

**GOLDEN KAMUY:  
CAN THIS POPULAR MANGA  
CONTRIBUTE TO AINU STUDIES?**

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**Introduction**

*Golden Kamuy*<sup>1</sup> is an incredibly popular Japanese manga that has been serialized in *Shūkan Young Jump*, a weekly comic magazine, since August 21, 2014. The magazine is produced by Shueisha that publishes its *komikkusu*<sup>2</sup> and digital media in Tokyo. The action adventure comic story by Satoru Noda revolves around two protagonists, Saichi Sugimoto, a returning Japanese soldier, and Asirpa, a beautiful Ainu girl in her teens. The manga also features many characters who play the roles of significant “supporting actors” for the dynamic development of the story. They all have strong and unique personalities, various criminal and non-criminal backgrounds, as well as complicated psychological characteristics. The compelling story also entails hunting, conflict, violence, food, and events in the history of Hokkaido, Japan and the world. *Golden Kamuy* has been creating much interest in the Ainu people, their history, and their culture among the *Wajin* (non-Ainu Japanese) in today’s Japan.<sup>3</sup>

I have been doing research on Japanese manga since the end of the 1980s and started my fieldwork on the Ainu during my sabbatical in the spring of 2011. In this essay, I am doing a content analysis of *Golden Kamuy*, paying special attention to the depiction of the Ainu and their culture as well as its educational values and contribution to the Ainu Studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Noda Satoru, *Golden Kamuy*, vols. 1–8 (Tokyo: Shueisha 2019). *Kamuy* is an Ainu word that means “god(s).”

<sup>2</sup> The Japanese word *komikkusu* refers to softcover comic books that contain a collection of the chapters of a serialized manga in weekly or monthly comic magazines.

<sup>3</sup> *Wajin*, *shisamu*, and *shamo* are Ainu words that refer to the non-Ainu Japanese. *Shamo* is a derogatory term. See Kurihara Noriyuki, ed., *Imakoso Shiritai Ainu Kitano Daichi, Sokoni Ikiruhitobito no Rekishi to Bunka, Manga Golden Kamuy* (Tokyo: San-ei Shobō, 2017).

### Who are the Ainu?

The Ainu<sup>4</sup> are an indigenous, ethnic minority group of Japan whose ancestors lived in what was once called the *Ainu Mosir*. The vast and peaceful land of the humans included northern Honshu, Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and the Kurile Islands. The estimated population of the Ainu today is approximately 25,000, but the number could be much higher. The majority of them reside in Hokkaido, and others live in the greater Kanto area near Tokyo and Chiba. Their lifestyles are totally assimilated in contemporary Japan, but their traditional music, dance, language, crafts, religion, and food distinguish them as an ethnic group.

The Ainu traditionally lived in harmony with nature as they engaged in hunting, gathering, fishing, and farming. They also traded goods with *Wajin* in Ezo (present-day Hokkaido), Akita, Aomori, and Iwate<sup>5</sup> as well as other people in the northeastern part of China, Kamchatka Peninsula, Aleutian Islands, and the downstream of the Amur River in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. They traded *kombu* (kelp), sea otter skins, eagle feathers, salmon, bear gall bladder, and bear skins in exchange for precious stones, porcelain, samurai armor, and clothes made of Chinese silk.<sup>6</sup>

The Matsumae Domain controlled a segment of southern Ezo since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The *basho ukeoi* system (contract fishing system) and the *Wajin* merchants made the Ainu engage in forced labor since the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Ainu men were “recruited” to work in distant places, and the only people left in the villages were elderlies, women, and children. Russian vessels started to frequent Ezo seeking ice-free ports in the 1760s. The Tokugawa government decided to take over the land from the Matsumae Domain as they feared that the Ainu might leave Japan and unite with foreign powers.<sup>7</sup> The Tokugawa government started its direct control over the eastern

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<sup>4</sup> The original meaning of the word Ainu is “humans (as opposed to gods),” “humans in general,” “man,” and “father.”

<sup>5</sup> Akita, Aomori, and Iwate are located in the northern part of Honshu.

