

MARRIAGE OF THE AINU PEOPLE AND THE ISSUE OF CULTURAL PRESERVATION IN JAPAN AND OTHER COUNTRIES

Tran Tuan Kiet, MA.¹

^{1*} Faculty of Foreign Languages, Nguyen Tat Thanh University.

* **Correspondence:** Tran Tuan Kiet, MA.

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ABSTRACT: The Ainu are an indigenous people mainly living in Hokkaido, Japan. Marriage in traditional Ainu society had distinctive characteristics shaped by long-standing customs. From a socio-anthropological perspective, this paper combines quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze documents and assess both traditional and contemporary marriage attitudes among the Ainu in Hokkaido (Japan). The goal is to understand their current situation and find solutions for preserving Ainu culture in particular and ethnic cultures in general. Findings show that due to the strong assimilation process by the Japanese, Ainu culture has been severely eroded. The Japanese government has made efforts to preserve Ainu culture, such as recognizing the Ainu as an indigenous people (2019), establishing research and cultural preservation centers, and providing financial support for Ainu communities to maintain their cultural identity. However, stronger measures are still needed to ensure the revival of Ainu culture in the modern context.

Keywords: *Marriage, ethnicity, Ainu, Japan, cultural preservation.*

1. Introduction

The Ainu are an ethnic group that has lived in Hokkaido (Japan) since around 1200 BCE (Boone Collection, 2007).

Researchers often use the terms “Ainu” and “Wajin” to refer to the Ainu people and Japanese people, respectively (Richard Siddle, 2014).

Historical research shows that Ainu culture originated from the Okhotsk and Satsumon cultures (Takehiro, 2007). The 13th century marked the first contact between the Japanese (then known as “Wajin”) and the Ainu living in Hokkaido (formerly called Ezochi) (Weiner, 1997). During the early Meiji reforms in 1868, the Japanese government renamed Ezochi to “Hokkaido” and unilaterally incorporated it into Japan, introducing policies to modernize culture, politics, and economics along Western lines.

The Land Certificate Decree of 1878 required Ainu lands to be merged into public land. In 1899, the Japanese government enacted a law labeling the Ainu as “former aborigines” and sought to assimilate them by seizing and controlling their lands (Loos & Osani, 1993).

For the next 36 years, the Ainu suffered discrimination on their own land, transitioning from an independent group to one assimilated into Japanese territory, language, customs, and religion. In 2008, the Japanese government officially recognized the Ainu as an indigenous people. Nevertheless, discrimination and prejudice against the Ainu still persist today.

Marriage became a way for the Ainu to cope with prejudice. Many increasingly married Japanese to reduce discrimination and secure better living conditions for their children. Although some pure Ainu communities remain in small southeastern towns or the Hidaka area, their overall numbers have declined, and distinguishing features have faded.

This paper examines Ainu marriage within the broader socio-cultural context of both the Ainu and Japan. It clarifies the traditional features of Ainu marriage and explores how these practices have changed, particularly with the fading of Ainu-Japanese distinctions and the rise of modern trends such as remaining single. It also considers cultural preservation of the Ainu and other minority groups.

2. Research Objects and Methods

2.1. Research Objects

The study focuses on both traditional and modern Ainu marriage. It clarifies their customs and rituals while reflecting on the social, economic, and cultural life of the Ainu in relation to Japanese society and governmental policies toward the Ainu in the past and present.

2.2. Research Methods

2.2.1. Method of Collecting Primary and Secondary Documents

The author collected published materials and sources, both domestic and international, relevant to the topic, including journals and articles from reputable sources. The author then selected, analyzed, evaluated, and synthesized these materials to conduct an in-depth study of the relationships and correlations between endogamous and exogamous marriages, as well as important events, regulations, and factors that shaped the concepts, perceptions, and ceremonial practices of the Ainu regarding marriage.

2.2.2. Analytical and Comparative Method

The author analyzed the socio-cultural characteristics and traditional marriage practices of the Ainu, comparing Ainu marriage across different historical periods, as well as with Japanese marriage practices. This approach clarifies the distinctive features, influencing factors, and marriage trends of the Ainu.

