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Infrastructures of Sovereignty:

Rivers and the Politics of Temporality in Ainu Mosir

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Anthropology

by

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June 2026

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June 2026

Infrastructures of Sovereignty:
Rivers and the Politics of Temporality in Ainu Mosir

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By

Michael J. Ioannides

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This dissertation is dedicated to Ainu river protectors, past, present, and future, including Kaizawa Kouichi, the late Sashima Masaki, and Raporo Ainu Nation.

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Doumo arigatou gozaimasu. Kore kara mo yoroshiku onegai itashimasu.

Iyayraykere. Suy unukar anro.

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ABSTRACT

Infrastructures of Sovereignty:
Rivers and the Politics of Temporality in Ainu Mosir

by

Michael J. Ioannides

Based on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Ainu Mosir (Hokkaido, Japan), this dissertation examines the ways in which Indigenous Ainu communities develop strategies to flourish in the 21st century. Through river-based activism, contemporary Ainu communities envision and enact futures of flourishing and abundance that are rooted in ancestral relationships to native lands and waters and the more-than-human beings who inhabit them. In so doing, they challenge Japan's settler colonial project of Ainu dispossession and elimination, insisting upon a future for the Ainu as an Indigenous people. Rivers connect future visions to ancestral ways inherited from the past and remain an important medium through which kin-based, territorial, and cosmological rights and responsibilities are expressed and carried into the future. In their struggles for Indigenous rights today, Ainu activists continue to focus on rivers as the central locus of Ainu sovereignty and the origin from which Ainu cultural and territorial rights emerge. I argue therefore that rivers are infrastructures of Ainu temporal sovereignty, undergirding Ainu claims to the right to a future as an Indigenous people in the 21st century. For many Ainu

activists, reclaiming their rivers means reclaiming control over their own destinies. Their work has implications that echo far beyond their local communities, holding the power to inspire the shift in values necessary to confront the intensifying global polycrisis of climate change, ecological collapse, and rising inequality. Attending to the deep relationships with rivers that contemporary Ainu activists are working to protect can prompt us to rethink our understanding of what infrastructure can be and help us to re-evaluate what it might mean to work toward a brighter, more abundant future.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

This dissertation contains many words from both Ainu and Japanese languages. Unfamiliar terms in both Japanese and Ainu are italicized. When an English term is used, its Ainu and Japanese equivalents are denoted in a parenthetical note. For example: bulrush (A: *sikina*; J: *gama*). When an Ainu or Japanese term is used, the English equivalent appears in the parenthetical note. For example: *sikina* (A: bulrush) or *gama* (J: bulrush).

For the romanization of Ainu-language words, I use the standard orthography used by the Ainu Language Project. The Ainu Language Project was launched in 2017 by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, a body of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology of the Japanese national government. Its goal is to collect and digitize all available, authoritative resources on Ainu language. It is currently managed by the National Ainu Museum. According to this standard orthography, the phonemes “chi,” “che,” and “cha” are written as *ci*, *ce*, and *ca* respectively. For example, the words *cise*, *cep*, and *caranke* are pronounced “chise,” “chep,” and “charanke.” The phoneme “shi” is written as *si*; for example, the word *sikina* is pronounced “shi-kina.” The exception to this is Ainu-language words that appear in written sources that I was unable to verify in the Ainu Language Archive; in which case, I kept the author’s original romanization.

For the romanization of Japanese-language words, I have opted to avoid using macrons to preserve the original *kana* usage. For example, I write *kouryuu* rather than *kōryū*. The exception to this rule is when referencing well-known place names. For example, I write Tokyo instead of Toukyou or Tōkyō. Japanese names are presented according to Japanese convention, with family name appearing first, followed by given name.

Following the convention found in both Japanese-language and English-language discussions of cross-cultural relations in Japan, I use the term “Wajin” to denote those people considered “ethnically Japanese.” I do so to disambiguate from the common term “Nihonjin” (J: Japanese), a word that obscures the distinction between ethnicity and national citizenship. In terms of nationality, the term “Japanese” applies equally to Ainu and Wajin alike. Thus, the use of “Japanese” as an ethnonym is misleading and, more perniciously, facilitates the erasure of Ainu people from official and popular discourses of “Japaneseness.” In this dissertation, therefore, the words Japan and Japanese should be understood to refer to the nation-state of Japan, while Wajin should be understood to refer to the ethnic group that eventually formed this nation-state.

In order to protect the confidentiality of this dissertation’s research participants, all names that appear in this dissertation are pseudonyms, with the exception of public figures and published authors. I have chosen Ainu-language names for research participants who identify as Ainu, and Japanese-language pseudonyms for research participants who identify as Wajin. In order to further protect participants’ confidentiality, their personal details have been intentionally obscured.

All photos and images are by the author except where otherwise noted in the image caption.

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Image: Ainu traditional dugout canoe (A: *cip*) next to a modern motorboat.

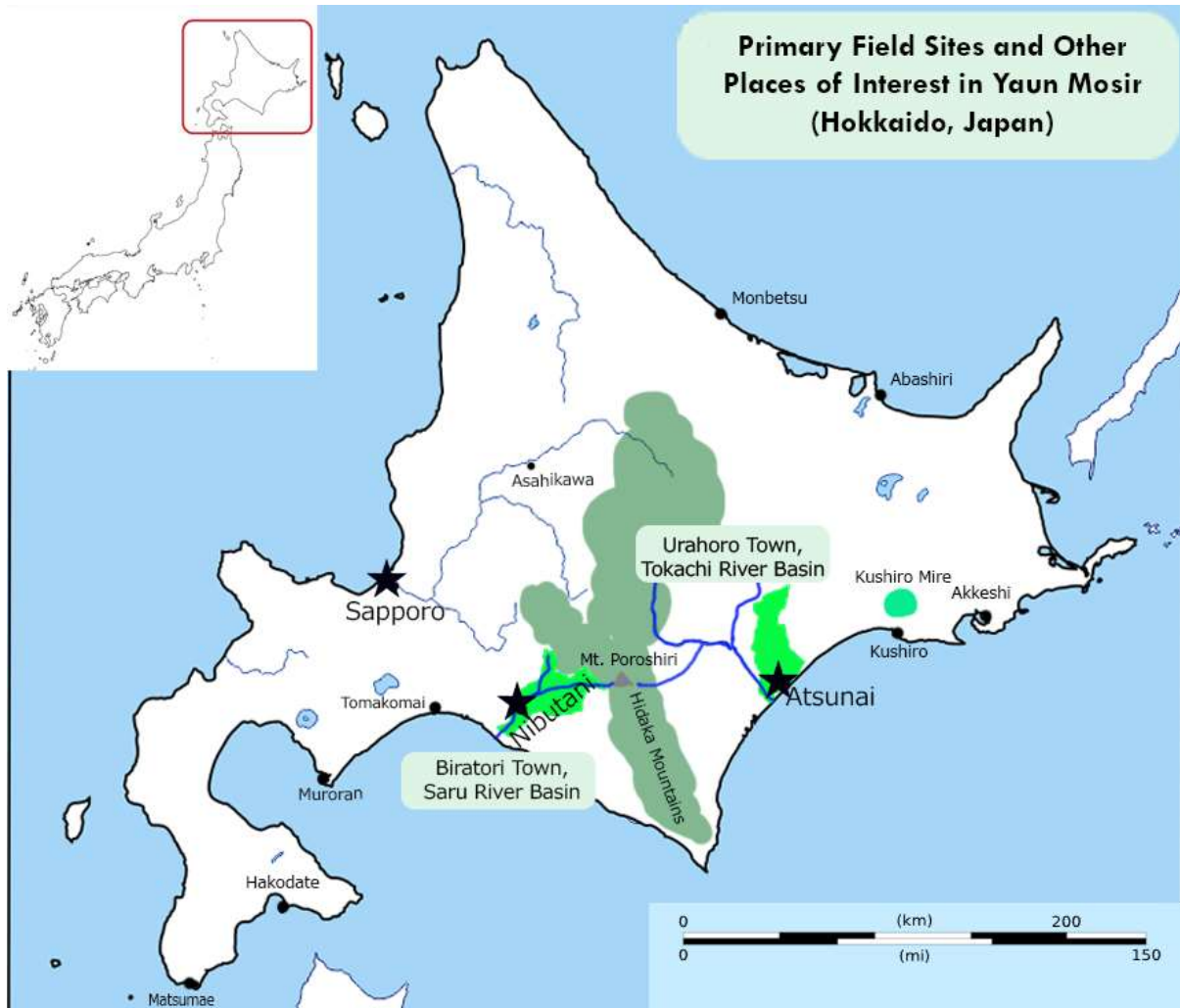


Image: Map of *Yaun Mosir* (Hokkaido, Japan), showing this dissertation's primary field sites and other places of interest.

I. INTRODUCTION: ON AND ON

*Doing nothing but needlework,
I remained with my eyes
Focused on a single spot,
And this is the way
I continued to live
On and on.*

--Kamuy Yukar No. 81; "Song of the River Goddess" (Philippi 1979, 99-100)

*Then, as it was, so again it will be
And though the course may change sometimes
Rivers always meet the sea*

--Led Zeppelin, "Ten Years Gone" (1975)

A. Prologue

For the Ainu, the Indigenous people of the land that is now known as Hokkaido, Japan, rivers are living beings and protectors of humanity. This fact was observed by one of the earliest writers to have spent significant time with the Ainu people, an English missionary named John Batchelor, who lived in the Saru River Basin in the late 19th century. He made the following observation with regard of the Ainu's relationship with rivers:

In travelling among the wilds of Hokkaido with the Ainu, nothing has ever made a greater impression upon me than the unparalleled awe and deep respect in which the men held the rivers. (Batchelor 1971, 387)

For the Ainu, rivers—and, indeed, all freshwater bodies and sources—are aspects of the Water Goddess, *Wakka-us-kamuy*. One of the most revered and powerful divinities, second only to the Fire Goddess, *Ape-fuci-kamuy*, she governs the spirits of all freshwater bodies, including rivers, lakes, ponds, waterfalls, and springs (Batchelor 1901, 538-539). Her role as

a protector of humanity is expressed in the Ainu's oral tradition, including the sung, epic narratives of the Gods (*Kamuy Yukar*).

One such story is presented below. It is based on Philippi's (1979) "Song of the River Goddess," an English translation of Kubodera's (1977) *Kamuy Yukar* No. 81, which was recited to him in 1932 by an Ainu elder named Hiraga Etenoa. Sung from the perspective of the Water Goddess, here identified by the epithet *Petru-us-mat* (the Lady of the River Course), it tells the story of how she establishes the moral framework of society and saves the Ainu from starvation by teaching protocols for how to properly make use of the river basin's resources. Based on the version recorded in Philippi, I present a condensed retelling of the story below:

These are the words of *Petru-us-mat*:

Doing nothing but needlework, I remained with my eyes focused on a single spot, and this is the way I continued to live, on and on. Then one day I received a message from the Divine Culture Hero, Okikurmi, along with offerings of sacred millet wine. Okikurmi's messenger told me that famine was ravaging the human homeland, and that Okikurmi had given his kinsfolk all the food he had, and with the last of his millet had brewed this sacred wine to beg my aid.

I was moved by Okikurmi's message and decided to intervene. I called my ally, the Goddess of the River Rapids,¹ and together we planned a great drinking feast, inviting all the important Gods: the Owl God,² the God of Deer,³ the God of Fish,⁴ and the Goddess of the Hunt.⁵ At the feast, I told the Gods of the plight of the humans and appealed for their help.

The God of Deer replied thusly: "When my kinsfolk go to pay visits to the humans, the humans scorn their meat and throw it away with utter contempt, without offering *inaw*, and my poor kinsmen come home in tears. I am angry because of this, and I have shut up all my kinsfolk in my storehouse."

The God of Fish replied thusly: "When my kinsfolk go there to do business, the humans kill them by beating them with rotten wood and throw them away with utter contempt, and my poor kinsmen come home in tears. I

¹ *Ciwas-kor-kamuy*.

² *Kotan-kor-kamuy*.

³ *Yuk-kor-kamuy*.

⁴ *Cep-kor-kamuy*.

⁵ *Hasinaw-uk-kamuy*.

am angry because of this, and I have shut up all my kinsfolk in my storehouse.”

After hearing their words, the Goddess of River Rapids and I, the Lady of the River Course, stood and began to perform songs and dances for the Gods. While we were dancing, my soul went off to the home of the God of Deer and opened the doors of his storehouse, before returning to my mortal body. Herds of deer large and small ran outside and scattered into the mountains.

The soul of the Goddess of River Rapids left went off to the home of the God of Fish and opened the doors of his storehouse, taking down the baskets of fish and scattering them over the river fishing beds, before returning to her mortal body. Such great schools of fish filled the rivers that the scales of those on the bottom rubbed against the rocks and the scales of those on the top were scorched by the sun.

As we continued to dance, the God of Deer and the God of Fish learned that the two of us had gone to their homes in their absence and released the deer and fish from their storehouses, but because we had shown them great hospitality, they could say nothing about it. At the end of the feast, all the Gods expressed their gratitude and went home.

After that, doing nothing but needlework, I remained with my eyes focused on a single spot, and this is the way I continued to live, on and on. Then I spoke in a dream to the Divine Culture Hero, Okikurmi:

“When the deer visited the humans, they were treated badly and went home in tears, so the God of Deer shut up the souls of the food in his storehouse. When the fish visited the humans, they were killed with rotten wood and went home in tears, so the God of Fish shut up the souls of the food in his storehouse. This was the cause of the famine in the human homeland. However, using your offering of sacred millet wine, I feted the Gods and, with the help of the Goddess of the River Rapids, released the souls of the food from the storehouses. From now on, you must command your kinsfolk never to do these things again. You must apologize to the God of Deer and the God of Fish and worship them with *inaw* and millet wine. You must cut willow branches and make pretty *isapakikni*; fish are to be killed with these in the proper way. And you must also say thank you to the Goddess of River Rapids for her help.”

After I spoke these words in a dream to Okikurmi, I continued to do nothing but my needlework, remaining with my eyes focused on a single spot, and this is the way I continued to live, on and on. (Adapted from Philippi 1979, 99-107)

The image of rivers expressed in this story is that of an eternal protector. Just as *Wakka-us-kamuy* works eternally at her needlework— “on and on,” with her “eyes focused on a single spot”—rivers flow eternally with one singular goal, namely to “move it all downhill” (Smith 2020, 4). That *Wakka-us-kamuy* is depicted as engaging in such eternal

needlework is also relevant to her role as a protector, because the traditional Ainu women's labor of embroidery is thought to possess apotropaic properties, protecting a garment's wearer from sickness and other evil spirits (lewallen 2016c, 131). In addition to being a protective act, lewallen (2016c) has shown that embroidery and textile work are "primary mediums wherein Ainu women communicated their visions for, and thus reproduced, Ainu society," allowing them to tap into an "ancestral space" of "restored physical, spiritual, and affective links to land and territory" (lewallen 2016c, 10-11). It is fitting, then, that the River Goddess, who is depicted as an eternal needleworker, is also the deliverer of guiding protocols and principles of ethical responsibility that protect the Ainu from utter destruction. In this dissertation, I show how the eternity of rivers reflects the eternity of Ainu assertions for self-determination, a struggle which has not been halted despite centuries of settler-colonial oppression, genocide, and erasure.



Image: *Inaw* (A: sacred shaved willow branches) adorning a *nusasan* (A: altar) by the Saru River.

Today, *Wakka-us-kamuy* is still honored in Ainu ceremonies, and in the Ainu community of Nibutani where I spent most of my time during fieldwork, the right-most *inaw* (A: sacred shaved willow branch) in the *nusasan* (A: altar) used in important ceremonial occasions is dedicated to her (Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Society 2025, 2). Nibutani is well-known as a place where Ainu culture has been strongly preserved, and where Ainu people continue to live *as* Ainu, despite being fully integrated into Japan's modern economy and lifestyle. This reputation is thanks in part to the efforts of a man named Kayano Shigeru, whose name will appear many times in this dissertation. Kayano was an important leader from Nibutani's Ainu community, whose legacy includes publishing dozens of books on Ainu culture, founding a museum and the country's first Ainu language education program, fighting a lawsuit against the construction of a dam in Nibutani while serving as the first (and so far only) Ainu member of Japan's National Diet in Tokyo, and founding the popular *Cipsanke* canoe festival. Held over two days every summer since the early 1970s along the banks of the Saru River, the *Cipsanke* remains a popular tourist attraction as well as a time of communal solidarity and celebration for local residents. Its many events include Ainu ceremonies, traditional dance performances, a drinks-and-snacks mixer (J: *kouryuukai*) featuring a raffle and an arm-wrestling tournament (complete with separate men's, women's, and children's brackets), all leading up to the main event on the second and final day of the festival: a ride in a traditional dugout canoe (A: *cip*).



Image: Ainu boatmen ferrying *Cipsanke* festivalgoers in a traditional *cip* (A: dugout canoe).

In the morning of the final day of the *Cipsanke*, a *kamuynomi* prayer service is held inside the *Poru Cise* (A: big house), the largest of the reconstructed, traditional thatch houses on the lawn of the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum. Inside, its single large room, local Ainu residents seat themselves on the floor around the room's central hearth, wearing formal, elaborately embroidered *attus* or *kaparamip* robes, the men wearing *sapampe* crowns woven from willow bark and the women in embroidered *matampus* headbands, as the room fills with festival goers and media crews. After some words of introduction from an emcee, the ceremony begins, and the men seated around the hearth perform a gesture of respectful salutation called *onkami*, slowly wiping the palms of their hands together six times before holding out their arms and, with slightly bent elbows and palms held upward, raising and lowering their forearms three times. During the ceremony many prayers are murmured, punctuated by the suppressed coughs of the crowd and the shutter-clicks of the media's cameras. Using carved wooden wands (A: *ikupasuy*), the men scatter libations of *tonoto* (A:

millet or rice wine) from lacquerware cups (A: *tuki*) toward the hearth and toward the *nusasan*, festooned with *inaw*, just outside the *Poro Cise*'s sacred east window (A: *kamuy puyar*) Among the many prayers devoted to the Gods of the local Ainu pantheon, the following prayer was offered to *Wakka-us-kamuy*, for it is she who will ensure the safety of festivalgoers during the boat rides:

Through the intercessions of the Fire Goddess,⁶ we offer sacred *tonoto* and words of prayer through the sacred window to the goddess who governs the rapids, the Lady of the Gods, *Wakka-us-kamuy*. We do this, for at this time, Ainu customs are in danger of disappearing like mist or a rainbow, so we villagers consulted with each other and decided to preserve one ritual. In this way, we want to enjoy this boat in your embrace. We pray that you will not be surprised, but rather that you will protect us and watch over our enjoyment without taking your eyes off us. (Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Society 2024, 17-18)

This prayer expresses the community's determination to preserve such Ainu ceremonies for future generations. It is the Water Goddess, *Wakka-us-kamuy*, as a manifestation of the river, who is called upon for protection in this endeavor. Indeed, as I came to learn from many Ainu activists I spent time with during my fieldwork, rivers continue to be central to articulations of what it means to live as an Ainu person in the 21st century.

⁶ The Fire Goddess is here referred to as *Iresu Kamuy* (A: "the god who rears us"), a common term of address for her during ceremonial rites. In other contexts, the Fire Goddess is generally known as *Ape-fuci-kamuy* (A: "sacred grandmother fire").



Image: Offerings are passed through the sacred window of Nibutani's *Poro Cise* before the cameras of *Cipsanke* festivalgoers.

B. Research Statement

The central argument of this dissertation is that rivers are infrastructures of temporal sovereignty for the Ainu people. Building on Rifkin (2017) and other scholars, I define temporal sovereignty as the right to envision and enact one's own future. As infrastructures of temporal sovereignty, rivers undergird Ainu claims to the right to a future as an Indigenous people in the 21st century. Rivers connect visions of an Indigenous Ainu future to ancestral ways inherited from the past and remain an important medium through which kin-based, territorial, and cosmological rights and responsibilities are expressed and carried into the future. Prior to their colonization by Japan, the social worlds of Ainu people revolved around river watersheds and riparian forests. Ainu communities were almost invariably sited along salmon spawning grounds in Hokkaido's major river systems. Ainu people living alongside

the same river shared a communal identity as *Petunkur*, people of the river.⁷ Rivers were also *kamuy*, deities with physical and spiritual links to the people who lived alongside and through them. Proper protocols with respect to a river's *kamuy* were passed down through Ainu lineages, and these protocols formed the basis of the Ainu's pre-colonial territorial system. With Japan's settler colonization of Hokkaido, Ainu people were stripped of territorial rights to their ancestral river systems, were prohibited from harvesting salmon, and were forced to assimilate to Japan's agrarian society. In their struggles for Indigenous rights today, Ainu activists continue to focus on rivers as the central locus of Ainu sovereignty and the origin from which Ainu cultural and territorial rights emerge. Through river-based activism, contemporary Ainu people assert temporal sovereignty, challenging Japan's settler colonial project of Ainu dispossession and elimination and insisting on a future for the Ainu as an Indigenous people. Their work has implications that echo far beyond their local communities, and has the power to inspire a shift in values necessary to confront the intensifying global polycrisis of climate change, ecological collapse, and rising inequality. In the dissertation that follows, I present examples from my fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork that show the important role that rivers continue to play in the articulations of sovereignty and self-determination expressed by Ainu people.

This dissertation will primarily focus on two river systems—the Saru and Tokachi River Basins in southeastern Hokkaido—but will also touch on other Hokkaido river systems, including the Nukabira, Monbetsu, and Kushiro River systems. The Saru River has been a site of controversy over the construction of large dams for more than 30 years. The

⁷ The term *Petunkur* does not have a dictionary entry in the Ainu Language Archive, but in the entry for *Sarunkur*, it states that Ainu people were identified by their home river, such as Sarunkur (A: people of the Saru River), Mopetunkur (A: people of the Monbetsu River), et cetera. Thus, rather than a purely emic term, the word *Petunkur* represents my interpretation of this emic concept rendered into the Ainu language.

protracted, Ainu-led struggle against Saru River dams became one of the most important catalysts for the Ainu rights movement and led to the government's first acknowledgment of the Ainu as an Indigenous people. Additional dam construction on the nearby Nukabira River has been influenced by this legal victory, culminating in the execution of a Cultural Impact Assessment and the establishment of public facilities dedicated to preserving and transmitting Ainu culture and traditional ecological knowledge. But these facilities have come under criticism from some local Ainu, who worry about the town government capitalizing on Ainu culture without meaningfully benefiting local Ainu residents. Meanwhile, in the Tokachi River Basin, Ainu activists from the group Raporo Ainu Nation have been engaging in a struggle to assert their Indigenous salmon fishing rights—a matter that is at the center of an ongoing court case (hereafter, the Raporo Case). These activists have been inspired by trailblazing activism and Indigenous refusal to abide by Japan's unjust prohibition of salmon fishing in the Monbetsu River Basin. More recently, the wetlands of the Kushiro River Basin have become the target of “green” energy development in Japan's headlong rush to carbon neutrality, drawing concerns from Ainu and non-Ainu observers alike. In all of these examples, rivers are a central locus of Ainu struggles and articulations of visions of a decolonized and sovereign future for the Ainu as a 21st century Indigenous people.

