



Northern Ethnographic Landscapes: Perspectives From Circumpolar Nations (Contributions to Circumpolar Anthropology)

Igor Krupnik

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The native people of northern Japan call themselves “Ainu” meaning “humans” in their language. Today, the island of Hokkaido remains the only homeland of the Ainu people, most of whom live in small villages scattered in different areas of this island. This volume is an effort to broaden the understanding of Ainu history, culture, and contemporary life; to redress a lack of familiarity by presenting a compendium on Ainu history, culture, arts, and modern affairs, so the culture may be recognized for its history, the beauty of its art and literature, and the message of spiritual balance between humans and nature, so much a part of its religion. To the early Ainu people, the world of humans comprised a huge territory stretching from central Sakhalin Island and the southern tip of the Kamchatka Peninsula to the northern Tohoku region in northern Honshu. Although often described as having a single language and culture, before 1850 they occupied such varied ecological habitats, and had such varied linguistic dialects, that they comprised essentially three distinct territorial subcultures, the Sakhalin Ainu, the Kurile Ainu, and the Hokkaido Ainu. Over time, however, political forces in Japan, but also in Russia, forced the isolation of all Ainu to the island of Hokkaido. Europeans have a long history of interest in the Ainu. Travelers spoke of their striking dress, elaborate ceremonial life, and unusual physical appearance. Their long flowing beards, hirsute bodies, large stature, deep-set eyes, facial features, and striking lip tattoos worn by women made Ainu appear very different from other Asian populations. Ainu technology was described as among the most “primitive” in the world, and anthropologists tended to see them as objects of geographic curiosity, rather than as a culture worthy of respect. Who are the Ainu, and how, and where, did their physical type develop? Are they derived from Mongoloid, Australoid, or Caucasoid populations, and what is the significance of their physical differences from other East Asian populations who, while each population is physically distinct, resemble each other more than any of them resembles the Ainu? Studies have converged toward the consensus that the Ainu are descendants of relatively undifferentiated East Asian Upper Paleolithic populations whose gene pool remained geographically isolated for thousands of years during which the development of more specialized Mongoloid features took place in mainland East Asia. Equally perplexing are issues regarding Ainu linguistic affiliations. The difficulty in determining linguistic origins has much to do with problems of reconstructing and tracing linguistic change over thousands of years, during which linguistic borrowing can obscure even dominant strains of heritage and ancestry. Contact and interchange with Japanese over two thousand or more years makes this particular relationship hard to decipher. The word “unknown” remains the most cogent summary that most Ainu linguists can agree upon. Today the “Ainu enigma” continues to elicit speculation and controversy, not least among the Ainu who are actively participating, and do not hesitate to express ideas about their origins as a non-Japanese ethnic people. The social and political issues connected with “when Ainu became Ainu”, and “who the Ainu are” are rapidly becoming as complex politically as the studies are scientifically. Despite economic and political setbacks, the Ainu maintained strength in the parts of their lives that continued to identify them as Ainu: their formal clothing, their woven baskets and sword straps, storytelling, and music, prayers to the gods, and their ceremonial events. Ainu believe that every being, whether animate or inanimate, is a god and a visitor to earth from the god world. These gods spend time on earth and make their material forms available to people for food, timber to build houses, grass to make mats, and elm bark for weaving clothing. People a

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