

# Ainu language special

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## Efforts underway to save Ainu language and culture

Chances are you haven't met an Ainu speaker in Japan. After all, Google's Endangered Languages Project puts the number of native speakers at fewer than five. But the Ainu people once populated a wide swath of northern Japan, stretching from Tohoku to Hokkaido, the Chishima islands, and the southern part of Sakhalin Island.

A range of forces has pushed the Ainu language to the brink of extinction, galvanizing efforts by the government, community groups and citizens to preserve and revitalize it in a race against time. Today these include the Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony (Upopoy) that opened in Shiraoi, Hokkaido, in 2020 as well as projects designed to incorporate the language in daily life. For example, people can now hear announcements in Ainu on some bus routes in Hokkaido, and anyone with an internet connection can access a popular conversational Ainu channel on YouTube.

A broader long-running effort to protect the cultural identities of indigenous peoples is International Mother Language Day, which is observed every Feb. 21. Formally declared by UNESCO in 1999, International Mother Language Day sees a variety of worldwide events and workshops conducted to raise awareness of languages and promote multilingualism. It is also associated with the United Nations International Decade of Indigenous Languages, which kicks off this year.

According to the third edition of UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, eight languages in Japan are endangered, including various Ryukyuan languages and Hachijo in addition to Ainu. The Ainu language is the only one designated as being critically endangered, where the "youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently." On a five-level scale with five meaning extinct, this represents level four. Formerly there were distinct Hokkaido, Sakhalin and Kuril dialects of Ainu, but today UNESCO categorizes the Hokkaido dialect as the sole remaining dialect in existence.

It is difficult to pinpoint how many people can speak Ainu, or even how many Ainu people there are. According to a 2017 survey by the Hokkaido Prefectural Government, an estimated 13,118 people in Hokkaido identify as Ainu, although the actual number may never be known, given that past discrimination forced many to hide their Ainu heritage, even at times from their own children.

Ainu is categorized as a language isolate, meaning it doesn't come from a protolanguage and cannot be linked to any language family. It is linguistically distinct from Japanese, and traditionally an oral language without an original writing system.

### Nationwide promotion

The Ainu language has become critically endangered today due to various forces that have been in play for hundreds of years. In 1869, the Meiji government officially declared Hokkaido (then known as Ezo) part of Japan, after which *wajin*, (a historical term referring to the ethnic Japanese, or non-Ainu people) began moving into Hokkaido in far greater numbers. Shortly after, Ainu culture suffered another blow when many Ainu on Sakhalin and the Chishima islands were displaced to Hokkaido with the signing of a treaty between Japan and Russia in 1875.

The Meiji government also spearheaded a cultural enlightenment movement throughout Japan in which Ainu customs were regarded as "uncultivated" and many were restricted or prohibited. Schools for Ainu children were established to increase

their attendance, but the Japanese language was given priority. While speaking Ainu was not specifically banned, using Japanese was expected at schools and government-run facilities. While these assimilation policies were intended to "civilize" the Ainu people, they caused Ainu to be spoken less, even within their families, leading to a precipitous drop in the number of Ainu speakers to the point where the language is now critically endangered.

The policies undertaken in the Meiji Era (1868 to 1912) to establish a modern nation-state resulted in decisive damage to Ainu cultural heritage and, coupled with discrimination from the overwhelming influx of *wajin* immigrants, marginalized the Ainu people and relegated them to poor living conditions. This situation started to change in the 1970s, when the Hokkaido Prefectural Government began taking steps to improve the living standards of Ainu people with support from the national government. These efforts have helped shrink the educational and economic disparities between Ainu residents and the wider communities in which they live. For example, in 1979 Ainu youth continued on to high school at a rate 21% lower than peers in their communities, and similarly enrolled in university at a 22% lower rate. But by 2017 these disparities had shrunk to 3.7% and 12.5%, respectively, according to a survey by the Hokkaido Prefectural Government.

