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## Chapter 8

# Ainu Religious Consciousness and Challenges of Cultural Preservation

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### Introduction

A report issued in July 2009 by the government's Expert Panel on Ainu Policy (an advisory body to the Chief Cabinet Secretary) outlined two Ainu policies for the future: 1) Eliminate ethnic discrimination and seek people's understanding for the creation of a multicultural society in Japan; 2) Protect the culture of these indigenous people by promoting Ainu culture. These policies were clearly stated in line with the spirit of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (adopted on September 13, 2007) and a resolution that urged the government to officially recognize the Ainu as an indigenous people (passed in the Upper and Lower Houses of Japan's Diet (parliament) on June 6, 2008).

The implementation of the first policy requires that the history and culture of Ainu people be appropriately taught to children through school education. Local governments must also disseminate information and implement social education to eliminate inappropriate language and behavior regarding the Ainu. As for the second policy, Ainu people's wishes for opportunities to learn about and hand down their ethnic traditions should be satisfied by building the facilities necessary to achieve this and offering relevant courses. In this regard, both tangible and intangible cultural property should be examined, and measures to protect, conserve, and promote it should be taken accordingly.

The most important consideration in implementing these specific measures is to appropriately address problems based on an understanding of how traditional culture has been handed down and maintained among Ainu people. It should also be noted that Ainu culture is not something only to be preserved as a traditional element; Ainu people also have an aspect of culture that conforms to modern society.

This chapter sheds light on the present state of ethnic culture from the two perspectives of religious consciousness—the core of Ainu culture—and cultural tradition.

### Ainu Religious Consciousness

Practicing religion, be it a traditional or a more modern one, is not limited to membership of a religious community, participation in religious events or the professing of specific beliefs. Our outlook on the world, including the afterlife, as well as the domains of humans and the gods (all perspectives that form the basis for the development of our views on life and society) in addition to social relations based on this outlook, are all considered to be aspects of religion in a broader sense. In traditional societies, people were born into religious cultures, so their practice of religion tended to involve everyday religious acts as a matter of course. In many modern societies, however, people are more conscious of religion and choose it of their own free will. Where culture has been handed down, religious culture has also been passed on to succeeding generations, and people are generally free to make up their own minds about religious culture and its transmission in modern societies. The traditional Ainu outlook on the world and religious culture will also be handed down selectively and renewed by the present-day Ainu.

Now that we have looked at religion as a whole, let us examine the religious consciousness of Ainu people by focusing on their affiliation with religious organizations—a factor which people associate with religion more easily. The state of affiliation with religious communities among Ainu people exhibited characteristics similar to those seen in Japanese society as a whole and in Hokkaido society in general.

Table 8-1 Outline of religious beliefs (or religious community affiliations) (multiple answers)

	Ainu religious belief	Buddhism	Shintoism	Christianity	New religions	New Christian religions	Other religions	No religious belief	No response	Valid cases
Actual number	166	2,632	138	29	79	9	48	1,969	771	5,703
Percentage	2.9	46.2	2.4	0.5	1.4	0.2	0.8	34.5	13.5	100.0

The largest number of respondents cited Buddhism as their household religion, followed by those without particular religious beliefs. Those giving these two answers accounted for 80% of all respondents (Table 8-1). Since those without response made up 13.5%, respondents with different religious beliefs accounted for only about 6%. Of those with non-Buddhist religious beliefs, 2.9% said they had Ainu religious beliefs (this figure may be influenced by the provision of such an option among the responses) without belonging to any religious community, and nearly 3% said they belonged to religious communities and had specific religious beliefs. The latter group consisted of those choosing Christianity (Table 8-3) and those citing new and other religions (Table 8-4).

These percentages for respondents with religious beliefs are compatible with the religious consciousness of Japanese people as a whole. That is, many are involved in events associated with religious culture without being actively conscious of the religious aspect even though the number of those who have specific religious beliefs or belong to particular religious communities is small.

