

AN ELDERLY AINU MAN'S STORY: ETHNOGRAPHY

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Introduction – Who are the Ainu?

In July 1962, my father and grandparents went to Hokkaido to visit their friends and do some sightseeing. They brought me back a small wooden jewelry box with a carved picture of two *kokeshi* dolls on the cover, as well as famous butter candies and three bears made from carved wood. My father used to read children's stories at night, and the bear family reminded me of a fairy tale. I later learned that these wood-carved bears were made by the Ainu,¹ the indigenous people of northern Japan.

Shigeru Kayano notes that tourism to Hokkaido was becoming very popular and a thriving economic driver in the region in the 1960s. The Ainu received much national attention as part of this new interest in tourism. The Japanese traditionally have a custom of bringing home local foods and goods as souvenirs (*omiyage*) for their family, relatives, and friends, while tourists purchase many Ainu artifacts such as woodcarvings, accessories, and traditional textile goods.²

Kayano also indicates in his book that, generally, the Japanese are ignorant of or indifferent to the existence of the Ainu people, their customs, manners, religion, and history of subjugation.³ I myself barely knew about them throughout my primary and secondary education in Japan. The word *Ainu* originally meant “human as opposed to God,” and it also referred to “humans in general” until the Ainu came into contact with the Japanese and Russians.⁴ Between that period and now, the meaning of the word has

¹ Hokkaido Ainu Association states that the Ainu population in Hokkaido was 23,782 in 2006 (accessed July 23, 2012, www.ainu-assn.or.jp), but the actual number “remains a mystery” (Poisson 5); Barbara Aoki Poisson, *The Ainu of Japan* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 2002), p. 5.

² Shigeru Kayano, *Ainu no Ishibumi* (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun Publications, 2009), pp.156–158.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 135–136, 155.

⁴ Ainu Minzoku Hakubutsukan, *Ainu Bunka no Kisochishiki* (Urayasu: Sofukan, 2009), pp. 12–13; and Hideaki Uemura, *Ainu Minzoku Ichimon Itto* (Osaka: Kaiho Shuppansha, 2008), pp. 11–12.

narrowed to refer to the Ainu themselves, yet the word is also used to refer to “a man” and “a father” in the Ainu language.

The Ainu are the indigenous people of the northern Tohoku region, Hokkaido,⁵ Sakhalin, and the Kuril Islands.⁶ Thus, they are not a monolithic group, and there are geographical and cultural diversities. The Ainu form an ethnic group, but they also exhibit certain racial traits. Hilger states that a full-blooded Ainu has fair skin, a long nose, “round, dark-brown eyes, curling lashes, prominent eyebrows, rather long earlobes, and an abundant head of hair, often with a slight wave,” as well as body hair.⁷ The Ainu I have met or seen in pictures in Hokkaido appeared to have descended from a variety of regions, some resembling Italians, Russians, Native Americans, Filipinos, Micronesians, among others. According to Hiroshi Ushiro, the ancestors of the Ainu could be a mixture of the proto-types of all the major races: Caucasian, Mongoloid, and Negroid.⁸ However, the Ainu have been actively promoted exogamy to Japanese to reduce the amount of discrimination that their descendants will experience. Hilger observes that, “Now the Ainu, who stood apart for millenniums, face complete absorption by the Japanese.”⁹

The Ainu language is characterized as an isolated language that does not have an alphabet. Instead, the Ainu have a very strong oral tradition of *yukar* (long epics in lyric form about heroes) and *uwepekere* (traditional folk ballads). Oration is highly praised among their culture and is used to settle arguments and disputes.¹⁰ *Ukocharanke* is a debate in which the Ainu

⁵ Hokkaido is about the size of South Carolina. Hokkaido and parts of Tohoku still have many locations that have Ainu names meaning tall mountains, big rivers, small brooks, small pond, or other words that derive from the Ainu language. Kayano, *Ainu no Ishibumi*, p. 78, insists that this is a proof that Hokkaido was indeed *Ainu Moshir* (Quiet Human Land), the territory that belonged to the Ainu.

⁶ These islands have been occupied by Russia since the end of WWII.

⁷ Inez M. Hilger, “Japan’s ‘Sky People,’ The Vanishing Ainu,” *National Geographic* 131/2 (1967), p. 272.

⁸ Ushiro Hiroshi, The Historical Museum of Hokkaido (Personal communication, June 9, 2012).

⁹ Hilger, “Japan’s ‘Sky People,’” p. 268.