The 1997 Act on the Promotion of Ainu Culture and Dissemination and Enlightenment of Knowledge about Ainu Tradition, etc. provided support for teaching, promoting and researching Ainu culture. The law's definition of culture included the language, music, dance, handicrafts and other customs. The U.N. General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, prompting the Diet to pass a resolution in 2008 urging the government to recognize the Ainu people as an indigenous group. With this, the government expressed recognition that the Ainu are an indigenous people "with a unique language as well as religious and cultural distinctiveness." The government subsequently established the Council for Ainu Policy Promotion, chaired by the chief Cabinet secretary, which laid the foundation for the 2019 passage of the Act Promoting Measures to Achieve a Society in which the Pride of Ainu People Is Respected.

This act seeks to increase understanding and respect for Ainu culture as part of broader understanding and respect for multiculturalism and coexistence with diverse ethnic groups. Government policies under the act will promote Ainu culture not only in Hokkaido, but also nationwide in recognition of the fact that Ainu are present in many regions of Japan today, not just Hokkaido.

Where the government had previously promoted the Japanese language over Ainu, it is now supporting efforts to preserve and promote the speaking of Ainu.

### Recording Ainu language

One such effort involves recording the Ainu language. According to Masanari Suzuki, a senior specialist for the Japanese language at the Cultural Affairs Agency, since 2015 the agency has been spearheading a project to archive Ainu speech recordings. The project aims to create a repository of materials not only for academic research purposes, but also to build the linguistic infrastructure for people to learn Ainu and pass it down to future generations. As part of this project, the Cultural Affairs Agency is digitizing analog voice recordings and providing financial and technical assistance to

Ainu communities and other groups that have materials in the language so they can create archival collections as well.

By March this year, the project expects to digitize a total of 4,403 hours of analog recordings. Some 670 hours of voice recordings are from the former Ainu Museum in Shiraoi, and 155 hours have been archived. The majority contain oral narratives and folklore. Much of the remaining recordings consist of interviews where privacy considerations require additional time in the archival process. The digitization process is scheduled to continue through 2026, with an eye to transcribing and translating the materials and releasing them as an archive.

In addition to digitizing and archiving materials, the project is creating a searchable linguistic corpus to make it easier for people to look up words and sample sentences in Ainu. The corpus can be used by Ainu speakers to build conversational skills as well as create new words in the language. It is in fact already being used this way — announcements at Upopoy, the new Ainu cultural facility, incorporate newly created Ainu words, Suzuki said.

### Community participation

Upopoy, also known as the Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony, is designed to showcase and revitalize the Ainu culture. As a national center for learning about and promoting Ainu history and culture, Upopoy enables people of all nationalities and ages to learn about the Ainu's worldview and respect for nature. It also acts as a symbol of a society based on mutual respect and coexistence, passing on and sharing various aspects of a culture that has developed over many years and is influenced by the surrounding nature. It opened in Shiraoi in July 2020 on the shore of Lake Poroto, which is about an hour from Sapporo and 40 minutes from New Chitose Airport.

Upopoy consists of the National Ainu Museum, the National Ainu Park and a Memorial Site for memorial services. *Upopoy* means "singing in a large group" in the Ainu language. Permanent museum exhibits focus on both the traditions and diversity of modern culture, spanning the themes of language, universe, lives, history, work and exchange from an Ainu perspective. The outdoor park features a re-creation of a *kotan* (traditional village), as well as a stage for traditional dance performances and areas for hands-on crafts, cooking and other activities.

Ainu people participated in the preparation of the exhibits and workshops at Upopoy, and their participation is also a focus of other recent government-sponsored projects.

Held since 2015, the Languages and Dialects in Danger Convention is sponsored by the Cultural Affairs Agency. Free and open to the public, the convention takes up topics related to the eight languages in Japan designated as endangered by UNESCO, as well as dialects in regions affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake. Participants share their multilingual experiences and how they have promoted both their language and language acquisition in their communities. While early conventions were mostly attended by older speakers, more recently the convention has attracted a larger number of younger participants, including school teachers interested in language acquisition.

### Learning chances expand

Established in 1997, the Foundation for Ainu Culture has been offering Ainu classes for years, including advanced classes, classes for parents and children and classes



Above: Four women perform an Ainu ritual at the Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony, also known as Upopoy, in Shiraoi, Hokkaido, in 2020. Right: An illustration depicts Upopoy on the edge of Lake Poroto. In Ainu, *upopoy* means "singing in a large group."