A breakdown of those citing Buddhism, Christianity, and new religions is shown in Tables 8-2 to 8-4. Among Buddhist sects, the percentage of those citing the orthodox Buddhist sect of Nichiren Shoshu was the highest; it should be noted that the figure surpassed that for respondents choosing the Jodo Shinshu sect. Since Hokkaido has a long history of activities that propagate Jodo Shinshu, it is the most powerful sect in the prefecture with the support of immigrants from the Hokuriku region (the northwestern part of Japan's main island of Honshu). On the other hand, Nichiren Shoshu is not a majority sect of the Nichiren Shu Buddhist order, and the growth of its influence in Hokkaido paralleled the expansion of the Soka Gakkai sect's influence. Since Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shoshu have parted ways, it is unknown whether those choosing Nichiren Shoshu were affiliated with Soka Gakkai or had quit Soka Gakkai and joined Nichiren Shoshu. Those not choosing sects/denominations were considered less bound to the temples their households supported, and may not be conscious of the associated religious beliefs.

Many of those with affiliation to Christian churches did not clarify their denominations; as such, it remains unknown whether they were Catholic or Protestant.

As for new religions, since Soka Gakkai is the largest new religion in Japan, it is natural that the number of respondents choosing it surpassed the figure for those citing other religious communities. However, the number of Soka Gakkai followers was larger than that for large- or medium-sized religious communities such as Rissho Kosei Kai and Shinnyo-en. It is preferable to consider the influence of Soka Gakkai in relation to Nichiren Shoshu.

There was arguably a need to ask those choosing Ainu religious beliefs to elaborate on their outlooks on the world and religion, but this matter will be examined in further detail in the next section.

Table 8-2 Breakdown of Buddhist sects

Units: No. of people, %

	Jodo Shu	Jodo Shinshu		Hokke Shu	Nichiren Shu	Nichiren Shoshu	Tendai Shu	
		Hongan-ji Sub-sect	Otani Sub-sect					
Actual number	29	73	3	6	42	47	132	3
Percentage distribution	1.1	2.8	0.1	0.2	1.6	1.8	5.0	0.1

  

	Soto Shu	Zen Shu	Shingon Shu	Other	No sect specified	Total
Actual number	44	79	38	9	2,136	2,632
Percentage distribution	1.7	3.0	1.4	0.3	81.2	100.0

Table 8-3 Breakdown of Christian denominations

Units: No. of people, %

	Catholic	Protestant	Other	No denomination specified	Total
Actual number	1	3	1	24	29
Percentage distribution	3.4	10.3	3.4	82.8	100.0

Table 8-4 Breakdown of new and other religions

Units: No. of people, %

	Soka Gakkai	Sukyo Mahikari	Reiha no Hikari	Rissho Kosei Kai	Shinnyo-en	Latter Day Saints	Jehovah's Witnesses	Other religions
Actual number	66	2	3	1	6	1	8	4
Percentage distribution	48.5	1.5	2.2	0.7	4.4	0.7	5.9	2.9

  

	No response	Total
Actual number	45	136
Percentage distribution	33.1	100.0

### Traditional Ainu Culture and Religious Rituals

In Ainu people's religious outlook on the world, souls and gods come from the next world to the world of humans to engage in exchanges with people. In events such as the bear-sending ceremony (known as *iomante* in the Ainu language) and the Blakiston's fish-owl-sending ceremony (*kotan-kor kamuy iomante*), Ainu people entertain gods called *kamuy* and send the animals' spirits off to their world. This concept is also seen with goods; when utensils and tools become broken or are no longer useful in the world of humans, ceremonies are held to respectfully send off the spirits of these goods before discarding them.

Ainu people recognize this world as that of humans and the next world as that of the gods, rather than believing in a humanocentric system of past, present, and future. In the world of humans, they communicate with the gods through prayers to them (*kamuy-nomi*). If the gods answer their prayers, humans are grateful and give them gifts. If not, no gifts are given. As such, the relationship is extremely dynamic and reciprocal.

