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Abetting Assimilation: Competing Narratives in Sister Inez Hilger's

Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People

Mark Spangler

HIST 399: Senior Thesis

Dr. Brian Larkin

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“Since most of the activities of former times at which songs were sung are no longer part of the Ainu life, songs are now sung by women whenever several are together.”¹

Through rain and shine songs have been sung and stories have been told, and nestled within the northern mountains, it was raining. It had been raining for a long time; for the people indigenous to the north had lost all their ancestral reasons to sing. Yet they still sang.

This story has played out countless times across the globe. It is a tragically familiar narrative: the death of indigeneity in the face of colonial onslaught. The quote above was written in one such story, its words penned by Sister Marie Inez Hilger of St. Benedict’s Monastery, a Benedictine from Minnesota who in 1965 traveled across the globe to write an ethnography of the Ainu in Hokkaido, Japan. It sounds like a stark cultural contrast, and indeed a 75 year old dressed in a traditional Benedictine habit would have been quite striking to the people of Hokkaido, but that is far from the only striking thing about this story.

Hilger’s work, titled *Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People*, is a complex book that serves various groups with competing interests. As an ethnography, it serves the Ainu themselves, but a repeated “vanishing” narrative and clearly pro-assimilationist sentiments work against the Ainu, instead serving her benefactors *The National Geographic Society* and the Japanese Imperial Family.

¹ Inez Hilger, *Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 75

Understanding the Ainu

In a sentence, the Ainu are the people indigenous to Northern Japan. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the Ainu lived in self governing villages, *kotan*, across an area stretching from Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands to the southern end of Hokkaido, though it is believed that some Ainu once lived in northern Honshu.² Ainu language and dialects are completely separate from Japanese, and all have their own religious and cultural systems. Most lived as hunter-gatherers, relying on game in the mountains and salmon in the rivers, though Ainu in warmer climates were also known to grow small crop yields. Additionally, the Ainu have always existed within a complex system of trade routes that connected them to surrounding Russia, China, and Japan, and to other indigenous communities like the Nivkh and the Uilta³.

Lasting contact with Yamato Japanese led to notable intermarriage and cultural exchange. By the mid-18th century, the feudal Matsumae clan began imposing more and more on the Ainu in Hokkaido, at that time known by its native Ainu name, Ezo. It was after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, however, that Japanese-Ainu relations began to accelerate on the path of domination. Concerned by the Russian Empire's growing appetites for East Asian territory,⁴ the Meiji government gave Hokkaido its current name and began incentivizing Japanese to settle there. These settlements overtaxed the natural resources of Hokkaido, endangering the livelihood of the existing population. This was codified in 1899,

² William Fitzhugh "Ainu Ethnicity: A History," essay, in *Ainu: Spirit of a Northern People*, ed. Chisato O. Dubreuil and William W. Fitzhugh (Seattle, WA: Arctic Studies Center, National Museum of Natural History in association with University of Washington Press, 2001), 10

³ Harrison, "The Indigenous Ainu of Japan and the 'Northern Territories' Dispute." 41

⁴ Harrison, "The Indigenous Ainu of Japan and the 'Northern Territories' Dispute."

when the Japanese government passed the “Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act,” legally requiring assimilation by forcing the Ainu to give up hunting and begin farming. This, combined with laws forbidding them from speaking their native language and practicing their religious traditions, eroded their way of life, contributing significantly to Ainu marginalization and impoverishment of the Ainu people.

By the time of Hilger’s arrival to Hokkaido, the number of Ainu citizens was unclear, but she maintains that there were about 300 full-blooded Ainu at her time of writing in the 1960s,⁵ though a footnote cites an Izumi Seiichi who claims that a 1960 Japanese census listed 17,000 “Aynus” living on Hokkaido.⁶ It remains impossible to get an exact count today, with current estimates ranging from around 20,000 to as high as 200,000 living people with Ainu ancestry. No matter the number, there are now few who identify as Ainu. As such, the Ainu language is considered by UNESCO to be critically endangered.⁷

Inez Hilger’s Background

Sister Marie Inez Hilger was born in October 1891 in rural Roscoe, Minnesota, and entered St. Benedict’s Convent in 1907 at the age of 17, which significantly shaped her life’s course. After teaching primary and secondary school for much of her young adulthood, she went to the University of Minnesota to earn a B.A. in American History and Literature before immediately starting her masters in

⁵ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, XIII

⁶ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, XIII

⁷ Ed. Christopher Moseley, *Atlas of the World’s Language in Danger*, Third Edition, (Paris, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2010)
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000187026>, 51

Sociology and Social Services from the Catholic University of America, becoming the first woman to be fully admitted there.⁸ She returned in 1936 to complete her formal education with a P.h.D. in Sociology, Anthropology, and Psychology each.⁹ While there, she became close friends with world-renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead, who ignited her interest in learning about the child life of indigenous cultures. Her first fieldwork was a study of twelve Native American tribes, which she later followed with an ethnography of the Araucanian people in Chile.

During her life, she wrote 70 essays and 8 books, three of which were published by the Smithsonian Institution. Her final project began in 1965 at the age of 74 when the National Geographic Society awarded her a grant to write an ethnography of the Ainu on the other side of the world from St. Joseph Minnesota.

Historiography:

Takakura Shinichiro, 1942

While the Ainu themselves have existed in one form or another for possibly over 10,000 years,¹⁰ written scholarship about them is limited before the 19th century, as the Ainu did not have a written language of their own. As such, scholars are often limited to works by European or Japanese authors. One of the earlier authors on the subject is Takakura Shinichiro, a professor at Hokkaido University whose most famous work on the subject was his 1942 “The Ainu of Northern Japan: a Study in Conquest and Acculturation.” Writing during the bloodiest part of the

⁸ Sister Marie Inez Hilger Collection, 244. Catholic University of America Special Collections, Washington D. C. <https://findingaids.lib.catholic.edu/repositories/2/resources/105>

⁹ “Sister Inez Hilger”, College of St. Benedict Archives. <https://www.csbsju.edu/csb-archives/csbhistory/csbmiscellaneouslists/sisterslist/sister-inez-hilger>

¹⁰ Kiyoshi Yamaura and Hiroshi Ushiro, “Prehistoric Hokkaido and Ainu Origins,” essay, in *Ainu: Spirit of a Northern People*, ed. Chisato O. Dubreuil and William W. Fitzhugh, 46

Showa period, - the height of Japanese power in World War Two - Takakura's words often sound like an echo of Japanese imperialist policy at the time: "it was undoubtedly necessary to establish a new administrative structure to attempt to assimilate the natives into the Japanese way of life while at the same time expanding the market for Japanese merchandise."¹¹