FOUNDATION FOR  
AINU CULTURE



for training teachers. It has also been working to create Ainu-language teaching materials. On the radio, conversation lessons have been available since 1987. Accompanying textbooks are available for beginner courses and podcasts of the broadcasts can be downloaded from the internet.

In addition to lessons, community-based language acquisition focuses on creating more opportunities to hear the language in daily life. One innovative initiative launched by Donan Bus Co. is broadcasting announcements in Ainu on three bus lines in the town of Biratori, which includes Nibutani, Hokkaido, where more than 80% of residents have Ainu roots. Many passengers have reacted favorably to the announcements and have commented that it seems natural to hear the Ainu language.

Considering that around 80% of place names in Hokkaido come from Ainu, Hokkaido bus announcements may seem an especially natural fit for the language. Sapporo, for example, was called *satporopet* in Ainu. *Sat* means dry, *poro* means large, and *pet* means river. New words were also created for the bus announcements, including *kampiop* (seat pocket), *uepekerkampi* (leaflet) and *tumamkauspe* (poster).

In keeping with the goal of showcasing Ainu culture both in Japan and abroad, the Cultural Affairs Agency exhibited artwork last February on the theme of the sounds of Ainu culture at New Chitose Airport. The exhibit, produced by Naked, Inc., is an immersive sound and light experience incorporating narration in Ainu and music from Ainu instruments and songs.

In Sapporo, people traveling through Sapporo Station can visit the Minapa ("many people laugh") Plaza, which features Ainu art exhibits as well as a big screen displaying the weather forecast in the Ainu language.

### Youth take Ainu to YouTube

A modern-day complement to the traditional classes and radio lessons is YouTube video lessons. The SITO Channel (*sito* is a type of Ainu dumpling made of grain) offers dozens of lessons on conversational Ainu using topics of interest to young people. Starting with self-introductions, the lessons move on to talking about love interests, foods from traditional deer stew to shaved ice, songs, animals and everyday experiences like birthdays, hay fever and studying for tests. Comments on the YouTube channel include thanks from people studying Ainu in Japan and around the world.

The SITO Channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsvS5QjLwv1Vh-WpK48L57Cg/>) is run by Maya Sekine, a student at Keio University. Sekine grew up in the close-knit Ainu community of Nibutani. Her maternal grandparents and mother are Ainu artisans with Ainu heritage and her father, while not of Ainu descent, is an Ainu language instructor. Sekine says she was blessed for being able to grow up around Ainu foods and crafts, and to use Ainu words in daily conversation. She did not realize at the time how much the culture was a part of her childhood until she left Nibutani to attend junior high school elsewhere.

In an interview, she shared that she went through something of an identity crisis in her early teen years, even hiding her ethnicity at one point. But leaving her hometown ultimately gave her a new perspective on her culture and identity, which blossomed into pride in being Ainu by the time she entered high school in Sapporo.

Sekine has become something of a language and culture ambassador for the community through her efforts to broaden awareness of the language. In addition to

her YouTube channel, she recorded bus announcements in Ainu when she was 18 and hosted Ainu radio lessons with her father Kenji in 2018.

Sekine says she senses a shift in how the Ainu culture is perceived today. Whereas older generations of Ainu people suffered discrimination, today's Japanese are becoming more accepting of diversity, including differences in ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. By increasing awareness of the Ainu language, she hopes to build acceptance for people from all kinds of identities and communities. While diversity is much discussed in society, it is not yet fully embraced. Sekine hopes that showcasing her Ainu background in accessible and positive ways will prompt people to become more open to diversity in general. She views her Ainu ethnicity as one part of her identity, something that is cool that she wants to share with others.

The Ainu people faced decades of hardships during which their language and cultural heritage were decisively damaged. The language has reached the point of being critically endangered, with only a few fluent speakers left. New initiatives launched by the government, including Upopoy and the Ainu language archive project, are seeking to promote the language and culture with greater grassroots participation by Ainu people for the benefit of their communities. There are now more opportunities than ever to see and hear the Ainu language in daily life, as well as a new generation of youth taking pride in their cultural heritage and interested in keeping the language alive. These efforts, coming from both the government and Ainu communities, offer the best hope yet for the survival of this critically endangered language.



