

Awareness, Recognition, and Promotion of Indigenous Ainu Language and Culture in Japan

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1. Introduction

For the rights of indigenous groups to be upheld it is self-evident that the indigenous groups must be recognized officially at the national government level and that the general population must be aware of their very existence. For the Ainu of Japan, getting official recognition has been a long and arduous process, and awareness of their existence has been rather low in Japan. As is the case for many marginalized indigenous groups, the Ainu have faced discrimination for many years that has led to many Ainu people hiding their indigenous roots.

The last few decades has seen a strengthening in the rights of indigenous cultures globally, a greater awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity at the citizen level within nations, and a growing sense of pride within the indigenous community for their culture. This awareness of the mere existence of indigenous groups is an important first step in the ability to promote the positive points of the culture and language to those within the community and to the nation as a whole.

First, comparing the visible presence of Ainu culture within Japan with that of other indigenous groups in the world, this paper highlights one of the main difficulties facing the Ainu language and culture promotion movement – namely ignorance within Japan (and the wider world) of

their existence. Next, the history of language shift from Ainu to Japanese is set out, showing how the erosion of the Ainu language (and culture) has contributed to present day lack of awareness of the existence of Ainu. In spite of this lack of awareness, the paper then looks at the significant steps that have taken place in recent years in getting official recognition at the international and national level. This recognition has provided an official platform to aid the promotion of Ainu language and culture, and has acted as proof of the relevance of the Ainu people as an important cultural asset in Japanese society in the twenty-first century. The paper then examines some of the ways that Ainu language and culture are being promoted, noting that official recognition allows opportunities for further promotion of Ainu identity.

2. Indigenous groups as (in)visible cultural assets

One indicator of the visible presence and national recognition of a minority indigenous culture is to visit official national tourist bureau websites of any given country. The Tourism New Zealand website (2012) is highly inclusive of Maori culture with its bilingual Maori/English headline reading “Kia Ora – Welcome to New Zealand.” It is rather hard to imagine the equivalent Japanese website declaring bilingually in Ainu and Japanese 「イランカラプテー日本へようこそ」 “Irancarapte – Nihon e Youkoso.” The Tourism Australia website (2012) features Aboriginal culture prominently in photographs on its homepage and devotes a whole section to “Aboriginal Australia.” The Chinese National Tourist Office website (2011) has an ethnic groups section on its homepage, and the Taiwan Tourist Bureau (2012) has a section on culture and heritage that stresses “this beautiful country’s multifaceted cultures” and the importance of a variety of indigenous groups within the country. In all of the

above official tourist bureau websites, information about indigenous groups was displayed prominently. In contrast, the Japanese National Tourism Organization website (n.d.) makes no mention of any indigenous groups within Japan on its homepage, nor of the Ainu on the front page of the Hokkaido section. Only after a search for “Ainu” can one find several sections of information embedded rather deeply within the website. This demonstrates the low profile that the Ainu and other minority groups have within Japan, compared with other neighboring countries also with indigenous populations.

This comparison is not entirely fair since there are geographic and demographic differences between the indigenous groups in each of these countries. Statistics New Zealand Tauranga Aotearoa (n.d.) states that the Maori population is 673,000 out of a total New Zealand population of 4,367,000, approximately 15%. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) estimated the indigenous population of Australia to be 2.5% of the total population, totaling 517,200. In China, there are approximately 106 million indigenous people (7.9%) out of a population exceeding 1.3 billion (World Bank, n.d.). In Taiwan, the indigenous population has been stated as 1.5% of the total Taiwanese population (Lin et al, 2000). In contrast, the Ainu population comprises a small percentage of the total Japanese population with official figures stating a total of 23,782 in Hokkaido in 2006 (Ainu Association of Hokkaido, n.d.) added to an estimated five to ten thousand living in the Kanto area of Japan (Tokyo Ainu, 2010). Kennedy (2009) reports estimates of the total population of Ainu as approximately 100,000. However, even this is less than 0.1% of the Japanese population. Clearly, there is a large discrepancy in the demographics between the indigenous groups in different countries.

