

4 Recent History of the Ainu

Poster for a Speech by Ainu Youths

During the Meiji Period (1868-1912) the Japanese government began settling and developing Hokkaido, which greatly impacted the culture and way of the life of the Ainu. Forced to live in challenging conditions, the Ainu endured and paved the way for the future. This photograph was taken around 1930 and shows a poster created to inform the general public about a speech to be given by Ainu youths at the Sapporo Clock Tower. The poster calls on the Japanese people to change their discriminatory preconceptions and draws attention to the issues associated with policies on the Ainu people.

The Meiji Government annexed Hokkaido and began to settle and develop the land. During this time the use of rivers and land was strictly controlled. This had an adverse impact on the Ainu way of life, which had primarily involved hunting and fishing. Towns were built and *tonden-hei* (farmer-soldiers) came to live, forcing some Ainu communities to relocate from their ancestral lands. After the start of the 1890s, a large influx of settlers began arriving in Hokkaido. Soon the settlers far outnumbered the indigenous Ainu in every municipality of Hokkaido. Assimilation policies unilaterally negating the traditional Ainu way of life also became stronger around this time.

As various aspects of their lives changed, the Ainu made continual efforts to adapt to the new era. Many Ainu across Hokkaido focused on agriculture or fishing. There were still others who proactively campaigned for schools to be set up to educate their children and others who campaigned for the rights to their ancestral lands that had been taken from them. In the 1910s, Japanese language was mostly used to voice opinions about correcting discrimination and prejudice against the Ainu people and discuss views about the future. Ainu authors began to publish books and Ainu volunteers created magazines.

Meanwhile, Ainu men were conscripted to serve in the Russo-Japanese War and World War II, while many others were mobilized to support the war effort.

After the end of World War II, as Japan democratized, the Ainu began to campaign to protect their lands and living. In the latter half of the 1960s, social and political debate began to take place, providing momentum for rethinking the way Ainu culture was perceived. The Ainu people themselves began to record and preserve their traditional culture to pass down to future generations. In this manner, the history of the Meiji, Taisho and Showa eras is linked directly with today.



Voices of Ainu in History

Let's listen to the voices of the Ainu in modern history.

Heard here is the voice of Yamao Mukai, the first Chairman of the Ainu Association of Hokkaido, established in 1946, speaking slowly and carefully while giving a speech. Around this time the association demanded that expansive pasture lands administered by the Imperial Household Agency be returned to the Ainu. The association asserted that these ancestral lands originally belonged to the Ainu, and must be returned to support their mainstay industries of agriculture and fishing.

The other voice is of Kitaro Nishihira, who was born on Sakhalin. In 1905, after victory in the Russo-Japanese war, Japan took control of Sakhalin, placing the indigenous Ainu and Uilta peoples under the control of Japan. However, Japan left Sakhalin after losing World War II and most of the local Ainu and Uilta population had no other choice but to immigrate to Hokkaido. These people faced great hardship before their move in addition to the trials of building a new life in a new land. This voice recording recalls life in those turbulent times.