¹⁰ Ainu Minzoku Hakubutsukan, *Ainu Bunka no Kiso-chishiki*, pp. 22–24; Kayano, *Ainu no Ishibumi*, p. 33; and Uemura, *Ainu Minzoku Ichimon Itto*, pp. 62–64.

opponents argue for hours and days until one gives up and another keeps debating. Oratorical abilities allot considerable social power to an individual in the Ainu culture.

The Meiji Government established the Hokkaido Colonization Board in 1869, and all of Hokkaido became government land. Japanese people were encouraged to immigrate¹¹ to *Ainu Moshir* in great numbers, where land and natural resources were abundant. The government supported the immigrants by granting them travel money, housing, food, agricultural devices, etc. The Ainu were classified as former aborigines, an insult, and their homeland was taken over by the Japanese from 1899. The Ainu, who used to be a hunting, fishing, and gathering people, were forced to become farmers. Fishing salmon, an Ainu staple, was prohibited in 1870, and deer hunting was also banned in 1889. The 1880s saw many periods of famine; it was a dire time for the Ainu, who had difficulty surviving since they were not allowed to obtain their traditional staple foods from natural surroundings.¹²

As part of the assimilation policies, government officials were sent to *kotan* (Ainu communities) and gave the Ainu family names, which were based on geographic characteristics such as mountains, rivers, and brooks. Today, the Ainu can still be identified by their last names, some of which include Hirame, Hiranuma, Kaizawa, Kawakami, Kawanano, Kayano, Kurokawa, Nabesawa, and Yoshikawa.¹³ What's more, the government prohibited traditional tattooing on women's mouths, the piercing of men's ears, and the performing of their sacred *Iomante*, the ceremony in which the Ainu "send off the sacred bear's spirit."¹⁴ The Ainu were forced to speak

¹¹ Many Japanese also immigrated to Hawaii and North America between 1868 and 1907, to Brazil and Latin America between 1908 and 1934, and to Manchuria in the 1930s. Araragi, Shinzo, "*Manshu Imin*" no *Rekishi Shakaigaku* (Kyoto: Korosha, 1994), pp. 49, 55.

¹² Uemura, *Ainu Minzoku Ichimon Ito*, pp. 43–46.

¹³ As for the meanings of the Ainu surnames, Hirame means "flounder" because of many flounders caught near the ocean, Kaizawa means "a swampland where shellfish grow," Kawakami means "up the river," and Kurokawa means "a black river." Shiro Kayano (Personal communication, 2011).

¹⁴ Ainu Minzoku Hakubutsukan, *Ainu Bunka no Kisochishiki*, p. 159.

Japanese and wear Japanese hair styles and clothes.¹⁵ Thus, the assimilation policies affected not only their way of life, but also Ainu spirituality and identity. It was an ethnic cleansing that continued through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Almost half a century had passed since I first received my wooden bears that were carved by the Ainu, and I was on my sabbatical during the spring semester of 2011. The purpose of my project was to learn about the Ainu by reading books and articles, visit several Ainu museums to get a first-hand glimpse of their art and folk artifacts, and, of course, meet people. Before I left, I sent an e-mail to Three Rivers Town (a pseudonym) in the southwestern part of Hokkaido, a bucolic town known for agricultural products and its Ainu population.¹⁶ I inquired whether I would be welcomed to visit their museums and meet some Ainu people. I soon received an e-mail telling me that Mr. E at one of the museums could give me a tour of the place and also introduce me to a few Ainu. I was more than happy to hear this and was even more surprised that a certain Ainu gentleman suggested that I stay with his family while I was in town. His name was Mr. K.

My Trip to Three Rivers Town

My first trip to Three Rivers Town took place at the beginning of May 2011, which was still early spring in Hokkaido. From the airport, I enjoyed the scenic train ride that wound through industrial parks, small towns, and pastures. The houses along the railway looked different from those in Honshu because many have chimneys but no air-conditioners, and their steep roofs are designed to prevent snow accumulation during winter. I especially loved the view of the ocean from my window. The train was not crowded, and the local passengers were middle-aged, elderly men and women, as well as high school students who talked in groups, played video games, or sent

¹⁵ Ainu Minzoku Hakubutsukan, *Ainu Bunka no Kisochishiki*, pp. 159–162; Kayano, *Ainu no Ishibumi*, p. 128, Hokkaido Ainu Association (accessed July 23, 2012, www.ainu-assn.or.jp); Kenji Namikawa, *Ainu Minzoku no Kiseki* (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 2010), pp. 80–81; and Uemura, *Ainu Minzoku Ichimon Itto*, pp. 45–46.