Among rituals, ancestor worship (*shinnurappa*) is of particular importance; Ainu people pray for their ancestors, who live the same lives as gods in the next world and wish for the divine protection of their descendants. The approach to the world of the gods stands at the core of Ainu people's view of religion. It is said that Ainu people used to consider their reciprocal relationship with the gods as the foundation for ethical standards in communities.

Now, what has become of such a view of religion and the implementation of rituals? Those practicing the rituals of *kamuy-nomi* and *shinnurappa* made up less than 10% of respondents in the survey, and the performance of sending-off ceremonies is now rare for both animals and for utensils/tools. Even the percentage of those who had heard of acts such as worshipping at sacred places, casting spells, and calling down spirits was only just into double figures. To summarize Ainu people's traditional view of religion and religious rituals, it can be said that only a fraction practice them and that levels of recognition for them as traditional events are also low.

Indigenous peoples do not necessarily preserve traditional ethnic and religious culture in their original forms. With the traditional culture of non-Ainu Japanese people too, there are different views on what periods or aspects of culture can be considered traditional. Some religious cultural customs from just a few decades ago are obsolete today. As Ainu people were forced to assimilate with non-Ainu Japanese people in the history of Hokkaido's development and have shared experience of social changes in the modern and present-day eras, it is quite natural that they retain elements of traditional culture as memories, like many people in Japanese society.

Table 8-5 Practice of religious rituals among Ainu people

Units: No. of people, %

		Still practice	Have practiced	Know through hearsay, rumor, etc.	Don't know	No response	Total
The bear-sending ceremony	Actual number	63	425	1,834	2,345	1,036	5,703
	Percentage distribution	1.1	7.5	32.2	41.1	18.2	100.0
Other animals-sending ceremony	Actual number	38	193	1,071	3,242	1,159	5,703
	Percentage distribution	0.7	3.4	18.8	56.8	20.3	100.0
The salmon-welcoming ceremony	Actual number	269	426	1,708	2,264	1,036	5,703
	Percentage distribution	4.7	7.5	29.9	39.7	18.2	100.0
Traditional wedding and funeral ceremonies	Actual number	76	302	1,155	3,018	1,152	5,703
	Percentage distribution	1.3	5.3	20.3	52.9	20.2	100.0
Traditional ceremony to purify building sites/ for housewarming	Actual number	119	357	976	3,086	1,165	5,703
	Percentage distribution	2.1	6.3	17.1	54.1	20.4	100.0
Traditional memorial services for ancestors	Actual number	530	612	1,034	2,487	1,040	5,703
	Percentage distribution	9.3	10.7	18.1	43.6	18.2	100.0
<i>Inaw</i> offering	Actual number	424	541	985	2,677	1,076	5,703
	Percentage distribution	7.4	9.5	17.3	46.9	18.9	100.0
Prayer to gods	Actual number	432	496	1,270	2,450	1,055	5,703
	Percentage distribution	7.6	8.7	22.3	43.0	18.5	100.0
Prayer to sacred places	Actual number	282	332	1,070	2,885	1,134	5,703
	Percentage distribution	4.9	5.8	18.8	50.6	19.9	100.0
Taboos and conventions/ rules to be followed in the ocean, rivers, and mountains	Actual number	190	185	923	3,261	1,144	5,703
	Percentage distribution	3.3	3.2	16.2	57.2	20.1	100.0
Ceremony to send the spirits of tools	Actual number	96	156	749	3,507	1,195	5,703
	Percentage distribution	1.7	2.7	13.1	61.5	21.0	100.0
Incantation	Actual number	48	179	794	3,502	1,180	5,703
	Percentage distribution	0.8	3.1	13.9	61.4	20.7	100.0
Consultation with a shaman	Actual number	35	245	730	3,483	1,210	5,703
	Percentage distribution	0.6	4.3	12.8	61.1	21.2	100.0
Dreaming interpretation	Actual number	322	215	825	3,190	1,151	5,703
	Percentage distribution	5.6	3.8	14.5	55.9	20.2	100.0

We should also focus attention on the handing down of the Ainu cultural spirit and the creation of modern Ainu culture instead of being swayed only by external cultural transmission. This report examines Ainu spirit in the next section.