2.2.3. Data Processing Method

The author applied both quantitative and qualitative analyses to process statistical data and surveys concerning population and traditional Ainu marriage, as well as Japanese marriage.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Overview of the Population and the Ainu People in Hokkaido

Hokkaido Island lies in the north of Japan, close to Russian territory. It borders the Sea of Japan, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the Pacific Ocean. Hokkaido is the second

largest of Japan's four main islands, with an area of 83,424 km² and a population of about 5.381 million, ranking eighth in Japan.

Regarding population characteristics, according to the CIA *World Factbook*, as of January 1, 2024, Japan's population was approximately 124,885,000, a decrease of about 531,700 people (0.42%) compared to the same period of the previous year. The ethnic composition of Japan is: Japanese account for 99% of the population, while other ethnic groups make up about 1% (Chinese: 24,424; Koreans: 51,126; Filipinos: 28,995; Brazilians: 18,223; and others: 23,792). Among them, the Ainu are considered Japanese citizens, numbering about 24,000 people, or 0.02% of the total population.

According to surveys conducted so far (*Hokkaido Utari Life Survey Report*), in 1884 Hokkaido had only about 227,900 residents, making it the least populated administrative area in Japan. With subsequent immigration, Hokkaido's population rose rapidly: in 1908 it reached about 1,322,400 (ranked 10th in Japan); in 1920 it rose to 2,359,183 (ranked 3rd). At the end of World War II, Hokkaido's population surged for a short time due to large inflows from overseas. However, after the war, the population growth rate in Hokkaido lagged far behind the rest of Japan. In 1959, Hokkaido accounted for 5.4% of Japan's population, but by 2000 this share had fallen to 4.48%. Hokkaido's population peaked at 5.699 million in 1997, then began to decline: 5,629,970 in 2006, 5,408,756 in 2015, and 5,317,875 in 2017. It is estimated that by 2040 the population will decline further to about 4.19 million. Experts attribute this decline mainly to a birth rate lower than Japan's national average. Since 1967, Hokkaido's total fertility rate has been below the national level; in 2013, it was only 1.28 compared to Japan's average of 1.43. The causes are delayed marriage and a reluctance to have children due to rising living costs and an increasingly individualistic lifestyle among Japanese youth. However, in these surveys, Ainu people were excluded if they denied their Ainu identity, meaning previous population figures were not entirely accurate and can only be considered approximate (*Ainu: People & Society*).

There are many hypotheses about the emergence of the Ainu in Hokkaido, Japan. After the Paleolithic period, both Honshu and Hokkaido entered the Jomon era—

which lasted until 300 BCE. When Honshu transitioned to the Yayoi period, Hokkaido entered the Epi-Jomon period (Midori Minami, 2007). The Epi-Jomon period overlapped with the Satsumon culture, characterized by Satsumon pottery, fishing, hunting, and small-scale agriculture lasting 4–6 centuries (Hokkaido Prefecture, 1999, 1991; Ministry of Justice, 2004). The Satsumon people traded Japanese metalware and pottery, and practiced small-scale farming of barley, millet, etc. (Brett L. Walker, 2001). Alongside this, the Okhotsk culture—known for Okhotsk pottery, fishing, and marine hunting—coexisted in Hokkaido from the 7th century and lasted at least four centuries. In fact, Okhotsk culture carried many continental elements and originated from marine mammal hunters from islands such as Sakhalin (Brett L. Walker, 2001).

The Okhotsk culture showed many similarities to Ainu culture, particularly the bear cult, as the bear was a central deity for the Ainu. Bear ceremonies were held on holidays, and bear skulls were placed in huts after rituals (FRPAC 2004: 2–3; Midori Minami, 2007). In Ainu beliefs, they conversed with deities because they considered themselves equal to them, caring for the gods in hopes of receiving care in return (Midori Minami, 2007). Widely accepted scholarship suggests that contemporary Ainu culture was formed on the basis of the Satsumon culture with influences from the Okhotsk culture (FRPAC, 2004, pp. 2–3; Ministry of Justice, 2004, pp. 6–7; Midori Minami, 2007).