Clearly looking out for number one, Takakura argues that the Ainu were subjected to the Japanese because of their failure to form a union,¹² and because "it was too easy to deceive the ignorant natives... and this became more the situation as the Japanese grew in strength."¹³

John Cornell, 1960

A less openly imperialist take on the subject is offered by American author John Cornell in his 1960 work "Ainu Assimilation and Cultural Extinction: Acculturation Policy in Hokkaido." While Hilger doesn't cite it in her work, it serves as a good example of what authors contemporary to her were writing. An codebreaker in the Pacific Theater of World War II, Cornell's work focuses comparatively more on the global aspects of Japanese-Ainu relations. Like Hilger, he is one of many authors to note the similarities between the Japanese government's treatment of the Ainu and the American government's treatment of the land's many indigenous tribes. He says that while Native Americans were "subjected to harsh mistreatment through planless absorption or forced isolation in marginal

¹¹ Takakura, Shinichirō. *The Ainu of Northern Japan: a Study in Conquest and Acculturation*. Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1942, 1-88, 81

¹² Takakura, *The Ainu of Northern Japan*, 23

¹³ Takakura, "The Ainu of Northern Japan", 29

reservations, the Ainu were handled by the state with remarkable sympathy and humanitarian concern.”¹⁴ It is perhaps impressive that Cornell doesn't let his sentiments from his time fighting the Japanese Imperial Military mar his opinion of their policy, but this quote and the following one both suggest that Cornell sees material gain in a positive light:

Casting the Ainu adrift from their former patrons, patently unprepared for this as they were, seems to have been done with fundamentally humanitarian intentions and in the misguided belief that rapid Japanization and agrarianization would be the kindest and most efficient way for the Ainu to enjoy the fruits of Hokkaido's development. There was no suggestion of intentional discrimination in this policy.¹⁵

Similar sentiments are to be found in Hilger's work, who translated the 1899 act as the “Law for the Protection of the Ainu,”¹⁶ and this is just one of many ways that Cornell's work sets itself in line with Hilger's. Both works aren't critical of the Japanese government, both treat the death of Ainu culture like an inevitability, and both focus heavily on the material gain of the Ainu in the 20th century.

David Howell, 2004

These works are representative of the academic milieu that Hilger was raised in, but obviously scholarship did not conclude 50 years ago. A great source to see how the Ainu are understood more recently is Dr. David Howell's 2004 work “Making ‘Useful Citizens’ of Ainu Subjects in Early Twentieth-Century Japan”. His words address what was implicitly understood by previous authors, this idea that the Ainu were condemned: “Commentators of all sorts, regardless of their other ideas,

¹⁴ Cornell, John B. “Ainu Assimilation and Cultural Extinction: Acculturation Policy in Hokkaido.” *Ethnology* 3, no. 3 (1964): 291. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3772885>.

¹⁵ Cornell, “Ainu Assimilation and Cultural Extinction” 295-96

¹⁶ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, XLV

took for granted that the Ainu were doomed to extinction as a distinct population. Indeed, *horobiyuku minzoku* - a “dying race” - became a stock phrase in discussions of Ainu affairs.”¹⁷ As for his own points, Howell is blunt where previous authors beat around the bush: “bringing about assimilation in a way that would benefit the Ainu themselves has never been a significant policy goal”.¹⁸ This is in direct with contrast with Cornell and Takakura’s works, and its not something that Hilger would state. After all, Howell’s primary point was that “the goal of assimilation was to transform the Ainu into ‘useful citizens’ of Japan by bring their everyday lives and livelihoods into line with normative patterns.”¹⁹ Being more recent, Howell’s work is much more in line with the academic tradition that I was raised in, and in some ways exemplifies the lens through which I understand Hilger’s works.

In the most brief way possible, the historiography of the Ainu people essentially moves from direct racism, to a more subtle racism, to a push for indigenous justice that very much echoes what we see in other parts of the world today. With that covered, what follows is mainly a literary analysis of Hilger’s work and a dissection of the various narratives it presents and whom they benefit.

Service to the Ainu

As an ethnography, *Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People* is most certainly a book that benefits the Ainu, but it does so in a very specific way. Take, for example, her stories about *uwepekere*, Ainu folk tales meant to teach lessons -

¹⁷ Howell, David L. “Making ‘Useful Citizens’ of Ainu Subjects in Early Twentieth-Century Japan.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no. 1 (2004): 5–29, 13

¹⁸ Howell, “Making ‘Useful Citizens’ of Ainu Subjects,” 23

¹⁹ Howell, “Making ‘Useful Citizens’ of Ainu Subjects,” 5

similar to fables. She interviews Kaizawa Toroshina of Nibutani in her book, who laments that “Children listened attentively to *uwepekere* before we had radios and television sets. They learned wholesome lessons from life from them. I often ask children what lessons of good conduct they are learning from radio and television, and they cannot tell of any.”²⁰ Her inclusion of this quote, and many similar ones in which older Ainu bemoan the ways that their children and grandchildren are breaking away from their parent’s culture, certainly would resonate with American readers at home who also had to contest with their children growing up in the countercultural movements of the 1960’s. Such quotes liken the Ainu, who Hilger at times calls “primitive,”²¹ to her American audience, creating a sense of similarity between cultures that forms a meaningful starting point for cultural exchange and understanding.

During her time in Hokkaido, Hilger used much more than just her main ethnography to chronicle and preserve Ainu culture. She believes herself to be the first to record certain Ainu exorcisms meant to treat neuralgia, rheumatism, facial tics, and convulsions.²² She recorded a *mukkuri* performance, an instrument described as looking like a violin but making harp sounds, as well as hours of conversation and stories in the Ainu language.²³ Her photographers, Eiji Miyazawa and Goro Tsuda, captured hundreds of compelling photographs documenting all aspects of

²⁰ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 12

²¹ Inez Hilger, “Japan’s ‘Sky People,’ the Vanishing Ainu,” *National Geographic*, February 1967, 281

²² Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 117

²³ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 74

mid-century Ainu life and preserving pieces of cultural heritage that may otherwise have been lost.

The reader can feel a real sense of care for her interviewees, like when she describes her conversations with Ainu women on the perils of their shared old age,²⁴ or when she interviews her host Kayano Shigeru (more details on him to follow) on live TV in Chikabumi and laments with him that commercials had taken too much of their time on-air.²⁵ Undoubtedly, all the material she published from Hokkaido represented a meaningful time in her life, where she engaged deeply in both scholarship and genuine human connection with a people who perhaps could not have been more different than her.

That said, *Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People* was not the only fruit to be born from her labors in Hokkaido. Her grant from the National Geographic society prompted her to write an article for the February 1967 issue of their titular magazine. Here we see a different Inez Hilger, one who sheds some of her academic nature to make room for a more enticing story.

