Ainu — Japan's Indigenous People

This article was created by students majoring in English in the School of Society and Collaboration at Sapporo University who are enrolled in the Interpreting/Translation Seminar. Under the comprehensive partnership agreement between Hokkaido Government and Sapporo University, they worked on publishing the article as part of an international initiative. The students introduce the charms of Hokkaido that they hope people overseas will come to know.

When you visit Hokkaido, you will find not only magnificent nature but also another special attraction. It is the culture of the Ainu. The Ainu are the indigenous people of northern Japan who have lived in harmony with nature for generations. The worldview of the Ainu, which respects the blessings of forests, seas, and rivers, can still be felt in many parts of Hokkaido today. In fact, many place names in Hokkaido come from the Ainu language, which reflects the belief that all things in nature have spirits.

The Ainu people have always valued living in balance with nature. Their traditional clothing, such as attus, is made from woven tree bark fibers, and the garment called luunpe is decorated with delicate embroidery. Both have been passed down through generations with different regional variation. These patterns represent wishes for protection from evil and for prosperity. Tools used for hunting and fishing, such as bows and dugout canoes, also show a deep connection with and respect for nature.

The Ainu people sustained themselves through trade in the past, but their trading rights were taken away by the ethnic Japanese. As a result, the Battle of Shakushain occurred in the 17th century, which ended in defeat for the Ainu. Later, during the Meiji era (the late 19th century), assimilation policies robbed the Ainu of their land, language, and culture. Although the Ainu faced a long period of discrimination, they struggled to protect and pass on their culture. In 2008, the Japanese government officially recognized the Ainu as an indigenous people. This action led to greater understanding and a change in public awareness. Since then, efforts to revive Ainu culture have been accepted.

Today, younger generations are relearning traditional dances and language, and Ainu culture is being introduced across Japan through films and books. These efforts are helping to deepen understanding and widen interest in Ainu culture. One of the most famous places to experience Ainu culture in Hokkaido is Upopoy (National Ainu Museum and Park) in Shiraoi

Town, in the southern part of Hokkaido. Visitors can learn through all five senses by watching traditional dances and storytelling, joining craft workshops, and viewing museum exhibitions. The on-site café serves traditional dishes made with natural ingredients from Hokkaido, such as salmon and wild plants, allowing visitors to experience the Ainu spirit through food. It is truly a hands-on cultural facility where you can "see, hear, and taste" Ainu culture.

For those who want to experience Ainu culture right in Sapporo, Sapporo Pirka Kotan is recommended. Visitors can enjoy hands-on activities such as wood carving and embroidery, which are closely connected to daily life. Making items like coasters or straps with Ainu patterns is especially popular with tourists.

Access:

Upopoy is about 65 minutes from Sapporo Station by Japan Railway (JR) limited express, and just a 10-minute walk from Shiraoi Station. From New Chitose Airport, it takes about 40 minutes by JR.

Sapporo Pirka Kotan can be reached in about 60 minutes by bus from JR Sapporo Station.

日本の先住民族　アイヌ

本記事は北海道と札幌大学との包括連携協定に基づく国際交流促進の取り組みとして、札幌大学英語専攻・通訳翻訳ゼミの学生が取材して作成した記事です。学生が、海外の人に知ってほしいと思う北海道の魅力を紹介します。

北海道を訪れると、雄大な自然だけでなく、もうひとつの魅力に出会えます。それは、自然を敬いながら生きてきた先住民族・アイヌの文化です。森や海、川の恵みに感謝しながら暮らしてきたアイヌ民族の世界観は、今も北海道のあちこちに息づいています。

アイヌ民族は、自然との調和を何よりも大切にしてきました。木の皮の繊維を織って作る衣「アットゥシ」や、繊細な刺繍を施した「ルウンペ」など、伝統の衣服には地域ごとに特色があり受け継がれています。その模様は魔除けや豊かさへの願いを込めたものともいわれます。また、狩りや漁に使う弓矢や丸木舟などにも、自然への敬意が表れています。北海道の地名にも多く残るアイヌ語は、すべての自然に魂が宿るという信仰を反映しています。

元は豊かな交易の民だったアイヌ民族ですが、和人によって交易の権利を奪われました。そのため、17 世紀に「シャクシャインの戦い」が起こり敗北して、明治時代の同化政策によって土地や言葉、文化を奪われました。長い差別の時代が続きましたが、アイヌ民族は文化を守り受け継いできました。2008 年には日本政府がアイヌ民族を正式に先住民族として認めたことで、日本社会での見方が変わり理解が進んだため、文化復興の動きが広がっています。若い世代が踊りや言葉を学び直したり、映画や書籍でアイヌ文化が紹介したりと、理解を深める輪が広がっています。

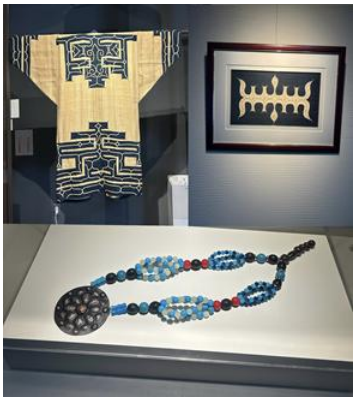
アイヌ文化を体感できる代表的な場所が、白老町にある民族共生象徴空間「ウポポイ」です。博物館の展示だけでなく、伝統舞踊や語りの公演、工芸体験などを通して、五感で文化を学ぶことができます。敷地内のカフェでは、鮭や山菜など北海道の自然の恵みを使った伝統料理を楽しめ、食を通してアイヌ民族の精神を感じられます。まさに「見る・聞く・味わう」ことができる体験型の施設です。

都市の中でもアイヌ文化に触れたい方には、札幌市の「サッポロピㇼカコタン」がおすすめです。木彫りや刺繍など、生活に根ざした文化を身近に体験できます。アイヌ文様が入ったコースターやストラップを作ることもでき、観光客にも人気のスポットです。

ウポポイへのアクセスは、札幌駅から JR 特急で約 65 分、白老駅から徒歩約 10 分です。新千歳空港からは JR で約 40 分で着きます。サッポロピㇼカコタンへは、JR 札幌駅からバス利用で 60 分で着きます。

Map / Photos

Sapporo City
Shiraoi Town
CC0 Hokkaido



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