C. Time and the River: Rivers as Historical, Relational Agents

Rivers' importance to the Ainu and to humanity in general originates from the basic biological need for fresh water. As one of the most important substances for individual as well as social life, fresh water has always had a powerful relationship with human societies

wherever they are found. The religious historian, Mercia Eliade, once called water the “the source of all possible existence,” adding that water “will always exist, though never alone, for water is always germinative, containing the potentiality of all forms in their unbroken unity” (Eliade, in Linton 2010, 3). Environmental geographer Jamie Linton (2010) further argues that “we [humans] mix language, gods, bodies, and thought with water to produce the worlds and the selves we inhabit” (3). Historian Donald Worster (1985) asserts that water has been “critical to the making of human history” and argues that “to write history without putting any water in it is to leave out a large part of the story. Human experience has not been so dry as that.” (Worster 1985, 19). Meanwhile, Indigenous historian and environmental justice activist Nick Estes, in solidarity with Indigenous water protectors from Standing Rock and other communities fighting against extractive infrastructure construction that threaten their water sources, contends simply yet powerfully that “water is life” (Estes 2019, 68). As Indigenous environmental scholar and journalist Dina Gilio-Whitaker argues, “there are few issues more sensitive than water: its availability, quality, accessibility, and even its power to destroy human life and permanently alter the existence of communities” (2020, 89). The anthropologist of water, Casey Walsh (2018), argues that the phrase “water is life” expresses “an unyielding respect and love for the planet and its beings that is at odds with a way of life built on extraction” (Walsh 2018, 89).

According to geographer Erik Swyngedouw, water flows through a “hydro-social cycle,” which “connects all manner of bodies to technological systems, biological and chemical compounds, and each other” (Swyngedouw 2015, 7). Environmental historian of Japan, Brett Walker, views water in a similar light, as a “bufferless web” connecting humans and other organisms to essential nutrients—along with dangerous toxins (Walker 2010, 131).

As the primary vessel through which fresh water moves through the landscape, rivers are key to planetary processes such as the hydrologic cycle and the distribution of nutrients throughout landscapes, driving biological diversity and supporting more than 100,000 freshwater species (Iqbal 2026; World Wildlife Fund n.d.). Smith (2020) argues that a “world without rivers would be unrecognizable to us” and observes that rivers are “literally universal”—observable even on other planets (Smith 2020, 5; 316). Rivers are also historical actors with the power to shape worlds: “Like us,” argues White (1995), “rivers work. They absorb and emit energy; they rearrange the world” (White 1995, 3). They do this in their singular mission to, as Smith (2020) puts it, “move it all downhill. Down, down to the sea” (Smith 2020, 4). Thanks to the laws of physics, water flowing through river systems “seeks the most efficient and uniform expenditure of energy possible” and “constantly adjust” and “compensate for events that affect them. They are in this sense, historical: products of their own past history” (White 1995, 12).

Walsh observes that bodies of water “define social groups and their boundaries” (Walsh 2018, 162). Rivers therefore become hybrid assemblages of social-natural forces that “exemplify the complicated and complex dynamics of human-nature entanglements” (Kelly 2018, *xvi*). Rivers have been a primary means by which humans have traveled and dispersed themselves throughout landscapes (Smith 2020, 33; Iqbal 2026, 1), and without them, settlement patterns “would have evolved in very different ways.” (Smith 2020, 316). Rivers served as essential infrastructures for human communities, not only by enabling transportation of people and goods, but by providing water for drinking, irrigation, and industrial uses, and sustaining important food resources. The existentially important role that rivers have played throughout human history transforms them “into vibrant sites of mundane

reality and cultural meaning” (Iqbal 2016, 1). Rivers are cultural worlds (Kelly 2018) and sites of memory (Wagner 2018) and play an important role in “the self-definition of communities” and “people’s sense of place” (Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2013, 201). Many rivers are regarded by local and Indigenous communities as living beings, relational agents who are endowed with personhood (cf. Trospen 2022, 9). This personhood has even been recognized under settler law in a few examples, such as the Magpie River in Canada and the Whanganui River in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is no surprise then, that rivers should be central to many Indigenous political movements (Salmond 2014; Estes 2019; Wilkinson 2024)

Rivers have also been used as a tool of political control, providing access to and control over inland areas and defining borders between nations while also serving as sites of encounter between different peoples, nations, and social groups (Torgersen 2018).

Anthropologist Bryan Tilt (2015) has ethnographically explored the way that water can function as “a medium through which social and political relations are negotiated” (5), while geographer Erik Swyngedouw, (2015) argues similarly that “water is intensely political in a very conventional sense as water is embedded in conflicting relationships of authority and power” (7). Karl Wittfogel’s *Oriental Despotism* (1957) is often cited as a classic, foundational source on water politics, yet his analysis primarily focused on the way that collective social activity congeals around the need to manage water, and much less on the social meaning of water itself. Other scholars have taken up the challenge of exploring this question further. Linton identifies a “hegemonic construction of water,” or “one way of knowing water that has attained general predominance,” which he terms “modern water” (Linton 2010, 9). Modern water is an abstract yet quantifiable resource that appears

“naturally available,” making the powerful believe that they have “license to abstract, adulterate, drain, dam, divert, and contain” water sources (Linton 2010, 183). Rivers have been altered in the appetite for modern water and harmed by agricultural and industrial development.

Yet modern water remains a pipe dream (no pun intended), and rivers have defied all efforts to contain their innate natural power. While modern states have “sought to impose dominance” over them, rivers “remained a force that shaped imperial practices along their own fluvial footprints through defiance or unnerving uncertainty” (Iqbal 2026, 16-17). Each river has “purposes of its own which do not readily yield to desires to maximize profit” (White 1995, 112) and has “served as a material constraint on every Promethean plan of growth and plenty” (Amrith 2018, 9-10). Although many rivers today “struggle to carry their loads to the sea,” they “will rejuvenate if we let them” (Smith 2020, 6; 319). In other words, rivers “can be immortal” (Smith 2020, 319), and as a result, they carry the “power to counter the narrative of environmental decline” in an era of rampant climate change and growing biodiversity loss and water scarcity (Iqbal 2026, 16). In such an era, it becomes “necessary to consider the ways in which humans tell stories or narratives about river systems” because such stories “impinge on the reasons for how they act; that is, they function in the sphere of morality and ethics” (Deane-Drummond 2018, 55). Turning our attention to rivers can help us to navigate this dangerous and uncertain time, because how we treat “our rivers, more than any other natural resource, reflects our attitudes toward the world around us, and ultimately our attitudes toward ourselves” (Wohl 2004, 2). As Walsh argues, in striving to build a “more sustainable relationship” to rivers and other water sources, it may be the “deep long-standing relationships that everyday people have with waters and with each other” that will “serve as a

fountain of ideas and practices for building more virtuous cultures of waters” (Walsh 2018, 162). Building such sustainable relationships with rivers therefore necessarily entails respecting “the entire world through which a river flows” and “carefully considering, and taking responsibility for, each of our actions,” from “the food we eat, to the clothes we wear, the homes we inhabit, the work we do, and the values we espouse” (Wohl 2004, 261). As I show in this dissertation, it is precisely through their relationship to rivers that Ainu values—both historical and contemporary—have been most clearly articulated. It is therefore of no surprise that rivers have played such a central role in Ainu Indigenous rights activism.

D. Like A House with No Furniture: The State of Indigenous Rights in Japan

During my fieldwork, I spent a good deal of time in the car with Ainu activists. The Ainu activist community is a relatively small network and that is dispersed throughout Hokkaido, so my fieldwork entailed driving to and from many towns across the island, often with Ainu activists as passengers. One Ainu activist who I often drove for these trips was Rimsema (a pseudonym), a woman who has represented the Ainu community at United Nations meetings, and who affectionately referred to me as her *asshii-kun* (J: a man used by a woman for his car; lit. “leggy-boy”). One day in early February (Hokkaido’s midwinter), Rimsema and I decided to drive from Nibutani to Sapporo to attend a court hearing in Raporo Ainu Nation’s salmon rights lawsuit, the Raporo Case. Our journey took us south along National Road 237, a major north-south artery that runs along the Saru River from Hokkaido’s southeastern coast into the Hidaka Mountains. As we drove south along the Saru River, Rimsema fondly recalled swimming and catching fish in the river as “the highlight of my summer holiday” when she was a child. Then, rounding a bend, we came in sight of the

infamous Nibutani Dam. Because of the dam, fish are scarce, and conditions are too murky and dangerous for swimming these days. “You know,” Rimsema told me, “that memory is not something that I can share with my daughters. It’s quite sad. Nobody wants to go there to swim anymore” (Interview, February 10, 2024).

Leaving Nibutani, as Rimsema and I cruised along the Hidaka Expressway past bare agricultural fields flanked by snow-blanketed hills with the sounds of DJ Krush pulsing from my rent-a-car’s stereo, we chatted about the status of Indigenous rights in Japan. Rimsema told me that the Japanese government “was kind of put into a situation where they had to recognize the Indigenousness of the Ainu,” but its failure to implement Indigenous rights in the form of tangible rights to land or resources continues to be a “huge problem” (Interview, February 17, 2024). “It’s very strange,” she told me. “It’s like having a house with no furniture. It looks like a house from the outside, but there’s no place to sit or sleep. So, it doesn’t really mean much.” (Interview, February 17, 2024).



Image: On the road in Hokkaido’s midwinter.

Ainu rights struggles in the present day build on a history of grassroots engagement with the Japanese government and legal system to assert their rights. One of the earliest examples was the First Chikabumi Land Dispute in 1900: when the Hokkaido prefectural government evicted Ainu residents from the land they had been allotted in the Chikabumi district of Asahikawa, local Ainu formed the Alliance for Continued Former Native Residence and successfully overturned the eviction (Siddle 1996, 117-118). In 1930, Ainu from across Hokkaido formed the Ainu Association of Hokkaido. As the largest Ainu organization in Japan, its members have included many prominent leaders of the Ainu rights movement. But its close relationship with the government and its bias toward wealthier male members has earned it criticism from some Ainu (Siddle 1996, 173). Furthermore, because it relied on the government “for what power it possessed” and had a “vested interest in maintaining the status quo...it could only challenge the established order with great caution” (Siddle 1996, 180). This sometimes put it at odds with other Ainu activist organizations. For example, when a group from Asahikawa led a movement to abolish the 1899 Former Natives Protection Act in the 1970s, the Ainu Association unanimously passed a resolution in opposition to the movement (Siddle 1996, 164).

Propelled by their active involvement with the global Indigenous rights movement, Ainu have been actively demanding Indigenous rights from the Japanese government since at least the 1970s, in part by applying “foreign pressure” (J: *gaiatsu*) on Tokyo (Stevens 2014, 200). For example, Ainu leaders met with Inuit representatives in 1977, participated in the World Council of Indigenous Peoples in the 1980s, and gave the opening address at the UN’s International Year of the World’s Indigenous People in 1992 (Swanson 2022, 177-178). In 1984, the Ainu Association submitted a draft bill, known as the *Ainu Shinpou* (J: New Ainu

Law), which included demands for political representation and compensation for more than a century of settler colonial dispossession (Siddle 2002, 406; Siddle 1996, 180-184). The draft law included explicit provisions on river-based fishing rights, including the stipulation that “such rights should be granted to those who wish them regardless of the presence of existing fishing rights,” and that “projects to improve the productive base for Ainu-managed fishing enterprises should be implemented without regard to existing legislation” (Siddle 1996, 199). However, the state was reluctant to adopt these measures, and the bill languished in committee for more than ten years.

In the 1980s, in Biratori, Ainu were organizing opposition against the construction of the Nibutani Dam, due to its expected environmental impacts on the Saru River and social impacts on local Ainu. This land dispute between Ainu landholders and the Japanese government culminated in an eight-year legal battle in the Sapporo District Court, *Kayano et al. v. Hokkaido Expropriation Committee* (hereafter, the Nibutani Dam case). On March 27, 1997, Presiding Judge Ichimaya Kazue ruled that the Nibutani Dam had been constructed illegally, in violation of local Ainu’s rights as an ethnic minority under Article 13 of the Japanese constitution and Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Levin 1999, 395; Miyajima 1998, 134).^{8 9} The Court agreed with the Plaintiffs that the Nibutani Dam had flooded a sacred landscape that had been used by Ainu people for generations and deprived them of their ability to engage in important cultural traditions (Levin 1999, 425-429). This landmark decision was the first acknowledgment of the Ainu as

⁸ [Constitution of Japan, Article 13](#): “All of the people shall be respected as individuals. Their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness shall, to the extent that it does not interfere with the public welfare, be the supreme consideration in legislation and in other governmental affairs.”

⁹ [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#), Article 27: “In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.”

an Indigenous people by the Japanese government, but has been seen as “an aberration, rather than the beginning of a new jurisprudence on Indigenous or minority rights by courts in Japan” (Stevens 2014, 218-219). Furthermore, the Court also ruled that removing the Nibutani Dam would be against the public’s interest and allowed the dam to begin operation and flood the very same areas that had just been ruled to be culturally significant (Levin 1999, 429).

At the same time as he was waging the legal battle against the Nibutani Dam, Plaintiff Kayano Shigeru was fighting for Ainu rights as a Biratori town councilman (1975-1992), and later a national legislator as a member of the House of Councillors (the Upper House of the Japanese Diet) under the Socialist Party (Kayano 1994, 162; Kawashima 2004, 37). In 1997, the same year as the ruling in the Nibutani Dam Case, Kayano helped bring about the long-fought goal of repealing the racist 1899 Former Natives Protection, replacing it with the 1997 Ainu Cultural Promotion Act (hereafter, CPA). However, the CPA stopped short of granting meaningful Indigenous or land rights to the Ainu, instead focusing narrowly on the protection of Ainu “culture,” in the form of traditional handicrafts, performance, and language (Siddle 2002, 413).

Already a party to United Nations (UN) human rights agreements such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Japan voted to approve the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) in 2007 during the 61st session of the UN General Assembly. Although the Japanese delegation expressed some reservations at the time about granting rights relating to land and territory, Japan officially recognized the

Ainu as an Indigenous people via a Diet resolution in 2008 (Takada 2023). Although Rimsemat and other Ainu greeted this recognition with cautious celebration, nearly two decades later, Ainu Indigenous rights have not been implemented in Japanese law. In 2019, Japan passed of the “Law for Promoting Measures to Realize a Society in Which the Pride of the Ainu is Respected”, (hereafter, the Ainu Policy Promotion Act). While the Ainu Policy Promotion Act amends the legal definition of the Ainu from an ethnic minority to an Indigenous people, recognizing the Ainu’s status as an Indigenous People for the first time in law, it stops short of guaranteeing specific Indigenous rights, such as rights to land, resources, or political self-determination, again focusing only on the promotion of “Ainu culture.”

The “Ainu culture” enshrined in the law includes traditional handicrafts, performance, and language. Other crucially important elements of culture, such as livelihood, land use, and economic activity, are not discussed in the law, and rights to resources integral to the continuation of Ainu culture are not provided. As one woman I spoke with told me,

Since the new Ainu law was enacted, there’s been ongoing criticism that the rights framework is flawed, because only matters concerning Ainu culture are addressed. There was hope that the law would change and the content would improve, but even after decades, it’s stayed the same. Well, since this situation has persisted for so long, I guess the government’s stance is they want to keep it that way. (Interview, May 14, 2024)

Some Ainu activists have publicly criticized the Ainu Policy Promotion Act, like, for example, Shimizu Yuuji, who questioned the purpose of the draft bill in 2018: “who is this bill for? It is certainly not for us” (Maruyama and Charbonneau 2019). As a result, many Ainu now feel that Japan’s recognition of Ainu Indigeneity has been largely performative, and express frustration with the government’s narrow focus on culture and reluctance to address the issue of rights (Interview, February 17, 2024). This type of attitude is remarkably

common among the people I met and spoke with during my fieldwork, both Ainu and Wajin (J: Ethnic Japanese) alike. One person I spoke with told me that he thinks that

Japan itself probably just wants to avoid being criticized internationally. Like, just blend in with the rest, and as long as things don't get any worse, that's good enough. (Interview, May 20, 2024a)

Another person told me that

This country is working hard to project itself internationally as multicultural. Well, if they want to tell the outside world that's the kind of country they are, then they should properly sort out their affairs. Times have changed, and if they want to tell the outside world that this is a new, multicultural era, then they have to properly recognize Indigenous rights, or it doesn't hold up logically. Saying "we're multicultural" to the outside world, but then inside it's like, "well, we're only Japanese here"—that excuse just doesn't fly anymore. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

Coinciding with the Ainu Policy Promotion Act in 2019, a so-called "Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony" (J: *minzoku kyousei shouchou kuukan*) that had been ordered by Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary back in 2009 was opened in Shiraoi in of 2020 (Upopoy n.d.).¹⁰

Known as *Upopoy* (A: singing together as a large group)—but occasionally jokingly referred to as "*Usoppoi*" (J: "sounds fake") within my earshot by critics I encountered in my fieldwork (Field notes, June 30, 2023; October 16, 2023)—the facility is an enormous and expensive "cultural theme park," costing around ¥20 billion to construct, that includes a new National Ainu Museum, an open-air "Ethnic Harmony Park" featuring performance spaces and a reconstructed Ainu village, and a state-sponsored charnel house for housing human Ainu human remains (discussed in Chapter IX) (Charbonneau and Maruyama 2019; Nihon

¹⁰ *Upopoy* was initially scheduled to open in April 2020 but was delayed due to the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Hokkaido Shimbun 2020). In January of 2021, six months after *Upopoy*'s opening, it had received fewer than 200,000 visitors—less than 40 percent of initial projections—due to public health concerns (Nishikawa 2021). The pandemic also had a chilling effect on Ainu political mobilization: Kimura Fumio, a prominent Ainu activist and *ekasi* (A: male elder) from Biratori, observed that "debate from both within and out [of] the Ainu community on crucial issues has come to a near halt" (Kimura 2020).

Keizai Shimbun 2020a; Centre for Environmental and Minority Policy Studies [CEMiPoS] 2020a).

Prior to Upopoy's opening, the artist and activist Ukaji Shizue wrote that "We Ainu can't understand why the Japanese government believes that the completion of those public facilities will bring us happiness," (Ukaji 2018a, 172). Danika Medak-Saltzman has argued that "the Japanese settler state disproportionately benefits from such a move, as it makes Japan appear to be making a liberal move...when it will actually shore up Hokkaido's tourist industry" (Medak-Saltzman, in Grunow, *et al.* 2019, 630-631). Observing the way that the timing of the 2019 law has coincided with Japan's preparations to host the 2020 Summer Olympics,¹¹ Maruyama and Charbonneau argue that the 2019 law is "meant to allure local municipalities by the sway of government subsidies which they may obtain if efforts are made to link Ainu culture to tourism" (Maruyama and Charbonneau 2019; cf. Morris-Suzuki 2020). Japan has made no movement toward returning any land or resources for the Ainu's autonomous use, and many activists are frustrated and cynical about the future. For example, my host father, Mici, expressed his pessimism about the prospect of implementing Indigenous rights in Japan as we sat in his living room in Nibutani, drinking coffee and petting his cat, Chape (A: *cape*; "cat"). He told me,

Japan'll never recognize Indigenous rights, I'll wager. Because if they do, they'd have to return the land. Since they've stolen the Ainu's land without any pretense of a contract or agreement, it's definitely something they could be criticized for under international law. Therefore, the government will never go there. They're too cunning for that; right, Chape?" (Interview, May 27, 2024).

¹¹ The outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 derailed plans for the Summer Olympics and resulted in their being delayed to the summer of 2021. Due to persistent public health concerns such as a slow vaccine rollout and the rise of mutated viral strains, the Olympics were ultimately held in 2021 in front of drastically reduced crowd sizes, in comparison to initial expectations. Images of athletes performing in new, multimillion-dollar stadiums empty of spectators served as a powerful reminder of the profligacy and ultimate pointlessness of Japan's Olympic-based construction boom.

My friend Omappoho told me that, for him, an irreplaceable first step toward Indigenous rights would be for the Japanese government to finally issue an official apology to the Ainu:

Maybe I just want them to apologize. Over the last few hundred years a culture that should have continued was stopped. And now, the people trying hard to bring back that culture from a hundred, a hundred and fifty, or two hundred years ago just feel incredibly empty. I think the government should apologize to them. Like, seriously, the one who delivered the blow should be the one to apologize. That's how I feel. I want the Japanese government to apologize. Even if the Ainu from back then aren't alive anymore, even if the Japanese leadership has changed, I think an apology is necessary. As for the rights and guarantees that come after that, I don't really understand them well enough to say. (Interview, May 13, 2024)

Instead of an apology, what the Ainu received was a mostly symbolic piece of legislation and a fancy new theme park that appears primarily geared toward Wajin tourists. As a result, few people I spoke with placed much stock in the government's taking any concerted action toward fulfilling its obligations under international law. One person I spoke with even made the following admission to me:

Honestly, I kind of think it'd be fine if Hokkaido just separated from Japan, personally. Being part of Japan just feels kind of boring, and honestly, I think Hokkaido should become its own independent country in the future. When I think about Japan, I just don't really count on it much. [Laughs]. You know, when I see politicians and stuff, it's just really unpleasant. (Interview, date redacted)

To longtime critics of Japan's so-called "Construction State" (e.g., McCormack 1996; Woodall 1996; Kerr 2002), it should come as no surprise that the Japanese government's ingress into Indigenous policy has essentially amounted to a flood of new infrastructure spending. These critics observe that infrastructure construction occupies a uniquely important role within the political economy of contemporary Japan. It serves as a means of circulating wealth and power among elites, characterized by close and often collusive ties between government bureaucrats, elected politicians, and construction contractors. Until recently, few

studies have considered Japan's ongoing settler colonialism in Hokkaido and its relationship to the construction state. To the extent that this literature considers coloniality at all, it relegates it to pre-1945 and largely focuses on places like Korea, China, and Taiwan, leaving unchallenged the misconception that Hokkaido has always been part of Japan. In contrast, pioneering work recently published in a special issue of the Japanese journal *Shisou* entitled *Hokkaido Ainu Mosir: 150 Years of Settler Colonialism*, by authors including Hirano (2022), lewallen (2022), Ishiyama (2022), and Ishihara (2022) persuasively argue that Japanese settler colonialism did not end in 1945 but has continued apace. While the arguments put forth by these authors may challenge mainstream narratives of Japan and its history, Ainu activists have long demonstrated an awareness of it and insisted upon basing any potential Indigenous policy upon it. "To create the right future," says Biratori Ainu elder and activist Kimura Fumio, "we must learn from the past" (Yoshigaki 2019). Building on the work of such pioneering scholars, my dissertation proceeds from the understanding that the island known as *Yaun Mosir* was remade into Hokkaido through a sustained project of settler colonialism over the course of four centuries, which continues to this day.

