and livestock breeding there, in which Ainu fared substantially worse than Japanese, and these were precisely the purposes for which land was provided. At the same time, because of numerous bans on traditional customs of Ainu, including use of traditional tools of hunting and fishing, the way of life of local population, which had developed over many centuries, was undermined, which eventually led to the decrease in the Ainu population. Thus, generally speaking, the policy of the Bureau put Ainu in a disadvantageous position compared to Japanese settlers.

In 1882, the Bureau of Development of Hokkaido was abolished, and the island was divided into three prefectures — Hakodate, Sapporo and Nemuro. Four more years later, in 1886, the prefectures were united in a single province of Hokkaido with its center in Sapporo while preserving divisions in Hakodate and Nemuro. The new authorities realized the weak

points of the earlier policy and headed for encouragement of agriculture among Ainu and for development of their education. The first task was generally carried out by allocation to Ainu of money for development of new lands, and also by provision of agricultural tools and seeds. At the same time, resettlement of Japanese people from the internal regions of Japan to Hokkaido was actively encouraged as well: in the fifteen years from 1869 to 1884 the population of the island grew from 40 to 220 thousand people, and in the next fifteen years — to 800 thousand. To provide the settlers with suitable sites for agriculture, the authorities of Hokkaido held events for selection of places for settlements, which forced Ainu to leave their native places. As a result, the authorities, along with selection of places for Japanese settlements, also began to designate sites for Ainu residence, which were called ‘lands with perspective of development by the former natives’, or even ‘reservations for the former natives’. The situation of Ainu was also aggravated by spreading epidemic diseases, years of poor harvests, and also forced relocation of big groups of Ainu from Sakhalin to Hokkaido, as well as from the northern Kuril Islands to the island of Shikotan after the 1875 Treaty of Saint Petersburg with Russia was signed, under which Japan abandoned its claims to the southern part of Sakhalin in exchange for the Kuril Islands to the north from Iturup.

Since the early 1890s, the governorship of Hokkaido and certain members of the Japanese Diet began to work on drafts of the “Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Law”, which resulted in the adoption of a law of the same name on March 1, 1899. This law consisted of 11 main and 2 supplementary articles. Articles 1–3 regulated the provision of agricultural lands to Ainu and the related rights. Article 4–7 gave the poorer Ainu the opportunity to receive technical and financial aid for housekeeping and for solving other household questions. Article 8 defined sources of funds for the purposes stipulated in the previous articles. Article 9 provided for construction of elementary schools in Ainu settlements. Article 10 regulated the issue of management of common Ainu properties. Article 11 established criminal liability for non-compliance with the law [Yamakawa 1996, pp. 112–115].

Though this law, given its name, was aimed at assisting the ‘former aborigines’ in need, in fact it became the logical conclusion of the previous thirty years of policies aimed at assimilating the Ainu. The traditions, interests, and opinions of Ainu were not taken into consideration: they had no right to choose their occupation, the Ainu customs were prohibited, the duty to learn Japanese and to change Ainu names to Japanese ones was imposed, and so on. However, at the same time, with the adoption of this law, the Ainu were officially defined as a separate ethnic group, which was enforced by the established practice to mark them in family registers books with the ‘土’ character (from the official name *kyudojin* 旧土人).

A Japanese author Tsutomu Yamakawa notes the fact that the adoption of the “Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Law” took place in the period between the Sino-Japanese war of 1894–1895 and the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–1905, marked by a sharp growth of imperial consciousness in government circles and among the general public of Japan [Yamakawa 1996, pp. 115–116].

As a result of the former war, Japan obtained Taiwan from China, while the victory in the latter paved the way towards the annexation of Korea, which happened in 1910. The Japanese policy concerning the population of Taiwan and Korea had much in common with what happened during the second half of the 19th century in Hokkaido to the Ainu. Basically, the successful experience of ‘development’ of Hokkaido was taken as the basis for the colonization projects in Taiwan, Korea, and later in Manchuria. At the same time, the actions of the Japanese authorities in the colonies were justified by their civilizing mission aimed at other Asian peoples. Ainu and the law concerning them became, therefore, the first experience of Japanese imperialism, for the appearance and propaganda success of which the preservation of Ainu as a minority was necessary [Meshcheryakov 2014, pp. 340–371].

In this sense, the participation of Ainu as soldiers in the Russo-Japanese war is a good example. In total, 63 Ainu took part in it, among them three were killed in battle, five died of diseases, two remained disabled. For their battle service, three were awarded the Order of the

Golden Kite, and 51 Ainu received other awards [Sekiguchi, Tabata, Kuwabara, Takizawa 2015, pp. 218–220]. Among those who were awarded the Order of the Golden Kite, an Ainu soldier Kitakaze Isokichi became particularly known. The information about him was placed in textbooks intended for Ainu children — as a worthy example of service to the Japanese emperor, despite ethnic origin. Besides, Japanese newspapers wrote about his deeds, highlighting his Ainu origin, as the status of Ainu and their lands had remained one of the stumbling blocks in the Russia-Japan relations for more than a century. Thus, the duality of the Japanese government's policy towards Ainu consisted, on the one hand, in forced change of Ainu way of life, their 'japanization', and, on the other hand, in intentional preservation of them as an ethnic minority for ideological purposes.

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