¹⁶ According to the statistics provided by the Hokkaido Ainu Association (accessed July 23rd, 2012, www.ainu-assn.or.jp), 28.6% of today's working Ainu are engaged in primary industries of agriculture and fishery.

text messages. I looked for some Ainu faces because I was very curious how they might appear today, but all of the passengers looked Japanese.

I arrived at my station and was one of the very few passengers who got off the train. An old Ainu man was waiting in his van in front of the small station. This was Mr. K. He took me to various places, talking about the Ainu and himself as he drove. We went to a plaza where there were several traditional Ainu buildings, including houses, storehouses, a bear cage, and boats with information boards for tourists and educational purposes. We went into a showcase *cise* (traditional thatched Ainu house), talked with the Ainu women who staffed it, and had tea and cake by the fire pit.¹⁷ In all, my short stay with Mr. K and his wife Mayumi in 2011 was filled with Ainu culture: visits to museums where the staff explained archaeological history, Ainu art, and folk artifacts.

Mr. K and his friend Reiko sang Ainu ballads and songs, and I ate traditional Ainu food such as *ohau* (soup with salmon and vegetables in a slightly salted broth) and *inakibi* rice (rice with barnyard millet). Mr. K and his wife, Mayumi, showed me several traditional Ainu clothing, a ceremonial crown, bandanas with embroidery, and hand-woven *saranip* handbags. They wore these items themselves, and then let me wear them and take pictures as well. The next day, Mayumi showed me how to make and embroider a traditional wardrobe with *Attush* cloth.¹⁸ The K's invited me to come back to Three Rivers; soon after, I got a scholarship from my university in the summer of 2012, and went there for two weeks to do field research and conduct interviews.

A Story of an Old Ainu Man

Mr. K is an Ainu who was born in 1934 in Three Rivers Town. His grandmother was widowed when Mr. K was very young and came to live with his family until he finished elementary school. She spoke the Ainu language with her Ainu friends in the community, with whom she would get

¹⁷ One of my informants, an Ainu woman, told me that fire is considered sacred by the Ainu, and that they give prayers and offerings to *Apefuchi Kamui*, the Goddess of Fire.

¹⁸ The cloth is made of fibers from barks of *ohyo* (Japanese elm) tree. According to Mr. K, *ohyo*'s fibers from the barks are strong, and they make long threads easily. Mayumi sewed pieces of cloths onto *Attush* and embroidered various Ainu designs.

together occasionally and enjoy story-telling all night. That is how Mr. K came to understand some Ainu language. However, his parents, just like many other Ainu parents in those days, encouraged him to speak only Japanese. All Ainu were encouraged to learn Japanese by the government starting in 1871, which was part of the forced assimilation policy.¹⁹

Many Ainu parents themselves thought that speaking Japanese would promote assimilation and prevent prejudice, discrimination, and bullying at school. Mr. K said: “The Ainu had been looked down upon and discriminated against in society throughout the Meiji and Taisho Periods,²⁰ and the Ainu elders thought that their children should study Japanese. Thus, they spoke the Ainu language among themselves, but they only spoke Japanese to us children. I am sorry that I am not a native speaker of Ainu. I have been going to the local Ainu language school for the last 10 years or so, and actually I am the Chair of the steering committee of the school. The man who started the language school asked me to become the Chair about a year before he passed away. I felt uncomfortable about the job because I was not really a ‘native’ speaker. So, I declined the offer, saying that I would not like to cause an unnecessary trouble. He then said that the Ainu Language School needed to exist, and someone had to become the Chair. He told me that I could learn the language myself at the school with the students and serve the Ainu community as well.”

Mr. K has been adamant about learning and practicing Ainu in his later years. He has particularly focused on learning the epics and ballads for the last ten years. He said, “Recently I won an award for singing an Ainu folk ballad in one of the contests in Sapporo,” and showed me the certificate. In 2011, he was also awarded a certificate of gratitude for his contribution to the preservation, transmission, and promotion of Ainu culture by Three River Town’s mayor.

His father, Saburo, excelled in reading and writing in his elementary school. Upon graduation, he started to work as an apprentice at O Store, a major liquor store in town, which also served as a small post office. He worked as a store clerk and mailman. He had to deliver mail on foot or by bicycle to places which were 15 to 20 kilometers (approximately 9.4 to 12.5 miles) away, and the roads had many hills. In time, he became a young man and married Natsu. She was from the same town and was the last of five

¹⁹ Uemura, *Ainu Minzoku Ichimon Itto*, pp. 45–46.