### **The Concept of Ainuness (*Ainu puri*)**

As people tend to prefer to express such matters in their own way, this survey asked about the concept of Ainuness in the form of an open-ended question, and many answers expressed a wide range of ideas indicating that *Ainu puri* and its related spirit remains alive and kicking today.

The largest number of respondents wrote that Ainuness meant remembering/practicing traditional culture, customs in everyday life, etc. among Ainu people. The second largest number of respondents cited Ainu characteristics such as coexistence with nature. Several examples of the answers received are reproduced below.

I aim to master the Ainu language and make a point of remembering the *upopo* (songs) I used to hear as my *huci* (grandmother) held me. We should preserve meat from animals hunted in the mountains by *ekasi* (elders) and eat it in winter. When harvesting mushrooms in mountain areas, they should be put in a *saranip* (a net bag made of bark) rather than a plastic bag so that the mushroom spores fall to the ground. Although I cannot embroider, it is important at least for children and grandchildren to master such skills. Lastly, we should maintain an appreciation for nature and everything around us, and teach our children to do so too.

*Ainu puri* encompasses the customs my grandparents and ancestors followed in life, and includes Ainu rituals, charms, fortune-telling from dreams, and the like. When I was a child, I often used to hear that the spirit of *Ainu puri* was maintained during traditional religious services for ancestors and certain anniversaries of people's passing.

Some respondents also wrote that Ainuness meant thinking about living as part of the Ainu community in light of relationships with their families, neighbors, and society. That is, rather than being something external, Ainuness is about feelings toward others.

Even if we cannot do exactly as our ancestors did, I believe we will find ourselves spiritually richer thanks to Ainu heritage, and will gradually come to cherish Ainu culture by being considerate to others, being appreciative of our food, learning about the history of the Ainu and studying how they have endured hardships.

Being thoughtful to others, giving and taking, considering others as our own relatives, and being considerate to elderly people. Simply knowing about things related to Ainu life, like the Ainu language, does not make us Ainu. *Ainu puri* involves feeling grateful for the Ainu spirit, gentleness, the gods, and the like. Namely, it is about appreciation for daily living.

It was also pointed out that with this spirit, even external changes in lifestyle are also a part of Ainuness.

Having respect for things in today's living environment (such as trying not to waste food and using things up) rather than trying to adopt past lifestyles, having pious feelings toward nature, animals, and plants; respecting ancestors, and staying generous to neighbors—all these things are part of *Ainu puri*. I want the destruction of the natural environment to stop so that it will continue to thrive and birds and animals will be able to survive. I also hope that Ainu oral literature will become more popular so that a wide range of people can understand it. If these things became a matter of course, I think this would be *Ainu puri*.

Living with nature, being grateful, instilling ingenuity and originality into daily life, and cherishing mutual support for others—although these concepts are vague, I believe they are part of our spiritual culture. Verbal communication is important in today's evolving lifestyles, but superficial *Ainu puri* alone is not enough.

These examples do not require any further explanation. *Ainu puri* represents spirit.

However, it is also true that culture has a physical presence that includes the form it takes and the way it molds things. People learn Ainu spirit through the use of language and the practice of rituals and customary acts. From this perspective, the spirit of coexistence with nature that has been cultivated on the basis of traditional occupations (such as agriculture, fisheries, and trade) may gradually become lost in daily life even among those living in Hokkaido's rich natural environment, let alone among urban dwellers and workers who have lower levels of interaction with nature in their daily lives. If the performance of Ainu rituals on ceremonial occasions is discontinued, opportunities to learn about interaction with the gods in the form of prayer will also be lost.

In this context, activities aimed at handing down and teaching about Ainu culture are necessary.