Service to *The National Geographic Society*

Her article in the '67 issue is titled "Japan's 'Sky People,' the Vanishing Ainu." As this title might suggest, the notions of a "vanishing culture" are even stronger here than in her ethnography, as evidenced by photo captions like, "Time's long shadow creeps over an Ainu grandmother who sees the distinctive life of her people - aboriginal inhabitants of Japan's Hokkaido island - drawing to a close".²⁶ This

²⁴ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 7

²⁵ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 101

²⁶ Hilger "Japan's 'Sky People,' the Vanishing Ainu" 268

certainly proclaims the twilight of a people. However, this quote continues with a question that didn't appear in her ethnography: “These mysterious people have long been an enigma. Whence came the Ainu - and when? Scholars have viewed their round eyes and wavy, abundant hair as evidence of caucasoid ancestry.”²⁷ Not only is the “vanishing” theme equally, if not more potent, but Hilger adds a new dimension: the origins of the Ainu as “Sky People”.

In a stupefying addition to her work, Hilger includes a conversation with a completely random Japanese man, who evidently just called and knew her from the publicity that surrounded her visit: “‘You have come just in time,’ said Tustomu Kuwada, ‘The end of the Ainu is at hand. But I can tell you their beginning. They came from the skies. Yes, from the skies! Their ancestors were space people-the same who still live in the clouds and send those flying saucers to earth.’”²⁸ Hilger herself makes only a single corroboration to this claim in the smallest section of this article to earn its own header, noting how she learned that “many an Ainu elder” believes in this spacial origin, and that there is a hill in the Saru River valley where a monument marks the spot where the Ainu arrived on earth.²⁹

This tiny section became part of her article’s title, where plenty of other concepts meant to encapsulate Ainu culture could’ve been instead. Further, since she does not mention this phone call anywhere in her book, it seems likely that this inclusion was for *National Geographic* and *National Geographic* only, there to sell copies and profit from the same kind of viewers that would later tune into *Ancient*

²⁷ Hilger “Japan’s ‘Sky People,’ the Vanishing Ainu” 268

²⁸ Hilger “Japan’s ‘Sky People,’ the Vanishing Ainu” 291

²⁹ Hilger “Japan’s ‘Sky People,’ the Vanishing Ainu” 292

Aliens. After all, *National Geographic* has always walked a line between scientific exploration and entertainment, as anthropology experts Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins argue in *Reading National Geographic*. Editors could, and did, justify photographs and articles that glorified and sensationalized any given aspects of “primitives societies... on the grounds that they were picturesque or otherwise piqued interest.”³⁰ While “attentive to both the market and the scientific community but slaves to neither,” the editors were “free to construct their own particular vision of the non-Western world.”³¹ Thus, editors of *National Geographic* had considerable power to convey particular images of the world, and likely that was doubly true in instances such as this where the Society’s higher-ups funded the research that would become an article.

In the 28 pages allotted to Hilger’s work, this notion of the Ainu as “vanishing” continues incessantly, from a photo captioning a tattooed Ainu grandmother who “sees the distinctive life of her people drawing to a close,” to saying that “the fires were going out” for Ainu culture,³² or with the inclusion of a header titled “Tranquil Coast Shelters Vanishing Race.”³³ Readers cannot finish the article without getting that picture.

This theme is important enough to her work that “vanishing” is the only adjective to grace the titles of both of her works, and this too serves the *National Geographic Society*. Key to their identity at the inception of *National Geographic*

³⁰ Lutz, Catherine, and Jane Collins. *Reading National Geographic* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 24

³¹ Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, 25

³² Hilger “Japan’s ‘Sky People,’ the Vanishing Ainu” 268

³³ Hilger “Japan’s ‘Sky People,’ the Vanishing Ainu” 272

was a distance from Social Darwinism, and instead an attraction to what their early editors called “social evolutionism”, which focuses on an “evolutionary guarantee” of progress through enlightenment ideals of rationality triumphing over instinct.³⁴ Of course, *National Geographic* would have the Ainu fit right into their narrative.

The Geographic had every reason to finance and publish this article. There’s a “primitive” race living on the fringes of “rationalized” society, seemingly embracing their shift away from “instinct”. Moreover, so much of the work focuses on appearance, not of traditional clothing, but of racial markers. Hilger notes that if you passed Shigeru Kayano “on a Chicago street, you might take him for an American”.³⁵ She creates a sense that, despite the talk of interplanetary origins, there is something European to these “white” aborigines, as though they represent a window into an earlier age. Nevertheless, in keeping with the narrative presented here, Lutz and Collins say it best, that *National Geographic’s* “underlying story was always the evolutionary chronicle, with its contrastive work, its encoding of hierarchy and power relations, and its projection of an inevitable outcome.”³⁶

Service to the Japanese State

Comparison to *Our Land was a Forest: An Ainu Memoir*

Japan-Ainu relations aren't ever a main focal point of Hilger’s works, but are nonetheless an unavoidable aspect in any work on the Ainu. Her first words on the topic are penned in the introduction of *Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People:*

³⁴ Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, 19

³⁵ Hilger “Japan’s ‘Sky People,’ the Vanishing Ainu” 271

³⁶ Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, 19

The Ainu realize that they are a vanishing people. Acculturation and assimilation into Japanese culture has been a painful one. Resistance was strong and resentment deep. A submerged antagonism exists today and finds expression. Older Ainu remember the early contact period as one of injustices, and speak of it as such. They are acquiescing to the inevitable and hope that their grandchildren will fare well, assimilated by and under the jurisdiction of the Japanese.³⁷

Note the use of the word “inevitable” returning from *National Geographic’s* values, and note the lack of detail in phrases like “a submerged antagonism exists today,” employing passive voice to avoid stating exactly who is worthy of antagonism.

Compare this point against one made by Kayano Shigeru. The “ardent Ainu” who would often accompany Hilger during her stay abroad wrote a memoir in 1980 titled *Our Land was a Forest*, where he puts the reader into the perspective of an Ainu man who lived through the worst of Japan’s assimilationist policies. One of the memories he shares in this work is the story of his father’s arrest. Kayano Seitaro was taken to jail for salmon poaching, as “the salmon he caught every night to feed us brothers, the old women in the neighborhood, and the gods, were off-limits at the time”.³⁸ Quoting in Ainu his grandmother’s fury at the situation, he translates “It’s not as if *sisam* created salmon. My son caught salmon, offered some to the gods, and at the same time fed his children. Why is he punished for this? The wicked *sisam* are not punished for their catch - I cannot understand this.”³⁹ *Sisam* is an Ainu word used to refer to their colonizers, the Yamato Japanese. Quotes like these, which

³⁷ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, XII

³⁸ Kayano Shigeru, *Our Land was a Forest: An Ainu Memoir*, trans. Kyoko Selden and Lili Selden (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 57.