From a genetic perspective, although the Ainu are regarded as the indigenous inhabitants of Hokkaido and parts of northern Japan (Tohoku) (Taeko Takayanagi & Takayuki Shimomura, 2013, pp. 347–360), genetic studies show that the Ainu are distinct from Japanese in Tohoku (northern Honshu). The Ainu are descendants of the Jomon people, while the Yayoi population, arriving later, carried genes from continental Asia (Han Chinese, Koreans). Genetic analyses confirm that the Japanese population originated from the mixture of early Jomon and later Yayoi settlers, while the Ainu and Ryukyans retain more Jomon genetic traits than the Japanese majority. Some studies also highlight the close genetic relationship between the Ainu and Ryukyans (Timothy A. Jinam, Hideaki Kanzawa-Kiriyama, Ituro Inoue, Katsushi Tokunaga, Keiichi Omoto, & Naruya Saitou, 2015, pp. 565–571).



Figure 1: Ainu bear-hunting scene.

The Ainu are described as ethical hunters who always performed rituals to honor the gods before killing a brown bear. They hunted large animals using arrows tipped with poison. (Brett L. Walker, 2001)

According to the *Ministry of Justice*, we do not know exactly when the Japanese (Wajin) first came to Hokkaido and made contact with the Ainu. Before the Japanese appeared in their land, the Ainu called their home (Hokkaido) *Ainu Mosir* (“land of peace” – the place where the Ainu live). Ainu men hunted bears in the mountains, seals at sea, and salmon in the rivers, while Ainu women gathered mushrooms, did weaving and embroidery, and prepared meals (Shigeru Kayano, 2004).

Many documents show that the Ainu traded with the Japanese from around the 13th to 17th centuries (Taeko Takayanagi & Takayuki Shimomura, 2013, pp. 347–360). More specifically, sources indicate contact with the Ainu occurred around the 15th century, when Japanese power expanded into Hokkaido. At that time, Ainu life was mainly based on hunting, fishing, gathering, and trading goods both within Ainu communities and with the Japanese and Russians (Midori Minami, 2007). By the late Edo period, the Matsumae clan had taken control of the Ezo region (Hokkaido) and employed Ainu men and women as laborers. The ethnic boundary was still maintained to some degree, because if the Ainu had assimilated Japanese language and customs, they would no longer have been regarded as an “undeveloped people”

in Japanese eyes, and the Matsumae clan, as well as Japanese society in general, would not have been able to continue exploiting cheap Ainu labor.

In reality, Ainu society increasingly changed as it grew dependent on trade with the Japanese, especially as demand for Japanese goods rose. By 1789, the Ainu realized that the Matsumae family and Japanese merchants were destroying their traditional way of life—the very means by which they maintained autonomy. By the late 18th century, many Ainu communities fell into despair, nearly lost their cultural identity, and even suffered starvation. Meanwhile, under geographic territorial policies, the Tokugawa shogunate issued the *Hakodate Edict* in 1802, promoting the “Japanization” (和風化) policy, which sought to assimilate the Ainu by imposing the Japanese language and customs. In 1804, the construction of three Buddhist temples—Kokutaiji (in Akkeshi), Tōjuin (in Samani), and Zenkoji (in Usu)—further encouraged the spread of Buddhism among the Ainu (Christopher David Loy, 2010).

Thus, before the Edo period, the Ainu existed as a distinct minority group. But during the Edo period (1603–1867), they faced wide-scale confrontation with the Japanese for the first time, and their traditional way of life was forced to change or faced extinction. Throughout the Edo period, the Ainu endured unfair trade and forced labor under the control of the Matsumae clan. During the intensified colonization of Hokkaido under the Meiji government, the Ainu were regarded as the lowest stratum of society, providing cheap, untrained labor. They were also required to attend separate educational programs.

As a result, the historical processes of imperial expansion and internal colonization of Hokkaido created socio-economic disadvantages that continue to affect the Ainu today (Taeko Takayanagi & Takayuki Shimomura, 2013, pp. 347–360). To “reduce the burden” on the Ainu community, the government implemented mandatory assimilation policies under the pretense of bringing “civilization” to the Ainu. In 1871, Ainu families were registered in household registers as ordinary Japanese but were simultaneously labeled as “former natives.” They were also given Japanese names. In 1872, all Ainu lands were nationalized (Midori Minami, 2007). In reality, many Ainu abandoned their identity and tried to become Japanese, concealing their Ainu origins and heritage.