Anthropologist ann-elise lewallen (2014) writes that, without access to tangible rights to land or resources, the Ainu are "prevented from enacting everyday cultural practice that might generate greater economic independence" (lewallen 2014, 178). As my host father, Mici, once explained to me, the Ainu "were a people who derived everything from the natural environment around them" (Field notes, February 5, 2024). The lack of access to land and prohibition of everyday cultural practices like hunting and fishing by the Japanese state, including of hunting, fishing, makes it extremely difficult to pass Ainu cultural knowledge down to future generations. Some Ainu activists, such as Urakawa Haruzo, worry that "even

if land is redistributed to us, nobody knows how to use it anymore” (Hohmann 2008, 23). But such frustrations and worries have not deterred others, like Ukaji Shizue,¹² from fighting “to create our own spaces in which to gather through our own efforts” (Ukaji 2018a, 171). Similarly, Ainu scholar, artist, and activist Uzawa Kanako (2014), writes that “all too often people seem to forget that cultures are a collective... We learn when we make things together, when we gather together, when we share ideas” (Uzawa 2014, 88-89). She advocates for “the creation of institutions that allow Ainu a symbolic and physical space to share and learn our own language and culture” (Uzawa 2014, 86). Ukaji links this goal to the struggle over the right to fish for salmon, as the Ainu had done for centuries before Japanese colonization, writing that “if just one river of Hokkaido was given back,” it would be

the first step to retrieving our lost circuit of communication. We can learn by trial and error. If an attempt goes successfully, it can become the model, and can generate the next one. In this way, we can practice Indigenous Ainu rights step by step. We have to do it by ourselves, with difficulty, not by unilateral agreement. This is the only way to get back the power of Ainu... One river can become a breakthrough. (Ukaji 2018b, 82)

For Ukaji, Ainu control over rivers is equated with Ainu control over their own destinies.

E. A Note on the Ainu Community and on Ainu Activists

Although the subject of this research is the Ainu community, what is meant by “the Ainu community” is complicated and merits some attention here. Unlike some Indigenous tribal nations, Ainu ethnic identity is not based on blood quantum, but rather is established through genealogical ties to an Ainu ancestor, recorded in Japanese family registers (J: *koseki*). Furthermore, Ainu and Wajin are not segregated. Although there are neighborhoods, towns, and villages in Hokkaido where the Ainu population may be more densely

¹² Ukaji Shizue is also the sister of the aforementioned Urakawa Haruzo.

concentrated and which may be clustered around the areas where Ainu settlements (A: *kotan*) were originally sited, Japan has not segregated the Ainu into spatially distinct reserves, as with Indigenous communities in other nations.¹³ Moreover, in the present day, Ainu people reside alongside Wajin settlers, or even under the same roof.¹⁴ Marriages between Ainu and Wajin are common, and many people who identify as Ainu today have mixed parentage in their lineage. In addition to such mixed marriages, the adoption of non-Ainu (including Wajin and Korean) children into Ainu households was a relatively common practice in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Batchelor 1901, 19; 232; Seok 2017).

My host family is a good example of a typical mixed Ainu-Wajin household. During my approximately ten months living in Nibutani, I worked at a family farm called Sikina Farm and lived in a log cabin in the woods behind the farm. My host family, who owns Sikina Farm, is comprised of Mici, an Ainu man in his late 70s, his wife Hapo, a Wajin woman in her mid-70s who has been living in Nibutani since emigrating there in the early 1970s, and their two unmarried, adult children, Yupi and Sapo. Yupi lives with his parents and oversees the daily operations of the farm, while Sapo lives in one of Hokkaido's big cities but comes home periodically to help with farm work and participate in family events. Sikina Farm is discussed in more detail in Chapter VII. During my stay in Nibutani, Mici, Hapo, and Yupi all took turns working in the *cise* at the museum to supplement their incomes from farming. Hapo, a student of Ainu language for more than fifty years, even performed a *Yukar* recital. In their daily lives, my host family constantly negotiates their identity as an

¹³ There were a few experiments with creating Ainu reserves (J: *hogochi*) in the Meiji Period, but these did not last more than a few years before dissolving. Nevertheless, Ainu people were forcibly relocated quite frequently, and many Ainu people today continue to reside in artificial communities created through colonial policy (Siddle 1996, 65-71).

¹⁴ Although the Ainu population is concentrated in Hokkaido today, Ainu people and communities can also be found living elsewhere in Japan. For instance, Watson (2014) and Uzawa (2018) provide stirring ethnographic accounts of Ainu life in urban Tokyo.

Ainu household and works tirelessly to preserve and transmit Ainu culture to many students and guests who paid visits to the farm throughout my time there.

The story of Aha, one Ainu woman I spoke with, illustrates two things about Nibutani: its reputation as a place where Ainu cultural knowledge has been continually practiced, and the role of impassioned Wajin allies within Nibutani's Ainu community. Aha's life journey brought her from her birthplace, in nearby Nukibetsu, to Tokyo for many years, but when she returned to Hokkaido in the early 2000s, she ultimately settled in Nibutani. One of her earliest involvements in the community's activities was the Cultural Impact Assessment for the Biratori Dam (discussed in detail in Chapter V). She told me that, during this time, she learned a great deal of Ainu cultural knowledge from Hapo, my Wajin host mother, and advised me to show her due respect. Indeed, I too would learn a great deal from Hapo's expertise over the course of my stay. Aha's story shows how Ainu from outside Nibutani have come to Nibutani to deepen their connection with Ainu culture, and how experienced, knowledgeable elders within the community also include Wajin people. Cultural knowledge, experience, and strong relationships with Ainu people are what define belonging in Nibutani's Ainu community, transcending ethnic boundaries defined by blood.

Furthermore, due to the long history of anti-Ainu discrimination, many people possessing such a genealogical link, or even those whose parents are both Ainu themselves, may not be aware of it, because their ancestors may have hidden it from them to spare them similar discrimination. One Ainu activist I spoke with, Ekimnekur, told me that

When I was little, I didn't even know I was Ainu. You see, my parents' generation, my grandparents' generation, they faced really intense discrimination. So, they never taught me anything about it, and I knew nothing. After that, I faced discrimination too, so yeah, there were really tough times because of being Ainu. (Interview, May 24, 2024)

People like this activist's parents, who are aware of their Ainu heritage but choose not to disclose it, are called "Silent Ainu" by Ishihara Mai (Ishihara, in Grunow, *et al.* 2019, 613). Ishihara considers herself a Silent Ainu, or an "Ainu liminar" as she defines "people who do not belong to any established categories" and are "excluded from such categories" (Ishihara, in Grunow, *et al.* 2019, 616). Such Ainu liminars bely the simple binary categorization of "Ainu or Wajin" (Ishihara, in Grunow, *et al.* 2019, 616). This is because, in Japan "even one drop of Ainu blood means you are not entirely Japanese" (Ishihara, in Grunow, *et al.* 2019, 615). For Ishihara, whose father is Wajin but whose mother "identifies as a member of the Ainu *minzoku* [J: people; ethnic group]," finding a sense of belonging as an Ainu liminar is challenging because they "are often invisible and silent, and this makes it difficult for us to even identify with each other. For this reason," Ishihara writes, "I have felt alone" (Ishihara, in Grunow, *et al.* 2019, 616). However, for Ekimnekur, having the opportunity to interact with other Ainu people and participate in Ainu cultural activities awakened his sense of pride in his Ainu roots and led him to embrace his Ainu identity as a young man:

But then one time, probably around when I started junior high, I got to see a dance by the preservation society. It was the bow dance, the *Ku Rimse*. Seeing that really moved me. After that, someone from the preservation society invited me, and I started dancing too. From then on, I guess I sort of understood Ainu culture, you know? (Interview, May 21, 2024)

In contrast to Ekimnekur's situation as well as those of the Silent Ainu that Ishihara describes, another young Ainu man I spoke with, Omappoho, told me that his parents did not hide their Ainu identities from him when he was growing up, but rather it was something taken for granted as a part of his daily environment. For Omappoho, too, it was developing relationships with other Ainu people outside his household that helped him deepen his awareness of his Ainu identity. He told me,

Neither of my parents hid being Ainu, but they didn't out of their way to tell us kids, either. But, since they were Ainu, I always thought I was Ainu too. Basically, that was it. My family is Ainu, so I'm Ainu. I guess that's what's closest to my real identity. I think family is like the smallest ethnic group. So, to oversimplify it: my family is Ainu, so I'm Ainu because I belong to that family. That's the simple part. Then, as my parents took me to more and more places, I realized, "Oh, this person is Ainu, too," and I started to feel connected to them as comrades. And then, there are Wajin people studying Ainu culture, too, which creates a connection where we're comrades studying Ainu things together (Interview, May 13, 2024)

This speaker's understanding of his community extends beyond Ainu people themselves to include Wajin neighbors (A: *sisam*) who share similar interests and values. Similarly, the Ainu community in Nibutani includes many mixed households. As Tamura Yurika (2024) has shown, many Ainu people emphasize the point that the word "Ainu" (A: *aynu*) was not originally an ethnonym, but simply a word that meant "human." In their efforts to emphasize their "shared, singular humanness" with Wajin, some of the Ainu who Tamura worked with "downplay any Ainu difference in an exoticized colonial imagination, foregrounding Ainu cultural elements as something that can be sensed and related to by any human" (Tamura 2024, 221). A similar emphasis on Ainu humanity is explored in the upcoming animated short film, *Rimse*, created and produced by Ruyka, an artist collective formed by the Ainu artist, scholar, and activist, Uzawa Kanako, and the animator Murotani Saki (Uzawa and Murotani 2026). In *Rimse*, the main character is Urar, a young Ainu girl living in contemporary Sapporo, who reflects that

In the Ainu language, "Ainu" means "human." To be human is to be true to oneself. To be human is to be moved by beauty. To feel the air of nature on your skin. To experience the changing seasons with your whole being. And to savor the joy of delicious food. (Uzawa and Murotani 2026)

Both the fictional character of Urar and the real Ainu people that Tamura spoke with emphasize Ainu humanity to counter the historical and continuing dehumanization that Ainu people have faced under Japanese settler colonialism.

Yet, Ainu and Wajin identities are not mutually exclusive. A woman I spoke with named Aepakasnumat, who has mixed Ainu and Wajin parentage, told me that both of these aspects of her identity mattered to her, saying,

My mom is Ainu, but my dad is Wajin. So, I'm close to both sides. I have this feeling that I want to study both cultures equally, in a balanced way, within myself. (Interview, May 14, 2024)

For her, too, it was having an opportunity to participate in cultural activities as part of a larger community that led to an awakening of the Ainu side of her identity:

I knew I was Ainu, but I didn't really think much of it. Then, by chance, I got a job related to Ainu culture. As I learned more about it bit by bit, I thought, "Oh, this is interesting." When I asked my parents about my ancestors, all these stories came out about relatives I didn't know about, really interesting stuff. Things my parents hadn't really talked about, things they hadn't particularly thought to pass on, I found it all really interesting and I've been involved with Ainu matters ever since. So, it was a small trigger that made me think that Ainu culture is wonderful. You never know where that trigger will come from, but I think becoming aware of it leads to pride. (Interview, May 14, 2024)

The variety of different ways one could relate to one's own Ainu heritage, as shown in Tamura's and Ishihara's work as well as the varied experiences of Ekimnekur, Omappoho, and Aepakasnumat, complicates the notion of "*the* Ainu" as a singular, coherent object of study. The intention of this dissertation is not to make any claims about Ainu purity or about any radical difference or incommensurability between Ainu and Wajin. Instead, my goal is to always remain attentive to the complexity and fluidity that characterizes identity in the communities in which Ainu people are living today.

Although I often use the term “Ainu activists” throughout this dissertation, this is a complicated word, not only due to the complexity of Ainuness discussed above, but because of the ambivalence to Indigenous rights that I observed from members of the Nibutani community. When asked what I am studying by people I met during fieldwork, I would say that I’m studying the connection between Ainu Indigenous rights (J: *senjuuken*) and environmental protection. A common response to this admission was “*aa, muzukashii desu ne*” (J: Oh, that’s difficult). People were generally uncomfortable talking about rights, giving responses like “I haven’t really thought about it” or “I don’t have much to say about that.” Many Ainu people I spoke with during my fieldwork told me they did not have strong feelings on Indigenous rights (or, if they did, they did not feel comfortable sharing it with me, a foreign anthropologist). The impression that I got during my fieldwork is that opinions either strongly in favor or strongly critical of Indigenous rights in Japan are relatively few in number, and that most people are just trying to put food on the table and feed their kids. In the greater scheme of things, such people seem to feel that the topic has little practical bearing on their lives. Then again, because much of my fieldwork took place in small communities, there may be more people who harbor strong opinions are willing to openly express them, keeping such opinions close to the chest in the interest of living harmoniously with their neighbors.

The reluctance of many Ainu people to talk about Indigenous rights may be partly due to the connotations that the term Indigenous rights has in Japanese. For example, I listened to the following exchange between my host brother, Yupi, and his friend, Ekimnekur:

Y: I’m always thinking about Indigenous rights, but when you mention that you want to defend Indigenous rights, the situation gets tense.

E: That’s exactly right.

Y: We need a system where we can decide things for ourselves. I believe it's our right to demand this. But some people say, "if you demand recognition of Indigenous rights, does that mean you want to kick all non-Ainu people out of Hokkaido?" That's not what we're saying at all.

E: Not at all.

Y: I think what's important is that Indigenous rights means the ability of the Ainu to make our own decisions and implement what we decide. It means self-determination, that we can act for ourselves. But the environment to actually do that hasn't been cultivated at all in this country. You can live and die here without knowing anything about the Ainu. (Field Notes, August 9, 2025)

Yet, many of the same people who were reluctant to talk about Indigenous rights were actively involved in Ainu cultural preservation and transmission, including future-oriented environmental and infrastructural work. One thing that I want to make clear is that, concerning each of the issues I discuss in this dissertation, there is a great deal of disagreement. Some of the perspectives presented here are held by a relatively small minority. My goal is not to present a statistically representative or replicable sample. Rather, as an ethnographer, I believe that my first responsibility is to try to understand and accurately represent the words and thought processes of the people I worked with, and built relationships with, during my fieldwork. Thus, my understanding of Ainu activism is expansive, including not only explicitly political or rights-focused work, but also the many other, often subtle and mundane ways that people were actively participating in Ainu culture in their daily lives.

F. Methods

Given this background, the three primary research questions I set out to investigate were: 1) How do contemporary Ainu people assert temporal sovereignty and envision and

enact Indigenous futures? 2) How do these futures intersect with or run counter to the settler futures being envisioned and enacted by the Japanese government? and 3) How can Indigenous activism increase self-determination for Ainu people and inform the creation of sustainable and just infrastructures for future generations? I will return to discuss these questions theoretically in Section G below. The data for this dissertation were gathered through fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Hokkaido, including an initial twelve-month stay from June 2023 to June 2024 and an additional two-month follow-up trip from July to September 2025. Of my total fourteen months of fieldwork in Hokkaido, I spent approximately ten months living in Nibutani and four months living in Sapporo, although I would regularly take short trips back and forth (for example, visiting Sapporo while living in Nibutani, and vice versa) and to other locations throughout Hokkaido, including Shiraoi, Asahikawa, Obihiro, Kitami-Monbetsu, and Urahoro-Atsunai, along with many locations within Biratori Town (where Nibutani is located) and the neighboring Hidaka Town. The primary methods I employed to gather data during my fieldwork were participant observation, interviews, and analysis of primary documents. I will explain each of these methods in detail below, but first, I want to address my positionality and my overall methodological orientation.

1. Positionality and Methodological Orientation

As a non-Indigenous anthropologist, I recognize my fiduciary and ethical responsibility to conduct research respectfully and acknowledge and embrace my personal, political commitment to Ainu Indigenous rights. Acknowledging this commitment is not to acknowledge a limitation of my research design; rather, I argue that my research design is

strengthened by it. Hale (2008) argues that “research and political engagement can be mutually enriching,” and that scholarship undertaken from an explicit activist perspective can claim methodological rigor due to its “deeper and more sustained analysis of the sociopolitical conditions that frame the research question and the research process” (Hale 2008, 4; 13; 20). Other scholars, meanwhile, have argued that politically engaged scholarship is the most effective and appropriate means of studying Indigenous movements and communities. Roche (2018a; 2018b) argues that researchers working with Indigenous communities must be “positively engaged in supporting Indigenous peoples to deepen and spread Indigenous efflorescence” (Roche 2018b, 225), contrasting this approach with the “lucid ambivalence” that characterizes scholars like James Clifford (Clifford 2013, 18; Roche 2018a, 14). Willow (2010) contends that, if Indigenous peoples “are to embrace any kind of anthropology, it will surely be an engaged anthropology that serves their self-defined interests” (Willow 2010, 38). While the ethical and political implications of engaged or activist ethnography have been much debated within the discipline of anthropology (e.g., Bourgois 1990), Willow notes that, when working with Indigenous people, engaged anthropology is most suitable for the simple, practical reason of access: “Native groups rarely require anthropologists’ investments in their cultural revitalization projects, but anthropologists *do* need indigenous assistance” if they wish to work in Indigenous communities (Willow 2010, 56). Research conducted in Indigenous communities needs to be rooted in relationships built upon trust and respect, which endure even after fieldwork has been completed. The necessity of this approach is especially urgent given the long history of “academic colonialism” and researchers’ pattern of exploiting Indigenous people, including the Ainu (Iwamoto 2007; Hudson *et al.* 2014). Researchers who express a commitment to

aligning their work with the desires of Ainu communities and building deep, meaningful relationships with members of that community are best positioned to conduct ethnographic research that is innovative, rigorous, and ethically sound.

In response to such commitments, I ground my overall methodological approach in Indigenous research methodologies. After more than a century of mistreatment in the name of academic research, Indigenous scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Shawn Wilson (2008), and Margaret Kovach (2009) have dedicated their academic careers to reclaiming Indigenous sovereignty over the production of knowledge about their communities. While each of these authors differs in their approach, three characteristics that are commonly shared among these authors are the importance of relational responsibility, ethical awareness, and narrative storytelling. While the Indigenous methodologies presented by these authors were originally developed based on their research in their own communities, Kovach notes that Indigenous methodologies are also attractive among non-Indigenous scholars who wish “to move beyond the binaries found within Indigenous-settler relations to construct new, mutual forms of dialogue, research, theory, and action” (Kovach 2009, 12). Indigenous methodologies therefore provide both a theoretical lens that privileges Indigenous epistemologies and an ethical praxis for conducting research with Indigenous communities responsibly.

Indigenous methodologies are usually written about in the plural. The ultimate goal of Indigenous methodologies is to produce scientific knowledge that is faithful to contemporary Indigenous epistemologies and of use to Indigenous people, organizations, and communities. Just as there is no single, universal definition of “Indigenous epistemology,” there is no one definition of “Indigenous methodology;” rather, Indigenous methodologies are crafted in the

field in collaboration with research participants. Rather than viewing the production of authoritative knowledge as solely their own prerogative as the researcher, scholars employing Indigenous methodologies view research as a collaborative and dialogic co-production of knowledge between the researcher and participants. I recognize that Indigenous knowledge systems are scientific, in that they are empirical, systematic, and collaborative (Cajete 1999; Menzies 2006; Whyte 2013). Employing Indigenous methodologies in this way has the power to “disrupt methodological homogeneity” in anthropological research (Kovach 2009, 12). I therefore view the proposed research as a collaborative co-critique of settler colonialism and co-examination of the possibilities for decolonized futures with research participants.

Indigenous methodologies share much in common with other qualitative research methodologies in that these approaches are both relational and process-oriented (Kovach 2009, 32). Indigenous methodologies, however, place special emphasis on the importance of relational responsibility. This means that research must not be conducted in an “extractivist manner”; rather, the goal of the research should be to build lasting relationships that endure beyond the immediate research timeline. Related to the importance of maintaining healthy and lasting relationships with research participants is the fact that indigenous methodologies treat “ethics as methodology” (Kovach 2009, 2013). This approach is rooted in a critical engagement with the ways in which research has been connected to colonial exploitation (Smith 1999, 1). In light of this history, studies employing Indigenous methodologies must approach “cultural protocols, values and behaviors as an integral part of methodology” (Smith 1999, 15). This approach also involves reflexively engaging with the “personal preparations involving motivations, purpose, inward knowing, observation, and the variety of

ways that the researcher can relate her own process undertaken in the research” (Kovach 2009, 35). Researchers employing indigenous methodologies must reflect on their own priorities as well as those of the community and ask themselves uncomfortable questions: Is the research I want to conduct wanted or needed by the community? Will my research provide tangible benefits to the community, or is its purpose simply to launch my own academic career? Indigenous methodologies hold that it is only by entering into a genuine relationship with Indigenous people as *people*, rather than research subjects, that the researcher trusted to representing Indigenous peoples in research. In other words, the overall methodological approach that I chose to adopt was to strive to be a good human first, and a good researcher second.

As briefly mentioned above, the three primary methods of data collection were participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and combined textual and visual analysis of historical documents, including both primary and secondary sources. I will now describe each of these methods in greater detail, beginning with participant observation.

2. Participant Observation

I conducted participant observation at three primary research sites located in Hokkaido: the village of Nibutani in Biratori Town, the prefectural capital city of Sapporo, and the village of Atsunai in Urahoro Town. Owing to the fact that my time in Hokkaido was split between multiple sites, my participant-observation activities were highly varied. Of the total of fourteen months of fieldwork conducted for this dissertation, approximately ten were spent living in Nibutani. The village of Nibutani is located in Biratori Town (J: *Biratori-*

cho),¹⁵ five miles upstream along the Saru River from the district's municipal seat in Biratori-Honcho (J: Biratori Main Town). Nibutani is a rural village community of about 500 people, and around 80 percent of its population is Ainu (Ainu Association of Hokkaido 1999; Okada 2012). Despite its small size, the village hosts several noteworthy points of interest, including a pioneering Ainu language school and three museums: the Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum, the Historical Museum of the Saru River, and the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum. In addition to the *Sarunkur* (A: "People of the Saru") who currently reside in Nibutani, many Ainu from other river basins have also moved there to study Ainu culture and fill jobs related to Ainu cultural preservation and transmission (discussed in detail in Chapter V).

During my approximately ten months living in Nibutani, I lived in a log cabin owned by an Ainu farming household, located a few hundred meters behind their house. It was an ideal field site for this research because Ainu culture is flourishing in Nibutani at the current moment, and various initiatives, including language classes, music and dance classes, craft workshops, and environmental projects, are regularly carried out. For example, during the tourist season, guests who enter the reconstructed *cise* at Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum are greeted by local residents practicing traditional Ainu craft arts like woodworking (J: *choukoku*), embroidery (J: *shishuu*), or weaving (J: *orimono*). On Saturdays and Sundays, the *cise* also host recitations of traditional oral narratives (A: *yukar*) by local elders and young language students alike. Living in Nibutani also provided me with access to greater Biratori Town. Oriented along the Saru River Basin, this region was the historical location of an important pre-colonial Ainu political group (or "river group") (Peng and Geiser 1977, 37).

