History

Although it is believed that the Ainu culture was established around the 12th or 13th century, the first historical materials to mention the Ainu date from around the 15th century. At that time, the Ainu primarily made their livelihood by fishing, hunting and plant gathering, and also traded with people in other areas. It is not certain when Wajin* began living in Ezo (presently Hokkaido). Their areas of residence spread from Mukawa in the east to Yoichi in the west. In the vicinity of what is now Hakodate, merchant ships came from Wakasa (the southwestern part of Fukui Prefecture) and wholesale shops and blacksmiths were established. From Ezo, the “three Ezo specialities” of kelp, dried salmon and herring, as well as products that came from China via Northern Ezo (presently Sakhalin), were shipped to Honshu. Iron implements, lacquer ware, sake, and the like were transported from Honshu. The Ainu were direct and indirect producers and tradesmen of articles shipped to Honshu.

Reaching a Compromise with the Ainu

In 1456, a young Ainu man had a quarrel with a blacksmith in Shinori (presently Hakodate) over a knife that he had ordered. In the heat of the argument the blacksmith stabbed the young man to death with the knife, prompting the father and son of Koshamain, an Ainu leader, to lead an uprising the following year. With increases in the number of Wajin in Ezo, the influential figures among them became feudal lords and their bases were referred to as castles. Twelve castles dotted the southern tip of the Oshima Peninsula. Koshamain’s father and son captured all but two of these castles in quick succession. One of the holdouts was Hanazawa Castle, under the Lord Sueshige Kakizaki, and it was here that Nobuhiro Takeda was serving as a guest general. Takeda launched a surprise attack and defeated Koshamain’s father and son, thereby escaping the imminent danger of annihilation. As a result, Takeda inherited the Kakizaki family and later on became the founder of the Matsumae family. The feud between Wajin and Ainu continued for nearly a century. Some of their battles were ended by Kakizaki’s surprise attack against Ainu leaders. The long, drawn out battles are thought to have been caused by political or economic discord between Ainu and Wajin. During this time, Kakizaki solidified his position as the ruler of Wajin and obtained the power to levy taxes on merchant ships from Honshu. Even so, political and military stability was not achieved. In 1550, the Law Concerning Traffic for Foreign Commercial Vessels was enacted to appease the Ainu and reach a compromise with them. Under this law, two Ainu leaders were forced to live in the areas now known as Kaminokuni and Shiriuichi, with Ainu and Wajin living north and south of these areas, respectively. Taxes levied on merchant ships from Honshu were partially distributed to these leaders. Ainu ships lowered their sails and sailors bowed when approaching Kaminokuni in the west and Shiriuichi in the east.

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*wajin: Before the Meiji era, this referred to people who migrated to Hokkaido from Honshu. The expression is currently used to distinguish the ethnic Japanese majority from the Ainu.
The Transition from Producer to Fishing Ground Laborer

Yoshihiro Kakizaki (the fifth-generation descendent of Nobuhiro Takeda) met Toyotomi Hideyoshi in Nagoya in 1593 and Tokugawa Ieyasu in Osaka in 1599. Around that time, he changed his surname from Kakizaki to Matsumae. In 1604, he was presented with the Kokuinjo, or Black Seal, an official letter from a feudal lord. It granted him a monopoly on trade in Ezo. Under the shogunate government, the Matsumae clan was unable to use rice as a stipend for clannsmen as was done in clans in Honshu. Instead, the Matsumae clan gave prominent retainers the right to trade with Ainu in limited areas, a system that was approved by the Tokugawa shogunate. These trade areas were referred to as “places of commerce” or “trading posts.” Enfeoffed lords (clannsmen stationed at places of commerce) sent ships to their own places of commerce once a year to trade with the local Ainu. They obtained goods there and resold them in Matsumae to merchants from Honshu, living off the profits. Later on, the enfeoffed lords borrowed living expenses and money necessary to trade with the Ainu from merchants and repaid the merchants with articles obtained through trade. When the debts to merchants began to increase, however, enfeoffed lords began contracting out to merchants the rights to trading posts for fixed charges. This is referred to as the “trading post commission system.” As the enfeoffed lords had done, merchants who contracted for these trading posts traded with the Ainu there. However, around 1740 or so, with increased demand for Nagasaki tawaramono (roasted sea cucumber, abalone, kelp, and other dried marine products sold in straw bags) and with burgeoning catches of shimekasu, which served as fertilizer for cash crops such as indigo on Honshu, merchants started to fish on their own. They attempted to increase their catch by improving their fishing gear and introducing new techniques, which led to their use of Ainu as laborers at fishing grounds. The Ainu went from being producers and traders to living as laborers tied to the fishing grounds.