3.2. Characteristics of Traditional Ainu Marriage

Ainu children were called *Aye-aye* (infants) for both boys and girls until around ages 3 or 4. From then until about age 7, boys were called *Sontaku* and girls *Opere*. From ages 7 to 16–18, boys were called *Heikachi* and girls *Matsukachi*. From ages 18 to 30, young women were called *Siwentep* or “women,” while young men were called *Okkaibo* or *Okkaiyo*. After the age of 30, a man was considered a true “Ainu man.”

By around age 12, boys were trained by their fathers and other men in the village to fish and hunt, beginning to join the work of adult men. Girls helped their mothers and older women with all household tasks such as gardening, cooking, cleaning, salting fish, spinning, weaving, and sewing clothes. Ainu men, like Native Americans, believed that household chores were beneath their dignity.

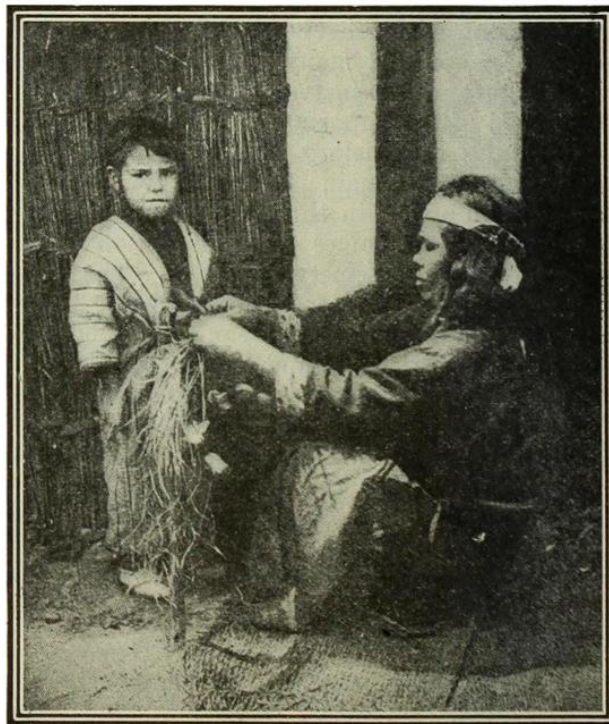


Figure 2: An Ainu father and child.

Source: *Ainu Family Life and Religion*, from *Popular Science Monthly* by J.K. Goodrich, 1888.

Regarding marriage age, for women it was closely tied to the tattooing custom around the mouth and hands. Descriptions note that when a girl reached the age of 10, she began to have tattoos inked around her lips, continuing over about 10 years until the process was completed at marriageable age. Apart from other conditions, the

completion of lip tattoos signified that the woman was eligible for marriage. Generally, women and men could marry only at ages 25 and 30, respectively. The Ainu believed that early marriage was like a tree that could not yet bear fruit, since the body was not fully developed and remained fragile. Thus, young people of 18 or 19 were considered incapable of working well, and even if they married, they could not yet have healthy children. In addition, women in particular had to acquire extensive knowledge and skills from both parents to become responsible wives, and only by age 25 was their body considered fully developed (Seminar Report 2000, The Foundation for Ainu Culture).

However, other research indicates that both men and women could marry at much younger ages. Girls between 12 and 16 were tattooed around the mouth, on the backs of their hands, and on their arms, and were also given a thin cord wrapped around them to signify the maternal lineage to which they belonged. This marked them as of marriageable age. Boys at ages 15–16 changed their clothing and hairstyle, and from then on were treated as adults. Once they could independently provide sufficient food through hunting, they were also considered ready for marriage (Midori Minami, 2007).

Many researchers generally regard Ainu society as patriarchal. However, some more recent opinions suggest that while Ainu men lived within a patrilineal framework, Ainu women operated within a parallel matrilineal system of their own (Midori Minami, 2007). For instance, although the practice of bringing a bride into the husband's household was common, in families with only daughters there were cases of adopting a groom into the wife's family (Seminar Report 2000, The Foundation for Ainu Culture). In addition, Lewallen (2010) points out that Ainu men traditionally held leadership roles in ceremonies and hunting. This male-centered social principle was reinforced by the lower status of women. In traditional religious rituals, women performed only supportive tasks at the request of elder men. Thus, Ainu society was organized primarily along patriarchal lines, contributing to the disadvantaged position of women in Hokkaido. This gender inequality is reflected even today in the male-dominated membership of expert councils on Ainu policy (Taeko Takayanagi & Takayuki Shimomura, 2013, pp. 347–360).