### **Participation in Ainu Cultural Activities: Preservation and Revitalization**

Few respondents had had opportunities to learn directly from *huci* (female elders) and *ekasi* (male elders), who communicate the external culture of *Ainu puri*, about the Ainu language, oral literature, the production and performance of musical instruments, embroidery and fabric weaving, traditional food collection methods, fishing and hunting techniques, and recipes for traditional Ainu dishes. Rather, they tend to learn and master aspects of culture through cultural activities at local community halls and workshops/events hosted by foundations and private organizations working to preserve and disseminate Ainu culture.

Table 8-6 Participation in Ainu cultural activities: Preservation and Revitalization

Units: No. of people, %

		Presently involved	Previously involved	Never been involved	No response	Total
Ainu language	Actual number	307	724	3,618	1,054	5,703
	Percentage distribution	5.4	12.7	63.4	18.5	100.0
Oral literature ( <i>yukar</i> , <i>uepeker</i> , etc.)	Actual number	181	365	4,020	1,137	5,703
	Percentage distribution	3.2	6.4	70.5	19.9	100.0
Singing ( <i>upopo</i> , singing while seated, etc.)	Actual number	361	550	3,698	1,094	5,703
	Percentage distribution	6.3	9.6	64.8	19.2	100.0
Musical instruments ( <i>mukkuri</i> , <i>tonkori</i> , etc.)	Actual number	339	686	3,585	1,093	5,703
	Percentage distribution	5.9	12.0	62.9	19.2	100.0
Dancing	Actual number	431	727	3,484	1,061	5,703
	Percentage distribution	7.6	12.7	61.1	18.6	100.0
Rituals ( <i>kamuy-nomi</i> , etc.)	Actual number	546	805	3,322	1,030	5,703
	Percentage distribution	9.6	14.1	58.3	18.1	100.0
Knitting	Actual number	175	403	4,000	1,125	5,703
	Percentage distribution	3.1	7.1	70.1	19.7	100.0
Embroidery	Actual number	288	590	3,743	1,082	5,703
	Percentage distribution	5.0	10.3	65.6	19.0	100.0
Fabric weaving	Actual number	141	317	4,112	1,133	5,703
	Percentage distribution	2.5	5.6	72.1	19.9	100.0
Traditional methods of hunting, farming, and fishing	Actual number	132	308	4,117	1,146	5,703
	Percentage distribution	2.3	5.4	72.2	20.1	100.0
Cooking and preservation methods	Actual number	306	624	3,684	1,089	5,703
	Percentage distribution	5.4	10.9	64.6	19.1	100.0
Woodcarving	Actual number	170	508	3,916	1,109	5,703
	Percentage distribution	3.0	8.9	68.7	19.4	100.0
Nature observation events (eco-tours, etc.)	Actual number	120	259	4,179	1,145	5,703
	Percentage distribution	2.1	4.5	73.3	20.1	100.0

In fact, few respondents had participated in activities related to the transmission of Ainu culture. Indeed, the vast majority had not necessarily had direct relations with Ainu culture at all. Even if we enumerate options for traditional culture as shown in the table above, many of them are connected to occupations, and necessary items in certain periods were created and used in the most appropriate ways. It is therefore only natural that in daily life, few had troubled themselves to hand down things that had become no longer necessary. However, many respondents highlighted in their responses to the open-ended question that they used Ainu culture as an appealing addition to their daily lives. Accordingly, we should attach importance to the fact that a certain number of respondents had expectations with regards to learning about traditional culture.

Table 8-7 Aspects of traditional culture you would like to be involved in in the future (multiple answers)

Units: No. of people, %

	Ainu language	Oral literature	Singing	Musical instruments	Dancing	Rituals	Knitting	Embroidery
Actual number	581	212	296	341	312	329	328	478
Percentage distribution	10.2	3.7	5.2	6.0	5.5	5.8	5.8	8.4

  

	Fabric weaving	Traditional methods of hunting, farming, and fishing	Cooking and preservation methods	Woodcarving	Nature observation events	No response	Valid cases
Actual number	355	303	459	430	475	4,161	5,703
Percentage distribution	6.2	5.3	8.0	7.5	8.3	73.0	100.0

Those wishing to learn the Ainu language made up the highest percentage, although even this was only 10% or so. Considering that the vast majority of respondents were not of school age, it is noteworthy that this many middle-aged and elderly people showed an interest in learning the language.