²⁰ The Meiji and Taisho Periods extends from 1868 to 1926.

children in her family. Saburo and Natsu had two sons, Mr. K and his younger brother.

The owner of O Store said to his father one day: "You have been working very diligently, and I will give you land. Go there, clear it, cultivate the land, and engage in agriculture. You can be independent." Mr. K was about two years of age when his family left town for the given land, which was further inland, where big trees and weeds were lush. He said: "My father cut the large trees, dug roots, and did his best to cultivate the land, but we suffered a lot financially because he was no longer receiving wages from the liquor store. We had nothing; no money, food. Nothing! We would go to a nearby brook, fill two buckets with water, and bring them back to the house on the opposite ends of a wooden bar over the shoulders, and stored it in a *miso*²¹ barrel. We used the water for drinking and cooking, but by today's sanitation standard, it would be considered harmful to your health.

"When I was four years old, my father caught Tuberculosis (TB),²² which was rather common in those days among the Ainu and the Japanese. There was not much mechanization in agriculture then, and people had to keep working very hard without proper nutrition. Many suffered from pneumonia and TB. My father could not afford to go see a doctor. My grandmother, being an old-fashioned Ainu woman, knew a lot about folk medicine.²³ She gave him herbs and barks in hot water, yet my father died in April when I was six years old.

"Our old house looked worse than stables or huts where cows, horses, or dogs lived. Looking back at those days, I really wonder how we survived in that house and maintained our health. We did not have indoor plumbing like many other traditional Ainu houses, and in the summertime we would go to the river. We did not bathe in the winter. I did not have any shoes and went barefoot to school, to play, or to the mountains to pick grapes. Sometimes pieces of broken glass bottles were on the road, so I often injured my feet. In the wintertime, snow and ice would come through the holes in the

²¹ Fermented soybean paste used for sauce, soup, and pickling in Japanese cooking.

²² Many of the Ainu died of diseases that were brought by the Japanese immigrants due to the lack of immunity, just like the original inhabitants in the United States as well as in Latin America.

²³ The Ainu folk remedies include various herbs and trees that utilize their seeds, leaves, roots, fruits, and sap.

walls of our house, and it was very cold. I wore shoes made of horse leather to school in wintertime. Those shoes were called *keri* and were made of either horse or pig skin. I would put old rags around my feet, and then wore *keri* shoes. By the time I arrived at school, my shoes were frozen. When I returned home, I would warm up my shoes near the stove; once you wear them they became soft and no longer hard. We made those shoes at home. There used to be quite a few horses in those days—rich families had a handful or dozens of horses to help them with farming and pulling down lumber from the mountains.²⁴ When a horse died, we made *keri* shoes with the skin and ate the meat. Now there are regulations for butchering meat, but in those days, we just ate it. We did not have good food, my father was overworked, and he ended up dying young with TB. I can remember my father only very vaguely because I was not even in elementary school when he passed.

“My mother, Natsu, had to work after she became a widow in her 20s, maybe she was like 27. I think my grandmother was in her 50s then, and she went to work with my mother as *dementori*, day laborers on farms. My younger brother and I were on our own while they were gone, and I followed their instructions in regard to what to eat for lunch since I was 7 or 8. I cooked and did other things, so I can still do them.

“I was the first-born and had to take care of my younger brother, and I took him to school with me, too. I, just like many other Ainu children in those days, and even today to a certain extent, was bullied²⁵ and discriminated against by the *wajin*²⁶ (Japanese) at school on many days by

²⁴ Lumber and charcoal production used to be two of the major industries of Three River Town, and several Ainu men told me that they used to deplore the naked mountains after all the trees were cut and sold. There has been a social and political movement to restore the mountains to the original state, and they have been successful.

²⁵ A *wajin* friend of mine who is a principal at an elementary school in Sapporo said, “In today’s schools in Sapporo or anywhere else in Japan, nobody can engage in bullying or discrimination, whether they are Ainu or *wajin*. Bullying and discrimination are subject to negative sanctions, and when reported, the Board of Education gets involved, does an investigation, and solves the problem. It is more a human rights issue, and not an Ainu vs. *wajin* issue as much as it used to be.” (Personal communication, 2012).