³⁹ Kayano, *Our Land was a Forest*, 58

reframe the story of the Ainu as a struggle against an occupying empire, are those most notably absent from *Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People*.

That said, Hilger does attempt to convey both sides of the story, as when she writes about how at times the Japanese gave gifts of swords and lacquerware to the Ainu, but also notes in the same paragraph how younger Ainu resent these family treasures as they are “reminders of injustices”⁴⁰ inflicted by the Japanese. This is just one example of Hilger’s careful balancing of Japanese / Western perspectives against Ainu quotes. Again, Kayano provides a point of comparison in telling the story of his grandfather’s forced evacuation into slavery. Abducted to work at a contract fishery 350 kilometers away from his home, he notes that their pay was “as little as a sparrow’s tear”, and gives the example of a certain Kaizawa Sirepano who treasured a lacquerware wine cup which was his only pay for year’s worth of work.⁴¹ These elaborations are noticeably absent in *Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People*.

Then, at the other end of her book, Hilger includes quotes like this: “‘Whatever is done for the Ainu of Hokkaido is not charity’, Sasaki said to us. ‘It is justice to them. The Ainu were the pioneers of Hokkaido and the benefactors of the Japanese. They gave up their land to Japanese when Japanese came to settle in Hokkaido.’”⁴² Even this is fairly measured, “they gave up their land” implies some amount of agency or choice on the part of the Ainu, which is most certainly not the case. Again, Kayano:

⁴⁰ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, XIII

⁴¹ Kayano, *Our Land was a Forest*, 36

⁴² Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 198

The Ainu have not intentionally forgotten their culture and their language. It is the modern Japanese state that, from the Meiji era on, usurped our land, destroyed our culture, and deprived us of our language under the euphemism of assimilation. In the space of a mere 100 years, they nearly decimated the Ainu culture and language that had taken tens of thousands of years to come into being on this earth.⁴³

Again, contrast this with a line from Hilger talking about how Japanese regret discriminating against the Ainu, and that there no longer is any legal discrimination, that the “difficulties are leveling out”⁴⁴. Clearly, there are two wildly different stories presented here, both well-represented by the author’s interest in covering discrimination against the Ainu.

Discrimination

On the topic of discrimination, which closes *Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People*, Hilger presents an optimistic front, arguing that both Japanese and Ainu people in their respective positions of power have worked hard to eliminate discrimination; her impression “that they have succeeded well in this never changed during our stay in the Ainu country,” is likely built on her claim that there was no legal discrimination against the Ainu by then.⁴⁵ Importantly, Hilger understood much her trip to Hokkaido through the lips of her two Japanese translators, Sano Chiye and Yamaha Midori, neither of whom spoke any Ainu.

Shigeru Kayano, in fact the first Ainu person that Hilger met on her 1965 trip to Hokkaido, was, as she she describes him, a handsome man with an intelligent demeanor; “he appeared a Caucasoid for certain,”⁴⁶ she writes. Kayano would go on

⁴³ Kayano, *Our Land was a Forest*, 153

⁴⁴ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 198-99

⁴⁵ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 198

⁴⁶ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 6

to be arguably the foremost Ainu activist of his time, and in her *National Geographic* article, Sister Hilger calls him an “ardent Ainu”, because he was among those dedicated to maintaining Ainu customs and crafts.⁴⁷ Kayano’s 1980 memoir, *Our Land Was a Forest*, covers the Ainu during the same period as Hilger’s stay abroad.

In his autobiography, Kayano includes his analysis on Japan-Ainu relations, as already established. Another great example of his can be found towards the end of the book, where he describes his efforts to fund a museum to store and display the many artifacts that he had bought during the course of his life as an “ardent Ainu”. Having made some money working the tourism trade in which Hilger met him, he was well-positioned to contribute to his cause. However, in order to build this museum in his hometown of Nibutani, he needed to raise money from other sources. To that end, he outlines how the prefectural government⁴⁸ provided him 2 million yen, equivalent to 50,300 USD in 2024, while at the same time putting 3.7 billion yen, or 83 million dollars in today’s money, towards the Hokkaido Settlement Memorial Building, a difference of 1,650%! Now, one can argue that donating money to an Ainu cause isn’t discrimination, and perhaps they’d be right, but the numbers tell us that the Japanese government was at least 1,650% more interested in memorializing the early Japanese colonists of Hokkaido than they were in helping a “vanishing people” build a museum with their own hands.

Directly Advocating Assimilation

⁴⁷ Hilger “Japan’s ‘Sky People,’ the Vanishing Ainu” 275

⁴⁸ Japanese prefectures, 47 in total, rank immediately below the Japanese National Government as administrative and jurisdiction subdivisions. The entire island of Hokkaido forms one regional prefecture.

Perhaps that much is obvious. After all, without the assimilationist policies of the Japanese State, would the Ainu ever be described as a fading people? Hilger is likely aware of Japan's role in this cultural loss, as evidenced by the header "Assimilation of the Ainu by the Japanese" in her foreword,⁴⁹ yet she to presents a strange dichotomy in the quotes from Ainu individuals that she selects. Throughout the book there are many heart-wrenching quotes and stories certainly meant to evoke an emotional reaction in the reader. Take, for instance, this quote about the prohibition of tattooing, a tradition that nearly all Ainu women once took part in: "I miss our old customs. I wish tattooing had remained. I feel lonely when I see our customs disappear, one by one."⁵⁰ It's hard not to feel the gradual cultural disintegration with this image of tattoo ink melting away like a snowflake in the Hidaka mountains. This is contrasted by the apparent solution that Hilger presents to the Ainu: assimilation.

