

3 The Age of Ezochi

Ezochi Trade Goods Collection

The Ainu obtained resources through hunting, fishing, and gathering, and manufactured them into trade goods such as the items displayed here: large Steller sea lion and bear pelts, beautiful sea otter pelts, eagle feathers and Japanese cranes, cords made from tree bark, and dried seafood including salmon, sea cucumber, and abalone. These goods were traded to the Wajin (majority Japanese; dominant ethnic group of Honshu), in exchange for goods such as rice, sake, tobacco, iron goods, lacquerware, and cotton. Hokkaido was known as “Ezochi” in the period from the 13th century to early 19th century. During this time, as the Wajin tightened their control, the Ainu people gradually lost their freedom over these resources and trade activities.

Towards the end of the Satsumon culture, the Wajin people of Honshu called the residents of Hokkaido “Ezo”. These people are ancestral to the Ainu people.

From the 13th century onwards, ways of life in Hokkaido underwent great changes. For example, pit dwellings were replaced by above-ground dwellings, *chashi* (hill forts of the Ainu) were constructed, large quantities of iron goods came into use, and rituals known in Ainu as *iomante* were carried out to return bears to the Kamuy world. Academically speaking, the “Ainu culture” refers to the emergence of a culture distinct from the previous Satsumon culture, in light of these lifestyle changes. The “Ainu culture” generally spoken of today gradually changed and took shape from the 13th century to the early 19th century, as the Ainu carried out trade with the people of Sakhalin (Karafuto).

In the 14th and 15th centuries, the Sea of Japan was bustling with shipping routes, bringing ceramics and copper coins from China to Hokkaido. Great numbers of Wajin people migrated to southern Hokkaido, building stronghold dwellings known as *tate*. Over time, this influx increasingly threatened the Ainu way of life, leading to violence between the two peoples which lasted from the mid 15th century to the mid 16th century. Over this time, the Wajin power was led by the Kakizaki clan.

In 1599, the Kakizaki clan changed its name to Matsumae, and in 1604 they were granted rights to trade with the Ainu people by the Tokugawa shogunate. Eventually, in the 1630s, the *akinaiba-chigyo-sei* (trade-fief system) was established, and new trade practices began to exploit the Ainu people. Dissatisfied with the unfair trade, a group of Ainu people led by Shakushain took up war against the Matsumae clan in 1669.

Shakushain and his followers were defeated, further strengthening the grip of the Matsumae clan. In the 18th century, the *basho-ukeoi-sei* (subcontracted trading post system) took effect throughout Ezochi, and the Ainu people became laborers at fisheries and other businesses operated by Wajin merchants. Furthermore, in the late 18th century, as foreign ships were spotted on the seas around Ezochi, the Matsumae clan and the Tokugawa shogunate further tightened their control, causing rapid changes to the Ainu people’s way of life.



The Ainu and the Matsumae Clan

In 1604, the Matsumae clan received a black-seal order from Shogun Ieyasu Tokugawa, which would drastically change the structure of trade between the Ainu and the Wajin. Until then, Ainu people had freely visited Honshu for purposes of trade, but now all trade would be carried out with the Matsumae clan. From around 1630, domainal vassals of the Matsumae clan began to visit Ainu settlements, imposing trade which took advantage of the Ainu. And, Wajin began to flood into Hokkaido in search of gold dust. These Wajin settlers soon began to interfere with Ainu industry and lifestyle.



Contact with Russia and its Effects upon the Ainu

In 1789, the Ainu of Menashi-Kunashir, no longer able to contain their anger towards dishonest trade carried out by the Matsumae clan and Wajin merchants, made an attack which killed 71 Wajin. Ainu chieftains persuaded the people responsible to turn themselves in to the Matsumae clan, and 37 Ainu tied to the killings were executed. Meanwhile, Russia advanced into the Kuril (Chishima) Islands, and in 1792, a Russian ship visited Hokkaido. These happenings were of great concern to the Edo government, which decided to take direct control over Ezochi, further tightening the grip of the Wajin domination over the Ainu people.