

Ways and words of indigeneity

Cross-border perspectives on the Ainu people of Russia and Japan (19th-21st century)

From the second half of the 18th century, Japanese and Russian populations establish themselves on the islands of Hokkaido, the Kuril archipelago and Sakhalin, peopled by the indigenous Ainu population. Territorial tensions between the two empires at times eclipsed the question of their respective interactions with the Ainu population, which was assimilated, Russified, or exhibited as aborigines of Imperial Japan. The Ainu disappear from Russian population census in the first decades of the 20th century, while in 1937, the designation “former aborigine”, used to designate their Japanese counterparts, all but disappears from public record.

Although the Ainu were presented in Japan as a “dying race” from the beginning of the 20th century, in 2008, the Japanese Diet recognizes them as an indigenous minority of Japan, while, in 2010, they reappear in a Russian census.

The object of this interdisciplinary and transnational panel is to bring to light the voices of indigeneity, through the study of indigenous literature and militant discourse, and the means of indigeneity, through the study of the stakes and constructs around, in Japan and Russia.

From « former aborigines » to a newfound indigeneity – Stakes and constructs surrounding the Ainu in Japan, in a historical perspective (1868-2008)

Noémi GODEFROY (Centre d'Études Japonaises, INALCO/ Centre de Recherches sur le Japon, EHESS)

Since the 1990s, the myth of a homogeneous Japanese population has been tackled and criticized by an increasing number of scholars, from many different academic backgrounds and disciplines. Today, this myth appears to us as all the more erroneous that, according to UN estimations, within a few decades, one fourth of the Japanese population will be of immigrant descent. Japan is thus increasingly apprehended, in the scope of social and humanities, as a multiethnic country, where some 26,000 people in Hokkaido and Tokyo claim to be Ainu. Since 2008, the Ainu are officially recognized as an indigenous minority by the Japanese government. This recognition took place a century and a half after the Meiji imperial government's decision to annex the island of Hokkaido and its population. How and why did Ainu and Japanese construct, deconstruct, repress or reinvent Ainu indigeneity? How were institutional, national and international norms used by the different actors at play, to benefit, or deny, the status of indigenous minority? This presentation will offer an analysis of the evolution of the stakes and constructs surrounding Ainu indigeneity in Japan, in a historical perspective.

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Between Resistance and Assimilation: the Birth of an Ainu Literature in Japanese
Gérald PELOUX (Laboratoire AGORA (EA 7392), Université de Cergy-Pontoise)

The Ainu people, whose "classical literature" is exclusively oral, has been forced to use the Japanese language as since as the early 1870s when the Ezo island (Hokkaido) is totally incorporated into the Japanese empire. In 1937, special schools for Ainu children are closed, the Japanese government considering the assimilation of this people as effective. In little more than two generations, the Ainu language has been eradicated throughout the most visible social practices.

Yet this assimilation occurs during a period when Japan saw the birth of its first modern protest movements (labor movement, women's movement, and, in the colonial territories, anti-Japanese movement). The Ainu are thus witnesses of contradictory evolutions that push towards assimilation in the Great Japan Empire and, at the same time, towards demands for the recognition of their own historical, cultural and social experience different from the Japanese people.

It is in this context that was born in the 1920s an Ainu literature in Japanese which is trying to reclaim more or less vindictively a flickering Ainu identity, within the framework of a colonial experience and as such, using the dominant language. Poets Iboshi Hokuto (1901-1929) and Batchelor Yaeko (1884-1962) are part of this small group of writers who are considered today as the first to have opened this way.

We will present in this communication the context in which this group of writers was born. Then in a second time we will discuss the relations to the Japanese and the Ainu languages of these two poets and the themes they are addressing in their poetic production.

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An Ainu voice in the Japanese Diet – Kayano Shigeru and the fight for recognition

Chikako MAJIMA (EHESS)

Kayano Shigeru (1926-2006) is famous in Japan for being the first – and to this day only- Ainu Congressman.

His path is an atypical one. He was born in an Ainu community in the south of Hokkaido, and raised in a family where Ainu language and customs were still very much alive. Nevertheless, as he reached adulthood, he moved away from his Ainu origins, because of the discrimination the Ainu faced at the time. When Kayano was 27 years old, he discovers that a precious family heirloom was presumably stolen by Japanese researchers, a common practice in the 1950s, and this entices him to reestablish contacts with his Ainu heritage and roots. This event acts as a trigger to cultural revival. He starts to collect Ainu artifacts, and opens the Ainu Museum in Nibutani. In parallel, he fights for the indigenous rights of the Ainu people. He becomes their voice, and paves the way for recognition. His speeches, in Ainu, and militant struggle, will lead to the recognition of Ainu within Japan, and outside of the archipelago.

What influence did Kayano Shigeru have in Japan? Was he unanimously recognized as the voice of all the Ainu people? What remains of his message and toil?

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Representing indigeneity at the National Museum of Ethnology – Evolving stakes and issues (1977-2014)

Alice Berthon (CEJ, INALCO)

In the past three decades, the representation of indigenous cultures has greatly evolved in ethnology museums, starting with those located in countries where descendants of colonizers live alongside first nations' natives, in North America, Australia, or New Zealand. Although it is less often cited as an example, Japan – and its' National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka – also fits into this category. It opened to the public in 1977, and exhibits, alongside foreign cultures, the cultures of the Japanese archipelago, and its indigenes. Although the permanent exhibition has recently undergone some changes (between 2014 and 2016), the Ryukyu islands culture section has always been exhibited alongside the Japanese, whereas the Ainu culture has been isolated. This spatial repartition within museum space reflects different agendas at different times, and underwent notable changes. This presentations aims at analyzing the choices made by the Museum in the way Japanese and indigenous cultures are exhibited, in the light of the evolution of the state of the arts regarding ethnological knowledge, political agendas, indigenous demands, and spatial logistics.

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From the people of the clouds to the people who don't exist – The Ainu of the Russian Far-East

Dominique Samson (Centre de Recherche Europees-Eurasie, INALCO)

During his trip in the Russian Far East at the end of the 19th century, Anton described the Ainu as “a modest, good, benevolent, reliable, communicative, polite people, who respect each other's property, valiant during the hunt, and even intelligent”, the Ainu had formally disappeared by the Soviet era. The Ainu community of Kamchatka was diluted by assimilation with the natives during the 19th century, and the Ainu community of Sakhalin was declared “extinct” in 1979.

In 2010, the Ainu suddenly reappear during a population censuses, and are close to a hundred to claim their Ainu identity. According to their spokesman, there could be close to 250 people of Ainu descent in Kamchatka. How are the Ainu people fighting for recognition in Russia, especially since 2008?