Indeed, the quotes below reverberate loudly through a book about a vanishing people: "Young Ainu parents expressed the hope that by the time their children will have reached the age of parenthood, all discrimination will have ended. They hope that by then all Ainu and Japanese will be looked upon and treated as one people and that no one will any longer be designated as an Ainu or as a descendant of the Ainu."⁵¹ Here, assimilation is seen as the solution to discrimination, that if there were no Ainu, there would be no discrimination. Its not a stretch to say that Hilger more

⁴⁹ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, XII

⁵⁰ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 151

⁵¹ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 199

or less openly advocates for this policy. Consistently emphasizing its apparent popularity:

Mori of Noboribetsu, a full-blooded Ainu, expressed an opinion that we hear from others also: ‘Ainu and Japanese should marry. The Ainu should be absorbed by the Japanese. Japanese and Ainu should be one people. My daughters married Japanese; my sons did likewise. It is enough if old Ainu culture is preserved in literature and museums. In actual life, there should be assimilation. Then, too, in many cases, children of such mixed marriages are more clever than are children of marriages between Ainu.’⁵²

It is enough if Ainu culture is preserved in literature. These quotes speak for themselves. Hilger must’ve had these words in mind when she penned the final words of her book:

When the last Ainu now in their seventies have died, the remaining full-blooded Ainu in all probability will be absorbed in to the rapidly westernizing Japanese culture. When this - regrettable, but inevitable - has happened, another people who once had a self-sufficing, self-sustaining and well-integrated culture will be remembered only because, in the past, there were persons who recorded some aspects of their life in words, in still and motion picture photography, and on tapes that will carry the sound of Ainu voices.⁵³

There are a couple of things to mind in this rather self-congratulatory quote. Again, the word “inevitable” echoes the tenor of her patron *National Geographic*. Here, both she and Mori argue the same point; that “It is enough if old Ainu culture is preserved in literature and museums.” Right there front and center again is the argument that the Ainu WILL vanish, that there can be no question. That everybody

⁵² Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 161

⁵³ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 202

should be content with the fact that historians will one day dust off the voices of a culture stowed away in some university's filing cabinets. By now it should be crystal clear who benefits from this rehearsed narrative, because it isn't the Ainu.

Mistranslation and Misrepresentation

These accounts can only assist the people doing the assimilating. Put simply, the Japanese government has a long history of antagonism towards the Ainu. The first meaningful legislation that the state wrote regarding their northern neighbors was that 1899 act. It put onto paper the government's plan to erase a people from their northern frontier, but Hilger isn't so keen on writing about it that way. In the aforementioned "Assimilation of the Ainu by the Japanese" section from her introduction, Hilger paints a history much more sterile than Kayano's. Beginning by writing already about modern Ainu housing, she then moves to say that "In the sixteenth century large numbers of Japanese migrated to Hokkaido, the Ainu country then known as Yezo or Ezo. The Ainu, angered by this, resisted them."⁵⁴ This is hardly the truth. The Ainu were not mad just because Japanese people were "migrating" to their shores, they were upset because, as Kayano writes, samurai were forcing his people into slavery at contract fisheries.⁵⁵ Ainu were upset because they were being killed, because their rituals were being outlawed. An ethnology has no requirement to tug at its reader's heartstrings, but it does have to be factual. It is another issue when such massive pieces of information are removed that the facts become misconstrued. Hilger does this on the next page when she says that "the

⁵⁴ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, XII

⁵⁵ Kayano, *Our Land was a Forest*, 13

1899 ‘Law for the Protection of the Ainu’ provided for the education of Ainu children.”⁵⁶ This is not incorrect, but she completely fails to mention that this law: forced Japan’s northern indigenous from their native homelands, forced them to take up rice farming and abandon their traditional lifestyles, prohibited them from practicing their religion, and prohibited them from speaking their language.⁵⁷ Perhaps its semantic to argue that the Ainu were provided with education rather than forced to attend school, but it seems important to note how this education was mostly in the Japanese language and that it focused on “national” ethics.⁵⁸ It seems valuable to compare her picture of a helpful law against Kayano’s gut-wrenching statement that “I seem not to have a single happy memory from my poor school days.”⁵⁹

As I stated before, Hilger calls this legislation the “Law for the Protection of the Ainu,”⁶⁰ but “北海道旧土人保護法公布” is translated more exactly as the “Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act.”⁶¹ It may seem minor, but the diction is important. For the Ainu to not even be graced with a name is one thing, but to regard them as “Former Aborigines” implies that already, before the century has even turned, that the Ainu are no more, that their assimilation has already begun, and thus that there was a meaningful reason to immediately strip them of their status as the indigenous people of Ezo. Again, Hilger had two Japanese translators with her who certainly could’ve gotten the correct translation. Though, they may have failed for a number reasons. Whether it was a simple mistake, whether Sano and Yamaha knowingly

⁵⁶ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, XIV

⁵⁷ Wetherhold, Sherley, *Going, Going, Gone: Five of Asia’s Most Endangered Languages*.

⁵⁸ Siripala, Thisanka. *Far-Right Politics and Indigenous Ainu Activism in Japan*, 2020

⁵⁹ Kayano, *Our Land was a Forest*, 48

⁶⁰ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, XIV

⁶¹ Dr. Elisheva Perelman, March 18th

mistranslated it, simplified it for Hilger's purposes, or, being Japanese citizens themselves, were also ideologically trained to regard Japan as an ethnically homogenous state⁶², we can never know. Regardless, it becomes just another instance of this rehearsed narrative, that the Ainu are better off with this state-enforced "protection".

Hilger on Housing

One way that we can see this idea repeated over and over again is in Sister Hilger's intense fascination on Ainu standards of living and housing. Much of this can easily be explained by her principal interest in studying Ainu-child rearing, where of course the physical environment in which a child grows up has significant impact on their development. Here is another instance where Hilger accurately depicts reality with a plurality of stories. 60 years ago, just as now, Ainu did not live in their traditional *cise*, and instead live in contemporary housing, with the exception of those in the tourist trade. Halfway through *Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People*, Hilger describes how she visited a reconstructed *cise*, where an Ainu couple spent their summers demonstrating to tourists how their people traditionally lived. She quotes the wife saying "It is good to live once more as we did when we were young, but we shall be glad to return to our home in Nibutani when the tourist season is over."⁶³ Hilger measuredly describes traditional housing later on in her ethnography,⁶⁴ but unlike the unnamed wife she quotes, she makes no judgements of

⁶² An expanded analysis on this point can be found in this work's epilogue below.

⁶³ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 99

⁶⁴ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 129-30, 147-48

her own on traditional Ainu housing, though the same can not be said for Ainu living more contemporaneously.

