



HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

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Author(s)	Tsahelnik, Tatsiana
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The Power of Ancestral Language:

Exploring Language, Trauma and Empowerment in the Ainu Context

(先祖の言語の力

—アイヌの文脈における言語、トラウマ、エンパワーメントの探求—)

This dissertation presents research that emphasizes the significance of focusing on the reclamation of heritage/ancestral languages as a tool for cultivating a positive and strong ethnic identity, fostering empowerment, and healing from historical and colonial trauma. It is grounded in empirical data collected from interviews with Ainu parents who are actively involved in learning their ancestral language. Additionally, it features a case study of a parent-and-child Ainu language study group established to foster the revival of the Indigenous community by offering a supportive environment for language reclamation.

This research emphasizes viewing the family as a central hub for Ainu language reclamation, as existing policies often overlook intergenerational language transmission as a critical factor in Ainu language vitality and, instead, tend to allocate resources primarily towards fostering a broader awareness of Ainu culture within the Japanese majority population. This research highlights parents' motivations and the challenges middle-generation Ainu parents face in approaching their ancestral language and investigates perspectives on the importance of their ancestral language in the absence of guaranteed Indigenous education policies.

The study aims to present a decolonized view of Ainu language vitality to advocate for self-determination in Indigenous education. It also seeks to contribute to the decolonization of the discourse surrounding Indigenous languages by emphasizing that Ainu should be the central actors in their language revitalization efforts, mainly engaging in language reclamation and policymaking related to the Ainu language and culture. While discussing the ongoing issue of Ainu language endangerment and revitalization, this dissertation aims to contribute to covering the gap in research regarding Ainu individuals' attitudes toward their ancestral language, as Ainu perspectives have largely been overlooked in academic and policy discussions.

Finally, this research aims to raise awareness of historical trauma and promote the concept of healing in Japan by focusing on Indigenous resilience against colonization while highlighting the importance of safe spaces in Ainu language education.

The research implements decolonizing methodologies, emphasizing the inclusion of speakers of endangered languages in the research process to ensure their voices are heard and valued.

The researcher employs autoethnography to reflect on her experiences as a speaker of an endangered language (Belarusian), a spouse of an Ainu person, and a mother of a child of Ainu descent. The experience of rediscovering her Belarusian identity through addressing her heritage language contributes to her engagement in language discussions with Ainu individuals and her

commitment to raising her child in both Belarusian and Ainu languages.

The study utilizes narrative inquiry to collect empirical data, aiming to empower Ainu parents by providing a platform for them to share their insights on their ancestral language, counteracting the historical silencing of their voices due to colonial policies. Empirical data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with Ainu parents involved in language reclamation, focusing on their experiences and perspectives on revitalizing the Ainu language.

Secondary resources include Ainu testimonies, governmental reports, and academic articles on Ainu identity and language attitudes. The author also implements Critical Discourse Analysis to examine power dynamics within discourse and policy related to these issues.

The results of the interviews demonstrate that the interviewed Ainu parents tend to openly embrace their ethnic heritage and share it with their children, countering historical colonial efforts to suppress Ainu culture and language. While it is uncertain how children will feel about the Ainu language as they grow, they are developing a strong sense of Ainu identity by engaging with their ancestral language and having their parents as positive role models.

The Ainu language also serves as a medium to connect with close and distant ancestors, reinforcing community ties and a sense of belonging and promoting confidence and pride in Ainu heritage.

The study reveals that a significant barrier for Ainu parents in supporting their children's language education is the lack of accessible courses and materials for self-study. Additionally, a larger portion of the budget for language promotion is allocated to research rather than directly aiding prospective Ainu language learners. Interviewees suggested that creating job opportunities requiring Ainu language skills could enhance its prestige and motivate more individuals to learn.

Parents acknowledge the importance of language reclamation for the Ainu and see benefits in their children learning the ancestral language. However, there is a tendency to prefer a liberal approach, allowing children to choose whether to learn it in the future. While they agree on the need for increased usage of the Ainu language in education, employment, and media to enhance familiarity in Hokkaido, some express concerns about potential backlash or hate speech against the Ainu people.

This approach addresses the intergenerational trauma experienced by Ainu people due to discriminatory practices, such as the prohibition of their language in colonial schools. The case of a parent-and-child study group illustrates a supportive community that offers a safe space for healing and promotes positive identity formation. Regaining ancestral language knowledge acts as a psychological shield against discrimination and aids in healing intergenerational trauma. However, there are concerns about societal acceptance of Ainu identity in Japan, causing anxiety about the children's future. Research indicates that these challenges are similar to those faced by other Indigenous groups, highlighting feelings of frustration and sadness over disrupted language transmission due to colonial policies. The topic of colonial trauma is yet to be widely approached following the example of trauma research and addressing the healing process among Indigenous groups abroad.

The research also reflects on similar experiences of language endangerment among Belarusians and Ainu, emphasizing the shared trauma associated with language loss and the role of language in identity empowerment. Additionally, there is a tendency to shift the responsibility for language revitalization to future generations while acknowledging that Belarusian and Ainu languages are often viewed as cultural entities rather than living, practical languages. The interview

results and examination of secondary resources demonstrate that the official discourse often overlooks the above-described significant meanings of ancestral language reclamation for Ainu, framing the language mainly as a part of traditional culture.

The research aims to objectively represent the opinions of Ainu parents while acknowledging that informal discussions and interview methods may have influenced their perspectives. It seeks to shift the focus on the Ainu language from revitalization to the importance of language reclamation, emphasizing the active role of the Ainu community. The exploration of colonial trauma highlights the need for engagement with minoritized communities and raising awareness of the healing from cultural oppression. Addressing these topics is vital for promoting the well-being and self-determination of marginalized societies.