²⁶ The Ainu refers to those non-Ainu Japanese as *wajin* (和人). I heard this word very often in their daily conversations among both the Ainu and the

my teacher and classmates. I was looked down upon just because I was an Ainu. I went to an elementary school in the R District in town where there were a lot of Ainu families. There were also many children whose fathers engaged in charcoal production in the mountains. These *wajin* families would stay in the region for five, or maybe six years, and they moved around like nomads. The local people, both the Ainu and *wajin*, did not discriminate against us, but these *wajin* children of charcoal makers would ridicule us as being dirty, hairy, and smelling like urine even though they were not better off than us. I was very strong when it came to fighting, and the *wajin* school teacher, who carried a cane-looking bar, which was about 1 yard and 4 inches in length, would always say that I was in the wrong in a fight or an argument just because I was an Ainu.

“Of course, I was not the only one who was bullied and scolded. The *wajin* children used to call us ‘You, Ainu!’ in a derogatory manner and say things like ‘*A inu ga kita*’ (‘Ah, a “dog” is coming’) when we approached them.²⁷ In Japanese *inu* means ‘dog’ and the word Ainu is divided into two words: *a* + *inu* (‘Ah’ and ‘dog’). This idea that the Ainu are inferior beings, and bad ones, truly let me down, and I had no motivation to learn the Ainu language when I was young. I did not even try to learn it, even though my grandmother spoke Ainu with her friends all the time. My mother did not speak Ainu in front of me. However, their voices speaking Ainu still sound in my ears since I heard them speaking Ainu to one another.

“When we moved to K District in town it was not the students but the *wajin* teachers who bullied us Ainu kids more. They would not even come near us because they thought we were filthy, and it was always us, the Ainu kids, who were beaten up. I experienced it, but I saw many other Ainu children who were bullied more than I.

“I envied those Ainu children who were half-Ainu and half-*wajin*, because looking like *wajin* reduced the amount of ridicule and bullying. The bullies would not really think that these kids were Ainu, either. They think that they were *wajin* and never called them ‘Ainu! Ainu!’ like they did to us. Unfortunately, the word Ainu, which means human in the Ainu language,

non-Ainu while I was in Three Rivers in 2011 and 2012. It seems that the Ainu/Wajin dichotomy characterizes one of the elements of one’s identity in Three Rivers.

²⁷ Several informants of mine told me that this kind of verbal insult is still exchanged today.

was used by the *wajin* as a word of contempt, a derogatory term. Actually, the Ainu Association of Hokkaido changed its name to the Utari (compatriot) Association in 1961 because of this negative association and then changed its name back to the Ainu Association in 2009.

“So many Japanese from different parts of Honshu moved to Hokkaido looking for a better life in those days. Japan was still a very poor nation, and people had very difficult times. However, many immigrants did not fare well; they were not at all prepared for the hush winter here. They suffered from hunger and cold temperatures, lived in primitive huts, and when they decided to leave Hokkaido and go back to Honshu, they left their infants with Ainu families just like those Japanese parents who left their infants and children to the Chinese at the end of World War II and barely came back to Japan themselves. This abandoning of their children and entrusting them in the hands of the strangers was one of the ways to save their young lives. Those *wajin* babies who were brought up by their Ainu foster parents spoke the Ainu language, followed the Ainu traditions, and believed their myths, and they became the Ainu of the Ainus even though they appeared to be *wajin*.

“My Ainu friend T looks like a *wajin*. His mother was an infant left by her Japanese parents. An Ainu couple from my town, who had lost their baby ten days earlier, heard about this baby, so the husband went to Wakkanai to pick her up, and brought her to their house on horseback. In those days there was no baby formula, and the Ainu parent had to look for a wet nurse on the way back home as he traveled. Luckily, the wife of the inn owner had a baby and could serve as a wet nurse. The suckling, after drinking milk, would feel full, stop crying, and be content. She was brought up by her Ainu parents and married an Ainu. Last year my friend T was in charge of a particular traditional Ainu ceremony and many people there asked me whether he was really an Ainu or not because of the looks he inherited from his *wajin* mother. His grandmother spoke only the Ainu language, and T stayed with her all the time until he was 17 years old. Thus, T can speak Ainu very fluently. I think he is just about the only one who is a native speaker among the Ainu men around here.

“In our district, there were a lot of Japanese immigrants from places like Sendai or Niigata, and they engaged in agriculture. As a good friend of mine used to say, they came to Hokkaido like an avalanche, occupied the land, and took all the fertile land away from the Ainu, and started farming and developing. The Ainu did not have their own nation, and our language does not have an alphabet, but my ancestors lived in harmony with nature.