The modern Ainu house serves multiple functions in Sister Hilger's work, chief among them being a physical location to compare past and present. In her *National Geographic* article, she writes that compared to traditional *cise*, "Houses are durably built of wood, usually unpainted. Corrugated tin or asbestos shingle covers the roofs. Most homes have radios, TV sets, and running water. Many dwellings contain small Shinto shrines, reflecting the readiness of younger Ainu to adopt Japanese ways."⁶⁵ This quote also makes its way into her main book, with a quote from an Ainu saying "We have this shrine to satisfy our young people. They want to be like the Japanese".⁶⁶ Intentionally reinforcing the disappearance of Ainu cultural values in everyday lived environments is yet another "vanishing" narrative, sure, but there's also a more materialistic angle here as well: In her own words, "the Ainu fare much better in modern houses than in cold, grass-walled huts. Virtually every Ainu community I saw looked much like any Japanese town."⁶⁷

Direct judgments from the author are rare across Hilger's relevant works, but this one need not be read between any lines. Speaking materialistically, it can be hard to argue against this point. Oyomada Natsu of Rankoshi is quoted saying "comparing it with our old ways, our present life is like that of feudal lords of those early days!"⁶⁸ It is easy to see how she would feel that way, as by the 1960's most

⁶⁵ Hilger "Japan's 'Sky People,' the Vanishing Ainu" 279

⁶⁶ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 149

⁶⁷ Hilger "Japan's 'Sky People,' the Vanishing Ainu" 279

⁶⁸ Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 149

Ainu had access to electricity, radios, TV, washing machines and the like; indeed, no Matsumae lord would know such luxury. So why does Hilger focus so much on housing? Primarily because its crucial to any ethnography, undoubtedly, but these narratives of luxury eroding “primitive religion” once again adhere to *National Geographic's* profit-driven ideas of consumer enlightenment as an inevitability. Once again, this description substantiates the notion that Ainu may be better off assimilating into the dominant culture of the nation they found themselves in, and it uses material gain to make that point.

Moreover, its worth emphasizing that Dr. Hilger is an established anthropologist. She published 8 books and 70 essays in her lifetime. As an anthropologist, she would certainly be aware that culture is malleable, and that humans create culture to fit their environments. So, by confining the Ainu solely to their traditional way of living, she bars herself from being able to see the Ainu adapt to a world changing around them. Put another way, there's nothing remarkable to her about Japanese people living with electricity, even though electricity is not at all native to Japan, but for the Ainu to do the same would represent the death of their culture. Essentially, Hilger is forbidding the Ainu to adapt to their new world, even in the face of their supposed extinction. There's nothing inherently “Ainu” about not owning a radio, but she doesn't see it that way. All of this is a red herring, it points to a material culprit behind Ainu cultural decline. This is an important point. Since the disclaimer about assimilation at the beginning of her book does so little to accurately portray the suffering the Ainu experienced at the hands of their colonizers, Hilger

sets herself up to get away with this bait-and-switch; that centuries of imperialism and 60 years of official assimilationist policy are not to blame for the plight of the Ainu, that instead its hot showers and television that corroded their lives.

Hilger and the Royal Family

Though no longer deeply integral to the function of the state, the Emperor and his Imperial Family mostly hold a ceremonial role today. Ostensibly a 2600 year old lineage, the Imperial Family in modern Japan occupies a similar level of prestige and respect as the British Royal Family - stripped of hard political power, but culturally relevant and expectedly wealthy. Considering that they still wield a substantial amount of soft power, it becomes all the more surprising that a Benedictine Sister from faraway Minnesota had a personal relationship with the future Empress of Japan.

Preserved within the archives of St. Benedict's Monastery, I found a couple documents from or about the Imperial Household. One letter, dated May 3rd, 1965, Hilger wrote to her dear friend Mother Henrita Osendorf, back at St. Benedict's Convent: "I had a elephone [sic] call last evening from the U. of Tokyo Secretariate that I was invited to have tea with the Crown Princess some day next week. I knew this was in the offing, and tried to get an invitation of Srs. Fracetta and Regia, also being Foreigners, but no success."⁶⁹ This letter suggests that Sister Hilger had, at least to some degree, an exclusive relationship with Emperor Hirohito's daughter-in-law, since her fellow Benedictine Sisters were not similarly invited.

⁶⁹ Inez Hilger, letter to Henrita Osendorf, May 12, 1965.

I found one more relevant document with an imperial Japanese letterhead written by a lady in waiting dated July 23rd, 1969, made in response to a gift that Hilger had previously sent congratulating Empress Michiko on the birth of then Princess Nori: “Michiko has asked me to convey to you her sincere appreciation of your good wishes on the birth of Princess Nori, and her warmest thanks for the (dainty) hand crocheted booties you so kindly sent.”⁷⁰ A cute heart doodle follows, and speaks to the relationship that these two had. These hand-crocheted baby booties, lovingly made for and sent to the Imperial family, intimately connect her with the same leadership of Japan that tried to eliminate its northern indigenous neighbors.

This relationship is more than just an interesting fact, however. Her relationship with the Imperial family afforded Hilger some significant advantages in the Land of the Rising Sun. Mentioning help from both then Ambassador to Japan Edwin Reichshauer and a Mr. Harigai of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a letter dated March 28th, 1965, it seems that Hilger had more connections than the average anthropologist. Evidently, this Mr. Harigai informed the Governor of Hokkaido Prefecture of their interests, sending out a call to “the Japanese official in every area where there are Ainu”⁷¹ in the span of one week. Assuredly, Hilger’s friends in high places made a significant impact on her ability to collect data and simply do anthropological work in Hokkaido. These relationships may have also contributed to the aforementioned publicity surrounding her trip, and it’s hard to

⁷⁰ Hisa Kakei, letter to Inez Hilger, July 23, 1969

⁷¹ Inez Hilger, letter to Henrita Osendorf, March 28, 1965

imagine that she would have had air-time on Sapporo NHK⁷² without such connections. To be sure, this exclusive link to the imperial family significantly expedited her research.

It's worth asking then, why the special treatment? Why would a nun from rural Minnesota have all these boons conferred upon her by the perhaps most powerful family in Japan? Scholarship on the still-living Empress Emerita Michiko is somewhat limited, but Herbert Bix's *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* gives some clues to answer this question. Here, he writes about the announcement in November 1957 of the marriage between Crown Prince Akihito and Shoda Michiko. She was the daughter of Shoda Hidesaburo, himself the president of Japan's largest flour milling company.⁷³ This likely aided her in becoming the royal family's first "common-born" member, which ruffled some feathers. On this, Bix writes, "What most concerned Hirohito was neither Michiko's Christianity nor even the maintenance of the Imperial house's ties to state Shinto, but rather the break with tradition that the marriage connotated."⁷⁴ Bix also calls her "the product of a Catholic upbringing,"⁷⁵ but this careful phrasing confirms that Michiko's faith isn't certain. Indeed, the imperial family continues to avoid any mention of her possible Christianity, likely only stating that she graduated from the University of the Sacred Heart⁷⁶ because of the prestige that private Catholic colleges have in Japan. Between

⁷² Hilger, *Together with the Ainu*, 101

⁷³ Newsweek. United States: Newsweek, Incorporated, 1958.

⁷⁴ Bix, Herbert. *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*. (New York: Harper-Collins, 2000), 661

⁷⁵ Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, 661

⁷⁶ "Their Majesties the Emperor and Empress", The Imperial Household Agency, Accessed April 2nd, 2024 <https://www.kunaicho.go.jp/e-about/activity/activity01.html>

these sources and my own archival research, I found myself with a new question on my hands: is Michiko secretly Catholic?