The Ainu people have also traditionally been associated with the far northern area of Japan, especially the island of Hokkaido, and the islands

to the north of Hokkaido. This is the area that is seen as their homeland, *Ainu Moshir*, although in more modern times, many Ainu have left Hokkaido for Tokyo and other areas to find work and escape discrimination (Tokyo Ainu, 2010). Geographically speaking, the Ainu presence is also on the margins of Japanese society compared with the greater dispersal of the populations of indigenous groups in some other countries.

Demographic and geographic reasons may be two of the reasons that there is a lack of awareness of the Ainu people in Japan, but there is also a lack of visible presence in the national psyche for this indigenous group. Japan as a homogeneous race is still an ideology held by a considerable number of people. This lack of awareness, coupled with the myth of homogeneity, contributes to the difficulty that the Ainu face in promoting their language and culture, and their human rights. However, it has been the lack of official recognition that has most greatly contributed to ignorance concerning the Ainu people, and created the greatest obstacle in the promotion of Ainu language and culture.

How the language reached the stage where it requires active promotion is explained in the following section, tracing the historical shift in language use away from Ainu and into Japanese.

3. Language (and culture) shift

3.1 A language contact model

The Ainu language is considered to be an endangered language with few remaining speakers. The Ainu language text for the Sapporo Rajio Terebi Ainu language broadcast describes the language as hardly used in everyday conversation (Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture, 2012). Yet, this has not always been the case. What caused the Ainu people to shift from Ainu language to Japanese?

It is well accepted that minority languages become endangered due to increasing language contact with a more dominant language, which may happen for a number of reasons. Before contact with the more dominant language, community members are monolingual in their own heritage language. Then, when this heritage language comes into contact with the more dominant language, the community members start to use both languages, and a period of societal bilingualism ensues. At first, the heritage language takes precedence in the community, but over time the dominant language tends to gain influence and often becomes used in prestigious domains such as in education and government. At this stage, the heritage language is often only used at home and in private domains. When a language dies out, it is no longer spoken in any domain by anyone and the dominant language has taken over completely, rendering the community monolingual once again, not in their own heritage language, but in the dominant language.

The simplified model set out above can be applied to the Ainu language in general, but each endangered language has its own story. Language contact between Ainu and Japanese caused language shift away from Ainu and into the Japanese language. During this process both languages affected each other, however, the effects of Japanese language on Ainu language far outweigh the effects of Ainu language on Japanese. Tamura (2001, p. 1) states that, “the influence of Japanese on [Ainu] syntax and pronunciation has been strong.”

In terms of pronunciation, one example where Japanese has influenced modern Ainu is in the pronunciation of /r/. As Tamura (2000, p. 19) shows, in the past, Ainu language clearly distinguished between *'etor* (mucus) and *'etoro* (to snore) and *retar* (white) and *re-tara* (3 straw bags). As Tamura states, “whether or not there is a vowel after /r/ is clearly differentiated phonologically.” However, in the modern day, some

people “always pronounce /r/ with a following vowel.” (p. 19)

In the case of the Ainu lexicon, there are a large number of loan words from Japanese. As Tamura (2000, p. 266–268) has shown, these include *sippo* from the Japanese *shio* (salt), *tampaku* from *tabako* (cigarette), *umme* from *uma* (horse), *puta* from *buta* (pig), *tenonkoy* from *tenugui* (towel), and *kampi* from *kami* (paper). In these cases, the words entered the Ainu language as “the items were incorporated into the Ainu culture” (p. 267). Other examples, given by Tamura, of loans into Ainu from Japanese, include *a-maketa* (forced to lose) from the Japanese verb *makeru* (to lose), *kawari-ne* from *kawari-ni* (instead of), and *sarampa* from *saraba* (farewell, goodbye). Also, by adding the suffix *-taro* to Japanese verbs, renders them usable in Ainu. Examples include *moketaro* (to earn money) from the Japanese *mookeru* (to make a profit) and *yorokontaro* (to be happy) from *yorokobu* (to be happy).

Although loans have predominantly been from Japanese into Ainu, there are also a few examples of Ainu words that have entered Japanese. The Japanese words *rakko* (otter), *tonakai* (reindeer), *shishamo* (smelt), *atsushi* (cloth made from tree bark), *ruibe* (thinly sliced frozen salmon), and *ainu* (people, Ainu) all have their origins in the Ainu language (Tamura, p. 268).