¹⁵ While it is typically translated to English as "town," the suffix *-cho* as it is used in Hokkaido is perhaps more equivalent to what an American might call a "county," being used to refer to large areas that contain vast stretches of agricultural and wilderness areas, in addition to villages and towns.

The Saru River Basin has been an important locus of Ainu rights activism, since these are the communities that have been most directly impacted by the government's dam construction efforts in the region. Biratori's local government is currently engaged in several environmental restoration initiatives in this area under the auspices of the Iwor Restoration Project. Thus, the greater Biratori region and Saru River Basin are important field sites for considering the relationship between Indigenous rights and environmental preservation.

While in Nibutani, I performed daily farm work for my Ainu host family on their farm, Sikina Farm (a pseudonym). I also participated in various family events, including helping to perform an ancestral memorial ceremony (A: *sinnurappa*) and gathering wild plants used in traditional Ainu cuisine and handicrafts, which my host family were regularly engaged in producing. I also participated in village life; for example, helping the local village association with tasks like mowing the grass in public areas and preparing the venue for the local Shinto shrine festival (J: *jinjamatsuri*), as well as dancing the *Obon* (A: Buddhist memorial dance) and participating in the sumo wrestling tournament at said festival. Thanks to an introduction by my host family, I was also able to participate in many Ainu culture events hosted by the Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Society (J: *biratori-cho ainu bunka no hozonkai*), including traditional ceremonies such as a new year's prayer service (A: *asirpanomi*) and a first salmon ceremony (A: *asircepnomi*), along with cultural classes such as Ainu language, dance, cooking, embroidery, and wood-carving classes. I also performed traditional Ainu dance with the Preservation Society at two well-attended performances, and my embroidery work was displayed during the Preservation Society's annual exhibition. I also participated in several cultural exchange activities by serving as an interpreter for groups of international visitors to Nibutani, including an Indigenous Maori school group from New

Zealand, a group of Indigenous artists and scholars from Australia, a group of Indigenous scholars from Hawai'i and Arizona, and a group of Indigenous students from Canada. I also helped facilitate a workshop in Nibutani sponsored by the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) that assessed Japan's progress toward Indigenous rights for Ainu people. In addition to the above, rehearsing and performing music became a major part of my fieldwork. I performed solo and duet performances on saxophone and Ainu lute (A: *tonkori*) for audiences in Nibutani and Biratori-cho more widely, and including at the 2024 Urekrek Ainu Music Festival and the 2025 Nibutani Indigenous Forum. Such musical performance enabled me to relate to members of the community not only as a researcher, but as a multifaceted human being, and was an unexpectedly useful tool in building rapport with the people who would become my closest friends there.

For the remaining four months of my total of fourteen months of fieldwork—mainly the winter months when it was too cold to live in the log cabin behind Sikina Farm—I lived in a share-house in the prefectural capital of Sapporo. Sapporo is a bustling, ultra-modern metropolis of more than 2 million people. In Sapporo, my participant observation involved activities such as participating in an embroidery class; attending lectures, seminars, and film screenings related to Ainu culture and political issues; attending rallies, press conferences, and court hearings related to Indigenous rights; visiting museums to examine Ainu art and their presentation; attending Ainu ceremonies and participating in related social events; and performing music with multiple ensembles at venues throughout the city. While I was based in Sapporo, I also took several research trips to many Ainu-related events and museums around Hokkaido, including traveling to Urahoro-Atsunai and other locations throughout Hokkaido. Through all of these participant-observation activities, I gained crucial insight and

first-hand experience related to Ainu Indigenous rights, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation.

The third field site around which my fieldwork revolved was village of Atsunai, located in Urahoro Town in the Tokachi River Basin. As in Nibutani, Ainu are the majority in the village community Atsunai. Like the Saru River Basin, the Tokachi River Basin was the historical location of a river-based Ainu political group comprised of several village communities, such as Aiushi and Tokachibuto (Raporo Ainu Nation 2022a). Most of Atsunai's present residents are descended from Ainu who were forcibly removed from such settlements along the Tokachi River. In more recent times, the region has hosted several large-scale infrastructure projects, including dams, canals, and river reroutes, which harmed the migrating salmon upon which villagers traditionally relied. Although many members of Atsunai's Ainu community are registered members of the local commercial fishers' cooperative, who are employed in fishing for salmon offshore in the fashion typical of Japan's commercial fisheries, they are legally prohibited from fishing for salmon in rivers by Japanese law. Because of this, members of the local Ainu community formed the organization, Raporo Ainu Nation, enlisted a team of attorneys, and are presently fighting for recognition of their Indigenous fishing rights in Sapporo's Court of Appeals, with a final verdict slated to be delivered in July 2026. Although I did not have the opportunity to live in Atsunai during my fieldwork, I made several trips there to attend Raporo Ainu Nation events and to help facilitate an IWGIA-sponsored workshop on Indigenous rights, and I also spent a good deal of time with the group's members in other places, including Sapporo, Obihiro, Kitami-Monbetsu, and Victoria, Canada.

Because of the hands-on nature of many of the activities I was involved in, including farm work and plant gathering, I often did not have the opportunity to take field notes in real time; in which case, I wrote field notes at the cabin, in my share-house room, or in my rental car during breaks and in the evenings. For activities of a less hands-on nature, such as attending lectures, screenings, and court hearings, I took written field notes in real time. I also created audio recordings where permitted. Upon returning to the US, I digitized and analytically coded my field notes and audio transcripts.

3. Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to participant observation, I conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with thirteen participants. Two participants were interviewed twice. These interviews lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to more than two hours, with an average length of fifty-one minutes across the fifteen interviews. All interviews were conducted in Japanese—the participants' native language—with the exception of two interviews, which were conducted in English. Of the thirteen interview participants, nine were Ainu (defined as someone with Ainu heritage who identifies as Ainu) and four were Wajin. Of the four Wajin participants, three were married to Ainu partners, and all four were active participants in Ainu cultural activities in their daily lives. Six participants were women, and seven participants were men. Participants of various ages, ranging from their 20s to their 80s, were interviewed. All thirteen participants were either currently living in Biratori Town or had roots there. I solicited interview participants from my general social network during fieldwork, as well as at the General Meeting of the Biratori-Cho Ainu Culture Preservation Society. Eleven of the participants were people I knew well and had built a strong rapport with over several months,

while two of the participants were people who I did not know as well. All participants voluntarily chose to participate in the research, were given detailed information about the purpose and content of my research, and gave informed consent to be interviewed. With each participant's permission, these interviews were audio recorded. Upon returning from the field, I transcribed these interviews and coded them looking for thematic patterns, translating key quotes into English for presentation in this dissertation. Information about the interview participants, which has been anonymized and kept intentionally vague to protect participants' confidentiality, is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Interview Participant Information Note: An asterisk (*) indicates that the participant was interviewed twice.					
Participant Number	Gender	Age	Ethnic Identity	Region of Origin	Current Residence
1 *	Woman	40s	Ainu	Biratori	Outside Japan
2	Woman	70s	Wajin	Japan (outside Hokkaido)	Biratori
3	Woman	80s	Ainu	Hokkaido (outside Biratori)	Biratori
4	Woman	30s	Wajin	Japan (outside Hokkaido)	Biratori
5	Man	20s	Ainu	Hokkaido (outside Biratori)	Biratori
6	Woman	50s	Ainu	Hokkaido (outside Biratori)	Biratori
7	Man	20s	Ainu	Hokkaido (outside Biratori)	Biratori
8	Man	50s	Wajin	Japan (outside Hokkaido)	Biratori
9	Man	20s	Wajin	Hokkaido (outside Biratori)	Biratori

10	Man	40s	Ainu	Hokkaido (outside Biratori)	Biratori
11	Man	70s	Ainu	Biratori	Biratori
12	Woman	70s	Ainu	Biratori	Biratori
13*	Man	50s	Ainu	Biratori	Biratori

4. Document Analysis

To further supplement the data acquired through participant observation and interviews, I analyzed primary texts and documents on topics including Ainu-led environmental restoration and Indigenous rights activism. These documents were all written in Japanese. The documents I analyzed are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Primary Documents Analyzed					
Title	Type	Field Site of Interest	Topic	Number of Issues/Documents	Year
Pewre Utari no. 22	Community Newsletter	Biratori	Nibutani Dam and Ainu community affairs	One 65-page document	1988
Utaspano Uoupekare nos. 17-37	Community Newsletter	Atsunai & Sapporo	Ainu repatriation case and Raporo salmon case	Twenty-one 4-page documents	2017-2025
Raporo Ainu Nation v. Japan and Hokkaido	District Court Decision	Atsunai & Sapporo	Raporo salmon case	One 70-page document	2024
Summary Report of the Ainu Cultural Environment Conservation Measures Survey, Saru River Region Cultural Evaluation Project [“The Biratori Dam Cultural Impact	Municipal Government Report	Biratori	Nibutani and Biratori Dams, Ainu culture, environment	One 776-page document	2006

Assessment (CIA)"]					
Biratori Town Cultural Landscape Explanation Sheets	Municipal Museum publication	Biratori	History of Biratori Town	Collection of seventy-five 2- page documents	n.d. (c. 2024)

Engaging with historical documents is important to producing historically engaged anthropological scholarship that is rooted in Indigenous research methodologies. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues that “history is important for understanding the present and...a critical and essential aspect of decolonization” (Smith 1999, 30). This is because “questions relating to our history” have been a “critical aspect of the struggle for self-determination” for Indigenous peoples: “Every issue has been approached by indigenous peoples [*sic.*] with a view to *rewriting* and *rerighting* our position in history” (Smith 1999, 28). Historical awareness of Japan’s ongoing settler colonialism in Hokkaido was strong among the Ainu people I spent time with. Many people I spoke with articulated a view of history that draws continuities between Japan’s colonial expansion into Hokkaido and the challenges that Ainu people face today, and commonly used words and phrases like “invasion” (J: *shinryaku*), “land dispossession” (J: *tochi wo ubaitoru koto*), and “arbitrary laws” (J: *katte ni tsukutta houritsu*). Although use of the term “settler colonialism” (J: *setoraa koroniarizumu*) was relatively rare, though not unheard of, during my fieldwork, people often used the term “colonial policy” (J: *shokuminchi seisaku*) to describe both historical and ongoing projects of “development” (J: *kaitaku* when referring to historical policies; *kaihatsu* when referring to current policies) in Hokkaido. Many quotes from Ainu that use such terminology appear throughout this dissertation, demonstrating a deep awareness of their situation as a colonized people.

Besides possessing a deep historical awareness and implicit theoretical understanding of Japan's settler colonialism in Hokkaido, people I spoke with frequently bemoaned the fact that such awareness is not widespread among the Japanese people today. I heard many critiques of the way Ainu history has been neglected in Japan's educational curriculum, resulting in a general lack of awareness of settler colonialism and its ongoing impacts on Ainu. For example, one Ainu activist told me that

Japan strongly emphasizes that it was the first to map out Hokkaido, making it part of Japan. And now, nobody questions that. "Yeah, Hokkaido was always Japan, right?"—probably everyone would say that without hesitation. Japan invaded another country and tried to take over, but people have zero awareness of that, so the whole question of Indigenous rights doesn't even come up. They think Hokkaido has always been Japanese territory. They take it for granted. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

Participants like this one continually stressed the importance of learning the true history of Hokkaido's colonization. One Wajin participant told me she became a supporter of Ainu Indigenous rights once she learned of Hokkaido's history from her teachers, demonstrating the power of such historical awareness:

When I heard about Hokkaido's history from my teachers, it just looks like an invasion, you know? People from Honshu, who weren't here originally, just came in arbitrarily, and the Ainu people who were living there first were forced into all sorts of things—like being told they had to stop speaking the Ainu language or fishing for salmon. Hearing all these stories, I've come to understand that too. (Interview, May 9, 2024)

But experiences like these are still relatively rare, due to the "extraordinarily homogenizing role" that public education and mass media play in contemporary Japan (Hansen 2024, 74). The Ainu activist mentioned above expressed his frustration with the lack of historical awareness and called Japan's education system a major obstacle to the recognition of Indigenous rights:

The education in this country is incredibly intense. The way they're all about how "Japanese people are homogenous"—that kind of education has tremendous power. That's actually the most skillful part of this country's education system, really. That's why, no matter how hard we try, our way of thinking doesn't get through. They can't even imagine it. People can't understand things they can't even imagine. Unless it becomes internalized in words they can understand, they just can't grasp it at all. We're demanding something they can't even conceive of, so it doesn't click for them. We need to change that first, that way of thinking, that perception. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

It is clear based on statements like these that engaging with historical evidence is crucial for building an accurate understanding of Hokkaido's historical and ongoing settler colonization by Japan. However, because the focus of my research is on the present day, coupled with the fact that Ainu history did not end in 1868, or 1945, or 1997, or 2019, or any other year, watershed or otherwise, I chose to focus on documents from the 20th and 21st centuries. Compared to the vast corpus of documents related to earlier periods of Ainu history, which has already been well-introduced to English-language readers by authors such as Howell (1995), Siddle (1996), Walker (2001), these more recent documents are much lesser-known.

G. Research Contribution

Making use of the methods described above, this dissertation contributes to scholarship by probing the ways that Indigenous peoples develop strategies to flourish in the 21st century. It does so by making novel connections between three major areas of scholarly interest: infrastructure, settler colonialism, and Indigenous temporal sovereignty. First, this work documents infrastructure's crucial role in temporal politics through the unique case study of Hokkaido. Political struggle surrounding infrastructure represents a contest over temporal sovereignty, or the ability to envision and enact particular visions of a desirable future. While the term infrastructure typically conjures images of large construction projects

such as bridges and dams, anthropologists and adjacent scholars have developed an understanding of infrastructure not merely as physical objects, but as a *process* of building stable social relationships, (Carse 2014; Choi 2021). Infrastructure is an important part of what Cross (2014) calls an “economy of anticipation” (Cross 2014), and by mediating flows of material, wealth, energy, and power, infrastructures create spatial arrangements designed to bring about desired futures (Larkin 2013; Appel *et al.* 2018). In other words, Infrastructures are “concrete instantiations of visions of the future” (Gupta 2018, 63).

While previous studies have elaborated on the temporality of infrastructure, their scope has largely been limited to built structures such as dams, canals, and water pipes (Walsh 2008; Larkin 2013; Carse 2014; Anand 2017). Instead, this research expands our understanding of infrastructure by taking its temporal dimension and role in the economy of anticipation as its starting point. If infrastructure is the way that people work in the present to bring about the futures they desire, then Ainu people working to restore human relationships with rivers be understood as doing “infrastructural work.” The very fact that such environmental relationships are not often considered in discussions of infrastructure is, I contend, itself rooted in settler colonialism. The fiction of *terra nullius* held that Indigenous people could be justly dispossessed of their land precisely because their relationships to the land—their infrastructure—were not recognized by settlers as “improving” the land. One goal of this dissertation is therefore to call for a broadening of our understanding of what infrastructure can be and to provide insight into the diversity of ways that human societies conceive of strategies to provide a better future for the next generation.

H. Preview of Chapters

The chapters of this dissertation will serve to illustrate and support my argument that rivers, as the infrastructures of Ainu sovereignty, continue to play an important role in Ainu articulations of their visions and hopes for the future. This is achieved through a narrative structure that blends historical data with ethnographic storytelling as it unfolds over the course of the chapters. In the next chapter, Chapter II, “Infrastructure and the Politics of Temporality Under Settler Colonialism,” I present an overview of the theoretical foundations that underpin my argument. In this chapter, I further elaborate on my argument that struggles over infrastructure represent contestations over temporal sovereignty and show how the stakes of these struggles are raised for Indigenous peoples living under settler colonial regimes.

Chapters III, IV, V, and VI draw our attention to Ainu relationships with rivers in the Saru River Basin. Chapter III, “The History of Settler Infrastructure in Hokkaido,” is the first of three major historical chapters that appear in this dissertation (Chapters VI and VIII are the other two major historical chapters). In it, I examine the history of infrastructure development in Hokkaido from the earliest days of Japanese colonization to the end of the 20th century, with a particular focus on social and environmental change in the Saru River Basin. I discuss the development of extractive industries in Hokkaido, their eventual collapse due to deindustrialization and neoliberalization, and the impacts felt by Ainu communities as a result of these. Through the infrastructural history presented in this chapter, I argue that settler colonialism continues define Hokkaido’s role in today’s Japan.

In Chapter IV, “River Protectors: Dam Construction and Ainu,” I examine a particular infrastructure project called the Saru River Comprehensive Development Project (SRCDP). This project found itself at the center of controversy, leading to the mobilization of local Ainu

to defend their rights. Although this movement failed to halt the construction of the project's two dams—the Nibutani and Biratori Dams—it managed to achieve what remains one of the Ainu rights movement's greatest victories. In this chapter, I show how this struggle helped set a direction for Ainu cultural revitalization and environmental preservation in the region and Hokkaido more broadly. This chapter also serves to elucidate the workings of Japan's unique system of public-private infrastructure development, known as the Construction State.

In Chapter V, “A Future From the Rubble? Restoring the Relationship Between River and Forest,” I show how the members of the Saru River Basin's Ainu community are continuing to work tirelessly to recuperate and maintain and relationships with and between ancestral lands and waters in the aftermath of dam-induced ruination. Central to this chapter is an in-depth discussion of the Biratori Dam Cultural Impact Assessment (Biratori CIA). This court-ordered study resulted in a 2006 report that extensively cataloged the environmental, socioeconomic, cultural, and spiritual impacts of dam construction on the Ainu communities living along the Saru River and its tributary, the Nukabira River. The report of the Biratori CIA was also a visionary document, setting the agenda for local government efforts aimed at environmental restoration and Ainu cultural revitalization and presaging many of today's initiatives. However, the local government's approach has not been universally accepted by the community, who critique its overly bureaucratic presentation of Ainu culture and environmental issues. Meanwhile, some local Ainu are spearheading their own environmental initiatives, highlighting an alternative approach to the government's model. Despite these differences, all of these initiatives commonly emphasize and seek to foster the intimate connection between the basin's rivers and their surrounding forests.

Chapter VI, “History of Ainu Livelihoods in the Saru River Basin,” examines historical changes in land use and livelihood strategies employed by the Saru River Ainu community, with a particular focus on cultivation, wild plant gathering, and hunting. I begin by describing what we know about life in the Saru River Basin prior to the Meiji Period. I then describe the extensive transformations that were wrought on Ainu lives by Japanese colonial land-use and agriculturalization policies, which forced Ainu to adopt wet rice agriculture. I also discuss the severe environmental impacts that the expansion of agriculture had in Hokkaido during this period. I conclude by describing how recent changes to Japan’s national agricultural policy are creating new hardships for Ainu farmers.

This focus on Ainu farmers is continued in Chapter VII, “Sowing Sarunkur Seeds: Ainu Farmers Today.” In this chapter, I describe life on Sikina Farm, the rice farm where I spent a great deal of my time during my fieldwork, working as a volunteer farmhand and living in a log cabin on the farm for more than ten months. As I personally experienced, rice farming is back-breakingly laborious and riddled with challenges, which are driven by infrastructure development and rural depopulation. To help overcome this challenging situation, local Ainu continue to rely extensively on gathering wild plants, and many in the community call for a return of Ainu hunting.

Chapters VIII and IX continue to deal with Ainu livelihoods, but the focus of these two chapters is on salmon fishing, and in particular, how Ainu salmon fishing rights are defined and understood, both historically and today. These chapters turn our attention from the Saru River Basin to the Tokachi River Basin, which finds itself at the center of an ongoing legal struggle being waged by determined Ainu activists from an organization called Raporo Ainu Nation. Chapter VIII is the third and final of this dissertation’s major historical

chapters. Here, I describe the important role of salmon in the traditional Ainu legal order and show how this legal order was undermined through Japan's unjust prohibition on Ainu salmon fishing which had devastating consequences for Ainu and salmon alike. Then, in Chapter IX, I describe the Raporo Ainu Nation's ongoing lawsuit over Indigenous fishing rights, discuss the major shortcomings of the court's ruling in that case, and show how Raporo's present appeals case represents a strong assertion of the Ainu legal order's legitimacy and relevance in the present day.

This dissertation's final chapter, Chapter X, "A More Wonderful World?" is about climate change and the increasing certainty of a hotter future. I discuss the worrying trend of increasing summer temperatures that has been observed in Hokkaido in recent years and explain how this reflects broader changes to the Earth's climate at a global scale. I then discuss Japan's response to climate change, which is characterized by an enthusiastic embrace of Hokkaido as ground-zero for renewable energy infrastructure in Japan, which is driven by the same logics that we have seen throughout Hokkaido's history. Focusing on the case studies of solar and wind energy development projects, I show how the development of renewables in Hokkaido is continuing to repeat colonial patterns and reflect on the strong critiques of renewables development expressed by the members of the Ainu community that I came to befriend during my fieldwork. Finally, I conclude by discussing visions of an alternative future that are being pursued by contemporary Ainu activists, centering on restoring the balance between people and rivers, and how attending to this relationship may to prompt the shift in values necessary to navigate the emerging polycrisis of climate change, ecosystem collapse, and rising inequality.

II. INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE POLITICS OF TEMPORALITY UNDER SETTLER COLONIALISM

A. Introduction

This research is an ethnographic study of the politics of temporality, as seen in contestations over infrastructure and natural resources between Indigenous Ainu activists and the Japanese government in present-day Hokkaido, Japan. Starting from the premise that Hokkaido is a settler colony, problematizing Japan's supposed post-coloniality, this research examines the ways that Indigenous Ainu people assert temporal sovereignty; in other words, how they claim the right to envision and enact their own futures as Indigenous people. My usage of the term temporal sovereignty expands upon Rifkin's definition as the ways that "sensations and articulations of time take part in Indigenous people's operation as politics and their pursuit of self-determination" (Rifkin 2017, 3). In settler colonial contexts, Indigenous peoples have been viewed as a so-called "dying race"—a relict of the past destined for inevitable extinction—with the future being represented in the settler (Tuck and Yang 2012; Weiss 2018). Infrastructuring—writing settler presence on the land through the construction of capital-intensive infrastructure projects—instantiates the state's claim to a settler future on Indigenous land while also being wielded as a weapon to inflict dispossession and genocide (Whyte 2018; Estes 2019; Dafnos 2020). Against this settler colonial backdrop, Indigenous activists work tirelessly to recuperate relationships of obligation to ancestral lands and waters and maintain these relationships into the future.