<sup>6</sup> Segawa Takuro, *Ainugaku Nyūmon* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2015), 104–114 and Uemura Hideki, *Ainu Minzoku Ichimon Ittō* (Osaka: Kaihou Shuppansha, 2008), 26–27.

<sup>7</sup> Several main characters of *Golden Kamuy* attempt to establish the Republic of Ezo, which is independent from Japan.

part of Ezo in 1799 and the western part in 1807. The land was returned to the Matsumae Domain in 1821, but Ezo became a Japanese territory in 1854.<sup>8</sup>

The history of the Ainu is the history of an ethnic cleansing that officially began in 1869 when the Meiji government renamed Ezo Hokkaido and established the Hokkaido Colonization Board. The Japanese government started its vigorous assimilation processes on the Ainu in 1871. It needed to show to the world that the Ainu are indeed Japanese nationals, and Hokkaido belonged to Japan. The policies included adoption of Japanese sounding names and Japanese language and prohibition of the Ainu language, their traditional tattoos on women's mouths, pierced earrings of men, and performing their very important "sending off the sacred bear's spirit" ceremony called *Iomante*. Those Ainu who wanted to cultivate land were provided with houses and farming equipment, and they were encouraged to settle down. However, the *Wajin* took all the fertile land, and the lands given to the Ainu were often small and uncultivable. Prohibition of fishing salmon in rivers began in 1870. Traditional poisonous arrows and spring-loaded poison traps were prohibited in 1876, and hunting deer in 1889. Due to these restrictions placed by the Japanese government, the Ainu were forbidden from catching their staple food, leading them to starvation.<sup>9</sup>

The lifestyles of the contemporary Ainu people are basically the same as any *Wajin*, but some people might encounter problems in their daily life that are related to the consequences of inequality from the past which include poverty, prejudice, discrimination, bullying in education, employment, and marriage.<sup>10</sup> The Ainu are supportive of one another, and the majority are self-sufficient. Many of them contribute to the maintenance

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<sup>8</sup> Ainu Minzoku Hakubutsukan, ed., *The Basic Knowledge of Ainu Culture* (Urayasu: Sofukan, 2009), 37–39; and ann-elise lewallen, *The Fabric of Indigeneity Ainu Identity, Gender, and Settler Colonialism in Japan* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016), 129–132.

<sup>9</sup> Ito Kinko, "An Elderly Ainu Man's Story: Ethnography," *Japan Studies Review* (2014):115–118; "Have You Heard about the Ainu? Elders of Japan's Indigenous People Speak," dir. Ito Kinko, *YouTube* video, 1:18:06. November 29, 2016 (accessed February 18, 2019, <https://youtu.be/0Q6cYEQUpBg>); Kurihara, *Imakoso Shiritai Ainu Kitano Daichi*, 82–83; and Uemura, *Ainu Minzoku*, 38–46.

<sup>10</sup> Kayano Shigeru, *Ainu no Ishibumi* (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun Shuppan, 2009); and Uemura, *Ainu Minzoku*, 90–93.

of their precious culture by learning the Ainu language, traditional crafts (woodcarving, embroidery, fabric production, and clothing making), songs, and dances.<sup>11</sup> The Ainu Cultural Promotion Act was enacted in 1997, and it enables the Ainu Cultural Foundation to administer a national budget for the preservation and promotion of Ainu culture as part of Japan's cultural heritage. Numerous Ainu women revivalists engage in creating cloth works – textile weaving, embroidery, appliques, and robe making that connect them to their heritage and tradition. Iewallen (this author uses all small letters for her name) observes this resurgence of Ainu culture as “broadening the discursive spaces within which Ainu can explore and express self-identity and determine how to *be* Ainu.”<sup>12</sup> Recently, the Ainu and their culture are getting more attention in Japan, and many events and exhibits about them have been frequently held at museums and cultural centers.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Noda Satoru - the Author of *Golden Kamuy***