The Japanese 'gave' the native Ainu barren and very poor land, told them to cultivate it themselves, and forced them to live there as farmers. The Ainu were not given much land anyway, and our ancestors were hunters, fishermen, and gatherers, but not really farmers. They became poorer and poorer, especially during bad harvests.

"Many Ainu men loved to drink, and some were in debt due to their heavy drinking. In those days, there was a credit system in which customers would purchase goods, the store owner would record the amount of the purchases, and the customers would pay the total amount of the bill on a specific date sometime later. Some Ainu men, who were totally drunk, would walk around in town smelling like alcohol²⁸ and come to this liquor store. The store owner, knowing that the drunkards would not remember anything, would write in their credit records that these unsuspecting Ainu 'purchased' some liquor on that day. Later, he would demand payment in full. The drunkards could not remember anything or defend themselves. The *wajin* store owner made plenty of money this way, and when the Ainu said that he could not pay the bill, the owner would demand that he pay in land. If the Ainu did not have land, a mountain would do. It was a totally corrupt system in which the Ainu lost a lot due to their notorious drunkenness.

"Among the immigrant Japanese farming families, there were the U and A families who were excellent and very rich farmers. I had a few classmates who were about the same age in my neighborhood; they were a son or a daughter of these very rich families. They were wonderful people and treated me (and often my brother, too) to delicious food. I am still friends with one of them like my brother. I also had a friend whose parents came from Sendai, and his family grew rice, the only one who did so in the community. One day, I was invited to this classmate's house, which was huge and I was very hesitant to enter. Even though I was a small child, I knew I was dirty and stinky. I was told by Mr. U to go to the back door, take off my shoes, and enter the house. They knew that my family was very poor so they

²⁸ One of the Ainu elderly women told me that when she was young she was bullied and ridiculed. When she went home from school, the *wajin* children would often call her "*Kotan biiru* (Kotan beer)!" because there were many Ainu drunkards walking around smelling like alcohol. Her father worked, made money, and spent it all on drinking. An elderly man said and laughed, "When a tiger dies, it leaves its leather. When an Ainu dies, he leaves a whole bunch of liquor bottles behind."

offered me food, saying ‘You must be hungry. Eat as much as you want. Eat until you get full and then go home.’ I ate a bowl of white rice for the first time in my life that day. I still remember how delicious it was.

“Our family lived on potatoes, *kabocha* (pumpkins), barnyard millet, and the like. I had millet for lunch at school. It does not have stickiness, so when it is warm, it is pretty good. But once it gets cold, it becomes very dry like rice bran. In those days, typical lunch boxes were oval-shaped and made of metal. All the students warmed the boxes on the stove in the classroom. When I tried to get my lunch box with my bare hands one day, it got so hot that I dropped it on the floor. The millet would spread all over the floor, and I could not eat it. I had to throw it away.

“When I was in the 4th grade, I was able to help my mother and grandmother by weeding in our very small vegetable garden in front of the humble house and gathering firewood in the mountains. I was also asked to work on a farm and earn money. I had to weed in the soybean or *adzuki* fields that were 100 or 200 meters (approximately 109-219 yards) long. Since I was only a child, I could not keep up with the adult workers, and many women helped me catch up with them. The wages were 2 *sho* (approximately 3.6 liters) of dried corn. We were living from hand to mouth, and we did not have much to eat. In wintertime, we ate preserved *kabocha* that we harvested in the autumn and dried in the sun. As soon as I arrived home from my farm work, I would ground the dried corn in a mortar called *iyuta*. Two people can pound the grain in the mortar easily, but three can pound at the same time, too. It is a bit more difficult that way, and I am the only one who can still do it. Anyway, when my mother would come home to find the gruel made with ground grains (corn, millet, etc.) she used to commend me and say, ‘You are great!’ and it made me feel very happy.

“My mother remarried Mr. W, a Japanese man from Niigata who came to Hokkaido to work, when I was 11 years old. Mr. W and my mother had two sons. Mr. W said that he would take care of me and my brother, but he would let us keep our last name in due respect to our late father. Mr. W was a great stepfather. He was very gentle and loved me and my brother genuinely. He did not have any prejudice toward the Ainu people. We were still poor, but our life with Mother and a new father began. Mr. W did several things for me, so my household labors, like going to mountains and making firewood, were lightened.