To uncover the answer, I returned to the man who started me on this thesis, and who added a whole new dimension to Hilger's work on the Ainu. What follows is a brief recap of what I learned during an oral history interview that I conducted with Richard Bresnahan. Bresnahan is currently the resident master potter at St. John's University. He learned his trade in Kyushu, where he became fluent in Japanese in the southernmost of the Japanese mainland's four major islands. I met with him to learn about the life of Father Neal Lawrence, a man whose story can reveal more about the relationship between these Benedictine communities and the Japanese Imperial Family. Before his ordination at Saint John's Abbey in 1960, Father Neal Lawrence was serving with the US Marine Corps at the siege of Okinawa. Having witnessed the carnage of war, he vowed to "dedicate his life working for peace among all people,"⁷⁷ which is how he found himself assigned as a diplomat serving General MacArthur's postwar occupational government. In fact, he was the first American diplomat to officially visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where his position against war was solidified by a little girl gifting him a blue glass bottle, melted by the Fat Man.⁷⁸ According to Bresnahan, he worked in Okinawa restoring the island's pottery and lacquerware traditions before eventually winding up at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota once his service was up.

⁷⁷ "Obituary: Neal Henry Lawrence OSB," March 7, 2009.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20090307084114/http://www.saintjohnsabbey.org/obituaries/nlawrence.html>.

⁷⁸ Richard Bresnahan Interview, Conducted by Mark Spangler, April 8th, 2024

After spending time in priesthood studies and teaching political science at St. John's University, Lawrence returned to Japan in 1960 to serve as a priest in St. Anselm's parish, where he would also teach English and write his own poetry. He favored Waka poetry, a form that uses a different meter than Haiku, and was used much more in imperial contexts, according to Bresnahan. In the course of writing the four books on Waka poetry he would eventually publish, he formed an English Waka poetry society where he met avid Waka poet Princess Michiko. Given that she would later publish her own poems,⁷⁹ the two became close, and he supposedly met with her two to three times a month in the Imperial Palace. According to Bresnahan, their discussions were not limited to poetry, for there was a chapel secretly constructed in her private quarters where he would say mass and give the Blessed Sacrament.

I'm going to state clearly that this is, in perhaps the strictest sense of the phrase, oral history. However, in conjunction with other sources, it becomes enough to wonder, to cast doubt. Indeed, if Michiko is Catholic, it ties up a lot of the loose ends that Hilger's story has; it would recontextualize her entire ethnography. If Michiko were Catholic, it would explain why a Benedictine sister from tiny Roscoe, Minnesota received so much help in conducting her research; It would explain why she would have such a close relationship with the Crown Princess to the Chrysanthemum Throne. Considering that Meiji-era assimilationist policy would remain in effect for another 30 years after Hilger's trip to Hokkaido, the state's choice to use a foreigner from the other side of the world might be called tactful. It

⁷⁹ The Imperial Household Agency. "Their Majesties the Emperor and Empress." <https://www.kunaicho.go.jp/e-about/activity/activity01.html>.

would make it appear as though the state were removed from the cultural genocide they were actively committing, while also giving the state the power to influence the narratives that their pocket anthropologist would write. As for why Hilger had a seemingly exclusive relationship with the Princess compared to her fellow sisters, we can only speculate.

Again, Michiko's Catholic faith and the claims that she regularly partook in communion with the monks of St. John's cannot be proven by one interview, but regardless of her own faith, it's clear that Hilger had a personal relationship with the Crown Princess which influenced her work in Hokkaido, and which possibly explains why she's so keen on forcing the "vanishing" narrative.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges inherent to her research, Sister Marie Inez Hilger put in diligent work to preserve and present Ainu culture for future generations, in keeping with the primary goal of contemporary anthropologists. Like us all, Sister Hilger was a product of her time, and some of her language, like her use of the problematic word "mongoloid,"⁸⁰ can perhaps be forgiven within her milieu. The same can not be said, however, for the overarching narratives presented across her relevant works.

Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People is a work that serves multiple parties because it was written for multiple, in ways competing parties. Yes, it is first and foremost a functional ethnology of Ainu culture in the mid-century, but its

⁸⁰ Inez Hilger, letter to Henrita Osendorf, September 14, 1964.

repeated notion that the Ainu are vanishing, fading, disappearing can do no service to a living culture. Yes, it would be challenging to live among Japan's Northern Indigenous in the 1960's and have optimism for a people whose numbers had declined, but it would not be challenging to write more critically about the cause of that decline. Yes, the book helps preserve a piece of Ainu culture, but it also presents pro-assimilationist narratives as a coerced fait accompli, while excusing the cultural genocide that the Japanese state had actively pursued for decades. Yes, her publications through *National Geographic* introduced a critically endangered culture to a wider audience. Except, because they funded the study, they used Hilger's work to frame the Ainu as a people who would inevitably "socially evolve" into enlightenment ideals by abandoning a more than 10,000 year old culture in favor of one that more closely aligned with Western values.

Her book functions as an ethnography, but fails to historically contextualize the people she writes of. Her work as an anthropologist is solid, it is a record-keeping document that has, as she said it would, "recorded some aspects of their life in words". *Together with the Ainu* succeeds at this, and were it written strictly as a record of her experience in Hokkaido, this paper might not exist at all. Nonetheless, her choice to focus heavily on the historical context of the Ainu seems to have only been to the benefit of her benefactors.

To that point, there is much more research to be done on Empress Emerita Michiko and the relationship between the Japanese Royal Family and St. Benedict's Monastery. The nature of oral history forces my claim that she may be Christian to

remain hypothetical, and it will likely remain that way for years to come; the Imperial Household Agency has nothing to gain from emancipating stories of a secret chapel and clandestine meetings with clergymen. Still, the archival documents paint the picture that Hilger clearly had a personal relationship with the Princess, and this would explain why she writes at such length on her contextualization of Ainu history. After all, the stark differences between *Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People* and “Japan’s ‘Sky People’, the Vanishing Ainu” prove that Sister Hilger’s language will change drastically to meet the needs of her benefactors, and its hard not to view the Imperial Family as another of her benefactors when they reached out to relevant government employees in Hokkaido for her.

Before concluding, I’d like to return to the quote from the start of this paper: “Since most of the activities of former times at which songs were sung are no longer part of the Ainu life, songs are now sung by women whenever several are together.”⁸¹ This sentence is all about cultural resilience. Japan’s northern Indigenous were robbed of their traditional lifestyle by their colonizers, the “activities of former times” now a distant memory to many. Yet, the Ainu still sing. The physical world around them had been completely uprooted, but the Ainu have refused to go with it. This quote is the one place where Hilger accidentally depicts a shred of hope for her “vanishing people”, and in terms of her historical contextualization, its practically the one thing she got right.