Noda Satoru was born in Kitahiroshima City in Hokkaido. His birth year is unknown, and it seems that he wants to remain “mysterious” by keeping a distance between his works and private life. When he engages in his research on the Ainu by visiting places and museums, he does not reveal that he is the author of *Golden Kamuy*.<sup>14</sup> Noda debuted in 2003 with *Today, Kyoko's Misfortune*, and he won the 54<sup>th</sup> Chiba Tetsuya Award in its Young Division with *The Goalie Only Looks in Front* in 2006. His *Spinamarada!*, a manga about a high school ice hockey club in Hokkaido, was serialized in *Shūkan Young Jump* between 2011 and 2012. The series was compiled into six volumes of *komikkusu*. After a year's hiatus, research, and preparation, Noda started *Golden Kamuy* in the same weekly comic magazine in 2014.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “Have You Heard about the Ainu? Part 2–Toward a Better Understanding and World Peace,” dir. Ito Kinko, *YouTube* video, 30:08. May 9, 2018 (accessed February 18, 2019, <https://youtu.be/kOjXywT1UCo>).

<sup>12</sup> Iewallen, *The Fabric of Indigeneity*, 27–29.

<sup>13</sup> Kurihara, *Imakoso Shiritai Ainu Kitano Daichi*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> “‘Golden Kamuy’ Author Doing His Homework in Depicting Ainu,” *Asahi Shimbun*, June 23, 2018 (accessed May 8, 2019, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201806230010.html>).

<sup>15</sup> “Satoru Noda,” *Golden Kamuy Fandom* (accessed March 14, 2019, [https://goldenkamuy.fandom.com/wiki/Satoru\\_Noda](https://goldenkamuy.fandom.com/wiki/Satoru_Noda)).

Depiction of Hokkaido's natural environment is abundant with minute details in *Golden Kamuy*: the four seasons, forests, wild animals (especially those native to Hokkaido such as brown bears, *yuk* [deer], and squirrels), birds (both native and migrant), fish (in rivers and sea), mountain vegetables, grains, and fruits. Noda also depicts imaginary animals and birds that appear in certain Ainu legends.<sup>16</sup>

Kitahiroshima City is located in the southern part of Ishikari Plain. Mountains and forests occupy about 30 percent of the city's land area. There are broadleaf forests of quercus and maples as well as plantations of larch and fir. The city was originally settled by 103 people from 25 households who migrated from Hiroshima Prefecture in the western part of Honshu in 1884. They engaged in developing the primitive forests and cultivating the land. The city is endowed with beautiful nature, and the citizens also enjoy harvesting mountain vegetables and mushrooms in spring and fall as well as hunting between October 1 and March 31.<sup>17</sup>

The popular and successful comic story by Noda can be formulated as follows: His great grandfather's life + a novel on hunting in Hokkaido + Ainu culture = *Golden Kamuy*.<sup>18</sup> Noda's great grandfather was a *tondenhei*, a soldier who guarded and cultivated land in Hokkaido. Noda wanted to use his great grandfather's experiences in his manga, and his editor gave him a book on hunting. Then, Noda added rich Ainu culture to create the compelling story.

In an interview, Noda was asked, "It has been rare that the Ainu culture is featured in comics. Why did you select this topic?" He answered:

Exactly because it is rare. It would look refreshing to the eyes of my readers. I think it is rather a delicate topic, and everyone has shied away from it. It also includes persecution and discrimination, a dark image. However, I was convinced that if I drew the theme in a positive and interesting manner, my manga would be popular. An Ainu whom I interviewed

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<sup>16</sup> Noda, *Golden Kamuy*, vols. 1–18.

<sup>17</sup> See official site for Hokkaido Kitahiroshima City Hall (accessed February 22, 2019, <http://www.city.kitahiroshima.hokkaido.jp/>).

