

The Kawamura Family—Preserving Ainu Culture for the Future

Until the late nineteenth century, the Ainu of the Asahikawa region lived in villages along the Ishikari River. As Asahikawa developed in the early twentieth century and their land was requisitioned by the government, people living in these villages were forced to relocate multiple times. The Kawamura Kaneto Ainu Memorial Museum stands on land that was once part of a village called Cikapuni Kotan (near the center of the present-day city of Asahikawa). In 1916, Kawamura Itakishiroma (?–1943), the village head of Cikapuni Kotan, built a small museum next to his home. His mission was to preserve Ainu culture and correct common misconceptions among visiting Wajin (ethnic Japanese).

Itakishiroma's son Kaneto (1893–1977) succeeded his father as museum director in 1944. Kaneto promoted Ainu culture in Asahikawa through events including dance performances and rituals such as Iomante (sending-back ceremonies for the spirit-deities of bears). In 1964, he hosted the

Hokkaido Ainu Festival in Asahikawa, a five-day festival attended by over 500 people of Ainu heritage from around Hokkaido. They participated in traditional rituals and memorial services, storytelling competitions, woodcarving contests, and a conference on Ainu culture.

Before Kaneto took over the museum, he was a railway surveyor. During his career, he worked in Hokkaido, Nagano, Sakhalin, and Korea.

According to contemporaneous accounts, he was paid only half the salary of his Wajin coworkers, due to discrimination against Ainu. Despite this, he managed to save enough money to expand the museum when he became the director.

Kaneto's activism extended beyond cultural preservation. He played a significant role in asserting Ainu identity and rights by making the museum a space where traditional practices and knowledge could be maintained and shared. His work has been continued by his descendants, particularly his son, Kenichi (1952–2021), who was the third-generation director. Kenichi

built a traditional Ainu house (*cise*) on the museum grounds with local volunteers, fostering cooperation between Ainu and other members of the community. He held Ainu language classes and organized exchanges with Indigenous peoples outside Japan, including those in Hawaii and other parts of the United States, Canada, and Taiwan.

Kenichi's son Haruto (b. 1999) took over as director of the museum after his father's death. He continues his father's work through demonstrations of Ainu culture, including the gathering and preparation of plants, woodcarving, and continuing the annual Asahikawa Ainu Culture Festival, established by his father in 1998.