

Tattoos

In Ainu culture, tattoos were only for women. They were believed to protect the wearer from evil spirits, make her beautiful in the eyes of the community, indicate that she had come of age, and prepare her for the afterlife. Ainu tattooists were always women, usually grandmothers or maternal aunts. Tattooing techniques were passed down from mother to daughter.

Tattooing typically started around age twelve or thirteen, when a girl reached puberty. The tattooist used a small knife to make fine incisions along the upper lip, into which they would then rub an inky mixture typically derived from birchwood soot and mugwort. The result was a distinctive dark blue color.

Around age fifteen or sixteen an Ainu girl received a second tattoo lining her lower lip. At this stage, she was also given an embroidered headband

and a beaded necklace. By around age twenty, the tattoo was completed, symbolizing her readiness for marriage. The lines around her mouth were extended toward the sides of her face, and she was presented with a more elaborate necklace for special occasions, along with metal earrings.

In 1871, the Japanese government outlawed tattoos for Ainu women as part of their measures to assimilate Ainu into Wajin (ethnic Japanese) society. According to accounts of the time, many women defied the law, as they believed they would not be able to get married or enter the afterlife without tattoos.