<sup>18</sup> "Kanaeru Chikara (7) Mangaka Noda Satorusan," Asahi Shimbun Digital, January 8, 2017 (accessed February 22, 2019, <http://www.asahi.com/area/hokkaido/articles/MTW20170110011620001.html>)

said to me, “You do not need to portray the pathetic Ainu. Draw the Ainu who are strong.”<sup>19</sup>

Noda indeed does draw strong Ainu. For example, he depicts Asirpa as a new type of young Ainu woman. Asirpa’s grandfather was Polish and her grandmother was an Ainu on her father’s side. Her Ainu mother died soon after she delivered Asirpa. Her father named his daughter Asirpa, which means “new year,” and “future.” He taught her hunting and survival skills in the natural environment. She has a *fuci* (grandmother) on her mother’s side who lives in an Ainu *kotan* (traditional village community). She has a tattoo around her mouth, speaks only Ainu, and transmits her wisdom and the Ainu tradition to her granddaughter. The *fuci* is depicted as a “vanguard of cultural preservation.”<sup>20</sup>

Asirpa is brave, intelligent, self-sufficient, mature, and talented. She also has a great sense of humor and sensitivity. She is at an age when Ainu girls start tattooing around their mouths, but she is ambivalent and reluctant. Asirpa recognizes herself as an Ainu woman in a new age. Noda portrays her as independent, powerful, and assertive. I am sure she has a very positive influence and effect on the minds of young readers, especially females. Asirpa is a great role model and an agent of socialization which the readers vicariously experience as they read the manga.

Noda definitely had confidence that *Golden Kamuy* would be very popular because of his on-going, in-depth research that entails not only reading resources, but also engaging himself in empirical observations and seeking information from specialists. For example, Noda went hunting with an Ainu hunter who taught him the techniques and knowledge to hunt various animals and meats. He actually ate the brain of a deer raw. Noda’s vigorous research, empiricism, and sincere respect and attitude toward the ethnic minority, their history, and culture won him much trust from the Ainu and other scholars.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Excerpt from “Golden Kamuy Noda Satoru Interview,” *Kono Manga*, January 4, 2016 (accessed February 22, 2019, <http://konomanga.jp/interview/51952-2/2>).

<sup>20</sup> Iwawallan, *The Fabric of Indigeneity*, 92.

<sup>21</sup> “Manga Taishō 2016 wa Noda Satorushi no ‘Golden Kamuy’ ni kettei,” *Oricon*, March 29, 2016 (accessed May 15, 2019, <https://www.oricon.co.jp/news/2069262/full/>); and “Kanaeru Chikara (7) Mangaka Noda Satorusan,”

### **Golden Kamuy – The Comic Story**

The unprecedented interest in the Ainu and their culture in recent years in Japan and elsewhere is partly due to the popularity of *Golden Kamuy*. In March 2016, the comic story won the *Manga Taishō* (Cartoon Grand Prize).<sup>22</sup> It received another award *Hokkaido yukari no hon taishō* (Grand Prize for Books Regarding Hokkaido) in its Comics Division in 2017 and the *Manga Taishō* of the *Tezuka Osamu Bunkashō* (the Manga Grand Prix of the Tezuka Osamu Cultural Prize) sponsored by Asahi Shimbunsha (Newspaper) in 2018.<sup>23</sup> The animation version of the popular manga started to air in Japan in April 2018, and the video clips are streamed on YouTube worldwide.

The two protagonists in *Golden Kamuy* are Saichi Sugimoto, a returning soldier from the Russo-Japan War (1904–1905) and Asirpa, a young Ainu woman in her early teens.<sup>24</sup> It is a story about Sugimoto seeking the enormous Ainu treasure trove hidden in Hokkaido at the end of the Meiji Era (1868–1912). He needs money to take care of the wife of his late best friend by bringing her to the United States to operate on her eyes. Asirpa, on the other hand, wants to know the whereabouts of her father who disappeared and had something to do with the hidden trove.