One more illustrative, but rather extreme, example of language shift can be seen in the case of naming customs. As Kayano (1994, p. 43–44) has stated, current Ainu names are “no different from ordinary Japanese names, but long ago, they were unmistakably distinct.” Kayano gives the example of his grandparents, named *Totkaram* and *Tekatte* in Ainu. After contact with Japanese, and the imposition of the Japanese family register around 1872, his grandparents were given the Japanese name *Kaizawa*. Others in the local area were also given Japanese names, such as *Hiramura* or *Nitani*, based on the names of their villages.

Maher (2001, p. 327) states that Ainu to Japanese language shift factors run from the beginning of the 19th century. After the original contact, the Ainu community went through the process outlined above, becoming bilingual in Ainu and Japanese, before Japanese took precedence over Ainu. Finally, a stage was reached where most Ainu people became effectively monolingual in Japanese. A brief chronological history of Ainu-Japanese language contact is set out below.

3.2 Chronological history of Ainu-Japanese language contact

Early contact between Ainu and Japanese was connected to the Ainu's control of natural resources in the north. The Japanese desired the sea products and other natural resources and friction developed between the Ainu and Wajin (Japanese) settlers. In 1457, Koshamain led the Ainu in almost driving the Wajin out of Ezogashima (Hokkaido), "initiating a century of intermittent warfare" (Siddle, 1997, p. 19). Realizing that war was not good for trade, the Wajin in the area made an agreement with the Ainu, dividing the land between the two groups. At this point, there was linguistic separation, with the Ainu "discouraged from learning Japanese although there was apparently considerable bilingual competence among the Ainu as reported by Jesuit missionaries and others" (Maher, 1995, p. 77).

In the 17th century, language contact took place through trade, although the non-assimilation policy would have restricted language shift away from Ainu into Japanese. During this period it has been estimated there were thirty to forty thousand Ainu, and that they had different dialects and showed cultural variations. However, they shared a "common lifestyle and material culture... The Ainu took pleasure in a rich oral tradition that centred on epic poems, and they worshiped phenomena of the natural world that they personified as kamuy (deities)" (McClain, 2002, p.

67). In 1618, one of the first Europeans to visit Hokkaido, Jeromino de Angelis, wrote that Ainu was an oral language, with none of the Ainu being able to read or write (1995, p. 290). However, at this time, the Ainu language still was in healthy, constant everyday use.

During the 18th century, the non-assimilation policy was still in place, so the Ainu language was protected from the language shift that became a feature of the following century. During the 19th century, there was a period of Japanese expansion into Ezo (Hokkaido) with early settlers, seen as pioneers, taking over land from Ainu. As the Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture (2010) shows, in 1869 Ezo was renamed Hokkaido, Ainu were “incorporated into the Nation” and “discrimination against them continued.” Furthermore, Ainu language and lifestyle were forbidden by law, and a “Japanization” policy was put into practice. The enforced study of Japanese language and customs had a serious effect on Ainu language use. However, at the end of the 19th century, Ainu language was still in use as shown by a missionary’s letter home that stated, “Ainus are delighted when they hear the Bible in their own tongue” (Payne, 1891–92). The bilingual nature of Ainu lifestyle at this time is confirmed by another missionary who stated in one of her reports that, “The day begins with Ainu prayers at 8.30, after which I give them a Bible lesson and instruction of the Catechism in Ainu. Then they study Japanese for a couple of hours. The afternoon is also spent in learning to read and write in Ainu, singing, needlework, musical drill, &c” (Hughes, 1899).

Assimilation policies continued in the 20th century under the Former Aborigine Protection Law that had been enacted in 1899. Ainu were educated in Japanese language and Wajin customs (Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture, 2010). The education policy had a “huge impact” on the Ainu language and by the 1920s it was only the

“very elderly” Ainu who could not speak Japanese (Maher, 1995).

During the last one hundred years, language shift has taken place so completely that now “only a few people can still speak Ainu language” (Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture, 2010). In this situation, the next outcome would appear to be language death.