Kokuinjo that Tokugawa Ieyasu presented to Yoshihiro Matsumae. It was with this seal that the Matsumae clan was given a monopoly on trade in Ezo. (Property of the Historical Museum of Hokkaido)
The Battle of Shakushain and the Uprising on Kunashiri Island

The Battle of Shakushain originated from a struggle between two groups of Ainu living in the Hidaka region over fishing and hunting rights. In 1669, however, Ainu in Ezo responded to a call by Shakushain, one of the leaders of the two groups, to wage an all-out war with the Matsumae clan. The opponents were almost equally matched, and the parties eventually reconciled. During the banquet celebrating the reconciliation, Shakushain was murdered in a surprise attack, thus bringing the wars of the Ainu to an end. As a result, the Ainu had no choice but to agree to obey the Matsumae clan.

The Matsumae clan brought several of its battles with the Ainu to a close with surprise attacks when it thought it was losing ground. It should be pointed out that the Ainu were very susceptible to surprise attacks because they were traders. Trade, which was indispensable to the Ainu livelihood, was not simply an act of exchanging goods, but rather a solemn ceremony for politely apologizing for the long period of silence. Therefore, when Wajin politely suggested reconciliation, the Ainu and their leaders, in particular, did not brush aside such suggestions and approached them in a dignified manner. When the formalities with their former foes were completed and the tense atmosphere was eased, the Ainu suffered surprise attacks.

With the Battle of Shakushain, the Wajin solidified their advantage. Many Ainu were forced to work at fishing grounds and put up with abuse and trade improprieties from those contracted with the right to run trading posts and the subordinates of such contractors. The opening of trading posts by the Matsumae clan and the employment of the Ainu even spread to remote places in Matsumae. Under these circumstances, the Ainu living on Kunashiri Island, who still had their independence, stood up against the abuse and improprieties of traders employed by Kyube Hidaya, who was commissioned to run the Kunashiri trading post. The battle spread to the Menashi region (presently Shibetsu) on the opposite shore. However, the war was brought to an end by the persuasion of the lords of Kunashiri and Akkeshi. Nonetheless, punitive forces dispatched by the Matsumae clan executed major figures and punished others concerned. This battle prompted the Matsumae clan to bring the Ainu on Kunashiri Island and in Eastern Hokkaido under its control. This was the last battle fought by the Ainu against Wajin.
In the Shadow of Politics

In 1799, ten years after the battles on Kunashiri Island and in Menashi, the Tokugawa shogunate gained direct rule over the southern half of Ezo and Eastern Ezo, and in 1807 it extended this control to the northern half of Ezo, Western Ezo and Northern Ezo by relocating the Matsumae clan to Yanagawa (presently Fukushima Prefecture). This was a result of the management of trading posts that imposed harsh labor at fishing grounds and improprieties on the Ainu as well as the vigilance against Russia’s southward advance. The shogunate conducted fair trade with the Ainu so they would not be enticed by Russia’s offers of appeasement and had other clans in Honshu dispatch soldiers to Ezo. Profits from trade were used for the management of Ezo, but the expenses for opening roads and expanding defensive preparations exceeded these profits. As a result of lowered vigilance against Russia and the Matsumae clan’s campaigns of territorial recovery, Ezo was returned to the Matsumae clan in 1821.