*Golden Kamuy* belongs to a genre called *seinen manga* (manga for youth and young adults), and the themes include adventure, survival, conflict, battle, historical romance, gastronomy, and the Ainu culture. Tatsuya Matsuura, who has been writing news flashes about the *Manga Taishō* prize, states that *Golden Kamuy* is one of the hardest comics to write a review of and label its category. He says that any attempt to classify this manga always ends in incongruity. This manga has many elements, some of which do not always mix and match. Matsuura lists them as “history, ethnicity, hunting, gourmet food, suspense, action, battles, gag, *yaoi*, etc.”<sup>25</sup>

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Asahi Shimbun Digital, January 8, 2017 (accessed May 15, 2019, <http://www.asahi.com/area/hokkaido/articles/MTW20170110011620001.html>).

<sup>22</sup> Kurihara, *Imakoso Shiritai Ainu*, 7.

<sup>23</sup> “‘Golden Kamuy’ Won the Osamu Tezuka Cultural Award for Manga! The New Birth Award is Shiodome Itagaki,” *Comic Natalie*, April 25, 2018 (accessed May 15, 2019, <https://natalie.mu/comic/news/279582>).

<sup>24</sup> Noda, *Golden Kamuy*, vol. 13; and Kurihara, *Imakoso Shiritai Ainu*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Tatsuya Matsuura, “Manga Award 2016, Noda Satoru ‘Golden Kamuy,’” *Excite News*, March 29, 2016 (accessed May 15, 2019, <https://www.excite.co.jp/news/article/E1459217477604/?p=2>).

*Golden Kamuy* contains much violence and brutality, which is definitely adult content not suitable for children. There have been 18 volumes published in 2019. Some of the major characters that surround the two protagonists, namely, Sugimoto and Asirpa, include ex-prisoners, murderers, hunters, soldiers, ex-samurai, and several Ainu characters such as Kiroranke (Asirpa's father's friend), Inkarmat (a sexy Ainu fortuneteller), Osoma (Asirpa's cousin), Asirpa's grandmother, and Uiruku (Asirpa's father). Episodes with violent themes and scenes are very common, and they include murder by guns, pistols, swords, saws, knives, awls, poison, fire, poison gas, punches, kicks, stabbing, decapitation, and disembodiment. There are certain war scenes where a "legitimate" mass murder takes place as well.<sup>26</sup> Generally speaking, a paradox has always existed in regard to the duality of Japanese serenity and brutality. Manga is no exception. Certain comics for adult men and women have been notoriously known as violent and ruthless, but the violence rarely translates into real-life situations. The brutality experienced in comics is "properly distanced, and should therefore lead to catharsis," and the distance from reality must be just right to have maximum cathartic effects.<sup>27</sup> The aggression and cold-bloodedness vicariously experienced in comics might lead to the containment of the readers' own anger and frustration by catharsis that enables their release of pent-up negative and afflictive emotions.

Certain episodes of *Golden Kamuy* are sexually explicit with much nudity. A mosaic design seen in pornographic films and DVDs in Japan, mushrooms, and other phallic designs are used to cover the genitals in the comic story. The characters have various sexual orientations, and one of the characters in particular is a beautiful transgendered young woman who used to be an old medical doctor and prisoner. Different kinds of sex acts are also depicted in the stories, and they include coitus between couples, S&M, group sex, masturbation, and bestiality. Certain episodes also feature a pervert who engages in human taxidermy and another one who has a fantasy and a desire to be murdered violently.<sup>28</sup> The Japanese traditionally enjoyed sex more openly than any other people in the world, and sexuality and sexual acts are always one of the most important themes in both adult men's and women's

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<sup>26</sup> Noda, *Golden Kamuy*, vols. 1–18.

<sup>27</sup> T.J. Scheff, *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual, and Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 25.

<sup>28</sup> Noda, *Golden Kamuy*, vols. 1–18.



comics.<sup>29</sup> Sex found in *Golden Kamuy* is nothing new or perturbing to many Japanese readers. Noda said in an interview, “[To make stories more interesting] the characters have multifaceted personalities. Even an atrocious prisoner has a lovable personality with playful and sublime aspects.”<sup>30</sup> Noda also mentioned that he actually prefers to depict more complicated perverts in his comic story.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Golden Kamuy* and the Ainu Studies**