B. Settler Colonialism

Settler colonialism is a structure of genocidal, ecocidal, and epistemocidal violence premised on the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous land and the elimination of Indigenous peoples as sovereign entities (Wolfe 1999; 2006; Voyles 2015; Gilio-Whitaker 2020; 2021). Anthropologist Patrick Wolfe defines settler colonialism as an “inclusive, land-centered project that coordinates a comprehensive range of agencies, from the metropolitan center to the frontier encampment, with a view to eliminating Indigenous societies” (Wolfe 2006, 393). Recognizing the considerable variation across time and space of settler colonial states, he argues that they nevertheless share a common, underlying “logic of elimination,” which works to eliminate native societies and establish a new, settler society on native land (Wolfe 2006, 387). In other words, settler colonialism “destroys to replace” (Wolfe 2006, 388). In contrast to other forms of colonialism that rely on the use of native labor to extract value from the colonies (Kauanui and Wolfe 2012, 247), settler colonialism is premised on “the expropriation of land through the annihilation” of the Indigenous people (Hirano 2015, 210). As Elizabeth Strakosch (2015) explains, settler colonialism’s logic of elimination works “to replace Indigenous peoples on their land both physically and politically, and to naturalize this replacement” (19).

Wolfe defines settler colonialism as “a structure not an event” (Wolfe 1999, 2; 2006, 388); in other words, it is an active structure that continually reinscribes and reinforces claims to settler sovereignty and legitimacy. In settler colonial contexts, there is no clear historical rupture between the colonial and the post-colonial; rather, the structure of settler colonialism is “territorially acquisitive in perpetuity” (Coulthard 2014, 125). This view has been expressed by many Indigenous commentators, such as Maori education scholar Linda

Tuhiwai Smith, who writes that settler colonialism “still hurts, still destroys and is reforming itself constantly” (Smith 1999, 20). As Tuck and Yang observe, “the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence” that “is not temporally constrained in the arrival of the settler, but is reasserted each day of occupation” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 5). According to Strakosch, Indigenous presence places settler society in an “inherently problematic state, given that the settler polity asserts a complete jurisdiction over the territory and the presence of Indigenous political societies prevents this claim from being actualized” (Strakosch 2015, 45).

Historian Lorenzo Veracini (2010) argues that such reassertions are based on a “recurrent need to disavow” colonial violence (Veracini 2010, 14). Tuck and Yang call such disavowals “moves to innocence,” which “problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 3). The act of appropriating native place names and cultural symbols constitutes one move to innocence focused on imagining an Indigenous past and a settler future (Tuck and Yang 2012, 10-13). As Strakosch notes, “the settler polity asserts a complete jurisdiction over the territory and the presence of Indigenous political societies prevents this claim from being actualized” (Strakosch 2015, 45). In other words, the legitimacy of settler sovereignty relies on the complete erasure of Indigenous peoples’ pre-existing sovereignty. Indigenous Anthropologist Audra Simpson (2014) has ethnographically examined this zero-sum sovereignty struggle, writing that “in situations where sovereignties are nested and embedded, one proliferates at the other’s expense...built into ‘sovereignty’ is a jurisdictional dominion over territory, a notion of singular law, and singular authority” (Simpson 2014, 12). Because Indigenous people’s inherent sovereignty existed “prior to colonial rule, independent of it,” and “springs from a

separate source,” than settlers’ juridical conception of sovereignty, “the colonizers’ legal system simply can’t deal with that” (Kauanui and Wolfe 2012, 241). The visible presence of Indigenous peoples therefore “prompts multiple forms of settler anxiety, even if only because the presence of Indigenous peoples—who make a priori claims to land and ways of being—is a constant reminder that the settler colonial project is incomplete” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 9). In this sense, settler colonialism is “driven by a complex temporality” in which settler sovereignty is both always-already-complete and always-yet-incomplete (Strakosch 2015, 45). As Strakosch explains, “precisely because of the absolute nature of contemporary state sovereignty claims,” the sovereignty of the settler colonial state “is constantly prevented by independent Indigenous political existence from being fully itself” (Strakosch 2015, 44-45). In other words, this contradiction reveals that “settler sovereignty is a performance claiming to be an essence” (*ibid.*).

Liberal narratives of linear progress serve as a palliative to settler colonialism, positing a historical rupture between “the exclusionary, colonial past” and the “tolerant, inclusive present,” even though such a historical rupture does not actually exist (Strakosch 2015, 21). The implicit idea behind these narratives is that, as the settler state “becomes more fully liberal, it becomes correspondingly less colonial;” in other words, “there is an end-point” to settler colonialism in these narratives that is “sometimes seen as imminent and sometimes achieved” (*ibid.*). Based on this line of thinking, then, “full liberalism” is seen as constituting “full decolonization” (*ibid.*). Yet, in truth, “the progressive settler state offers inclusion as decolonization, not a choice of inclusion or decolonization (as actual return of land and jurisdiction) and certainly not inclusion and decolonization” (Strakosch 2015, 22). Thus, liberal progress narratives actually serve to buttress the settler state against moral

arguments premised on the long and ongoing history of colonial injustice. Strakosch argues that “liberal dynamics of inclusion, recognition and multiculturalism transform Indigenous people into cultural minorities and push these groups toward incorporation into the settler state” (Strakosch 2015, 23; cf. Hankins 2014). Once hailed by the state as a minority ‘other’ and equilibrated with other ‘others’, minoritized individuals are called upon to demonstrate “convincing representations” of their otherness through performances of cultural “authenticity” (Hankins 2014, 49). Such a move does important work in at least three ways: first, it implicitly positions Indigenous sovereignty as having already been extinguished; second, it legitimizes the sovereignty of the settler state by positioning it as the legitimate recognizer of authentic minority status; and third, it helps to “shore up continued access to Indigenous peoples’ territories for the purposes of state formation, settlement, and capitalist development” (Coulthard 2014, 125).

As Jodi Byrd (2011) has argued, the discourse of liberal multiculturalism presents the settler colony as a “desired state formation within which to be included” (Byrd 2011, xvii), interpellating and disciplining minoritized subjects into modes of thought and behavior that are premised on the very assumption of the settler state’s total sovereignty. In this way, liberal multicultural recognition politics are “premised on a tacit acceptance of settler colonialism that legitimates and, in fact, underpins the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous communities” (Ilewallen 2016c, 89-90). Recognition politics channel and “domesticate” Indigenous sovereignty claims (Coulthard 2014, 67). Audra Simpson is one Indigenous scholar who has offered a detailed critique of recognition politics. Her work raises “the question of legitimacy for those who are usually in the position of recognizing” and emphasizes “refusal” as an alternative political paradigm to recognition (Simpson 2014, 11).

C. Infrastructure

In a frequently cited review article, anthropologist Brian Larkin (2013) defines infrastructures as “matter that enable the movement of other matter” (Larkin 2013, 328). As Larkin explains, infrastructures are “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space” (*ibid.*) and that “mediate exchange over distance, bringing different people, objects, and spaces into interaction” (Larkin 2013, 330). Appel and colleagues (2018) likewise agree that “connection through space...is central to the working of infrastructure” and argue that “space and spatiality naturally come to mind when thinking of infrastructure’s features and effects” (Appel, *et al.* 2018, 14-15). In addition to facilitating the movement of goods and labor, infrastructures have also been seen as “political technologies to govern populations,” (Anand 2017, 14). Appel and colleagues argue that infrastructures “have been technologies that modern states use not only to demonstrate development, progress, and modernity...but also to differentiate populations and subject some to premature death” (Appel, *et al.* 2018, 5). Axes of social difference, such as “class, gender, race, and kinship are all refracted through differentiated access to infrastructure” (Appel, *et al.* 2018, 6). While the term infrastructure typically conjures images of large construction projects such as bridges and dams, anthropologists and adjacent scholars have developed an understanding of infrastructure not merely as physical objects, but as a *process* of building stable social relationships (Carse 2014; Choi 2021). Political struggle surrounding infrastructure represents a contest over temporal sovereignty, or the ability to envision and enact particular visions of a desirable future. Infrastructure is an important part of what Cross (2014) calls an “economy of anticipation” (Cross 2014). By mediating flows of material,

wealth, energy, and power, infrastructures create spatial arrangements designed to bring about desired futures (Larkin 2013; Appel *et al.* 2018). In other words, infrastructures are “concrete instantiations of visions of the future” (Gupta 2018, 63).

Parallel to the tradition of theorizing infrastructure by anthropologists, there is a second history of the term as it has been used and understood by international development planners, economists, and state agencies. William Rankin (2009) links the proliferation of the infrastructure concept to the creation of international bodies such as the International Development Agency and the World Bank following the Bretton Woods conference of 1944 (Rankin 2009, 67-69). In English-language development discourse, infrastructure’s “immediate predecessor—and in many respects its direct synonym” was the concept of “social overhead capital,” which refers to “capital that is not attributable to any one productive activity...and is shared between many individual enterprises” (Rankin 2009, 63-64). Social overhead capital emerged “as a kind of working theory among the staff at the World Bank (Rankin 2009, 64) which encapsulated “a particular theory of the state,” under which “the political division between public and private becomes secondary to (and potentially misaligned with) the economic division between overhead and productive” (Rankin 2009, 67). Another important implication is that “given the overall shift in the late 1950s towards thinking about development in terms of human beings,” planners began to “blur the boundary between material objects and social services” in their discussions of infrastructure (Rankin 2009, 69). These ways of thinking were influenced by, and in turn further influenced, the development of Keynesian economics and developmentalist state planning, which characterized the Western model of international development until the rise of neoliberalism in the late 1970s.

In the late 1970s, neoliberalism emerged as a new theory of capitalist economics and began to become hegemonic among economists and development planners. This led to a reconfiguration of the way infrastructure would be thought of and discussed by planners and economists—as well as private investors. In his book *Licensed Larceny: Infrastructure, Financial Extraction and the Global South*, Nicholas Hildyard (2016) explores infrastructure’s status in the minds of a particular class of speculators and venture capitalists as a “financial asset class”:

Ask an ordinary person in the street in any large city in the industrialized world to react to the word “infrastructure” and the reply (in so far as ordinary people even think about “infrastructure”) is likely to include “roads”, “railways”, “airports”, “bridges”, “water pipes”, “sewers”, “drains”, “lighting”, “heating”, “power stations”, “pylons”, and “internet cables.” Some might add in “libraries”, “parks”, “sports grounds”, “hospitals”, “clinics”, and “schools”. Extending the analysis beyond bricks and mortar, phrases such as “used by all”, “servicing the community”, “enhancing public life”, or “what keeps a community functioning” may emerge... Not so when investors are asked the same question. Surf the internet sites where finance talks to finance, or read the briefing prepared by City fund managers or Wall Street’s shadow bankers and a very different approach to “infrastructure” emerges... the “in” in “infrastructure investment” is not about putting money into society through improving the facilities and services that people rely on, or providing them where they do not yet exist: it is about taking money out of such facilities and services... Yield, not physical characteristics, becomes the determinant of what is or is not an infrastructure asset. Jean Perarnaud, managing director of the Private Infrastructure team at Partners Group, a tax haven-based Swiss investment management firm, captures the approach in an interview with Infrastructure Investor: “For us, infrastructure is stable, contracted cash flow for the long term.” (Hildyard 2016, 22-23; internal citations omitted)

Accompanying the neoliberal model of infrastructure investment, which focuses on the use of public-private partnerships (PPPs), financiers have developed a dizzying array of financial tools that ensure private investors benefit from public projects. PPPs often include contractual clauses that provide preferential treatment for private investors, enabling them to skim the top of the public purse in order to turn a profit from social overhead (Hildyard 2016,

34-38). Financial mechanisms like these ensure that the primary beneficiaries of PPPs always remain neither the state undertaking the infrastructure project nor the public who is ostensibly to benefit from it, but rather investors and speculators.

Even more pernicious, the use of PPPs in international development initiatives has replicated colonialist and imperialist patterns of exploitation:

this is an agenda that explicitly abandons any pretense of achieving “spatially balanced” development; that needs to treat people as mere pawns to be moved at the whim of planners; and that puts the interests of globalized business against those whose livelihoods are organized not around just-in-time delivery systems but around the collective right of all to survive. (Hildyard 2016, 84; internal citations omitted)

Infrastructure construction has disproportionately harmed Indigenous communities, who are often at the forefront of struggles against capital-intensive development projects (Oliver-Smith 1991). The cost to the environment has also been immense, driven by the shift of thinking about infrastructure as social overhead capital to infrastructure-as-asset-class and the insatiable economic need to build more and build bigger.

According to *The Guardian's* Jonathan Watts (2019), “in the time it takes you to read this sentence, the global building industry will have poured more than 19,000 bathtubs of concrete.” The gold rush presented by infrastructure PPPs creates an imperative to pour concrete at any cost, to the detriment of the earth itself: “By one calculation,” Watts writes, “we may have already passed the point where concrete outweighs the combined carbon mass of every tree, bush and shrub on the planet” (*ibid.*). Laying so much concrete is a major driver of anthropogenic climate change. From the outset of its production to its end use, the overall commodity chain of concrete contributes 4 to 8 percent of humanity’s carbon dioxide emissions, at around 2.8 billion metric tons (*ibid.*). Laying so much concrete also contributes to a “heat-island effect” in large cities that contributes to extreme weather and other

problems. Concrete production accounts for almost 10 percent of global industrial water use (*ibid.*). Yet despite the clear problems with the current use of concrete, the prognosis for a shift in priorities seems exceedingly grim. “Many engineers argue that there is no viable alternative,” at least not one that can provide the same structural strength at such a low cost (*ibid.*). One expert on concrete and other construction materials warns that “what’s important to understand is that there are no miracles here—no potential breakthrough” (Mehta 2019, 2). And of course, the environmental impacts of concrete represent only one facet of the overall environmental footprint of infrastructure construction. If we include the total amount of natural resources and energy consumed in the pursuit of infrastructure megaprojects, as well as all the instances of toxic exposure and other environmental harms associated with these projects into our analysis, the total environmental cost of infrastructure construction clearly becomes much higher.

The social and environmental costs of the neoliberal model of infrastructure cannot be ignored. The insertion of the profit motive into the delivery of needed services means that more infrastructure will continue to be built in spite of these serious problems, and without regard to any real social need. Furthermore, information about these projects will become less and less transparent, with less public oversight and more potential for backroom dealings. Indeed, the global construction industry is already well-known to be rife with corruption, graft, and other financial crimes (Watts 2019). In short, infrastructure construction has emerged as a crucial sector of financial extractivism, which Acosta (2013) defines as a mode of accumulation that emerges through the through the transfer of large quantities of resources and from colonial areas to imperial metropolises (62). Preston (2017) argues that settler colonial and racial discourses continue to structure neoliberal extractivism

in the 21st century (356). In short, this view of infrastructure as extractivism focuses on imperial (i.e., oligopolistic and perpetually acquisitive) networks that underly the extraction of monetary value from peripheral (often colonial) areas through capital-intensive construction projects (Ye, *et al.* 2020, 162-163).

Examining infrastructure construction in settler colonial contexts, Tia Dafnos (2020) defines the process of “infrastructuring” as “a biopolitical technology for regulating all aspects of life through the capacity to enable, filter, and obstruct mobilities and access to necessities, making some lives live and letting others die” (116). As Deborah Cowen has written, “infrastructure has long been central to the destruction of Indigenous life and the making of settler colonial futurity” (Cowen, n.d.). In settler colonial projects, as Kyle Powys Whyte (2018) has written, the ontologies transmitted through settler infrastructures are animated by settler colonialism’s central logic of elimination that works to erase Indigenous ontologies:

The settlers’ aspirations are to transform Indigenous homelands into settler homelands...By seeking to establish their own homelands, settler populations are working to create their own ecologies out of the ecologies of Indigenous peoples, which often requires that settlers bring in additional materials and living beings (e.g., plants, animals) from abroad. Consider US settler colonial domination of Anishinaabewaki. The US rerouted the hydrology to facilitate its own forms of transportation and water use. The US mined, deforested, and industrialized the Great Lakes Region. US settlers killed off or decimated many species and intentionally and unintentionally introduced new ones. The draining of wetlands, the development of commercial agriculture and recreational areas, and building of massive urban areas and military, chemical, oil, and gas industries transformed the ecologies of Anishinaabewaki into a US settler ecology, including states such as Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Minnesota. (Whyte 2018, 135)

Infrastructuring becomes the means by which the settler effaces Indigenous presence and re-writes his own presence onto Indigenous territory. Beyond the construction of new settler infrastructures, settler colonial infrastructuring also involves “the obstruction or destruction”

of Indigenous “infrastructural flows,” in what constitutes “infrastructural warfare” (Dafnos 2020, 116). This involves landscape transformations that prevents Indigenous peoples from accessing the “resources necessary for maintaining an Indigenous way of life” (Gilio-Whitaker 2020, 45). The destruction of Indigenous lifeways and their replacement with settler infrastructures is the linchpin in settler colonialism’s eliminative structure.

Gilio-Whitaker argues that “collusion between corporate interests and government” has been a “core process” of settler colonialism (Gilio-Whitaker 2020, 77). Nowhere is this collusion more visible than in the case of process of “infrastructuring”. Pasternak and Dafnos (2018) explain that “the securitization of ‘critical infrastructure’—essentially supply chains of capital, such as private pipelines and public transport routes—has become a priority in mitigating the potential threat” of Indigenous sovereignty claims settler colonial contexts (Pasternak and Dafnos 2018, 741). They argue that Indigenous sovereignty claims present a “potential ‘emergency’” to government and corporate interests because “the location of physical assets and circuits of critical infrastructures snaking through or near Indigenous territories” produces “uncertainty for future economic projects and investments” (Pasternak and Dafnos 2018, 749). As Pasternak and Dafnos explain, “Indigenous peoples interrupt commodity flows by asserting jurisdiction and sovereignty over their lands and resources in place that form choke points to the circulation of capital” (Pasternak and Dafnos 2018, 741). As a result of the risks they are seen to pose, Indigenous communities become targets of “state-industry collaborations to both undermine Indigenous self-determination and then manage the protest provoked by such destabilization” (Pasternak 2017, 225). Evoking James Scott (1998), Dafnos argues that “the spacemaking of infrastructure turns milieus ‘legible’,”

while the “statistical-actuarial knowledge of police power enables interventions to produce optimal conditions in the name of security” (Dafnos 2020, 16).

D. Indigenous Temporal Sovereignty

Because settler colonial states posit the completion of settler sovereignty, contemporary Indigenous peoples are seen as either “merely ‘putting off the inevitable,’ attempting to ‘preserve themselves’...even though that effort is, by definition, unrealizable due to the cataclysmic changes” brought about by settler colonial invasion; or they have “embraced these changes...and are thereby slowly but inexorably assimilating” into settler society, ceasing to be Indigenous at all (Weiss 2018, 13-14.). “In either case,” argues Weiss, “the only future open” to Indigenous people subjected to settler sovereignty “is to disappear, encompassed both literally and figuratively by the settler-colonial state” (*ibid.*). Yet, despite the fact that Indigenous peoples have faced centuries of genocidal pressure from the expansion of settler states, they have continued to exist and assert their sovereignty and self-determination. Since their first encounter with colonial invaders, Indigenous peoples have always actively resisted their elimination and have endured, contrary to settler assumptions about the inevitability of Indigenous demise as a so-called “dying race”. As Gilio-Whitaker explains, Indigenous peoples “have always had to fight to defend their lives, lands, and treaties. Resistance became a way of life a long time ago; only the tactics have changed” (Gilio-Whitaker 2020, 164). Indigenous peoples have always challenged the inevitability of a settler future and worked to bring about their own visions of desirable futures (Wallace 1956; Willow 2010; Clifford 2013; Roche 2018a). Indigenous cultural revitalization movements represent powerful interventions in the politics of temporality. By imagining and enacting

particular visions of Indigenous futurity, Indigenous cultural revitalizers reassert temporal sovereignty in ways that challenge the settler state's imagined future of liberal multiculturalism.

Settler colonialism is a future-oriented project, and settler societies have produced discourses that naturalize the particular vision of the future that settler colonialism works to bring about: namely, a future in which Indigenous sovereignty has been completely eliminated and settler sovereignty has been rendered total. While nominally pursuing paths to multicultural recognition and inclusion for Indigenous peoples, settler states continue to be animated by liberalism's teleological view of history, which posits the inevitability of Indigenous subsumption into an ever-widening sphere of settler inclusivity. Racist beliefs about social evolution and the presumed inevitability of Indigenous demise, expressed through "dying race" narratives, continue to hold major purchase on the popular imagination. Anthropology as a discipline was instrumental in lending an air of scientific legitimacy to this teleological view. Early ethnographies helped to reinforce Eurocentric ideas about Indigenous "savages" who were doomed to extinction, which served as a foil for the creation of the self-image of the West as a "utopian projection" (Trouillot 2003, 18). Anna J. Willow (2010) adds that the concern of early "salvage anthropologists" about the inevitability of Indigenous demise was "perhaps tinged with elements of self-preservation," since "if the conventional objects of anthropological analysis no longer existed, what would become of the discipline and its practitioners?" (Willow 2010, 47). In other words, early ethnographers and salvage anthropologists helped to propagate this trope in part to justify their own careers.

Against the teleological view of history embraced by both liberalism and salvage anthropology, I argue that there is nothing natural or predetermined about the trajectory of

settler expansion and Indigenous diminishment, nor has settler society triumphed as much as it imagines. Indigenous peoples are still here, and they have not fully assimilated to settler societies, as many had once assumed. Marshall Sahlins (1999) argues that true “anthropological enlightenment begins” with acknowledging how wrong the salvage anthropologists were about the presumed inevitability of Indigenous demise (Sahlins 1999, *ii-iii*). The future is never given; rather, it is actively made through both practical activity and political contestation. Political structures large and small, from settler states to Indigenous cultural revitalization movements, project particular visions of the future and work to enact those futures in accordance with particular political goals. In other words, the struggle between settler colonial structures of elimination and Indigenous peoples’ resistance to this elimination can be productively conceptualized as a political contest over the capacity to shape the future. The idea of political power as the capacity to shape the future is captured in anthropologist Jamie Cross’ (2014) notion of the “economy of anticipation,” in which “the collision of different futures produces conflict and contestation” (Cross 2014, 9-10). While the power of political economic structures like settler colonialism to influence the future is undeniably potent, they have not always succeeded in bringing about the futures that they seek. Indigenous peoples’ persistence in the face of settler colonialism’s genocidal pressures and capitalism’s appropriative pressures—what Gilio-Whitaker terms “resistance as a way of life”—demonstrates Indigenous movements’ own capacities to influence and bring about particular futures (Gilio-Whitaker 2020, 164).