### Cultural Learning Space

The term *cultural learning space* refers not to physical space but to 1) subjects to be learned about, 2) relations between learners and educators, and 3) social conditions for the promotion of learning.

As for the first point, the subjects appear to have become significantly developed, and a considerable number of research publications, academic reports, and books on Ainu culture are now available. However, it must be said that the extent of studies on Ainu culture has not matched that of Okinawan studies or the corresponding levels of support from prefectural residents. Although the research and promotion of Ainu culture by Ainu people are important, it is considered essential to also involve many non-Ainu people from Hokkaido. In this sense, more effort should be made toward developing educational materials and offering training programs to teach Ainu culture appropriately as part of local-district studies in school education.

As for the second point, providing more opportunities for Ainu people to learn together is important in the short term, and it is also desirable from a medium- to long-term perspective to offer forums for Ainu people to meet non-Ainu individuals and establish facilities and organizations aimed at promoting multicultural studies. Ainu respondents had various kinds of blood/genealogical relations—some had Ainu heritage in both their paternal and maternal lines, some had it in one or the other, and some were not Ainu but their spouses were. Some also had environments enabling them to learn about Ainu culture, while others did not. Given this situation, it can be considered that the burden on learners and educators can be alleviated by not judging the authenticity of Ainu culture based on blood relations or the degree of ethnic culture inherited.

As for the third point, cultural promotion measures alone are not sufficient to promote culture. A high number of Ainu people wanted to learn about Ainu culture, but all they could do in practice was to lead their lives and help support their families. Many respondents said they wanted to learn about Ainu culture if they could afford to, and these appeared to be the real feelings of Ainu people and those living in rural areas in Hokkaido. Since the fundamental resolution of this issue lies beyond the scope of cultural policies, it may be considered a strategic option to target elderly people who are able to hand down culture and youngsters receiving education to produce guardians of cultural transmission.

## Conclusion

It should be seen as quite an achievement that recent Ainu policies and cultural promotion measures have increased the number of those who are proud of being Ainu and are highly motivated to hand down their culture in Hokkaido society. In open-ended questions, many elderly respondents looked back on their childhoods, recalling their experiences of having been bullied and discriminated against, and expressed their views in comparison with the present situation. Such views were varied, and included the following: a desire to demand compensation from the Japanese government for discrimination, assimilation, and land requisition (many respondents considered this an unjustified deprivation of customary use rights); a desire to obtain rights to use public land necessary for the transmission of Ainu culture; and the opinion that the route to coexistence between Ainu and non-Ainu Japanese people should be developed in a constructive manner to ensure respect for each other's cultures as well as a sense of values in regional communities and in Japanese society beyond cultural policies that highlight the difference between the Ainu and Wajin.

People have different opinions on ways to promote Ainu culture depending on their viewpoints and ideas. Putting them together indiscriminately would not be a fair way to report on a survey. However, if I may add a word at the end of this chapter as the surveyor, we do seek special considerations for measures to promote Ainu culture in Hokkaido's prefectural and national budgets. The program review for budget savings by the Government Revitalization Unit at the end of 2009 called for a significant cut in the national budget for education, which prompted discussions on expenses related to cultural promotion in Hokkaido. Enhancing transparency in budget development/execution and cutting out waste are extremely important considerations, but short-term results and achievements should not be demanded from educational and cultural policies.

Since Ainu culture is an invaluable aspect of cultural heritage for these indigenous people and a precious cultural resource for the present-day Ainu, Japanese society has made a political judgement that promoting Ainu culture is indispensable in order to realize a multicultural society. I would like to conclude this chapter by saying that we have no business stopping this historical current created by the Ainu for themselves, that Japanese society has decided to support.