One of the unique characteristics of *Golden Kamuy* is that it depicts various aspects of traditional Ainu life which many *Wajin* do not know or have not cared enough to know in contemporary Japan. The manga portrays their history, customs and manners, religion, food, clothing, language, and philosophy, among others. *Golden Kamuy* is the first Japanese comic that has an Ainu as one of the protagonists, and it indeed depicts positive and powerful images of the Ainu and their lifestyle. Readers learn the world of the Ainu through Asirpa as their guide. In this sense I would say that it is a groundbreaking comic series that is also educational. It is not too much to say that it belongs to a category called *benkyō manga* (“study comics”) that provides easy and joyful learning for children and adults alike. For example, the classic manga *Japan Inc. Introduction to Japanese Economics* by Ishinomori Shōtarō (a renowned Japanese comic artist) teaches the mechanisms of the Japanese economy and industries in the format of a comic story.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, *Golden Kamuy* can be “a textbook” for the Ainu Studies.

The Ainu language is freely spoken by both the Ainu and non-Ainu characters in *Golden Kamuy*, and it is basically the first bilingual comic in Japanese and Ainu languages. Hiroshi Nakagawa, a professor of Ainu Language at Chiba University, supervises the Ainu language content. Ainu

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<sup>29</sup> Ito Kinko, *A Sociology of Japanese Ladies' Comics Images of the Life, Loves, and Sexual Fantasies of Adult Japanese Women* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011). 149–191.

<sup>30</sup> Excerpt from “Golden Kamuy Noda Satoru Interview – Motto hentaiwo egakasetekure! Fukuzatsuna kyarakutāga sakuhinwo omoshirokusuru!” Kono Manga, January 11, 2016 (accessed February 22, 2019, <http://kono-manga.jp/interview/52634-2>).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Shōtarō Ishinomori, *Japan Inc.: An Introduction to Japanese Economics (The Comic Book)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

is considered an isolated language, and it is not related to Japanese at all. It does not have a system of writing, and everything has been transmitted orally. The Ainu have a very strong oral tradition such as *Yukar* (a long epic about heroes) and *Uwepekere* (traditional folk ballads). Noda eloquently introduces them in his comic story. Oratory gives the Ainu power, and it was one of the requirements for becoming a village leader.<sup>33</sup>

The readers of *Golden Kamuy* will also learn many Ainu words, idioms, proverbs, and greetings in certain episodes. Noda provides his readers with the meanings and explanations of the usage when an Ainu word or idiom is introduced in his manga, as well as the visual images.

Certain Ainu words appear repeatedly, and the readers master them naturally. For example, the protagonists and other characters enjoy eating Ainu food together on many occasions, and they always say “*Hinna! Hinna!*” with big smiles. *Hinna* is a word of gratitude to the food, and it is translated as “delicious.” Sugimoto loves *miso* (fermented soy bean paste) and Asirpa always confuses it with *osoma* (an Ainu word for feces). She laughs and teases Sugimoto for eating *osoma* as she makes funny faces. Noda portrays Asirpa in such a comical way that the readers delight in her various facial expressions.

In a certain episode, Asirpa takes Sugimoto to her *kotan* and introduces her cousin to him. Sugimoto is quite surprised to find that her name is Osoma (feces). Asirpa explains that the Ainu give their babies nasty names when they are born so that bad spirits that cause illness do not take them away from the parents. Examples of the names include “Lump of Feces,” “Someone Who Farts,” and “Grown Up Stinky.” Sugimoto is amused when he learns that Asirpa’s baby name was “Grandfather’s Anus.” Traditionally, Ainu parents give their children their name based on their psychological characteristics and personal events when the child is about six years old.<sup>34</sup>

Readers also learn and master many Ainu words related to hunting (arrows, bows, traps, poisons, medicines, etc.), fishing (boats, names of fish, seals, whales, traps, seasonal fishermen, etc.), gathering (names of plants, herbs, and mountain vegetables, peeling tree barks, etc.), family and kinship (father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, uncle, etc.), food (soup, cooking methods, ingredients, garlic, spice, storage, etc.), cooking devices and

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<sup>33</sup> *Ainu Bunkano Kisochishiki* (Urayasu: Sofukan, 2009), 22–24 and Yoichi Tsunoda, *Zukai Ainu* (Tokyo: Shinkigensha, 2018) 182–185.