Organizing and participating in cultural revitalization movements has been one important facet of Indigenous people’s resistance to settler colonialism (Wallace 1956, Willow 2010; Clifford 2013; Roche 2018a). Through these movements, Indigenous peoples

have asserted their sovereign right to engage in practices and relationships that derive from separate ethical, political, and spiritual traditions than those of the liberal settler state. Indigenous cultural revitalization movements are critical interventions in temporal sovereignty in which participants assert an Indigenous futurity through a “discursive linking of past and futures” (Clifford 2013, 28). Environmental activism has long played an important role in such expressions of Indigenous futurity, since “cultural revitalization starts with protecting the land” (Cornthassel and Bryce 2012). Contemporary Indigenous cultural revitalization movements express a radical rejection of settler colonialism’s eliminative and extractive imperatives, and as such, represent powerful efforts toward the realization of decolonized futures for Indigenous communities. Indigenous cultural revitalization movements are primarily future-oriented, articulating and working to enact a vision of the future that stands in direct conflict to settler colonialism’s own future-oriented vision of Indigenous elimination. By protecting and renewing long-held relationships with Indigenous lands and more-than-human kin—as well as between past and future generations—Indigenous cultural revitalization movements enact an *Indigenous futurity* that resists settler colonial erasure and capitalist environmental destruction.

Anna J. Willow (2010) observes that anthropological analyses of cultural revitalization movements have been “oriented primarily towards the past” (Willow 2010, 55). In contrast, her Indigenous Anishinaabe interlocutors were “much more interested in *living* revitalization than explaining it, adding that, for them, “cultural revitalization is a *forward-looking, optimistic, and ongoing* project” (*ibid.*; emphasis mine). For Willow’s interlocutors, cultural revitalization is something that “occurs where past, present, and future meet; it is a strategy enacted in the present and designed to incorporate the best characteristics of the past

into a blueprint for a better future.” (Willow 2010, 54-55). Intergenerational knowledge transmitted between past ancestors and future generations crucially informs Indigenous movements’ praxis in the present. Sociologist and education scholar Michelle M. Jacob (Yakama)—who notes that “the struggle for liberation was never *only* for the present generation” (Jacob 2013, 123)—provides an insightful illustration of the ways that Indigenous cultural revitalization movements draw on ancestral knowledge and values to envision and enact more desirable futures. Through her work with Yakama cultural revitalization activists, Jacob describes how, by “holding fast to traditions but working for change, activists create *new methodologies* to carry on traditional cultural practices” (Jacob 2013, 6; emphasis mine).

Joseph Weiss’s (2018) incisive ethnography of the community of Old Masset in Haida Gwaii (British Columbia, Canada) provides a great deal of insight into the ways that Old Masset residents link their ideas of tradition to ongoing projects of future-making. According to Weiss, “future-making...includes not only various modes of imagining, anticipating, aspiring to, avoiding, structuring, and materializing possible futures but also ways of reading the past and refashioning the present ‘retroactively’” (Weiss 2018, 21). This engagement with the past, as living history open to contemporary reinterpretation, challenges the inevitability of settler futurity. In other words, Indigenous temporal sovereignty is aspirational, in that it “emerges in discourse as people talk about how things are and how they should be, as they assert what will certainly happen in defiance of other possibilities, make claims and offer criticisms, make plans and voice hopes” (Weiss 2018, 191). The view of Haida future-making afforded by Weiss’s study reveals Indigenous futurity as an assertion of temporal sovereignty that “unsettles” settler and liberal notions of history and teleology (Weiss 2018,

184). In doing so, temporal sovereignty “carries the potential for the strategic reiteration of the settler present, shifting its realities even as it reinscribes them” (*ibid.*). According to Weiss, Haida future-making is so unsettling because it challenges “the possibility that there could be any single, coherent settler future” (Weiss 2018, 190). But the significance of Indigenous futurity is greater still because of the potential it presents for conceptualizing and enacting futures not only for Indigenous society, but for settler society as well. As Weiss explains, because Haida people have been “incorporated within the Canadian settler state,” they “have no choice but to make futures for it” (Weiss 2018, 190). In other words, “in Haida future-making we find the implicit assertion that Haida people can make futures that address the dilemmas of Haida and settler life alike” (*ibid.*).

In Old Masset, as in many Indigenous communities around the world, both overt struggles over sovereignty as well as more subtle, lived practices of cultural revitalization and future-making congeal and become especially visible through struggles over land, resource access, and infrastructure. Indigenous people’s struggles for environmental justice have taken on new prominence as more and more members of settler society begin to recognize and take seriously the existential threats posed by racialized energy capitalism, such as climate change, desertification, and irradiation. In this sense, struggles like these—which I gloss as “Indigenous environmental justice struggles”—give the “nightmare futures of environmental collapse a frightening immanence” as “not just futures that threaten the erasure of Indigenous peoples under settler colonialism” but also “the erasure of settler society itself” (Weiss 2019, 190). Viewed in this way, then, Indigenous environmental justice struggles are important to consider not only as important facets of Indigenous cultural revitalization, but also as providing glimpses of alternative ways of conceptualizing

sustainable infrastructure. Although Schlosberg (2013) argues that “the environmental justice movement brought indigenous perspectives on the relationship between human beings, non-human nature, and culture into the conversation” (Schlosberg 2013, 39), other scholars have critiqued environmental justice as being overly focused on distributive justice, the idea that environmental costs and benefits must be meted out equally among the different racial groups. As environmental sociologist David Naguib Pellow (2021) argues

a focus on environmental injustice primarily through a distributional lens runs the risk of missing entirely the myriad forms of racial hegemony that have historically tended to operate through and rely upon the simultaneous degradation of human communities and ecosystems. In other words, the distributional paradigm tends to focus on the symptoms of environmental injustice while overlooking its underlying driving forces, for example, the ideological and cultural work that defines certain populations and ecosystems as pollutable—or ‘wastelands’. (Pellow 2021, 2; citing Voyles 2015)

Gilio-Whitaker (2020) stresses that “for environmental justice to be responsive to the needs of Native peoples it must be indigenized—tailored to account for their very different histories, relationships to the land, and political relationships to the State” (Gilio-Whitaker 2020, 150). She also writes that environmental justice “must transcend the distributive, capitalist model” and instead “reflect a restorative orientation” (Gilio-Whitaker 2020, 32-33). In other words, “justice for Indigenous peoples is about restoring balance in relationships that are out of balance” (Gilio-Whitaker 2020, 33).

E. Conclusion

As shown in this chapter, political struggle surrounding infrastructure represents a contest over temporal sovereignty, or the ability to envision and enact a desirable future. While the term infrastructure typically conjures images of large construction projects such as bridges and dams, anthropologists and adjacent scholars have developed an understanding of

infrastructure not merely as physical objects, but as a *process* of building stable social relationships. By mediating flows of material, wealth, energy, and power, infrastructures create spatial arrangements designed to bring about desired futures. Under the settler colonial logic of elimination, political struggle over infrastructure takes on a new dimension, as infrastructure becomes a means of materializing settler control over Indigenous land and erasing Indigenous presence. Yet Indigenous peoples have not been eliminated, but continue to fight for control over their own destinies through infrastructure-based activism. In so doing, Indigenous activists envision and enact futures in which a life of Indigenous flourishing and abundance for future generations is rooted in ancestral relationships to native lands and waters and the more-than-human agents who inhabit them. As we shall see throughout this dissertation's remaining chapters, rivers have served as the rallying points around which Indigenous Ainu people have come together to form communities and fight for their rights. Attending to the deep relationships that contemporary Ainu people continue to articulate can prompt us to rethink our understanding of infrastructure and help us re-evaluate what it might mean to work toward a brighter, more abundant future.

III. A HISTORY OF SETTLER INFRASTRUCTURE IN HOKKAIDO

A. Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the ways that the island of *Yaun Mosir* was transformed into Hokkaido through a sustained project of Japanese settler colonialism lasting more than four hundred years. Specifically, I show how the construction of settler infrastructures was central to the process by which Hokkaido became incorporated and naturalized as a part of Japan. I begin by describing the earliest settler infrastructures established on the island by the feudal Matsumae Domain. I then examine the intensification and securitization of infrastructure construction in 19th century in response to geopolitical concerns, along with the role of forced labor in this process. I then turn to a discussion of extractive industries in Hokkaido, including logging and mining, centering on Biratori Town in the Saru River Basin, before ending with a discussion of the effects of neoliberal deindustrialization in the late 20th century.

Michele Mason (2012) argues that “the formation of the modern nation-state that is now known as Japan was not a foreordained destiny but was created out of a crucible of conflict,” rejecting revisionist readings of history that presuppose “the existence of the Japanese nation-state before the process of appropriating the island” of Hokkaido (Mason 2012, 4; 23). In actuality, Japanese expansion northward during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) and the establishment of a colonial economy in Hokkaido during the Meiji period (1868-1912) “contributed to the discursive and material creation of the modern Japanese nation and empire” itself, and was crucially important for “eliminating opposition, consolidating state and military power, and molding national-imperial subjects” (Mason 2012, 4; 55). Sidney Xu Lu (2019a) argues similarly that, as “modern Japan’s first colonial

project, the colonization of Hokkaido in early Meiji revealed how the processes of nation-making and empire-building were intertwined” (Lu 2019a, 524).

Conventional narratives about the history of Hokkaido’s colonization have tended to strongly emphasize a pioneer narrative of peaceful migration and benevolent technological transfer from the Japanese heartland to the northern island. In actuality, modernization and development efforts in Hokkaido initiated under Japanese colonialism had devastating effects on both the natural environment and the Ainu people who relied upon it. Mason writes that, to many Japanese today, the settling of Hokkaido is a “story of how a great nation-state called Japan extended the fruits of its superior civilization—advanced technology and industry, political acumen, and moral fortitude—to the northern hinterland” (Mason 2012, 146). Although documents from the Meiji period (1868-1912) unambiguously used the term *takushoku* (J: colonization, settlement) to refer to Japan’s activities in Hokkaido, the state’s official narrative has used and continues to *kaitaku* (J; “opening up,” *i.e.*, cultivation, development), a seemingly apolitical term that sidesteps thorny political issues such as the exploitation of nature and the dispossession of the Ainu (Siddle 1996, 51; lewallen 2007, 521). Historian Pia Maria Jolliffe (2019), citing fellow historian Philip Seaton, writes that “*kaitaku* is a euphemism that masks processes of colonial appropriation” (Jolliffe 2019, 5), building on Seaton’s argument that “prevailing national narratives weave Hokkaido’s complex and fraught history into a seamless tale of Japan’s modernization that favors a lexicon of development (*kaitaku*) and progress (*shinpou*) over colonization and conquest” (Seaton 2016, 52).

Historians like Jolliffe and Seaton insist that such a revisionist history, which views Hokkaido as an inalienable territory of the Japanese nation, remains the “dominant narrative”

in Japan, which defines Japan's imperialist period as beginning with Japan's annexation of Taiwan in 1895 (Joliffe 2019, 2-3). In this way, the island that would eventually be named Hokkaido came to be "considered part of Japan's legitimate sphere of influence, its "colonial status...routinely ignored" (*ibid.*). Historian Sakata Minako (2018) writes that, while "the Japanese had regarded Hokkaido as their territory...based on the doctrine that places inhabited by the Ainu were Japanese," in reality "the Japanese government found itself obliged to introduce strategies similar to those used by Western countries in their colonies" (Sakata 2018, 116). Tellingly, Japanese intellectuals of the Meiji (1868-1912), Taisho (1912-1926), and early Showa (1926-1945) periods, such as Nitobe Inazou, considered Hokkaido as a colonial holding alongside other territories such as Taiwan, Sakhalin, and Korea (Sakata 2018, 110). Although Japan's 1945 surrender to Allied Forces on the heels of two devastating atomic attacks by the United States is typically imagined as heralding the end of Japan's age of colonialism, since it was forced to give up most of its other colonial territories, Hokkaido remained under Japanese control and "continued to be administered through quasi-colonial structures" (Siddle 1996, 8). Anthropologist ann-elise lewallen (2016c) argues that this fact helps to "reify and further instantiate Japan's claims to Hokkaido and Okinawa as legitimate constituents of the nation," (lewallen 2016c, 3). Such claims obscure the legacy of settler colonialism, which "continues to manifest as mental, emotional, and, increasingly, verbal and physical forms of violence" today (lewallen 2016c, 6). In a similar vein, international relations scholar Nagai Fumiya (2019) writes that, "because of the 'myth' that all the Japanese colonies were liberated...Japan's colonial rule on Hokkaido has rarely been acknowledged in the Japanese society" (Nagai 2019, 250). In sum, although the

contemporary development narrative considers colonialism in Hokkaido to have ended, “settler colonialism inside Japan continues” (Iwawaki 2016c, 3).

B. The Earliest Settler Infrastructures

The island of *Yaun Mosir* comprises one part of *Ainu Mosir*—the homeland of the Ainu people since time immemorial—together with *Yanken Mosir* (A: Sakhalin; J: *Karafuto* in Japanese) and *Rutom Mosir* (A: the Kurile archipelago, J: *Chishima*) in Japanese, an area disputed between Russia and Japan, which stretches to the southern tip of the Kamchatka Peninsula) (Kitahara 2021). Although *Yaun Mosir* was treated as *terra nullius* by Wajin colonists, archaeological evidence suggests that human habitation of the area stretches back at least 20,000 years, to when the island was still attached to continental Asia (Hirano 2023, Irish 2009, 16; Siddle 1996, 26-27). Beginning in the 15th century, *Yaun Mosir* came to be known by Wajin as *Ezo ga shima* (J: the island of the northern barbarians) or, simply, Ezo. As early as the 17th century, the importance of Ezo’s natural bounty to the economy of the emerging Japanese polity was undeniable. The Matsumae Domain, the feudal realm established on the southern tip of the island, obtained a variety of products through trade with the Ainu, including animal skins and eagle feathers; pharmaceuticals such as kelp and bear gall-bladders; trade goods from mainland Asia such as Chinese silks; and live hunting hawks, which were an important status symbol to the samurai rulers of feudal Japan (Walker 2001, 39; 93-94; 100-102). The island’s mineral resources such as lead, zinc, copper, sulfur, and gold were particularly valuable to the Matsumae, who established mines in *Ezochi* to extract these resources (Irish 2009, 49; Walker 2001, 82). Similarly, fisheries products such as salmon, herring, and sardine were also of high importance, as fishmeal fertilizer was

commonly used to fertilize agricultural fields throughout Honshu (Irish 2009, 49; Howell 1995, 2; Siddle 1996, 36). In the early years of colonization, the area under Wajin control was known as *Wajinchi* (J: Wajin land), which encompassed only the southernmost tip of the island's Oshima Peninsula. Meanwhile, the majority of the island remained under Ainu control, and was known as *Ezochi* (J: barbarian land). This denomination referred to a cultural idea, rather than a specific geographic area, as the boundaries of *Ezochi* shifted over time (cf. Howell 2005).

In 1550, Kakizaki Suehiro (a predecessor of the Matsumae domain) negotiated an agreement with the Ainu leaders Hasitaynu and Cokomotaynu, which established that the Wajin's sphere of influence would be restricted to the southern tip of the Oshima Peninsula (Miyajima 1998, 48).¹⁶ Prior to Wajin incursions into the island, the Ainu had been a military force to be reckoned with: indeed, Ainu of *Yanken Mosir* (Sakhalin) and *Yaun Mosir* (Hokkaido) united in alliance and successfully held back Kublai Khan's invading army for three years (1284-1287) before finally being defeated (Miyajima 1998, 38). However, intense cultural changes experienced by the Ainu during the period after Wajin settlement began seems to have resulted in a gradual destabilization of Ainu society, to the point where the Matsumae clan's northward expansion rarely met with any organized resistance, despite the finding of an 1804 Matsumae survey that Ainu had acquired firearms through trade with Russia (Miyajima 1998, 41). Historian David Howell (1995) has written that "Hokkaido has always straddled a physical, political, and intellectual boundary, its status as Japanese territory both conditional and suspect" (Howell 1995, 16). Early Japanese maps depicted

¹⁶ Although most rational observers would call this agreement a treaty, it is not considered a valid treaty under current Japanese law because the present Japanese state did not exist when the treaty was agreed to, or so it is argued. This enables the Japanese state to continue to avoid facing its obligation to recognize Indigenous rights.

Ezochi as a *terra incognita* which lay outside the northernmost territories of the feudal polity (Walker 2001, 1-3). Even the Matsumae lords themselves considered the island to be a foreign land, as evidenced by Matsumae Kimihiro's 1618 boast to a visiting Jesuit missionary that "Matsumae is not Japan" (Siddle 1996, 35-39).¹⁷ It was not until the comprehensive mapping and surveying work conducted by Edo-period geographers such as Mogami Tokunai (c. 1788-1808) Matsu'ura Takeshirou (c.1845-1858) that *Ezochi* began to become legible to Wajin administrators, laying the groundwork for the construction of the earliest settler infrastructures in *Ezochi* (Walker 2001).¹⁸



Image: Offerings laid before a statue of the Ainu resistance fighter, Shakushain, on the day of his annual memorial ceremony and festival in Shizunai-Shibechari.

¹⁷ For further evidence of the distinction between Matsumae and the rest of Japan, fans of the Great American Novel might consult Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, which lists "Matsmai" (Matsumae) alongside "Nippon" (Japan) and "Sikoke" (Shikoku) (Melville 1971 [1851], 506).

¹⁸ Matsu'ura is noteworthy for expressing an unusually high degree of compassion and respect for Ainu compared to his Wajin contemporaries (Iwawaki, in Grunow, *et al.* 2019; Hirano, in Grunow, *et al.* 2019). Iwawaki notes that Matsu'ura's writings contain rare direct testimony from Ainu during this period (Iwawaki, in Grunow, *et al.* 2019, 607-608). Matsu'ura's compassion notwithstanding, the geographic knowledge gained from Matsu'ura's maps and writings were ultimately indispensable to the settler colonial dispossession of Ainu lands.

Japan's history of infrastructure construction dates back hundreds of years. Some of the earliest major infrastructures were the street grids of Nara and Kyoto (Kerr 2002, 36), along with several ancient dams that were built to support irrigated rice agriculture. Some of these dams are over 1,000 years old, including the Kaerumataike Dam on the Yodo River in Nara Prefecture, which dates to around 200 CE and continues to be used today (Öhman 2016, 63; Jansen 1983, 18). Dozens of large earthfill dams taller than 15 meters in height were constructed prior to Edo period (1603-1868), including the 32-meter high Daimonike Dam in 1128 (Jansen 1983, 20). Feudal lords enlisted corvée labor and commanded efforts to build fortifications and reroute rivers (Brown 2013, 97). After 1603, the Tokugawa regime in Edo (present-day Tokyo) implemented political reforms that “improved rulers’ ability to undertake more and larger public works projects” than previously possible (*ibid.*). Japan’s private construction industry began to emerge during this period (Woodall 1996, 33-34).

While infrastructure construction enabled the centralization of political power throughout the Japanese heartland, it also helped project this power outward, toward peripheral territories it was keen to incorporate into the emergent Japanese nation-state. The Matsumae were responsible for establishing the earliest Japanese settler infrastructures built in *Ezochi*. These early infrastructures, which included prison camps and contract fisheries, were sustained through the use of forced labor. After Shakushain’s War of 1669—a major conflict between the Matsumae authorities and an alliance of Ainu and Wajin living in *Ezochi*—guard posts and fortifications were established on the marches between *Wajinchi* and *Ezochi*, and movement between the areas was severely restricted (Howell 2005, 130). In response, Ainu also built fortifications in the border regions, called *casi* (A: palisades). Over time, this border area crept steadily northward and eastward as Wajin settlement in southern

Ezochi continued to increase (Walker 2001, 43). As Miyajima writes, “by 1684, there was a trading post near present day Wakkanai; by 1754, on the island of Kunashir; and by 1790, on Sakhalin” (Miyajima 1998, 70). In the 18th century, Matsumae authorities established a network comprised of arrest houses (J: *rouya*) and enclosed labor camps for criminals and vagrants (J: *ninsoku yoseba*), which “had the declared intention of conditioning their inmates to the wage labor system through monotonous work processes” (Jolliffe 2019, 18-19). Through contracts signed with private enterprises, prison labor became increasingly profitable, and its use in infrastructure construction would continue until the late 19th century (Jolliffe 2019, 20). Alongside these early prisons, the Matsumae set up contract fisheries (J: *basho ukeoi*) along at river mouths throughout *Ezochi*, conscripting Ainu as slave-laborers (Irish 2009, 51). In order to compel them to work in the fisheries, Ainu were prohibited from raising crops and from buying seeds and farm tools (Irish 2009, 50). The high demand for wood products at the fisheries drove the deforestation of *Ezochi*’s wilderness, which in turn contributed to environmental hazards such as serious erosion and landslides (Howell 1995, 55-56). The terrible exploitation Ainu faced at the *basho ukeoi* had devastating consequences for marine and riparian ecologies and precipitated the breakdown of the Ainu’s traditional legal order, which centered on rivers (this is discussed in greater detail in Chapter VIII). Forced Ainu labor also prefigured the Japanese government’s later use of forced prison labor after 1868 (see Section E below).

The *General Overview of Various Places in Eastern Ezo*, a document which describes conditions in the regions surrounding contract fishery sites in the early 19th century, states that the Saru District was “a place with a large population of Ainu but scarce resources” and that “although salmon ascend the Saru River... they are extremely few” (Biratori Town 2006,

99). The amount of production of the Saru fishery is listed as approximately 900 koku annually, among the lowest of all the sites in the Hidaka region.¹⁹ This is likely because, by the time the report had been written, the basin had already been heavily exploited for decades by the contract fishery at the mouth of the Saru River, the Saru Basho. The famous explorer and cartographer, Matsu'ura Takeshirou, made three visits to the Saru Basho, in 1845, 1856, and 1858 (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 10). During his last visit, he observed that 31 percent of the Saru Ainu population had been conscripted as laborers for the fishing grounds in Saru, Akkeshi, and Yufutsu, which were all contracted to a Wajin merchant named Yamada Bun'emon (Biratori Town 2006, 97-98). Matsu'ura wrote that "all the capable Ainu adults from the Saru River area, both men and women, had been indentured" (Miyajima 1998, 63).²⁰ Ainu villagers were forced to walk more than 350 kilometers to Akkeshi "in silence...under threat of swords," (Kayano 1994, 32-33). Kayano Shigeru's grandfather, Totkaram, was one of the Ainu conscripted for the fisheries. Kayano has written about his heart wrenching story in his memoir, *Our Land Was a Forest* (Kayano 1994, 27-34). His grandfather went so far as to mutilate and poison himself in his attempts to escape the fishery at Akkeshi.

C. Geopolitics, Securitization, and Rivers in the 19th Century

In 1799, in response to the appearance of Russian explorers in the North Pacific, the Tokugawa Shogunate in Edo claimed sovereignty over *Yaun Mosir* from Matsumae Domain,

¹⁹ One *koku* equals approximately 180 liters. The production figures for this period, as listed in the "General Overview," are as follows: Saru - 900 *koku*, Niikappu - 600 *koku*, Shizunai - 2,000 *koku*, Mitsuishi - 1,000 *koku*, Urakawa - 1,700 *koku*, Shamanai - 2,000 *koku*, Horoizumi - 3,000 *koku* (Biratori Town 2006, 99).