“My stepfather had relatives in Sapporo and Otaru, and he used to go there to visit them several times a year. When I was in the 6th grade, he went to Sapporo and brought me back a new set of skis. In those days, skis

were very rare, and even children from rich families did not have them. All my friends were envious of me, and many people asked where I got them and begged me to touch or use them. I felt very lucky to have Mr. W as my stepfather.

“In the fall of 1945 or so, my maternal grandfather gave my mother some land, and we moved to a small rural community. Mr. W built a hut with the logs that he had cut and brought from the mountain. He also used the cheap wood boards that did not meet the industry standard, which he purchased from a saw mill. Snow and wind came in from the holes in the walls and under the eaves during winter. We needed to put up wood boards to cover the holes. My mother and stepfather worked very hard every day, but our life was not easy. I tried to help them out and went to a farm and made some money. I went to junior high school for two years, but in my third year I went to work in the mountains, cutting grass, trees, and such. Because of this, I could not attend enough days at junior high school, so I did not receive a diploma. Many Ainu were in the same position. However, when the junior high school celebrated its 100th year anniversary, my name was entered into the registration of graduates.

“Mr. W concluded that his family could not keep living in poverty and decided to apply for a new land and engage in agriculture. He bought land thanks to an order that allowed people without land to purchase some cheaply. If they were successful in cultivation and could pass an inspection within five years, the land became theirs to keep. Our plot was about 30 km (approximately 19 miles) from our abode. My stepbrothers were still very young, and my parents took the youngest son with them to work since he was not healthy. I took care of my brother and stepbrother, while my parents were away. They would take two to three hours every day to commute in a horse buggy on the mountain roads. They needed to cut trees without machinery, and it was very hard labor to cultivate the land. I would ride my bicycle with my brother and helped my parents there, too.

“The work in the lush land was excruciatingly difficult. It is beyond a normal person's imagination. There were huge trees and weeds everywhere. My stepfather also engaged in charcoal production in the mountain. He built a kiln, burned wood, sold the charcoal to special charcoal sellers, and earned a living. After several years, when the land had finally been cultivated, my stepfather was diagnosed with cancer and died a year later, in 1972. He was 60-some years old. He loved his children and grandchildren. My youngest brother inherited the land and business, and, today, he has 23 green houses and his business is doing very well.

“In my teenage years, the only jobs available were related to the lumber business; cutting trees, transporting logs on the river, making lumber, etc. I stayed and did various kinds of work in the mountains for months and months. We loaded logs into trucks that delivered them to paper mills or woodworking plants. In the winter, my hands often froze, and they turned white. However, I kept working because it was my boss’s order. In those days, orders from an adult, your senior, must be carried out by all means. I worked very hard not to be scolded. Later, I purchased a horse and worked in the mountains, because I could make more money with my own horse.

“I got married to Mayumi when I was 24, which was in 1959. Mayumi and I have known each other for a long time, since our childhood. During that time, dating was not common here. You may not be able to believe it, but things like dating did not exist. Both of us had only mothers, and we were poor.”

I asked Mayumi how she liked Mr. K, and she said, “I fell in love with my husband because I thought that his family grew rice, and this meant I would probably not go hungry again.”

Mayumi’s father was an Ainu who died young. Her mother was a *wajin* from Sapporo who was adopted by an Ainu couple when she was four. Her adoptive parents had always spoken in the Ainu language, but Mayumi’s mother only spoke Japanese in front of her children, which was typical of parents in those days. Mayumi’s mother did speak Ainu with her friends, though. Her mother had many siblings, one of whom found where she lived, and they later introduced themselves and kept in touch as a family.

Mr. K. continued, “Mayumi and I had six children; four boys and two girls. It did not make sense for me to always stay in the mountains leaving my family behind. I decided to get a truck driver’s license so that I could commute to work and stay with my family every day. I told my wife, ‘It could be tough while I am going to a driver’s school, but when I become a truck driver I can stay with you.’”

“I purchased a big truck and worked as a driver for a very long time. I loaded gravel and sand onto my truck and drove to Sapporo just about every day. I would get up at two or three o’clock in the morning and go back and forth to Sapporo²⁹ a few times a day. It was a time of a very high economic

²⁹ The city of Sapporo hosted the 11th Olympic Winter Games in 1972, the first Winter Games held in Japan and Asia.

growth in Japan,³⁰ and construction companies needed sand and gravel to build buildings and roads.