The Minapa ("many people laugh") Plaza by Sapporo Station's Nanboku Line features Ainu art exhibits and a big screen with weather forecasts in the Ainu language. CITY OF SAPPORO



Left: Maya Sekine teaches conversational Ainu on her YouTube channel. Above: The Languages and Dialects in Danger Convention is held in Amami-Oshima in February 2020. Launched in 2015, the convention has attracted younger participants in recent years. CULTURAL AFFAIRS AGENCY

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## Respected comic book spurs hope for indigenous tongue

In 2009, UNESCO in its "Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger" designated the Ainu language as being critically endangered. As the most dire of the five categories — only extinct is worse — used in the report, it highlighted the precarious state that had befallen the language.

Still, over the years before and since, a variety of initiatives have been undertaken to revitalize Ainu by stirring interest in it through pop culture, scholarship, the internet and other avenues.

An oral language that did not have its own writing system, Ainu has been brought to the brink through the process of assimilating its speakers, most prominently the indigenous inhabitants of Hokkaido, into Japanese society.

This process began in earnest during the Meiji Restoration in the late 1860s, when the new government began to exercise direct control of the island and *wajin* (a historical term referring to the ethnic Japanese, or non-Ainu people) began to settle there in large numbers.

Ainu people were taught Japanese in schools built by the newcomers. Their minority status and the economic realities of needing to do business with the newcomers in their language led many in the indigenous population to abandon their traditions and not teach their native language to their children.

### A unique language claws back

The Ainu language, it should be noted, is an isolate, meaning it is not a dialect of Japa-

nese, for example. It has no linguistic connection to Japanese or, for that matter, to any other East Asian language.

"The fact is, Ainu is not the only language in the region that can be defined as an isolate. Japanese and Korean are also isolates," explained Hiroshi Nakagawa, a Chiba University professor emeritus of linguistics and Ainu culture. "In fact, if you look around Northeast Asia as a whole, there are numerous minority group languages throughout the region that are linguistically isolated. Ainu is one of them. Sure, we can still point to grammatical similarities among Japanese, Korean, Mongol and some other languages, but here, too, Ainu still stands alone."

And when it comes to speakers of the language, the current situation is even more concerning than UNESCO suggests, Nakagawa warned.

"UNESCO said a few years ago that there are still 15 native speakers of Ainu, but we observers simply do not think that is the case," he said. "Today, there is no one who speaks only Ainu, and there is no one who can speak Ainu better than they can speak Japanese."

For his own part, Nakagawa's own interest in Ainu as someone from outside the community arose from a simple desire to research a non-European tongue. However, something an elderly Ainu speaker said one day makes him wonder if some other force might have been at work.

"One of these older ladies who'd been teaching me Ainu terms looked at me and

said, 'I can see your *tsukigami* (guardian spirit),' he related with a twinkle in his eye that shined through even over a video call. "And I can see that your *tsukigami* wants you to learn Ainu."

Regardless, whether out of a simple desire to beat his own path or due to having acted under the impetus of powers beyond human ken, Nakagawa now numbers among the scholars and activists, as well as people in the arts, business and government, who remain determined to keep the language and culture alive, not just today, but for tomorrow as well. Their efforts across the spectrum may already be having some impact.

"While we don't have exact statistics, my sense is that the number of people who can speak Ainu to at least some degree — especially young people — is sharply on the rise," Nakagawa noted. "Increasing the number of people who speak Ainu as a native language is necessary as a remote objective, but what's crucial as a realistic objective is increasing the numbers of those who study in connection with their own ethnic identity."

### Pop culture solicits savior

Interestingly, thanks to manga writer Satoru Noda, the academic Nakagawa even found himself playing a role he perhaps never expected: Since 2014, he has served as the Ainu-language supervisor on Noda's popular comic book series, "Golden Kamuy."

Set in the early 20th century, the adventure series features a young Russo-Japanese War veteran with an Ainu girl on a quest for gold stolen from the Ainu. The full details of the adventure tale are far too complex to be related here; however, aside from the story itself, what seems to make the series compelling for many is the fact that it also offers a rich portrayal of Ainu culture.