On the other hand, some argue that matrilineal principles also coexisted. For example, women's role in agriculture was highly valued. The Ainu were descendants of the Epi-Jomon culture, which practiced small-scale farming compared to Japanese standards, yet their traditions were considered foundational to later Yayoi and Kofun agricultural society in Japan. Ainu women, therefore, served as the backbone of their community's farming economy (Brett L. Walker, 2001).

Furthermore, regarding family lineage, men could worship their paternal ancestors for more than 10 generations, while Ainu women similarly commemorated their maternal ancestors across 10 generations. Each lineage revered its own *kamuy* (deity), such as the bear, wolf, or eagle, as a family symbol. A newborn child was believed to be the reincarnation of an ancestor: a girl was seen as the rebirth of a maternal ancestor returning to this world (Midori Minami, 2007).

Thus, Ainu marriage and family structures reflected the patriarchal basis of Ainu society, while matrilineal principles—especially in relation to ancestry and kinship—existed alongside them.

Marriage usually took place within the same village, while marriages between villages were rare. Therefore, endogamy was the prevailing rule in Ainu marriage. However, exceptions existed, as indicated by special terms for marriage between different villages. For example, *iritaku* referred to distant kin of the same bloodline living together (a village was essentially regarded as an extended family). A woman who married away from her homeland would change her name, but the new name would not record her original village. As travel became more common and people moved farther for work, such inter-village marriages became more frequent.

In traditional Ainu marriage, two main types existed: love marriages and arranged marriages. In other words, some marriages were organized by parents, while others were voluntary.

- **Love marriages:** These were most common in southwestern Hokkaido, such as Shiraoi and Hidaka. When a daughter came of age, her family would build an extra shelter (a separate room for her) on the south side of the house. A young man who loved her was allowed to visit freely, and he might later become her

husband (Midori Minami, 2007). It was customary for visiting youths to bring gifts and deepen their acquaintance. Typical gifts included:

- *From man to woman:* a handmade *menokomakiri* (woman's knife), *chemop* (pin), weaving tools, or one of his own *ninkari* (earrings).
- *From woman to man:* a homemade mother-of-pearl head covering, *matanpushi* (headband), or kimono.

However, even in love marriages, unions were not permitted in certain cases, such as between blood relatives or with families considered taboo (e.g., families of *Ipesakuru* ["bad hunters"] or *Ponitak* ["cursed"]) (Midori Minami, 2007).

- **Arranged marriages:** This form was more common and found throughout Hokkaido. In such cases, parents consulted with each other from the time their children were young and decided on suitable marriage partners. Once grown, the pair married after exchanging gifts. Since the arrangements were made early, there was no risk of the children developing relationships considered inappropriate (such as between relatives). If someone of marriageable age wanted to marry someone else, the engagement could be broken, and in that case all gifts would be returned or compensation given to the party who had provided them.



Figure 3: A married Ainu couple with eating bowls.

Source: The National Museum of Denmark. By S. Kinoshita.

3.3. Contemporary Ainu Marriage and the Issue of Cultural Preservation

As analyzed earlier, in 1869 (the second year of the Meiji era), when the remote region was named Hokkaido and incorporated into Japan, Ainu settlements (*Ainu kotan*) and Ainu houses were even dismantled, and the Ainu were forced to adopt a lifestyle similar to that of the Japanese. Customs such as women's tattooing and men's wearing of earrings were banned.

From 1884, the government encouraged the Ainu to abandon their previous hunting-and-gathering lifestyle and shift to agriculture. Government specialists directly taught methods of cultivation, seed planting, and farming techniques (Neil Gordon Munro, H. Watanabe, B. Z. Seligman, 1996).

As a result, the Ainu were increasingly influenced by Japanese culture and lifestyle. With changes such as the development of permanent agricultural villages, there were major transformations in religious practices, concepts of marriage, and marriage customs. To improve social standing, many Ainu adults stopped teaching their children the Ainu language and traditions, instead demanding an education equal to that of the Japanese.