However, in recent years there has been a change from suppression of the Ainu language to support for it, “leading to a marked reinvigoration and revival of it” (Wurm, 2000, p. 80). The 1997 Ainu Cultural Promotion Act specifically calls for the promotion of Ainu language and culture, and the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (DRIP) and subsequent Diet recognition of Ainu as indigenous people gives rise to further hopes for revival of Ainu language and culture.

4. Official recognition

In 1986, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone made his infamous remark to the United Nations that Japan was a homogenous nation devoid of minority groups. His proclamation was met with anger in many circles, including by those such as the Ainu, Okinawan, Korean, Chinese and Nikkeijin who by their very existence disproved Nakasone’s idea of a homogeneous Japan.

In 1997, with the passing of the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act by the Japanese government, there appeared to be a change in the official stance concerning the recognition of the Ainu. Some saw this 1997 Act as a positive step forward for the Ainu culture and language in a changing Japan that recognized the multicultural make-up of its society. However, others believed that the old attitudes of homogeneity still prevailed in Japan, and the 1997 Act ignored fundamental indigenous rights, concern-

ing itself simply with cultural rights of the Ainu people. According to some, the Act simply didn't go far enough in addressing the fundamental human rights and identity issues facing the Ainu (Siddle, 2002, 2003).

In 2007, ten years after the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (DRIP). This was a significant moment for the Ainu people. However, as Lewallen (2008) has stated, even though DRIP "was approved in September 2007 with a "yes" vote from Japan, the government continued to refuse indigenous recognition for Ainu people, citing the absence of an international standard for indigeneity." However, in June 2008, the Japanese Diet unanimously passed "a resolution that recognizes the Ainu as indigenous people of Japan" (Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture, 2010). Lewallen suggests the "primary factors in the hasty adoption of the resolution" were Japan's hosting of the G8 summit in Hokkaido in July 2008, and the anticipated global attention, along with the Indigenous Peoples Summit in *Ainu Mosir* [Ainu homeland]. In this context it seems that it took external pressure for the Ainu to be recognized as an indigenous group in Japan. Cotterill (2011) sets out a 'broken triangle' model of relational influence between the state, Ainu, and international bodies, with the relationship between Ainu and the state (Japan) constituting the 'broken' part, and where the international body (United Nations) forced the hand of the Japanese state, which needs to play its role in a globalizing world.

Since official state recognition of the Ainu as an indigenous group, there have been further advances in the official recognition of Ainu that should lead to greater awareness of the Ainu existence. These included the first visit by the Emperor of Japan to the Ainu Museum in Shiraoi where he reportedly was very interested in the exhibits and performances

(Asahi Shimbun Digital, 2011). Also, in order to promote Ainu culture to foreign visitors, a permanent display of Ainu culture was opened at Chitose International Airport in Hokkaido on January 27, 2012 (Tomakomai Minpousha, 2012). It has also been reported that hopes are rising for a project to establish a national museum dedicated to Ainu lifestyle in Shiraoi (MSN Sankei Nyuusu, 2012).

5. Ainu language revival

The growing official recognition of Ainu gives rise to hopes for a continued and prolonged revival of Ainu language and culture. Ainu language revival can be divided into two categories, direct language-specific revival and indirect language-through-culture revival.

5.1 Direct language revival

The Ainu language was traditionally an oral language, passed on from generation to generation, and only in relatively recent times has an orthography been in place (either Roman alphabet or more commonly the Japanese katakana syllabary). The orthography has allowed a number of materials to be produced that can aid Ainu language study and revival.

A number of dictionaries and grammars have been compiled since the missionary John Batchelor's early 20th century *An Ainu-English-Japanese Dictionary* that included a grammar guide. Those include a Chitose dialect dictionary (Nakagawa, 1995); the dictionary compiled by the first Ainu member of the Japanese Diet, Kayano Shigeru (1996); a Saru dialect dictionary (Tamura, 1996); and a talking dictionary of Ainu (Bugaeva & Endo, 2010), especially useful as it can be accessed online. Tamura's (2000) *The Ainu Language* is a useful English guide to many

aspects of the language.