Nakagawa's role as the Ainu language expert for the series came about through the Ainu Association of Hokkaido.

"The association first connected me with Noda," Nakagawa said. "The manga was set to begin life as a magazine serial, and he had prepared a few segments before I came on board."



Above: Hiroshi Nakagawa speaks about the influence of "Golden Kamuy" and the future of the Ainu language. Right: Nakagawa's new book, "Ainu Bunka de Yomitoku Golden Kamuy" ("A Deep Read of Golden Kamuy Through Ainu Culture"), explains Ainu culture using references from "Golden Kamuy." YOSHIKI MIURA; SATORU NODA / SHUEISHA

"When we first spoke, he told me what his plans were for the series and what he was looking for," he continued. "I read what he had prepared and thought, 'Oh, this is really interesting.' The content is wonderful. The depictions of the Ainu in particular were amazing. I told him that he should feel free to ask and I would lend a hand. This is how my involvement began."

Nakagawa's chief role has been to offer detailed advice related to Ainu terms and language, though he occasionally offered suggestions about characters and situations. "Essentially," he explained, "I answer whatever questions Noda has" about Ainu culture and language.

The manga certainly seems to have struck a chord in Japan. Aside from sales of the original magazines, some 18 million copies of the 28-volume series in book form have been sold so far. Among other awards, it took the Manga Grand Prize in the 2018 edition of the prestigious Tezuka Osamu Cultural Prize.

Interestingly, "Golden Kamuy" also seems to have captured the imaginations of some abroad. It has been republished in translation overseas, and images from the manga were even featured prominently as the key visual for a 2019 British Museum exhibition of manga art.

Adding to its impact, the comic books have also been turned into a popular animation series of the same name.

Such mainstream popularity is surely helping to keep interest in Ainu culture and language alive today among the general public. In addition, Nakagawa has seen sales of a work he subsequently produced to explain the culture more deeply via the comic book series — "Ainu Bunka de Yomitoku Golden Kamuy" ("A Deep Read of Golden Kamuy Through Ainu Culture") — post strong results as well, offering perhaps further proof the manga has helped to increase interest in Ainu culture. But perhaps even more important

than the mainstream reaction, he added, has been the response from the Ainu community.

"On the whole, people in the Ainu community have been pleased about the series," he said. "Whenever Ainu have been presented in films and so forth in a historical context, in most cases they have been shown in a pitiful light. Their culture is referred to as being on the verge of extinction and so forth."

"Previous works also have fantastical elements," he added. "However, this story does realistically present Ainu within an historical context. Moreover, it shows them not as being weak victims, but rather as a people actively trying to control their own destinies. This kind of presentation has been a first for the community. They've been waiting for someone to tell a story like this."

This is not to say that the manga (or anime) have been universally well-received within the Ainu community; for example, depictions seen as exaggerated and perhaps grotesque by some have been brought up as causes for objection.

### Taking it to the next level

Still, if nothing else, the series does offer the possibility of reaching out to both the Ainu community and the general public to stoke interest in Ainu culture. In addition to pop culture, Nakagawa and his research peers are engaged in other activities that help to fill in the gaps. For example, he is part of a multinational team that has created a glossed audio corpus of Ainu folklore for the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics. At this website, visitors can hear recitations of Ainu folk tales accompanied by written glosses of the Ainu being spoken and sentence-by-sentence translations in both Japanese and English.

Materials are also being created that should appeal to more than just scholars. Chiba University's Center for Areal Studies



currently hosts a website for children that uses games through which they can learn some basic Ainu vocabulary and cultural concepts while they play. Nakagawa has also published introductory Ainu-language texts and volumes on Ainu folklore.

The ultimate hope for all these works has been to spark interest in Ainu language and culture and help keep them alive. However, interest in some relatively exotic culture alone is not enough.

"Economics are the basic reason why minority languages disappear," Nakagawa observed. "People stopped using Ainu because they couldn't get by if they couldn't use Japanese," he went on, stressing the need for linkages to be formed between economic activities and Ainu culture.

Still, the basic interest in keeping Ainu alive is there, as evidenced by the responses to "Golden Kamuy" and the like. For example, as Nakagawa pointed out, there has been the positive development of an uptick in the number of television programs that cover Ainu topics.