In reality, despite significant progress in recent years in reviving and preserving Ainu traditional culture, since the Meiji era the Ainu have faced difficulties, discrimination, and attempts to erase their culture. The Ainu were even regarded as a "dying people" with a vanishing culture. Under restrictions on religious freedom, rituals that embodied the spiritual essence of Ainu life—such as the salmon ceremony and the bear-sending ritual, the most important Ainu rite—were banned (*The Foundation for Ainu Culture HP*).

Particularly concerning marriage, since the Meiji period and under assimilationist policies, many Ainu avoided marrying other Ainu, which caused traditional Ainu wedding practices to nearly disappear. Ainu marriage fundamentally changed: marriages between two Ainu became rare, while Ainu–Japanese marriages generally followed mainstream Japanese wedding customs. According to Hokkaido

government statistics from 2006, Ainu made up only about 0.02% of Japan's population, with only around 24,000 people officially identifying as Ainu. In reality, precise figures were impossible since many concealed their heritage due to discrimination and widespread intermarriage with Japanese across generations (Taeko Takayanagi & Takayuki Shimomura, 2013, pp. 347–360). These transformations in marriage during the Meiji era laid the foundation for later changes in Ainu marriage up to the present.

Historically, the Ainu endured economic and social discrimination across Japan and were often regarded as backward or primitive. From the 19th to 20th centuries, the Japanese government restricted Ainu freedoms, especially regarding their language, hunting rights, and communal living. At times, the view that the Ainu were “inferior” was so pervasive that many Ainu concealed their identity to live more easily. Some Ainu children even said they did not want to “grow up to be Ainu.” Many Ainu parents vowed to end their Ainu lineage with their generation, telling their children to identify as “ordinary Japanese” (Minami Midori, 2007). Even today, surveys show high levels of discomfort due to discrimination: in a Hokkaido University study of 2,558 Ainu, 46.3% cited “experiencing discrimination” as their most unpleasant experience (Taeko Takayanagi & Takayuki Shimomura, 2013, pp. 347–360).

During the Meiji period, under the ideology of a monoethnic nation, Japanese national consciousness emphasized that Japan had always been homogeneous and that the Yamato people were biologically “pure” (Dikotter, 1997; Yoshino, 1998, pp. 28–29). This was reflected in policies during 1930–1945 that sought to erase Ainu “bloodlines” by mixing them with Japanese (Richard Siddle, 2014). Assimilation through marriage was promoted to reduce prejudice: intermarriage diluted Ainu blood, weakening Ainu identity across generations while strengthening Japanese identity. Journalist Kita Masaaki of *Hokkaido Shakai Jigyo* published articles on this issue of “mixed marriage,” citing a 1936 survey in Tohoku reporting 756 Japanese living in Ainu households and 695 Ainu living in Japanese households (Richard Siddle, 2014).

From the Meiji era onward, Ainu women increasingly sought to marry Japanese men. Records of 480 Ainu marriages over 140 years show that 57.9% were Ainu–Ainu

marriages, 20.4% were Japanese men–Ainu women marriages, and 20.0% were Ainu men–Japanese women marriages. The first known Ainu–Japanese marriage dates to 1890, when a woman born in 1867 married a Japanese man. From then on, Ainu–Japanese marriages rose while Ainu–Ainu marriages declined.

Trends shifted: Ainu–Ainu marriages accounted for 76.0% among couples married 110 years ago, but only 59.6% for couples married 100 years ago, and 46.5% for those married 90 years ago. After the 1899 *Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act*, Ainu–Japanese marriages increased in the 1920s–30s and after World War II, while Ainu–Ainu marriages dropped sharply. Except during the war years of the 1940s, intermarriages with Japanese steadily increased since the 1920s (Toru Kouchi, 2009).

Assimilation policies emphasized that “pure Ainu blood” would soon vanish—not that the Ainu people themselves would disappear (Minami Midori, 2007). Influenced by notions of Japanese superiority during wartime expansion, “mixed marriage” was seen as a way to “improve” Ainu lineage (Richard Siddle, 2014). Many Ainu themselves desired marriage with Japanese to adopt Japanese traits. Interviews confirm that Ainu often sought such marriages to blur distinct Ainu physical traits (dark skin, heavy body hair), which were associated with discrimination. Even today, elders often advise grandchildren: “You must marry a Japanese and dilute your blood,” reflecting a desire to reduce recognizable Ainu features (Toru Kouchi, 2009).

