

The Ainu People: History and Culture

The Ainu People

The Ainu are the indigenous people of northern Japan. In the Ainu language, “Ainu” means “human.” Little is known about the beginnings of Ainu culture. The earliest documented mention of the Ainu is thought to date from the mid-1300s. They inhabited Ezo (present-day Hokkaido) as hunters, gatherers, and fishermen, and has a deep understanding of the land in which they lived. The Ainu originally occupied a vast area that included Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands, as well as the northern tip of the Tohoku region. At the core of their culture was a spirituality that placed great importance on coexisting harmoniously with nature.

Ainu Culture

The Ainu people have their own language, belief system, and traditions, separate from those of other Japanese. Traditionally, there was no written language, with knowledge being passed orally from generation to generation. The Ainu language’s influence can be seen in the names of numerous sites across Hokkaido. Many of these place names refer to geographical features or characteristics of the surrounding area, showing how closely Ainu are connected to the natural world around them. They hold the belief that there are two separate worlds: the one in which they live and the spirit world. All living things in the human world, as well as man-made tools and even natural disasters, are thought to be spirits that have come from the spirit world to either aid or harm them in some way. These spirits are revered as being either indispensable to human life or as forces beyond their control. Rituals called *kamui-nomi* are performed to give thanks to the spirits and pray for continued peace. Brown bears are worshipped as reincarnated gods that have come from the spirit world to deliver meat for food and fur for warmth. A ritual called *iomante* sends off these bear spirits to the spirit world. At such events, Ainu wear embroidered garments whose patterns all have meaning. For example, the patterns on cuffs and hems are believed to ward off evil spirits. During special ceremonies, Ainu perform traditional dances and songs. Popular dances include the Crane Dance, when dancers lift their coats up behind them symbolizing the wings of a crane, and the Dance of the Ainu Girl’s Black Hair, when women rhythmically swing their long hair back and forth.

Ainu Lifestyle

The Ainu traditionally lived in villages, called *kotan* in the Ainu language. These settlements were mainly located by rivers, lakes, and the sea, to give them easy access to food and drinking water. In

these villages, the Ainu built houses called *chise* that were made of natural materials such as trees, bamboo grass, or reeds, tied together with plants such as grape vines. The four-sided roofs were slanted down to allow snow to slide off, and vents at the top enabled smoke from the hearth to escape. A separate raised structure for food storage was close to the *chise*. The Ainu caught *Sakuramasu*, a type of trout in the summer, while salmon was the primary catch in the autumn. These fish would be cooked, dried, and stored in preparation for the harsh winters. As hunters and gatherers, the Ainu ate wild plants, animal meat, and seafood. Soup was a common meal, cooked with a variety of ingredients such as salmon and vegetables. Everyone in the village had designated duties which changed with the seasons. Typically, the men would hunt for large animals such as deer and bears in spring, and summer and autumn were fishing seasons. In winter, they would catch small animals such as rabbits and sable. Meanwhile, the women and children would make fabric using plants and the hides of animals, and pick vegetables for meals. They knew hundreds of species of edible plants and never harvested more than was necessary. The Ainu traded harvested goods such as animal fur and bird feathers with people from neighboring countries in exchange for materials such as glass beads, silk fabric, and metal products.

The Ainu Today

The Ainu no longer completely follow the traditional way of life, but they are proud of their heritage and much is being done to ensure that their history and culture are not forgotten. The Council for Ainu Policy Promotion, and annual events such as the Ainu Cultural Festival and the Ainu Language Speech Contest, have helped to promote Ainu traditions not only within Japan but around the world. In 2009, the Ainu ancient ceremonial dance was entered into the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List. In Akan-Mashu National Park, visitors can learn about Ainu culture at locations like the Kussharo Kotan Ainu Folklore Museum, Akanko Ainu Kotan, Ureshipachise's Ainu cultural facility in Shiranuka, the Nakashibetsu Municipal Folk Museum, and the Shibeche Local Museum. Ainu traditions are also celebrated in ceremonies across the region. In the town of Shiranuka, for example, the Shishamo Festival is held to pray for safety and a good catch of fish, and in Bihoro, visitors can witness the Bihoro Pass Festival, another prayer celebration.