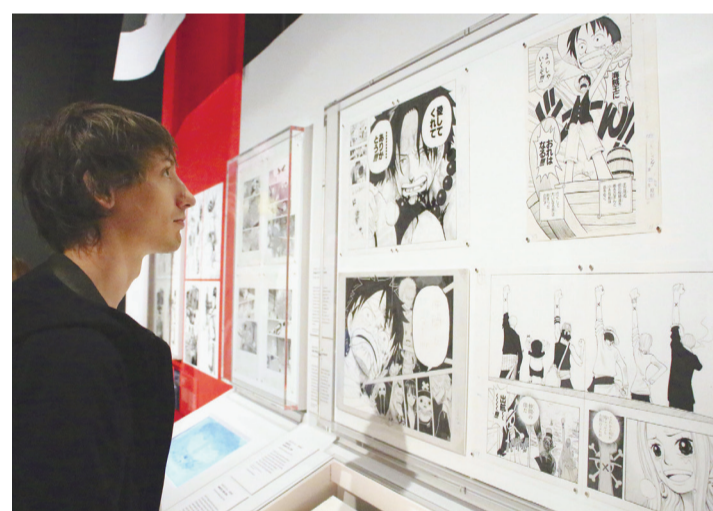
Things like "Golden Kamuy" are first steps, Nakagawa said, and the issue now for those people seeking to revitalize Ainu language and culture is how to take the interest that has been created to the next level.

"The situation that I think we should be aiming for is one in which the Ainu language and culture are allowed to develop in a way that does not seem to be out of place. Hearing Ainu spoken in the course of everyday life should not seem like something exotic. Hopefully, something like 'Golden Kamuy' can contribute in some way in this regard."

Pages 6 and 7 are sponsored by the government of Japan.



Hartwig Fischer, director of the British Museum in London, announces a manga exhibition in front of a board with the image of Asirpa, one of the main characters in "Golden Kamuy," in December 2018. KYODO



A manga exhibition at the British Museum in 2019 drew about 180,000 attendees during its three-month run, setting a museum record for special exhibitions. KYODO

### Place names in Hokkaido with Ainu roots

About 80% of the geographic names in Hokkaido, including the capital, have their roots in the Ainu language. Here is a smattering of examples.

**Sapporo (札幌)**  
Ainu: sat-poro-pet  
Original meaning: Dry, large river

**Kamui Kotan (神居古潭)**  
Ainu: kamuy-kotan  
Original meaning: The place where the gods live

**Shiretoko (知床)**  
Ainu: sir-etok  
Original meaning: Edge of the land that sticks out

**Noboribetsu (登別)**  
Ainu: nupur-pet  
Original meaning: Dark-colored river

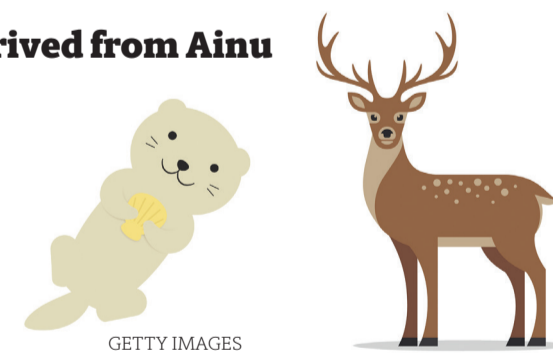
**Furano (富良野)**  
Ainu: hura-nu-i  
Original meaning: River with smell

**Shiraoi (白老)**  
Ainu: siraw-o-i  
Original meaning: Where there are many horseflies

\* Spelling and pronunciation may vary regionally.  
\*\* There may be other interpretations.

### Japanese animal names derived from Ainu

Some Japanese animal names have roots in the Ainu language. Here are some examples.



Japanese	Ainu	English
etopirika (エトピリカ)	etupirka	tufted puffin
komai (コマイ)	komay / kankay / kanay	saffron cod
rakko (ラッコ)	rakko	sea otter
shishamo (シシャモ)	susam	smelt
tonakai (トナカイ)	tunakay / tunahkay	reindeer

\* Spelling and pronunciation may vary regionally.