<sup>34</sup> Noda, *Golden Kamuy*, vol. 1, episode 12.

utensils (chopping boards, knives, bowls, spoons, pots, pans, etc.), animals and birds (rabbits, deer, bears, wolves, badgers, foxes, eagles, woodpeckers, etc.), religion (*kamuy*, altar, guardian gods, protective charms, rituals, etc.), music (songs, mouth harp, guitar, etc.), and household items and devices (robes, weaving machines, lights, toys, etc.) throughout the episodes.

*Golden Kamuy komikkusu* features Asirpa wearing traditional Ainu clothes on the cover of each volume underneath its slipcover. The Ainu use raw materials from the natural environment such as tree fibers, animal furs, fish skins, and bird feathers to make robes as well as cotton cloth. The first volume features *attus*, which is made of *ohyō* (a kind of elm tree fiber). According to Iwawaki, “Fabric woven from *attus* was resistant to inclement weather and made ideal outerwear for snow and rain.”<sup>35</sup> In 2013, Ainu *attus* made in Nibutani were recognized by the Japan Traditional Craft Association as “assets of noble vintage and national heritage” as well as “objects worthy of government funding.”<sup>36</sup> Other garments featured include *cijiri*, which is a black cotton robe embroidered entirely in thread, and the *ruunpe*, which is an ornate cotton robe that has appliqued pieces of cloths made of cotton, silk, and bleached cotton with elaborate embroidery.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, garments such as the *kaparamip* is a “reverse applique garment made by fastening white cotton cloth to a navy or dark-colored base cotton.”<sup>38</sup> On the cover of one of the volumes Shiraiishi Yoshitake wears a prisoner’s clothes dyed in persimmon color.

Noda also introduces the readers to the history of the Ainu, their “literature” which is transmitted orally (e.g., folklores, legends, and proverbs), particular architectures (e.g., different kinds of houses and bear cages), customs and manners, and animal psychology. The readers learn much about the animal behavior as well, especially that of bears and deer, which is a must for successful hunting and continuing Ainu livelihood. Furthermore, Noda includes beliefs and rituals of the Ainu religion, various gods, and the Ainu’s relationship to nature.

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<sup>35</sup> Iwawaki, *The Fabric of Indigeneity*, 157.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>37</sup> “Ainu Cotton Clothes,” Ainu Life Culture Reproduction Manual of the Ainu Culture Promotion and Research Promotion Organization, April 2001 (accessed May 15, 2019, [https://www.frpac.or.jp/manual/files/2001\\_04.pdf](https://www.frpac.or.jp/manual/files/2001_04.pdf)).

<sup>38</sup> Iwawaki, *The Fabric of Indigeneity*, 237–238.

The Ainu have been living peacefully in an ecological environment where “what goes around comes around.” They take only what they need when they go to the mountains to harvest plants and mountain vegetables. They leave the rest for harvesting in the following year. Additionally, greed and overharvesting cause terrible irreversible consequences. The Ainu do not wash clothes or dump feces in the river. Fish can live only in clear water, and when the river is contaminated salmon and trout cannot come back upstream from the ocean to lay eggs. No fish means no otters, foxes, and bears that live on fish. Thus, the consequences of polluting the environment brings a life or death implication to the Ainu. In many episodes of his comic story, Noda effectively portrays how the traditional Ainu interact with their natural environment and how they relate to it as they appreciate its abundance to various *kamuys*. Mother Nature is also depicted as something to fear and dealt with respect in certain episodes. Hence, these portrayals bring ecological awareness and environmental consciousness to urban readers who rarely see the mechanisms of nature firsthand in their busy lives.