In 1855, the year foreign ships began to be allowed to make port calls at Hakodate, the shogunate had direct rule over the surrounding areas. The shogunate control spread to include Ezo and its surrounding islands the following year. The southwestern part of the Oshima Peninsula, however, continued to belong to the Matsumae clan, who held it to reinforce the defenses against Russia, to reclaim Ezo and to foster new industries.
Aiming to insist to Russia that the Ainu belonged to Japan and their places of residence were Japanese territories, the Tokugawa shogunate appeased the Ainu through trade and protection. Furthermore, the ban on wearing bamboo hats, straw raincoats and Japanese sandals, which had been imposed by the Matsumae clan, was lifted. The shogunate forced the Ainu to change their hairstyles, clothes, names, and the like to those of Honshu and outlawed traditional Ainu customs and manners, including earrings, tattoos, and the ceremony to send back bear spirits. During the second ruling of the shogunate, the aforementioned measures were reinforced, provoking the antipathy of the Ainu. This indicates that the customs and manners cultivated by the Ainu were deeply rooted in their daily lives and could not be easily changed – not even by force.
In 1869, the new Meiji Government renamed Ezo as Hokkaido, unilaterally making it part of Japan. The Ainu were incorporated into the nation and listed as “commoners” on their family registers. But the Ainu were also referred to as “former aborigines” and discrimination against them continued. In the same year, Kaitakushi (the Development Commission), which was established to rule Hokkaido, outlawed the Ainu language and lifestyle, and introduced a policy of forced Japanization. It took away land and resources of the Ainu, making these national property. This property was then sold to the private sector. Salmon fishing and deer hunting were banned. Together with the institution of a national system aimed at moving Japan away from Asia and toward Europe as well as increasing wealth and military power, social pressures aimed at the transformation of livelihood and lifestyle accelerated.

As a result of the policy that gave priority to development advantageous to Wajin, the situation of the Ainu worsened, even to the point that they did not have enough food. Although agriculture was encouraged, in many cases it was difficult to change lifestyles overnight. For this reason, the Ainu were mistakenly defined as being deficient in property management skills, resulting in restrictions on their rights to own land and other property.

The government concluded the Treaty for the Exchange of Sakhalin for the Kuril Islands with Russia in 1875, forcefully relocating the Ainu on Sakhalin and the Kurils to the islands of Hokkaido and Shikotan. Those who were forced to relocate suffered from the abrupt change in lifestyle and prevalence of diseases, and many of them died. Such forced relocation continued in numerous areas.

In 1886, the Hokkaido Government was established. The new government promoted development and transfer of land and resources to the private sector, thereby reducing the places where Ainu could live. When the hardships of the Ainu were further aggravated by this policy, the Hokkaido Former Aborigine Protection Law was enacted in 1899. This law was aimed at granting land to be used for farming and assimilating the Ainu to Wajin culture by educating them in the Japanese language and Wajin customs.

Some Ainu who were given land succeeded in farming, but many failed to convert their land to farmland, thereby resulting in forfeiture of that land, or were given land unsuitable for farming from the very beginning. The amount of land granted to the Ainu was far smaller than that granted to Wajin – especially those with large amounts of capital. The Hokkaido Former Aborigine Protection Law stipulated that the land to be handed over to the Ainu be up to 15,000 tsubo per household. This can be clearly seen as ethnic discrimination when compared with the 1872 Regulations on Land Sales and Leasing in Hokkaido, which allowed 100,000 tsubo per Wajin, and the 1897 Law Concerning the Disposal of Nationally Owned Undeveloped Land in Hokkaido, which stipulated that up to 1.5
million tsubo of reclaimed land be disposed of free of charge.
With regard to the establishment of schools, there were Ainu who donated land and funds to enable their children to receive an education. However, the Ainu language and culture were denied at school, and children had to learn the Japanese language and Wajin lifestyle. Important aspects of education under the Hokkaido Former Aborigine Protection Law included the basic principle of education segregated from Wajin children and unreasonable discrimination in educational content.

From the Taisho Era to the Era of the 15-Year War

The period from the 1910s to the 1920s, referred to as “Taisho Democracy,” saw a breath of social freedom, which prompted the Ainu to become more aggressively engaged in activities. The Ainu protested against discrimination, criticized the prejudice and ignorance of Wajin who still believed the Ainu were leading traditional lives, and called for independence. There were also movements to form ethnic organizations. Some Ainu were even elected to municipal assemblies.
In 1934, the Asahikawa City Former Aborigine Land Protection Law was enacted. This was a measure to redress the problematic situation of the Ainu in Chikabumi, Asahikawa, who were about to be expelled from their land. The Ainu had their representatives lobby in Tokyo and took other measures to prevent the forfeiture of the land. The situation was restored to normalcy, although some problems remained unsolved, such as placing the land that was supposed to be granted to the Ainu under the control of the Governor of Hokkaido as common property.
Ainu Activities after World War II

After Japan’s defeat in World War II, the Ainu established the Hokkaido Ainu Association (renamed the Ainu Association of Hokkaido in 1961), toward becoming a proud ethnic group by enhancing their social standing. In those days, agricultural land reform was being undertaken whereby land was taken away from landlords and sold to tenant farmers at low prices. However, much of the land granted to the Ainu under the Hokkaido Former Aborigine Protection Law was lost as a result of this policy. The Hokkaido Ainu Association was opposed to this reform, but no consideration was given to the past unreasonable deprivation of Ainu lands. As a result of a series of measures that began in the Meiji era and the illegal transfer of rights due to economic reasons, land that still belongs to the Ainu accounts for less than 150% of that in the initial period.