From a gender perspective, marriage was central to women’s social status. For Ainu women, ethnic issues were especially significant. Ainu women often faced discrimination from both Japanese and Ainu men. Those of mixed Ainu–Korean descent were particularly stigmatized. This made marriage choices more difficult. Surveys reveal differing identity responses: among Ainu women married to Japanese men, 22.1% “did not identify as Ainu,” 25.7% were “neutral,” 27.8% “denied,” and 24.4% “acknowledged” their Ainu identity. Among Ainu men married to Japanese women, 29.4% “did not identify as Ainu,” 26.7% were “neutral,” 17.4% “denied,” and 26.6% “acknowledged” (Kenichi Ochiai, 2008). Scholars note that Ainu women married to Japanese men tended to deny their identity, while Ainu men married to Japanese women tended to acknowledge it.

Overall, for older generations especially, Ainu–Japanese marriage was difficult and stigmatized. Although opposition has lessened, some still hide their Ainu identity when marrying to avoid prejudice. Surveys also show that Ainu women married to Japanese men have higher divorce rates, with ethnicity sometimes a direct cause (Kenichi Ochiai, 2008).

Assimilation policies also banned Ainu customs such as burning houses upon the death of a grandmother or wife, tattooing, and ear piercing (Seminar Report 2000, The Foundation for Ainu Culture). Traditional tattoos marking womanhood and marriage eligibility nearly disappeared by 1897 (Meiji 30). Thus, traditional Ainu marriage practices, including weddings and house-building (*chise*), have nearly vanished (Group Gendai, 1971).

4. CONCLUSION

Under historical prejudice, “marriage” became a means for the Ainu to assimilate into Japanese society. Conversely, many Ainu themselves sought marriage with Japanese to reduce discrimination or alter physical traits that marked them for prejudice.

As a result, the number of “pure Ainu” has drastically declined. Today, fully Ainu individuals are very rare. For example, one survey of 112 respondents and 95 couples (including widows/widowers) found only 7 out of 207 (3.4%) could trace pure Ainu ancestry back four generations (Toru Kouchi, 2009). Most Ainu today are of mixed descent.

In major cities like Sapporo and Tokyo, since the 1970s–80s Ainu rights movements, positive attitudes toward Ainu identity have emerged (Higashimura, 2002, p. 231). Some young people even report being “respected” when identifying as Ainu. This suggests that for younger generations, being Ainu has less negative impact.

Although challenges remain, many Ainu today openly embrace their heritage and reconnect with traditional culture. Negative stereotypes of Ainu as “pitiful” or “victims” have largely disappeared. In fact, with growing interest in Ainu culture, some Japanese particularly Japanese–Ainu couples actively respect and adopt Ainu

traditions. For example, a Japanese couple who moved from Tokyo to Nibutani in 1972 studied traditional Ainu woodcarving under an Ainu master. More than 30 years later, they continue to live as Ainu, running a shop selling Ainu crafts. The husband makes *cepkeri* (salmon-skin shoes), while the wife makes *emusiat* (sword belts). Their children attended Ainu schools with Ainu peers (Takano, 1993, pp. 93–94).

By the late 20th century, cultural revival movements grew stronger. In 1994, Kayano Shigeru, the first Ainu elected to Japan's National Diet, introduced legal reforms to protect Ainu culture, which were later enacted. In 2008, Japan officially recognized the Ainu as indigenous people, replacing the 1899 designation of “former natives.”

A 2020 NHK interview highlighted optimism among Ainu youth. For instance, Yamamichi Yomaru (31), an Ainu working at Upopoy, grew up in Nibutani, one of the few areas where Ainu culture remains strong. Since 2011, he has studied the Ainu language and crafts, and now teaches woodcarving and cultural workshops.

Historically, the Ainu existed passively on the margins of Japanese society. Being a small group, their differences with the Japanese diminished through contact. Modern marriage, largely indistinguishable from mainstream Japanese weddings, exemplifies this assimilation.

At the same time, the erosion of Ainu traditions is clear. Marriage rituals, wedding customs, and the building of *chise* have nearly disappeared. Yet, thanks to revival efforts by both the government and Ainu activists, Ainu identity is increasingly respected. Importantly, the Ainu no longer need to conceal their identity in marriage. Traditional marriage customs may even be revived in modern unions, providing a foundation for preserving and sustaining Ainu cultural heritage.

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