### **Conclusion**

*Golden Kamuy* has recently played a vital role in introducing Ainu culture to those *Wajin* who had not been interested in them before reading this compelling comic story. It is thereby crucial to read and understand the manga correctly in its historical contexts. As in this case, the time period is set at the end of the Meiji Era when Japan was still on its way to modernization and becoming a world power. The Ainu are totally assimilated living in modern homes with amenities and not in a traditional *cise* (house), which can easily burn and are thus dangerous. They get their food from their family gardens, stores, and supermarkets, drive cars and trucks, use cell phones and internet, and wear fashionable clothes.

Some of the Ainu men wear a traditional robe made of tree fiber and a head dress, and women might wear traditionally embroidered robes with headbands and necklaces for formal occasions, like attending a public ceremony or delivering a speech. Their unique attire gives them identity and a sense of pride and great heritage as it is transmitted for generations.

Manga and animation, which is usually based on popular manga, are huge, thriving, and popular mass entertainment industries that affect Japanese economy, politics, public opinion, education, and socialization. They are often so powerful that it is acceptable to say that the contemporary Japanese mindset and public opinion are deeply influenced by popular manga and anime. The readership and viewership are not limited to children, youth, or

young adults. Manga is for everyone, and even certain Prime Ministers have openly admitted that they were avid readers of manga.<sup>39</sup>

As a result, manga serves as a bonding agent, influences people's values and political ideologies, and sets trends in fashion, hobbies, language, and economy. Manga has contributed to social changes in Japan over so many years and in so many ways.<sup>40</sup> *Golden Kamuy* increases the awareness of the ethnic minority group among the *Wajin*, and it also teaches the Ainu history, traditions, cuisine, religion, language, and values as well as survival skills in nature. In this sense, this manga is completely educational. One of the judges of the *Manga Taishō* selection committee admitted that "The contribution of this comic (*Golden Kamuy*) is extremely important in that it afforded an opportunity for many young people all over Japan to be interested in the Ainu culture." Another source pointed out that, "The author has been doing very good research on the literature and references and the manga depictions are refined and worth looking at."

The Tokyo Olympic Games will be hosted in Japan in 2020, and the Ainu culture will be showcased as the nation receives global media attention. Prior to this event, the Japanese government has begun a major effort to renovate the Ainu Museum in Shiraoi, Hokkaido. It was closed in 2018 and will reopen as a national museum solely dedicated to the Ainu and their culture in April 2020. The area where the new museum is located will be called Kokuritsu Minzoku Kyōsei Kōen (National Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony). The aims of the space is "to promote nationwide understanding of the history and culture of the Ainu" and "to pass on traditional Ainu culture and expand the horizons of Ainu culture toward the creation and development of new culture."<sup>41</sup> The space will have various educational facilities and pedagogical tools to teach children, students, adults, and tourists alike about the Ainu people, their culture, history, and traditions.

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<sup>39</sup> Ito, *A Sociology of Japanese Ladies' Comics*. 18–26.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Refer to "2020nen Shiraoi Poroto Kohanni Kokuritsu Ainu Minzoku Hakubutsukan, Kokuritsu Minzoku Kyōsei Kōen Tanjō," The Ainu Museum, August 13, 2016 (accessed May 8, 2019, [http://www.ainu-museum.or.jp/kokuritsu/pdf/2020\\_kokuritsu03.pdf](http://www.ainu-museum.or.jp/kokuritsu/pdf/2020_kokuritsu03.pdf)); and "Overview of the Master Plan for the Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony," Kantei, January 16, 2015 (accessed May 8, 2019, [http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/ainusuishin/pdf/symbolicspace\\_e.pdf](http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/ainusuishin/pdf/symbolicspace_e.pdf)).

The popularity of *Golden Kamuy* is very timely in this critical time in Japanese history when there is so much interest in the Ainu, and when Japanese society is moving towards more acceptance, tolerance, and inclusion of diversity, which includes all kinds of minorities. *Golden Kamuy* is a manga not only for entertainment, but also for the education of the masses in regard to the Ainu. Prejudice and discrimination prevail where there is no mutual understanding, tolerance, and compassion. I am convinced that the success of this comic story can definitely contribute to the promotion of Ainu Studies and revitalization of the endangered Ainu language.