In the 1960s, environmental improvement projects were initiated whereby assembly halls (community halls) and joint workshops were established in areas where many Ainu lived, to redress the disparity in living standards and the hardships they had faced. In 1974, the Hokkaido Ainu Welfare Measures, which incorporated measures for housing, employment, school attendance and other issues, were launched. Although this was supposed to be a seven-year program, it has been continued to date with different priorities and under different names. In the 1970s, activities designed to preserve and pass on the unique Ainu culture began to expand.

In 1984, the Ainu Association of Hokkaido (formerly the Hokkaido Ainu Association) drafted and proposed the Legislation Concerning the Ainu People, which called for the recovery of the basic human rights of the Ainu, the elimination of discrimination against them, the introduction of special legislative seats in politics aimed at enabling the direct reflection of the views of Ainu representatives, the implementation of comprehensive educational and cultural measures, and the improvement of some conditions including agriculture, fishery, forestry, commerce and industry to allow them to achieve economic independence. The Association lobbied for the enactment of this new law at the Hokkaido Government, the central government, the Diet and other organizations. In 1986 when then Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone stated that "Japan is a racially homogeneous nation and there is no discrimination against ethnic minorities with Japanese citizenship," discussions and campaigns related to the Ainu became brisk. In addition, the Ainu began to pay attention to global trends in the rights of indigenous people, accelerating exchanges with other countries. With the aforementioned trends as the background, the first Ainu took a seat in the Diet.

Enactment of the Law for the Promotion of Ainu Culture

— Aiming to realize a society in which the ethnic pride of the Ainu is respected —

In response to wide-ranging campaigns centering on Ainu demands for the adoption of a new law, the Diet abolished the Hokkaido Former Aborigine Protection Law in 1997 and enacted the Law for the Promotion of the Ainu Culture and for the Dissemi-
nation and Advocacy for the Traditions of the Ainu and the Ainu Culture. This law addressed only cultural areas among the items requested by the Ainu Association of Hokkaido. Since the law aims “to realize a society in which the ethnic pride of the Ainu people is respected and to contribute to the development of diverse cultures in our country” (Article 1), it encourages a shift from conventional attitudes epitomized in the national policies that denigrated Ainu ethnicity and promoted forced cultural assimilation. It has also made it the responsibility of the nation and local authorities to promote measures designed to disseminate Ainu culture.

**Trends at home and abroad**

Indigenous peoples share the experience of having been relegated to a disadvantageous position under the dominance and oppression of current nations and societies - despite their being indigenous inhabitants. Looking back on the tumultuous changes throughout the world in the modern and contemporary eras, we find no regions or ethnic groups that have been spared from changes in primary livelihood activities and lifestyles and in the traditional cultures based on them. Unfortunately, the situation in which changes that ethnic groups did not aspire toward or choose were unilaterally forced upon them and the conditions remained uncorrected for a long period of time, leading to the continuation of a massive feeling of loss, a sense of mistrust and negative influence for several generations can be still observed throughout the world. The same was true of the Ainu: collective rights were not guaranteed for them as an ethnic group, and the independent and diverse potential of development remained restricted for a long time.

The United Nations continued to study ways to recover the rights lost by indigenous peoples around the world for long time. And in September 2007, the United Nations General Assembly passed “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”. The bases attained are written clearly, Self-Determination, territories and resources and intellectual property rights on the declaration.

In addition, in June 2008, the Diet unanimously passed “a resolution that recognizes the Ainu as indigenous peoples of Japan” on a basis of United Nations Declaration. In response to adoption of the resolution, the Chief Cabinet Secretary announced the Government view on the instructions of conducting policy towards the Ainu “on a basis of recognizing the Ainu as Indigenous peoples”. In July of the same year, the Government organized “an Advisory Panel of Eminent Persons on Policies for the Ainu People”. In July 2009, the Panel submitted a report to the Government.

In accordance with such trends, concern of general society is growing more and more interested in the Ainu and the Ainu culture. Unfortunately, there are still remains unsolved, such as discrimination, unstable living, to rectify situations, the Ainu policy has been promoted so far, even as establishment of new general measure is desired.