

Hokkaido: Nineteenth Century to Now

In 1869, the Meiji government (newly established the previous year) made Ezo an official part of Japan and renamed it Hokkaido. This was a pivotal moment for Ainu, as it ushered in an era of hardship and cultural assimilation. Declared Japanese citizens, they were stripped of their ethnic identity. Their traditional hunting and fishing grounds were taken away, and their children were required to speak only Japanese in school.

For generations, Ainu had lived in harmony with the land, relying on its natural resources. However, the arrival of government-employed farmer-soldiers, known as *tondenhei*, drastically altered their way of life. The *tondenhei* were tasked with clearing forests for agriculture and defending Japan's northern border from Russian threats, but for the Ainu, they represented the confiscation of their ancestral lands and loss of their autonomy.

In 1899, the government introduced the Hokkaido Former Aborigine Protection Act, presented as a means of protecting the Ainu but effectively assimilating them into Japanese culture. Ainu were assigned Japanese names, encouraged to take up farming, and discouraged from speaking their native language. Despite these efforts, Ainu culture has endured. Throughout the twentieth century, Ainu activists protested and petitioned for the return of their lands and the repeal of the Hokkaido Former Aborigine Protection Act, which was finally abolished in 1997. Today, crafts, rituals, and oral traditions preserve Ainu history and culture for future generations.