

The Peniunkur in Ishikari

The Peniunkur are a regional group of Hokkaido Ainu who originally lived along the upper reaches of the Ishikari River. They were among the Ainu exploited by Wajin (ethnic Japanese) merchants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The merchants were initially trade partners with Ainu but eventually took control of trade routes and resources, even forcibly relocating the Peniunkur to work in their fisheries.

This development occurred gradually from the end of the sixteenth century, when the founder of the Matsumae family was granted control of southern Ezo (part of present-day Hokkaido) in return for his service to the samurai general Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598). While most domains under the shogunate derived their wealth from agriculture, the Matsumae's fortunes came through trade with Ainu. They established coastal trading posts and appointed their retainers to manage them. By the eighteenth century, management of the posts had been granted to the merchants who

owned the ships that engaged in coastal trade. To keep up with the growing demand around the country for marine products, the merchants also set up commercial fisheries. Several of these were located in Ishikari, near the mouth of the Ishikari River.

In 1817, as the fishing industry expanded, merchants forcibly relocated the Peniunkur to work in their fisheries, far downstream from their homes.

They worked long hours from early spring to autumn, net fishing for herring and salmon. When not fishing, they were assigned chores such as cutting wood, drawing water, and making deliveries. Living conditions in crowded encampments caused diseases such as smallpox to spread quickly.

In early winter, the Peniunkur returned upriver to their homes along the upper reaches of the Ishikari River, over 100 kilometers away. The long trip

home was made even more difficult by the region's heavy snowfalls.