Traditional Ainu language materials include recordings of mythical chants by Wateke (Murasaki & Minegishi, 2001), the complete text and sound of fifty-four fairy tales by the last Sakhalin Ainu speaker (Tamura, 2001), *yukar* (hero epics), *kamuy-yukar* (stories of deities), and *uepeker* (old tales).

Textbooks play an important role in learning any language, and this is no different in the case of Ainu. Three of the main Ainu language textbooks have all been in use for over a dozen years. *Akor Itak* (1997) was created by the Hokkaido Utari Kyoukai and includes wordlists, dialogues for conversational practice (from various dialects), examples of traditional culture, grammar explanations and explanations of Ainu place names. *Ekusupuresu Ainugo* (1999) has a more focused approach, concentrating on dialogues in Ainu with vocabulary lists, Japanese translation and explanations of important points. The texts produced by FRPAC (*Ainugo Rajio Kouza Tekisuto*) appear four times a year and are designed to go with Sapporo Terebi Rajio broadcasts of the Ainu language (on air for fifteen minutes on Sunday mornings and repeated on Saturday nights). The style of the FRPAC texts has changed over the fourteen years they have been published and the materials are published in different dialects. The text for the first quarter of 2012 is in the Asahikawa dialect and follows a general pattern for each of the thirteen units that comprises: Ainu dialogue accompanied with Japanese translation; Ainu wordlist with Japanese equivalents; explanatory notes. The final unit of the text provides a review of the grammar points covered during the year of study. All of these materials are provided free (including archived audio recordings of the radio broadcasts) at the STV Ainugo rajio kouza website (<http://www.stv.ne.jp/radio/ainugo/index.html>).

For those wishing to learn the Ainu language, the radio programs



**Photo: Texts spanning more than a decade from the FRPAC
Ainugo Rajio Kouza**

and the textbooks mentioned above, along with the dictionaries, grammars, and traditional materials, are all valuable resources. Many people, however, learn better in a classroom situation, and there have been several Ainu language class initiatives over the years. In Biratori, in the heart of the Ainu homeland, children's classes have been held in the Ainu language that combined Ainu language and culture study (Anderson & Iwasaki-Goodman, 2001). In the present day, Ainu language classes are held in a number of locations in Hokkaido, and also in Tokyo. In addition to the radio courses, FRPAC has a four-pronged approach to promoting Ainu language education in Japan (Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture, 2011). The first of these is to train instructors through intensive courses on “effective instruction methods” and has six instructors and seven participants. The second is to hold classes to develop skills of intermediate-level speakers so that they can become advanced enough to become instructors. The third is a project to preserve Ainu culture and traditions through language study for parents and children. The fourth is to develop language-teaching materials.

5.2 Language revival through cultural revival

The Ainu language has had a presence within Japanese society for many years with place names in Hokkaido being heavily influenced by the Ainu language. The name Sapporo, the capital city of Hokkaido, is derived from Ainu and means ‘dry big river’ (Hokkaido Kankyou Seikatsubu, 2001). Moreover, the Ainu words for otter (*rakko*) and reindeer (*tonakai*) are used as part of everyday Japanese vocabulary. However, the Ainu culture is often perceived as that of a backward race, lost to the period of history in which hunting and gathering was relevant. Rituals and ceremonies, such as the *iyomante* [the returning of the spirit of a bear to the other world], may be seen as barbaric in modern Japan. And in the minds of many, Ainu culture has been consigned to museums. However, as Kennedy (2009) states, Ainu traditional culture is evolving into “contemporary modes of expression which are relevant and of growing interest to Japanese and young Ainu today.” These modern modes of expression have been described as a “remarkable revival of Ainu arts, dance and music—with a cool, contemporary edge” (Birmingham, 2010).

Demonstrations and displays of Ainu musical instruments such as the *tonkori* and *mukkuri* are on offer to the general public at the Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture and through the very names of the instruments, knowledge of the Ainu language spreads. Oki Kanno gives dynamic public performances of contemporary *tonkori* music both nationally and internationally with his Oki Dub Ainu Band. He also collaborated with Umeko Ando on the CD *Hankapuy*, featuring *tonkori* and *mukkuri* and Ainu language.

