

Ainu

Ainu are an Indigenous people whose ancestral homeland includes Hokkaido and northern Honshu on the Japanese archipelago, as well as southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands. Traditionally, Ainu lived by hunting, gathering, and fishing. They also grew millet and other hardy grains to supplement their diet. From Hokkaido, they traded with Japan's main island, Honshu, the lower Amur River basin, and further north to areas around the Sea of Okhotsk.

The Ainu worldview is shaped by their close relationship with and dependence on nature. They believe that living creatures, natural elements, and even human-made objects are inhabited by spirit-deities, known as *kamuy*. These *kamuy* are revered and considered active participants in daily life, bestowing blessings such as meat and furs but also causing natural disasters.

In the early twentieth century, the government enacted policies to assimilate Ainu into Japanese society. People were given Japanese names, denied access to traditional hunting and fishing grounds, and discouraged from using their own language. Despite this, Ainu history, beliefs, and cultural identity survived through crafts, rituals, and a rich oral tradition of stories and epics.

From the late nineteenth century, the Ainu lifestyle changed significantly as

Hokkaido became increasingly settled by Wajin (ethnic Japanese).

Traditional Ainu practices such as hunting and fishing were restricted and Ainu children were educated only in Japanese. Despite this, Ainu history, beliefs, and cultural identity survived through crafts, rituals, and a rich oral tradition of stories and epics. Today, Ainu heritage is being preserved and revitalized through education, contemporary art, music, ceremonies, and cultural exchanges with Indigenous peoples around the world.