²⁰ According to Matsu'ura's records, forty-three out of the one hundred and sixteen villagers from the *kotan* (A: villages) of Nibutani, Pipausi, and Kankan were conscripted (Kayano 1994, 27-34; Irish 2009, 193). Peng and Geiser (1977), citing Kaizawa (1971), put this figure at forty-six people (Peng and Geiser 1977, 199).

and the entire island fell under the central government's direct administration (Howell 2005, 133; Siddle 1996, 37; Ziomek 2014, 497). However, by 1821, for various reasons related to domestic affairs, the Shogunate had lost interest in managing the island and administration was returned to the Matsumae Domain once more (Ziomek 2014, 497). Then, in July of 1853, a fleet of "black ships" (J: *kurofune*) under the command of US Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in Edo Bay to demand the opening of Japanese ports. Perry's gunboat diplomacy triggered Japanese officials' interest in solidifying the government's control over peripheral territories, including *Ezochi*. In an 1854 treaty negotiated between the US and the Shogun, Tokugawa Iesada, Japan agreed to open two ports to foreign ships, one of which was the port of Hakodate on *Ezochi*'s southern tip (Blaxell 2009, 2). The Shogunate posted a governor to Hakodate, which Blaxell (2009) argues was "an early sign of the importance [the island] would assume in Japanese national projects" of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (*ibid.*). At this point, the central government in Edo took over direct control of the island from the Matsumae "and implemented a largescale assimilation policy" on the Ainu (Jolliffe 2019, 4). In 1855, the border between *Wajinchi* and *Ezochi* was formally dissolved, and Wajin were permitted to permanently settle in the former *Ezochi* (Irish 2009, 116).

Even after being officially claimed as Wajin territory, however, the island of *Yaun Mosir* was still viewed as existing outside of Japan proper. In 1856, for example, one Shogunate official argued that Ezo was merely "a country under the reins" of the Edo polity, rather than an inherent part (Walker 2001, 41). In the wake of the brief but decisive Boshin War in 1868 and the restoration of the Meiji Emperor to political power, the island was formally annexed and incorporated as part of the nascent nation-state of Japan. In 1869, Ezo was renamed Hokkaido (J: northern sea route). Michele M. Mason explains that the name

“Hokkaido” was chosen for its association with the Heian period (794-1185) cosmological concept of *gokishichidou* (J: five provinces and seven highways), which centered on the imperial court in Heian (present-day Kyoto). This naming served the function of reinforcing the centralized authority of the new Meiji regime over Hokkaido by linking this authority to the “invented tradition” of a mythic imperial past (Mason 2012, 24-25; cf. Hobsbawm 1983; Siddle 1996, 53). In this way, discursive links to ancient Japanese infrastructure served as a legitimizing narrative expressing control over the island by the newly formed Japanese state.

In the decades after 1868, the Meiji regime’s Hokkaido policy was organized around the singular goal of national modernization. The island’s rivers found themselves as a central target of the government’s ambitions. Rivers had already been important to Wajin colonization since its earliest days, providing the pathways by which Matsumae authorities were able to begin mapping and governing *Ezochi* (Watanabe and Ito 2024, 2). But Hokkaido’s rivers were powerful, and presented a major challenge to the designs of settler technocrats. Many of Hokkaido’s largest river systems flow through low-lying areas prone to cyclical flooding, which provided the basis for the rich ecosystems upon which Ainu livelihoods had relied. One major flood of the Ishikari River in 1898 caused widespread damage and killed 112 people (Suzuki, *et al.* 2013). Floods like these presented a crisis for Hokkaido’s colonial authorities, and in response, the authorities intensified their efforts to control Hokkaido’s rivers in the early 20th century, rerouting and channelizing river courses and damming major rivers with enormous hydropower dams and minor streams with small erosion control dams. Japan’s control over Hokkaido was in many ways materialized through its control over the island’s rivers.

Watanabe and Ito (2024) argue that Hokkaido's rivers were "transformed into infrastructure" by early Wajin settlers, and in the process, they "contributed to the shaping of the institutions, strategies, and practices of territorial control" in Japan's colonial territories (Watanabe and Ito 2024, 1). "While rivers moved people and goods," they write, "people also moved rivers through construction projects (*ibid.*). Focusing on the case study of the Kushiro River during the Meiji period, they argue that rivers were transformed "from a landform of cosmological significance to a pliable water infrastructure," a process which "required the state to first usurp the local river-based territoriality" from the Ainu and "render the river into an inert object of technocratic management" (Watanabe and Ito 2024, 1; 3). In so doing, they "estranged local communities from their life-worlds and disrupted vital ecological processes essential for a thriving habitat." This process led to the dissolution of the Ainu people's traditional legal order and is examined in detail in Chapter VIII.

D. The Influence of Anglo-American Settler Colonialism

While Hokkaido's natural resources would provide the material fuel for Japan's rapid industrialization in the late 19th century, it was at the center of an ideological transformation that was heavily influenced by Anglo-American settler colonialism. Japanese officials began to be influenced by this ideology through official state visits by Meiji officials to the US and the influx of new information and ways of thinking from abroad (Lu 2019b, 13-14). Historian Eiichiro Azuma (2019) writes that, by the late 19th century, the "American frontier myth, and the teleological narrative of national expansion, progress, and racial ascendancy that it extolled, had begun to take hold in modern Japanese consciousness rather seamlessly". As Lu explains,

Informed by the experience of Anglo-American settler colonialism and this new concept of land ownership, Japanese expansionists considered it the natural right of the Japanese, members of a civilized and industrious race, to participate in the imperial scramble for *vacuum domicilium* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (Lu 2019b, 14)

To carry out their plans to achieve parity with the industrialized West through the rapid modernization of new Japanese nation-state, the Meiji government established the *Kaitakushi* (J: Hokkaido Colonization Commission), which enacted sweeping reforms designed to develop the wilderness of Hokkaido into fuel for industrialization and to encourage Wajin settlement. Although the *Kaitakushi* was dismantled in 1882, the policies and practices it helped to establish have had a lasting impact on Japan's project of settler colonialism in Hokkaido (Lu 2019b, 40).

During the period of *Kaitakushi* administration, Hokkaido's population quadrupled and the area of cultivated land increased twenty-five-fold (Irish 2009, 124). The *Kaitakushi*'s land reforms, along with imported diseases such as smallpox, measles, and tuberculosis triggered intense demographic shifts in Hokkaido. Between 1871 and 1909, the population of Wajin in Hokkaido increased from 160,000 to 1.5 million, while the Ainu population dropped from an estimated 66,618 to below 18,000 (Hirano 2015, 203-204).²¹ Efforts were primarily focused on exploiting and exporting Hokkaido's natural resources to fuel capitalist accumulation in Japan's urban core. This objective was made explicit by Kuroda Kiyotaka,²² hired to be the *Kaitakushi*'s director in 1870, with his assertion that "Hokkaido is Japan's coffer" (Mason 2012, 128). Ainu were dispossessed of their lands through forced land seizure

²¹ Most Wajin towns, railways, roads, and ports in Hokkaido were built between 1900 and 1920 (Himiyama 2002, 223-224). The rate of Wajin settlement would remain high until the 1920s, when the colonization of other locations, such as Manchuria, Taiwan, and Korea, "diverted some of the energy for Hokkaido development overseas" (*ibid.*).

²² Kuroda Kiyotaka was a general during the Boshin War who led pro-imperial forces in the Battle of Hakodate. He would later go on to become Japan's second Prime Minister in 1888.

as well as assimilationist land tenure policy (Siddle 1996, 90-91). The Ainu's Indigenous land use was not recognized as constituting true ownership (Hirano, in Grunow, *et al.* 2019). Major land reforms enacted by the *Kaitakushi* in 1872 and 1877, as well as its successors in 1886 and 1897, defined all of Ainu territory as *terra nullius*, resulting in the near-complete dispossession of Ainu land by the Japanese government (Hirano 2023a; 2023b; 2024; Mason 2012, 69; Peng, *et al.* 1974, 731).

As has been argued, Japan's colonization of Hokkaido was profoundly influenced by Anglo-American settler colonialism. One major booster of Japanese settler colonialism in Hokkaido—and, later, elsewhere throughout the Pacific Rim—was Tsuda Sen, founder and editor of the *Kaitakushi*'s biweekly periodical, *The Development Journal* (J: *kaitaku zasshi*) (Lu 2019b, 46).²³ In his publications, Tsuda used “the legend of the Mayflower pilgrims” to encourage Wajin settlers “to connect their lives with the very destiny of the Meiji empire” (Lu 2019b, 47). He argued that “the soil of Hokkaido was as rich as that of the United States, and their climates were equally suitable for farming” and predicted that “soon an ‘America’ would emerge from the Japanese archipelago” (*ibid.*). Significantly, in the very first issue of the journal, Tsuda emphasized the view that Hokkaido was “no longer the land of Ezo” (Lu 2019b, 50), which serves as an indicator of the process of naturalizing and legitimizing Japan's claim to the island.

In 1871, Kuroda hired more than forty American bureaucrats and frontiersmen to help oversee the *Kaitakushi*'s colonization programs in Hokkaido. Historian John Hennessey (2020) describes the extensive collaboration between the *Kaitakushi* and US advisors as a “colonial trans-Pacific partnership,” for many of these advisors had been key figures in the

²³ The *kaitaku zasshi* ceased publication in 1882, only two years after being founded by Tsuda.

US westward expansion in the mid-19th century. Today, these Americans are still regarded as important figures in Hokkaido's pioneer narrative and, in addition to the infrastructures of settler colonialism that they helped establish that remain standing, statues and monuments to them can be visited in Sapporo and throughout Hokkaido. US advisors helped to inaugurate an era of radical simplification and legibility (cf., Scott 1998) by introducing comprehensive topographical and geological surveys; promoting Western scientific agriculture; building roads, railroads, and dams; developing coal mines; and establishing Sapporo Agricultural College, which later became Hokkaido University. Among the most notable foreign experts hired by the *Kaitakushi* was former US Agriculture Secretary Horace Capron, who was personally recommended for the position by President Ulysses S. Grant and who had firsthand experience directing Indian removal, having forcibly relocating Creeks, Delawares, Kickapoos, Shawnees, Tonkaways, and others to Oklahoma (Irish 2009, 145; Hirano, in Grunow, *et al.* 2019, 603). Based on this experience, Capron wrote of the “close similarities between the ‘primitive’ Ainu and the ‘savage’ Native Americans” and viewed Japanese settler colonialism as “an act of spreading civilization and making better use of the land” (Lu 2019a, 533).



Image: Painting by Kubo Mamoru of Kuroda Kiyotaka (front left) and Horace Capron (center) planning the colonization of Hokkaido. Akarenga Building, Sapporo.

Capron's earliest advice for the development of Hokkaido involved a thorough land survey, the establishment of a private property system, the creation of a machine factory, the hiring of additional foreign farmers to act as advisors, and the development of industries such as coal mining and industrial-scale livestock ranching, notably at Niikappu in the Saru River region, which would later become the Niikappu Imperial Ranch (Hirano 2015, 201-202; Miyajima 1998, 105). During his time, Horace Capron was widely acknowledged as a primary architect of Hokkaido's colonization and received many accolades, including from the US ambassador to Japan, John Armor Bingham, who in 1876 wrote a telling description of Capron's unsurpassed role in the Japanese settler colonial project in Hokkaido:

It may be truly said that there was no State in Yesso [Ezo] in the sense that men constitute a State, when you took charge of that Island and it may also be said that when you left it, a State was formed and what is essential to a State inaugurated by you, the introduction of the industries and the appliances which will secure food, clothing and shelter to a nation. (Harrison 1951, 142)

As the leader of the *Kaitakushi*'s US contingent, Capron had personal input in selecting many of the other US advisors hired by the agency. Other noteworthy Americans who worked for the *Kaitakushi* included rancher Edwin Dun, who was hired by Capron to establish Niikappu Ranch; mining expert Benjamin Smith Lyman, who laid the groundwork for Hokkaido's mining industry and surveyed potential hydropower sites throughout the island; civil engineer A. J. Warfield, whose excessive drinking and terrorization of local Ainu were well known; medical expert Stuart Eldridge, who established a hospital, a medical school, and Japan's first medical journal; railroad engineer Joseph Crawford, who supervised laying the first rail tracks in Hokkaido; and mechanical engineer N.W. Holt, who planned some of the earliest large dams and hydroelectric power stations on the island. William S. Clark, who had previously founded Massachusetts Agricultural College (which later became University of

Massachusetts at Amherst), was brought on to lead Sapporo Agricultural College (which later became Hokkaido University). Clark's famous appellation, "Boys, be ambitious," continues to be a popular slogan connoting the "pioneer spirit" of Hokkaido, appearing everywhere from t-shirts to road signs (Irish 2009, 143-153). Western advisors like these facilitated the transfer of "authoritative" colonial knowledge acquired through US westward expansion, and helped to disseminate Anglo-American settler colonial ideology throughout the young state of Japan. In this way, Japan's administration of Hokkaido was shaped in the image of Anglo-American settler colonialism. This influence served to transmit the techno-scientific knowledge necessary for the construction of ambitious infrastructure projects, such as large dams, railroads, highways, and petrochemical facilities.

From 1881-1882, the *Kaitakushi* become embroiled in a financial scandal involving the attempted sale of assets to Kuroda's close associates for less than 3 percent of their value (Jolliffe 2019, 6). Political unrest led to the Kuroda's resignation and the complete dissolution of the *Kaitakushi* in 1882.²⁴ After the agency was disbanded in 1882, most of the foreign experts returned home and the administration of Hokkaido's colonial development was carried out by their Japanese successors (Irish 2009, 159). In 1886, the Hokkaido prefectural government was established and took charge of Hokkaido colonization initiatives. The prefectural government's approach "placed the importation of private capital at the center of its colonial policies" (Lu 2019a, 537-538). This "inflow" of capital resulted in a "wave of land-grabbing," which in turn led to "the formation of a big-farm economy similar to the agricultural model in the United States," and "most of the explored lands in Hokkaido

²⁴ Though disgraced by his involvement in the scandal, which led to the *Kaitakushi*'s downfall, Kuroda's political career made a remarkable comeback after he was appointed Minister of Agriculture and Commerce in 1887 and became Prime Minister of Japan in 1888.

were soon claimed by a small number of wealthy landlords, many of whom lived in Tokyo, while the majority of the local population were turned into agricultural laborers” (*ibid.*).



Image: Hokkaido settlers, circa 1912. Historical Museum of Urahoro Town.

E. Japanizing Settler Colonialism: The Family State Ideology

Although the influence of Anglo-American settler colonialism was strongly felt in Hokkaido thanks to the foreign experts discussed above, placing undue emphasis on their contributions runs the risk of obscuring the ways that Meiji leaders were cultivating and imposing their *own* theories of colonial rule over the Ainu and their lands. In addition to enacting policies designed to increase economic productivity and cement the centralized administrative control of the state, the Meiji regime actively promoted a nationalist ideology of “one nation, one people, and one language” (Maruyama 2016, 90). In order to naturalize the new regime’s rule over the Japanese archipelago, the Meiji-era thinkers propagated the idea of a consanguineous Family State (J: *kazoku kokka*) that “bound the people of the Japanese Empire biologically through a theory of bloodlineage” (Bresner 2009, 36).

In his seminal treatise on nationalism, Benedict Anderson (2006) observes that nationalism is at once objectively modern and while also being ideologically rooted in

antiquity (Anderson 2006, 5). In Japan, this essential contradiction was nowhere more apparent than in the figure of the Emperor himself, who Sidney Cheung (1997) argues was presented as “the ancient man made modern” (Cheung 1997, 260). Images of the emperor, dressed in a Western-style military uniform, were widely disseminated after the introduction of photography in Japan, which “made the invisible and holy emperor a visible and powerful figure” that “represented the modernization of Meiji Japanese society” (Cheung 1997, 260-261). At the same time, the figure of the Emperor also suggested the antiquity of the Japanese nation, by virtue of his membership in a lineage that was held to proceed directly from the gods of mythic times.

Adopting the Family State ideology as a metaphor for society, Meiji leaders argued that Japan was “a spatially unified nation of one extensive family on a cohesive and progressive march through time” (Jacobson 2008, 171). According to this scheme, the Emperor was both a father-figure to the Japanese people and the pinnacle of social advancement (Siddle 1996, 14). According to Jacobson (2008), the Family State ideology “allowed for the suppression of agitation from below” by channeling subjects’ loyalties toward the Emperor and the state (Jacobson 2008, 172). Japan’s colonial enterprise in Hokkaido was “intimately connected” to the creation and propagation of the Family State as an ideological framing (Mason 2012, 35). In Hokkaido, the Family State ideology was articulated through a concept that Mason (2012) calls the “trinity of prosperity,” which described a supposed “inherent alignment of interests and shared destinies” of Hokkaido settlers, the Emperor, and the state (Mason 2012, 32-33). Settlers were interpellated as “emissaries of Japanese modernity” and were called upon to subordinate their “individual interests to those of the nation and the empire” (*ibid.*). The Family State ideology was further

reinforced by visits to Hokkaido by the Emperor and members of the Imperial Family, such as a 1912 visit by Crown Prince Yoshihito (later, Emperor Taisho) and the 1922 visit of Emperor Showa (Siddle 1996, 93).



Image: Painting of Crown Prince Yoshihito crossing the Toyohira River during his 1912 visit to Hokkaido. Houheikan, Sapporo.

The Ainu, meanwhile, were interpellated as “*sekishi*” (J: “children of the Emperor”), a term used to refer to subjects of the Imperial Family State. The kanji reading of *sekishi* includes the characters *seki* (red) and *shi* (child). This combination of characters can also be read as “baby” or “infant,” reinforcing the paternalistic and infantilizing qualities of *sekishi* when used to refer to Imperial subjects as “children of the Emperor.” Although Ainu *sekishi* were formally equal to Wajin *sekishi* (Hirano 2024, 128), they were understood as being especially backward and infantile, were thought to possess “deficient notions of property ownership” as “immature beings who could not reap the benefits of the land,” and were therefore seen as being in need of the state’s strict guidance and “protection” (Hirano 2024, 135). Hidden beneath the veneer of discourse extolling the Emperor’s “impartial compassion” for his subjects were ideas of Social Darwinism and racial hygiene that were

adopted and adapted from Western thinkers. As Hirano (2024) argues, the “narrative of ‘impartial compassion’ obscured or justified the ideology of racism rooted in social evolutionism and concealed the underlying mechanics of settler colonial dispossession of Indigenous peoples and destruction of their mode of life” (Hirano 2024, 128).

Such a mindset was enshrined into Japanese law in the 1899 Hokkaido Former Natives Protection Act, which remained the primary law governing Ainu affairs in Japan for nearly a century. The law describes the Ainu as “former natives” (J: *kyuu dojin*) who “have only basked in the light of imperialization for so long” and possess a low level of “intellectual development” (Hirano 2024, 127). Commenting on the dire situation of Ainu under Japanese rule, the law states that

Once more we are seeing the law of nature—the survival of the fittest—at work, and though this should not come to us as a shock, these natives are above all his majesty’s children (*sekishi*). Now to witness them sink to such depths of despair, we should...eliminate this calamity and alleviate this poverty by way of suitable industries, preservation of life, as well as the creation of families...[this] is the duty of the nation, that is, to follow his majesty’s idea of treating them with impartial compassion. (Hirano 2024, 127)

Hirano argues that “the logic of dispossessing the lands and livelihoods of the Ainu” was presented as an “imperial blessing,” an expression of “impartial benevolence” toward the Ainu people by their concerned father, the Emperor (Hirano 2024, 135). But Article 10 of the Protection Act granted the Hokkaido Prefectural Office the right to manage all Ainu communal properties, including the right to sell or allot them to Wajin settlers, which resulted in rapid dispossession and exacerbated the conditions of poverty that the law was supposed to alleviate (this process is discussed further in Chapter VI). In other words, the ideology of the Family State was an important way in which the leaders of the new state of Japan made Anglo-American-style settler colonialism palatable to Japanese hearts and minds.

F. The Role of Forced Labor

After the end of the Boshin War in 1868, although Hokkaido's development was certainly one of the Meiji government's top priorities, it also faced "more immediate and pressing crises at home," including deciding how to deal with the large number of "disgruntled and impoverished former samurai," or *shizoku*, from the war's losing side (Mason 2012, 33). It was ultimately decided that many of these former samurai were to be resettled to the newly annexed Hokkaido, serving the dual purposes of developing Hokkaido's vast land area and suppressing potential sources political dissent (Irish 2009, 119; Mason 2012, 33). *Shizoku* who would not submit to the government's migration program were sent were sent to modernized prison facilities called *shuujikan* (J: "gather and control prisons") alongside hardened criminals and other political prisoners (Sakata 2018, 117; Jolliffe 2019, 34). Five *shuujikan* facilities were established in Hokkaido, compared to just three throughout the rest of Japan: Kabato (1881), Sorachi (1882), Kushiro (1885), Abashiri (1890), and Tokachi (1895) (Jolliffe 2019; Mason 2012, 93-101). The stated goal of these facilities, according to Japan's Interior Minister, Itou Hirobumi,²⁵ was to "promote the convicts' rehabilitation and improvement, provide a stable life in sparsely populated Hokkaido, and have them reclaim a life of independence" (Mason 2012, 96). Yet Jolliffe argues that "no concerted effort" was made rehabilitate prisoners or reintegrate them into the society (Jolliffe 2019, 72). Jolliffe attributes this failure to "the strong focus on the employment of prison laborers during the course of colonization" (Jolliffe 2019, 72; cf., Sakata 2018, 118). Convict labor from Hokkaido's *shuujikan* provided an important source of virtually unpaid labor, which was indispensable for the rapid development of the island's

²⁵ Itou would later go on to become Japan's first Prime Minister in 1885.

infrastructure. Sometimes working alongside Ainu laborers, convicts provided the bulk of the labor force performing the most strenuous and dangerous work involved in building roads, bridges, railways, and dams, in addition to working in Hokkaido's coal mines (Mason 2012, 96; 127; Irish 2009; 136; Jolliffe 2019, 49). Home minister Itou was explicit about the potential for convict labor to fast-track development projects: by "putting the deported convicts' labor power to practical use, [and] applying it to the development of Hokkaido, we will exploit the nation's natural resources" (Mason 2012, 95). An official named Kaneko Kentarou, who was dispatched to Hokkaido by Itou in 1886, wrote a missive that exposes the cynical logic behind the use of convicts for colonial development. In it, he states:

If common laborers are hired for these extremely arduous tasks and are unable to bear the workload, we will be in a situation where wages will rise to a very high level. For this reason, prisoners from the prefectures of Sapporo and Nemuro should be relocated and deployed here. These are rough hoodlums by nature, and if they are unable to bear the work and are broken by it, then the situation is no different than that of common laborers, who leave behind wives and children, and whose remains must be interred in the ground... If they are unable to bear it and perish then it is, in light of today's situation, in which reports are made on the extreme difficulty of funding prisons, to be considered a politically strategic reduction of these persons that can take place in no other way... In the case that prison labor is used, a great portion of the cost of development would be saved in comparison to the use of common laborers. This I call killing two birds with one stone! (Jolliffe 2019, 54-55)²⁶

Kaneko's missive displays a cold rationality that treats death as an "economic calculation factor," (Jolliffe 2019, 56). Finance Minister Matsukata Masayoshi,²⁷ meanwhile, proposed permanently settling prisoners and prison personnel in Hokkaido, writing hastily in 1881 that "if we promote the plan that they should, in the long run, settle here and provide for

²⁶ Jolliffe notes that Kaneko "likely learned the strategy of using convicts for hard labor and thus counteracting labor shortages from his brother-in-law Dan Takuma, the future managing director of the Mitsui Corporation. After studying in the US, Dan ran the coal mine in Miike (Fukuoka) from 1884, which had been using forced laborers since 1873" (Jolliffe 2019, 56).