⁸¹ Inez Hilger, *Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People*, 75

There are only so many ways to say so, but *Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People* and its surrounding publications are exceptionally complex, weaving together no dearth of intertwining, at times discordant, narratives.

Epilogue:

I'd like to elaborate here that the Japanese state has, time and again, made every effort to present its country as ethnically homogenous.⁸² Even now, Japanese politicians maintain that Japan is populated only by Yamato Japanese. Just recently, Aso Taro, the Deputy Prime Minister of Japan (an office akin to the Vice President in the US) stated, "No country but this one has lasted 2,000 years with one language, one ethnic group and one dynasty."⁸³ Obviously, neither the Ainu nor other indigenous groups like the Okinawans, fit into this myth, which - as this quote demonstrates - is a very old one. Others in government positions have mocked and criticized the Ainu more directly.⁸⁴ Japan's national unity has been built on the myth that there is only one Japanese people, that this creates social cohesiveness and steady economic growth; that somehow Japan's ability to compete with Western nations is owed to its supposed cultural and ethnic homogeneity.⁸⁵ This idea, essentially the conceptual opposite to the "Great American Melting Pot", is exactly what allowed Japanese discrimination against the Ainu to perpetuate.

Nearly a century after the "Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act" was codified, it was finally abolished with the 1997 Ainu Cultural Promotion Act (ACPA), which may have seemed a step in the right direction, but was ultimately just a single

⁸² David Howell "Useful Citizens" 18; Oguma, Eiji. *A Genealogy of 'Japanese' Self-images*, trans. David Askew (Trans Pacific Press), 2002; and Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. "Becoming Japanese: Imperial Expansion and Identity Crises in the Early Twentieth Century." *In Japan's Competing Modernities: Issues in Culture and Democracy, 1900-1930*, ed. Sharon A. Minichiello. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press), 1998

⁸³ "Aso Apologizes for Remarks about Japan's Historical Unity." Kyodo News+.

⁸⁴ Nikaido, Yuki. "Ainu Woman Fights Sugita's Discriminatory Remarks." *The Asahi Shimbun*, November 17, 2023. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15059695>.

⁸⁵ Dharitri Chakravartty Narzary, "The Myths of Japanese 'Homogeneity,'" *China Report* 40, no. 3 (August 1, 2004): 311-19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000944550404000308>.

step. This process began about two decades earlier, when nascent Ainu activism groups began protesting for a restoration of their rights through traditional fishing and forestry rights, guaranteed seats for Ainu representatives in both the Diet and local governments, and greater ability to promote Ainu culture and language.⁸⁶ However, the ACPA only really hit on the final demand, providing for and recognizing Ainu culture through the creation of the “Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture.” This foundation achieved its stated goals mostly by promoting the teaching of Ainu language and skills like woodcarving and textile weaving.⁸⁷ For some, like Ainu activist Tahara Ryoko, it wasn’t enough: “We Ainu wanted the restoration of the rights that had been taken away from us, and demanded various things. In the end this turned out just to be a law to promote culture.”⁸⁸ Indeed, this act was mostly a means to continue the commodification and memorialization of Ainu culture.

Ainu were again given a ray of hope when Japan joined 144 other countries in signing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007. This was followed by the ratification of the New Ainu Policy (NAP) in 2019, which replaced the 1997 ACPA. UNDRIP, according to itself, is a declaration which “stresses the obligations of signatory states to facilitate the realization of the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples and their lands, and to take measures to correct, reconcile, and provide reparations for instances of historical

⁸⁶ Siddle, *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan* (1st ed.). Routledge. 1996
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203435465>

⁸⁷ Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. “Performing Ethnic Harmony: The Japanese Government’s Plans for a New Ainu Law - The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 16, no. 21 (November 1, 2018)
<https://apjif.org/2018/21/Morris-Suzuki>.

⁸⁸ Siddle, *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203435465>

exploitation and colonization.”⁸⁹ With this signing, the Japanese Diet would create the “Advisory Council for the Future of Ainu policy”, which still only held a singular Ainu representative.⁹⁰

Clearly, progress for the Ainu would be slow, and the 2019 NAP would further exemplify this by mostly being a redundant rebrand of the ACPA, despite media reception of the new policy as being a huge step for Japanese-Ainu relations.⁹¹ Its first article asserts that the Ainu are an “indigenous” group for the first time in Japanese legislative history, though they are addressed as an ethnic group in all future articles, a label that brings with it far fewer rights and privileges. Again, Ainu have found themselves facing closed conference room doors, despite various articles in UNDRIP (namely 19, 20, 33, and 34) assuring that indigenous peoples have the right to maintaining their autonomy and cultural identity. When Japanese Minister of Education Hagiuda Koichi was asked about discrimination against the Ainu at a press conference in July 2020, he said:

There were supposedly different values between the Aborigines and the Japanese. I maintain a distance from opinions that these different values should be recorded as discrimination against the ethnic minority by the majority. If there is a negative or sad history in the relationship between the Aborigines and the Japanese peoples, it is of importance that memorial keepers tell it or record it...⁹²

⁸⁹ Hiroshi Maruyama et al. “Critiquing the Colonialist Origins of the New National Museum Upopoy | ヒューライツ大阪.”
<https://www.hurights.or.jp/archives/focus/section3/2022/03/critiquing-the-colonialist-origins-of-the-new-national-museum-upopoy.html>.

⁹⁰ Morris-Suzuki, “Performing Ethnic Harmony:”

⁹¹ Hiroshi Maruyama et al. “Critiquing the New National Museum Upopoy”

⁹² Hiroshi Maruyama et al. “Critiquing the New National Museum Upopoy”

Nothing could show the snaillike speed of progress better than a Japanese state official using the past tense to talk about the Ainu as though they are all gone. Sounds familiar. Note this aversion to depict the Japanese as oppressors of the Ainu, using “if” to suggest that Japanese-Ainu discrimination is nothing more than a dead myth.

This is where, legislatively, the Ainu find themselves in the modern Japanese state. Today, assimilationist narratives of the past are echoed in current delusions⁹³ that the Ainu no longer exist at all. There is, however, hope to be found in Shiraoi, site of the National Ainu Museum, where interest in their unique art, culture, language, and cuisine has been reignited. After centuries of oppression the Ainu may at last find some hope, but the work is far from over.

⁹³ Nakamura, Naohiro, and Yuko Osakada. “Examining the Effectiveness of the Educational Role of the Permanent Exhibition at the National Ainu Museum, Japan, Using Online User Generated Review.” *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, 26 Dec 2023, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15595692.2023.2298859>.

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