“In winter, this truck driving job got scarce due to snow, and I went to Kisarazu or Kimitsu in Chiba Prefecture in Honshu to work and make money. I went there every year from January to the “Golden Week” in May. I drove my truck there and worked at Tokyo Bay to fill the land. There were so many jobs available, and I did that for 20 years until 2007. Even though I lived there in the winter time, 20 years is a long time, and I know Kisarazu and Kimitsu very well. Without that job, I do not think we could have built this house. We do not have any mortgage payment, we only have *Kokumin Nenkin* (Social Security), and from now on it will be difficult since the amount of money has been reduced. The politicians are trying to increase the tax rates now, too. Japan will sink in the future, you know! It will.”

Mr. K has been very active in many Ainu activities since the 1970s. He said, “In 1970, I became the director of the Hokkaido Ainu Association’s local branch and served more than 40 years. I am also the Vice President of our Ainu Culture Preservation Association and the Chair of the steering committee of the Ainu Language School. I have been active in a project called ‘Restoring *Iwor*.’ *Iwor* is a traditional and ecological living space, and it entails biological resources in the area. The Ainu traditionally do not have a notion of private land ownership. Land belongs to their community.”

Mr. K told me that he is very happy that he is an Ainu, and I asked him why. He said, “I had to endure many hardships, but I also benefitted a lot from my membership in the Ainu Association, and I can really say that I am glad I am an Ainu now. We built this house more than 30 years ago. You can borrow up to 7.2 million yen to build your house, and start paying a mere 2 percent mortgage rate in the following year. This is significantly lower than other mortgages. If you need to get a driver’s license, you will get 50,000 yen since a driver’s license is considered a necessity to earn money for living. If you are a fisherman and need a boating license, it is the same. My children benefitted from scholarships, too. For example, when a student enters a senior high school, scholarships are given three times a year, and the same for

³⁰ According to Henshall, Japanese annual GNP grew around 9% in the 1950s, 10% in the early 1960s, and more than 13% in the late 1960s and early 1970s; Kenneth Henshall, *A History of Japan: From Stone Age to Superpower* (Houndsmille, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 157–158.

college students.³¹ You need to return the money you are awarded if you drop out, though.

“The Japanese government helps with building sewage disposal system facilities and pays about 70 to 90 percent of the cost. This program is part of improving the living conditions of the Ainu residents, and of course the *wajin* residents benefit from it, too, since they live in the same neighborhood. Paving the roads was also supported by money that the Ainu Association received from the Japanese government. In order to preserve Ainu culture, money is available for those who teach and learn Ainu crafts. As for me, when I go to elementary schools and teach how to grow products, I am paid 5,400 yen per hour. They do direct deposit. My brother who owns greenhouses also gets money, and the *wajin* farms equally benefit from this help. Thanks to the money given to the Ainu, both the Ainu and *wajin* residents in the whole community can thrive.

“I think the prefecture of Hokkaido has the attitude that they want to cherish Ainu culture, which I think is good. Hokkaido used to be an Ainu land, yet the history of the Ainu is full of exploitation and oppression. I came to be friends with a very influential Ainu man, and he invited me to come along with him to different places in Honshu such as Tokyo, Osaka, Matsuzaka, Akita, as well as abroad, to Canada, South Korea, and New Zealand, to promote mutual awareness among the ethnic minorities of the world. I feel very lucky to have travelled to these countries as a representative of the Ainu.”

On March 11th, 2011, huge earthquakes and many tsunamis hit the northeast Tohoku Region of Japan, and the Fukushima nuclear disaster also took place. Mr. K commented on what was going on at that time. He said, “The Japanese are now discriminating against these people from Fukushima. I would say that the radioactivity will not be contagious. We are not contaminated by the individuals from Fukushima who are visiting us here in Hokkaido. Some people misunderstand this, and certain gas stations have signs saying ‘No Cars from Fukushima Served.’ This is horrible. It was reported in yesterday’s paper. That is awful.”

When I left his house in 2011, Mr. K said to me, “Like many other Ainu elders, I am not young anymore, and my years are limited. I am very

³¹ One of my informants in her 20s told me that this scholarship might be causing jealousy among the *wajin* students, which leads to their bullying the Ainu students.

happy that you are studying the Ainu, and since you know English and Spanish, you can reach out to more people and let them know about us. I really appreciate that. Please come back next year. I will introduce you to more Ainu. This is your home, and you are welcome any time. I will be waiting for you." I did go back in May 2012, and interviewed some 30 people, both Ainu and *wajin*, in Three Rivers.