The Ainu music and dance group *Ainu Rebels* brought Ainu very much into the modern day with their rap and hip-hop performances. Their performances in Ainu robes included Ainu language lyrics and contemporary adaptations of traditional Ainu dance, with the aim of spread-

ing awareness of Ainu culture in Japan. Birmingham (2010) interviewed Yuki Koji, the leader of the Ainu Arts Project, another music performing group, who explained that his rock group, who also wear Ainu robes and incorporate *tonkori* and *mukkuri*, perform fifty times a year singing mainly in the Ainu language.

The jazz singer Kumatani Tamiko, featured in the *Tokyo Ainu* documentary, took a different approach by singing world famous songs with Ainu lyrics in her performances. Two of the songs she sang in the Ainu language were *The Lion Sleeps Tonight* and *Amazing Grace*. Below, the Ainu lyrics (translated by Fukushima Shouichi) for *Amazing Grace* are reproduced from the CD (in katakana orthography) alongside their English equivalent (Supeesu Oruta, 2010).

カムイ レンカイネ Amazing Grace

カムイ レンカイネ ソンノ ピッカ フミ ネ
Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound

フッコ プリ クコチャン ア コロカ
That saved a wretch like me!

カムイ オカ クスケライ タネ シンリツ プリ
I once was lost, but now I'm found,

アイヌプリ ソンノ クエラマスイ
Was blind, but now I see.

クラムクルン ヒ タ カムイ エネブンキネ
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,

クス クサンベピッカ ルウエ ネ
And grace my fears relieved;

カムイ クエイソコリ オロワ オロワ

How precious did that grace appear,

カムイ エンカシッカマ

The hour I first believed!

As the cultural revival of Ainu gathers pace, we can see more and more examples of Ainu culture, and in particular of the fusion of the traditional with the modern, in an attempt to bring Ainu culture out of the museums and into modern everyday life. And as it does so, it takes the Ainu language with it. No matter how small the influence, the influence is there.

Many minority languages, such as the Maori language in New Zealand and the Welsh language in Great Britain, have their own dedicated television channels. The Ainu language does not have the benefit of such a channel, but the medium of television and movies is still an important one. In December 2010, the *Tokyo Ainu* documentary had its public release. It is just under two hours in length and tells the stories of Ainu people living in the Kanto area of Japan. It is an important addition to the materials documenting the story of Ainu discrimination, the struggle for indigenous rights, and how contemporary Ainu are coming to terms with their identity as Ainu in the modern day away from their traditional homeland. The Ainu participants all speak in Japanese during the documentary but Ainu words such as *shamo* (Japanese person) and *tashiro* (Ainu knife) can be heard. One of the participants tells of how she finds it easier to learn the Ainu language through *kamuy yukar* (traditional stories of deities), than through Ainu language classes, a reminder that the old traditions are still important in the maintenance of Ainu culture and the revival of Ainu language.

6. Conclusion

It would be naive in the extreme to think that the 2008 governmental recognition of the Ainu as an indigenous group will act as a panacea for all the difficulties Ainu face in Japanese society. There is still considerable discrimination against Ainu and many Ainu face harsher living conditions than Japanese (Ainu Association of Hokkaido, n.d.). The history of repression and discrimination, in a society that has traditionally been perceived as homogeneous, has left many scars and made it difficult for Ainu to embrace their identity openly. There is a long road ahead before mainstream Japanese society becomes aware of Ainu culture and values it as an asset in a culturally diverse Japan.

However, the official changes in recognition can help to provide a more stable platform for linguistic and cultural revival. In the case of Ainu language, the revival continues. Several decades ago, expectations of the death of the Ainu language were not unreasonable. But this has not been the case. The language has been kept alive directly through a series of efforts outlined in section 5.1, although the FRPAC (2011) warnings that Ainu language education is “in a desperate state” cannot be ignored. Perhaps the prospects for the Ainu language in the short-term lie in “vigorous ethnosymbolic usage as found in code-switching” (Maher, 2001, p. 332). This “ethnosymbolic” usage can be seen in the revival of Ainu culture set out in section 5.2. Through preservation of traditional Ainu culture, and fusion of the old with the new, through storytelling, music, dance, weaving, embroidery, and carving, the Ainu language finds other ways to exert its continued presence.

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