²⁷ Matsukata would later go on to become Japan's fifth Prime Minister in 1891.

themselves, we will also meet the goals of the national economy, and can kill two birds with one [stone].” (Jolliffe 2019, 39).

Between 1881 and 1894, convicts were a primary labor force in rural development: felling trees, leveling fields, digging ditches, constructing roads, and mining coal and sulfur (Jolliffe 2019, 11; 19; 34; 41). Jolliffe estimates that 1.75 million hectares of forest and swamp land were cleared by convicts (Jolliffe 2019, 40-41). Their work also included polishing rice, woodworking, bricklaying, and home repair for wealthy families (Jolliffe 2019, 19). In 1888, Sorachi inmates were used to construct water mains, a dam, and irrigation works in Ichikishiri, making it only the second place in Japan to boast a modern water main (Jolliffe 2019, 49).²⁸ In addition to facilitating land reclamation and infrastructure construction in the Ishikari Plain—today, Hokkaido’s major breadbasket—Sorachi inmates were also employed in coal mining in mountainous Horonai. In 1883, only 60 prisoners were working at the Mitsui Corporation’s Horonai Mine, but by 1888, up to 78 percent of the mine’s workers were Sorachi inmates; on average, a thousand Sorachi inmates worked in the mine from 1886-1894 (Jolliffe 2019, 60; 77). This enabled Mitsui “to deliver the cheapest possible coal to the Asian markets,” enabling it to compete with British coal (*ibid.*). Hokkaido’s coal was shipped abroad from major ports in Hakodate and Muroran (Edgington 2012, 487). Work in Horonai mine was dirty and hazardous: from 1883-1891, an estimated 81 inmates died and another 3,301 were injured while working in the mine (Jolliffe 2019, 62). Okada Asajirou, a Tokyo University physician who visited Horonai mine in 1893, wrote that “he who enters this mine, an inimical danger equal to a tragic and gruesome arrow,

²⁸ Jolliffe also writes how, in 1982, “a chance discovery of similar water mains in Tsukigata proved that such lines had also been built by prisoners from Kabato Prison, although the exact construction date is not clear” (Jolliffe 2019, 49).

advances into the kingdom of death” (Jolliffe 2019, 61). In 1894, with the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, Horonai’s coal production rose to 18,979 tons, most of which was shipped abroad for the war effort (Jolliffe 2019, 61).

The Kushiro region, meanwhile, was home to extensive, high-quality sulfur deposits and when operations were transferred to the Yasuda Corporation in 1877, the company looked to “the cheapest possible prison labor” in order to reap the highest profit (Jolliffe 2019, 62). In 1885, the Kushiro *shuujikan* was opened, and inmates were put to work building the infrastructure necessary to modernize sulfur production and transport. They cleared more than 218 hectares of land and built a refinery complex with at least 500 buildings, along with several kilometers of road, railroad, and telephone line, as well as thirteen bridges (Jolliffe 2019, 52; 63-64). Kushiro inmates also established a wet rice agriculture experimental station and widened the Kushiro River channel for shipping (Jolliffe 2019, 52; 63-64). By 1887, 42 prisoners had died, more than half suffered from dropsy and malnutrition, and “there was not a single prisoner or guard who was not affected by sulfur gas in some way” (*ibid.*). At Kushiro, Jolliffe writes that

A prisoner would often simply collapse from lack of nourishment or exhaustion, only to be given a ‘*coup de grâce*’ by the sword of an especially cruel guard, put down like an animal. Such incidents were cloaked in euphemisms such as ‘accidental death by fall’ or ‘death due to an escape attempt,’ (Jolliffe 2019, 64)

In part because of public outcry over such inhumane conditions, Kushiro Prison was closed in 1901, only 16 years after it had opened.

In 1890, 50 Kushiro prisoners were transferred to Abashiri, who set about building prison facilities there, and in 1891, an additional 1,200 inmates were sent to Abashiri Prison to begin construction on the Central Highway between Abashiri and Kitami (today’s Route

39) (Jolliffe 2019, 65). This route was seen as possessing a “crucial military function,” which resulted in “pressure to complete the project within a single year” (Jolliffe 2019, 67). In less than 8 months, prison laborers from Abashiri built 163 kilometers of road, a grueling pace of work that claimed the lives of 211 inmates (Seaton, in Jolliffe 2019, xv). Prison labor was used to retrofit the Abashiri Bridge to accommodate steamboat passage, and inmates were also hired out to the settlers in Kitami on private contracts (Jolliffe 2019, 66). In 1891, 600 inmates from Abashiri and Sorachi were transferred to Tokachi and put to work clearing 3,600 hectares of land (Jolliffe 2019, 70). By 1895, when the Tokachi Prison building was completed, prisoners had already cleared another 3,000 hectares of farmland, built 44 kilometers of road, and carved out the Karikachi Pass, with at least one inmate dying in the process (*ibid.*). During this time, the island continued to function as a “lucrative satellite economy” for the rest of Japan, which was dependent on Hokkaido foodstuffs, lumber, and minerals (Mason 2012, 116).

As public support for prison labor began to shift in at the turn of the 20th century, the number of inmates sent to Hokkaido *shūjikan* began to decline, prompting prison bureau official Ishizawa Kingo to lament that “we will have difficulties to accomplish projects in the next fiscal year” and that “land clearing will get much more behind” (Sakata 2018, 118). In 1904, extramural prison labor was abolished (*ibid.*). While the penal transportation system was abolished in name in 1908, the government continued to send long-term prisoners to Hokkaido, though this was now seen as imprisonment on the mainland (Sakata 2018, 124). In this way, the prison economy in late 19th-century Hokkaido contributed to laying the discursive groundwork for the naturalization of Wajin settler presence and Ainu erasure. In short, Hokkaido’s colonial development was instrumental to the development of the capitalist

economy within Japan, and served as “the model for virtually all of Japan’s extractive empire” throughout the Pacific region prior to WWII (Mason 2012, 114-115).

G. Extractivism and Deforestation: The Hokkaido Timber Industry

Hokkaido’s vast stretches of primordial forest made for a convenient testing ground for the Meiji administration’s new policies, such as its forestry reform in 1870, which designated 200,000 hectares of forest as “suitable for clearing” and auctioning to private interests—though this practice of sale was later halted in 1873, thanks in part to the influence of prominent Meiji statesman Oukubo Toshimichi, who had become enamored with the German model of state forestry after a trip to Berlin (Aoki 2019, 259). Henceforth, the Meiji government held title to all forest lands unless villagers could prove prior ownership (Aoki 2019, 260). This policy resulted in the state retaining control of 9 million hectares—a full third of Japan’s total forest area (*ibid.*). A logging industry rapidly developed in Hokkaido, which provided construction materials and fuel to Wajin settlers as well as for export to Japanese and Chinese timber markets (Irish 2009, 140, 219, 224). Deforestation—which had already become a problem even before the Meiji restoration due to the high demand for wood products at the *basho ukeoi*—intensified after 1868, as millions of trees were felled to clear land for agricultural fields and Hokkaido’s growing Wajin towns (Howell 1995, 55-56; Simmons 1973, 284; Irish 2009, 130; Lie 2001, 91). Deforestation during this period caused severe floods, which frequently damaged Ainu farmers’ fields and contributed to their food insecurity (Maruyama 2012, 66-67). Additionally, the construction of dams altered the flow regimes of Hokkaido’s rivers and streams and contributed to sedimentation and river channeling that, combined with industrial pollution, added additional strain on salmon

populations, which were already undergoing decline due to overfishing (Irish 2009, 297; 322). The vast availability of Hokkaido timber contributed to a construction boom throughout the rest of Japan. New Western construction techniques were being introduced by engineers from Europe and the United States. According to Woodall (1996), it was during this period that “the country’s first true construction contractors” began to operate (Woodall 1996, 33-34). Indeed, many of contemporary Japan’s largest construction companies were founded in the Meiji Period, including Obayashi Corporation, Taisei Corporation, Kajima Corporation, Kumagai Gumi, and Nishimatsu Corporation—the latter of which would go on to build the Nibutani Dam more than a hundred years later.

Logging began in the Saru River region in 1783, when lumber merchant Hidaya Kyuubee started using the river mouth as a base for harvesting and exporting timber (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 142). Logging in Biratori intensified in the early 20th century, and by 1904, logs were floated down the Saru River for processing and shipping in a practice known as log driving (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 77). In log driving, logs that were cut upstream were piled up to dam the water, before releasing it all at once and forcing the logs far downstream (Kaizawa 1999a, 30). This practice caused flooding during heavy rains. A settler named Tanizaki Konijirou²⁹ owned and operated a lumber mill, where he purchased timber and floated it 104 kilometers down the Saru River to the sea, where it was shipped for use in shipbuilding, construction, and making matchsticks, railroad ties, baseball bats, and other commodities (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 142).

²⁹ Because I have only seen this person’s name written in textual sources, without *furigana*, I have been unable to confirm its English reading, but this represents my best guess.



Image: Scale model depicting log driving on the Saru River. Historical Museum of the Saru River.

In 1906, the Okuyama Matchstick Factory was established in Sarufuto (present-day Miyagawa), marking the start of the modern timber industry in the Saru River Basin. The region's white poplar trees (J: *doronoki*) were particularly popular for making matchsticks (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 52). Biratori's standing timber resources were sold to the Mitsui Corporation, which began full-scale logging of an area that extended from Biratori-Honcho until well into the foothills of the Hidaka Mountains. Logs continued to be driven down the Saru River to be sent to Honshu for construction. To aid in timber transportation, Mitsui laid a railway line from Mukawa to Tomakomai, where ground had just been broken on the construction of the Oji Paper Mill (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 142). By 1909, Oji Paper was harvesting coniferous trees in the Saru Basin, and the mill opened in 1910 (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 142). Meanwhile, Wajin continued to settle in the Saru River. Charcoal production and lumber operations flourished from the beginning of the Taisho Period in 1912 to the early Showa Period in the 1920s (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 104).

In 1913, Okuyama Matchstick Factory stopped harvesting white poplar for matchsticks because they had become increasingly rare, turning instead to other timber varieties (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 52). By 1921, most of the

“giant oak trees” along the Saru River had been felled (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 134). Driven by the logging industry, the Tomakomai-Sarufuto-Tomikawa line of the Tomakomai Railway opened in 1913 (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 81), and the Saru Railway opened in 1922 (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 81; 93). By 1936, Mitsui owned the largest private forest in Biratori by far, at 6,079 hectares (Biratori Town 2006, 113). As the Asia-Pacific War intensified, demand for timber and pulp production for use in aircraft and shipbuilding, with targeted species including Ezo spruce, Sakhalin fir, Japanese oak, Japanese white birch, Japanese horse chestnut, Chinese ash, and Japanese walnut (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 52). By 1941, severe deforestation was having negative effects on streams and fish (Biratori Town 2006, 421).



Image: Loggers of Biratori Town, circa 1912. Historical Museum of the Saru River.

By around 1954, log driving on the Saru River had mostly ceased, due to interest in hydropower development (although it continued to be practiced on some upstream tributaries), and the logging industry had largely shifted to truck transport, facilitated by the expansion of the road network (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 77). Log driving finally ceased in its entirety in the Saru Basin after 1967 (Biratori Town Nibutani

Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 77). Hokkaido's timber industry peaked around 1975, when approximately 14 million cubic meters were harvested for lumber, charcoal, and paper, most of which was sold on the Japanese market (Shimotori and Takahashi 1986, 165-166; Shimotori 1975, 32). Such wanton felling would prove to be unsustainable, further driving the deforestation of Hokkaido's natural forests. The share of natural forest in Hokkaido sharply declined, as timber companies planted fast-growing species like larch (J: *karamatsu*) to replace old-growth forests. By 1986, planted forest accounted for 1.4 million of the island's 5.6 million hectares of forest cover (Shimotori and Takahashi 1986, 167). Because of the overexploitation of timber, forestry specialists in the late 1980s argued that it "cannot be denied...that the forests of Hokkaido are growing poorer both quantitatively and qualitatively (Shimotori and Takahashi 1986, 167).

Geographer Himiyama Yukio's (2002) analysis of land use change in Hokkaido provides a striking picture of environmental transformation during the post-war years. Between 1955 and 1985, the area of "settled land" in Hokkaido—that is, land occupied by townships or cities, increased almost five-fold (from 310 km² to 1,470 km²) (Himiyama 2002, 226-227). During that same period, dry field agricultural land increased by twenty percent (from 8,670 km² to 10,400 km²), while paddy field used for wet rice farming increased by a more modest twelve percent (from 2,410 km² to 2,700 km²) (Himiyama 2002, 229-230). Due to agricultural and urban development, total forest cover in Hokkaido decreased by five percent in that thirty-year period (from 59,190 km² to 55,930 km²), a figure which Himiyama characterizes as "astonishing," since "in Japan as a whole forest area increased" (Himiyama 2002, 230). Hokkaido's broadleaf forests, in particular, experienced a "sharp decline" since 1955 due to agricultural development, urbanization, and the planting of

fast-growing coniferous trees, mainly larch, fir, and spruce (*ibid.*). Himiyama emphasizes that Hokkaido's forests are declining "not only in biospheric value, but also in economic value due to ill management," (Himiyama 2002, 231). Wetland, which was once found widely throughout Hokkaido, decreased by thirty percent (from 870 km² to 630 km²) (Himiyama 2002, 231; Nakamura, *et al.* 2002, 73-74). Despite this remarkable decrease, Hokkaido's wetlands still accounted for 90 percent of all wetlands in Japan during this period (*ibid.*). Such rampant deforestation created the conditions for catastrophic landslides and floods, which the government would later seek to control through large dam construction (as discussed in Chapter IV).

H. Boom and Bust: Postwar Development and Deindustrialization

In 1945, Japan emerged from the end of Second World War to widespread destruction, which had been caused by the Allied forces' bombing campaign against civilian centers such as Tokyo, Yokohama, Osaka, and Nagoya, and culminating in the unprecedented use of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the aftermath, Japan's construction industry was mobilized to rapidly rebuild critical economic and social infrastructures, contributing to a postwar "reconstruction boom" that peaked in 1947 (Woodall 1996, 35-36). In the post-war period, Hokkaido continued to function as an important satellite economy, providing a much-needed source of food and forest products to the devastated Japanese heartland (Irish 2009, 259). To ensure a steady stream of such goods and to strengthen Japan's border against the USSR, the planning and implementation of capital-intensive construction projects resumed a few short years after the war, with the founding of the Hokkaido Development Agency (J: *hokkaidou kaihatsu chou*) in 1951 (Irish 2009, 291). While proposals to form such an organization in 1947 had met with resistance from the

Allied Occupation government, Saunavaara (2018) notes that “the perception concerning the necessity of a unit which would coordinate the comprehensive development of Hokkaido did not disappear,” and ultimately the “discordant occupiers” consented to passing the Hokkaido Development Law (J: *hokkaidou kaihatsu hou*) in 1950, which called for the creation of the agency (Saunavaara 2018, 41; see also Saunavaara 2014, 135). The Hokkaido Development Agency later became the Hokkaido Development Bureau (J: *hokkaidou kaihatsu kyoku*) after the law was amended in 1956 (MLIT 2008a). In short order, the Bureau issued plans for a series of projects, which involved increasing the island’s population; expanding its production in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries; and constructing infrastructure (Irish 2009, 291). Since the passage of the Development Law 1950, nearly 10 percent of Japan’s annual budget for public works has gone to funding projects in Hokkaido (Maruyama 2013, 75).

Coal mining in Hokkaido reached its peak in the recovery period after the war, with the island’s approximately 250 mines employing more than 100,000 workers in 1961 (Irish 2009, 295). Hokkaido’s timber industry also continued to grow after the war, peaking in the mid-1970s with around 14 million cubic meters harvested for lumber, charcoal, and paper, most of which was sold on the Japanese market (Shimotori and Takahashi 1986, 165-166; Shimotori 1975, 32). To support Hokkaido’s extractive industries, facilities such as steel plants and pulp mills spread rapidly along the coastal belt between Hakodate and Tomakomai, initially incorporating only minimal controls for wastewater and frequently being sited without consideration for the environment (Simmons 1973, 288). Apart from the publicly sponsored development of these major industries, smaller-scale private sector projects were also being pursued in the mid-1970s with little oversight from the Japanese government, including the construction of small erosion control dams (J: *sabou damu*), even

in protected areas (Simmons 1973, 268). Post-war agricultural development mainly followed in the footsteps of early efforts by the *Kaitakushi*, with many of the crop varieties and livestock originally introduced by Western experts in the late 19th century still being raised today. Just as during the prewar period, most goods produced in Hokkaido are exported to the Japanese heartland. In this way, Hokkaido continues to function as a colonial economy within Japan. The Japanese economist, Taira Kouji (1983), scathingly critiqued the government's land use policies in Hokkaido, writing that

The basic image of Hokkaido in the Japanese government's land utilization policy even today is no different from that which characterized the initial colonization policy...the institutions, procedures and habits of thought and action bred of decades of colonization efforts and colonial administration under Tokyo's direction are still in force. (Taira 1983, 1-2)

Despite Hokkaido's natural bounty and its importance to Japan's national economy, its people continue to lag behind the rest of Japan's citizenry in key economic and social indicators. As a result, in the 1980s, it was "not unusual to hear some Hokkaidoites say that the Japanese government has wasted enormous resources to promote a wrong development policy in Hokkaido, producing a dependent colonial economy incapable of standing on its own feet" (Taira 1983, 4). Today, "all inhabitants of Hokkaido are marginalized and disadvantaged in contemporary Japan as a result of persisting economic, political, and civil disparities" (Mason 2012, 183). The island's per-capita income remains below the national average, and in 2006, unemployment in Hokkaido rose despite a decrease at the national level (Irish 2009, 326). Hokkaido's inhabitants must also cope with the island's higher medical costs compared to the rest of Japan (Irish 2009, 330). Relative to the rest of Hokkaido's inhabitants, the Ainu have especially faced socio-economic hardship. Post-war reforms instituted by the Allied Occupation, including revisions to the 1899 Hokkaido

Former Natives Protection Act in 1946 and 1947, abolished tax exemptions on Ainu allotments and ended welfare measures, such as the provision of agricultural supplies and medical services (The Former Natives Protection Act and Ainu allotments are discussed in greater detail in Chapter VI) (Siddle 1996, 149). Additionally, thanks to the 1946 passage of the Agricultural Land Readjustment Law (J: *nouchi chousei hou*) and the Special Law for the Creation of Freeholders (J: *jisakunou-sou tokubetsu sochi hou*), 1,271 Ainu farmers lost the lands they had been allotted under the 1899 Protection Act, amounting to a staggering loss of thirty-four percent of arable land held by Ainu throughout Hokkaido (Siddle 1996, 149-151).³⁰ As of 1987, only 1,360 hectares of Protection Act allotments remained under Ainu ownership (Siddle 1996, 185; Maruyama 2016, 103). Ainu also have a harder time finding employment and completing their education than the rest of Hokkaido's inhabitants (Advisory Council for Future Ainu Policy 2009, 15; Nakamura 2015a, 664-665). In 2008, the number of Ainu households receiving public assistance was one-and-a-half times higher than the Hokkaido average and two-and-a-half times higher than the national average (Advisory Council for Future Ainu Policy 2009, 16). Similarly, of the approximately seventeen percent of Ainu people who attend university (compared to a national average of forty-seven percent), about one in five ends up dropping out—a rate nine times higher than the national average (Irish 2009, 211; Nozaki 2011, 65-68; OECD 2014, 1). Iewallen (2016c) argues that “higher education is simply beyond the grasp of most Ainu families,” although recent scholarships and programs like Sapporo University's Urespa Club have made significant strides in this regard (Iewallen 2016c, 218; Honda 2015; Uzawa 2019).

³⁰ In Hidaka, the region where Biratori Town is located, the figure was thirty-two percent (Siddle 1996, 149-151).

Neoliberal deindustrialization after the oil crisis of the 1970s added additional pressure on Hokkaido residents. Extractive industries such as coal mining, timber production, and ocean fisheries have all declined since the 1970s (Irish 2009, 327). Ninety percent of Hokkaido's coal mines were closed and around 380,000 people moved away from Hokkaido's mining towns in the late 20th century (Irish 2009, 296; Cutler 1999). Hokkaido's steel industry also experienced cuts in the wake of the oil crisis, as well as the 1985 spike in the value of the Japanese yen (J: *endaka*), which contributed to the depopulation of Hokkaido's steel towns. For example, Muroran, the home of Japan Steel Works, shrank by fifty percent from its peak of 183,600 people in 1968 to only 94,000 in 2010 (Edgington 2012, 477; 488). Between 1975 and 1990, almost 4,000 steelworkers lost their jobs, and unemployment in Muroran rose from around two percent to more than seven percent (Edgington 2012, 491; 493). As a result of the collapse of the steel industry, the city of Muroran has been pursuing a variety of infrastructure projects using public works funds in order to revitalize the local economy but it remains to be seen whether these efforts can stem the city's continuing shrinking and aging population (Edgington 2012, 504; 509).



Image: Painting of a Hokkaido coal mining town, circa 1950. Yubari Coal Mine Museum.

Biratori Town also experienced its share of pain due to deindustrialization with the collapse of the local chromite mining industry. This industry had its roots in the Meiji period and contributed to a booming economy in inland Biratori Town that lasted for a few decades before ultimately succumbing to market pressures and being shuttered completely. Official settlement of Wajin in the Saru River region began in 1870, with the arrival of 146 settlers from Sendai. Most settled near the mouth of the river, in present-day Tomikawa, but some settled near Ainu *kotan* in present-day Biratori Town, including two households in Nina and seven households in Biratori-Honcho. From that point on, Wajin settlers from places like Iwate, Yamagata, and Awaji Island began to arrive in waves (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 23). While settlers in the early Meiji period were often poor, in the late 1880s, the government shifted its settlement policy to encourage the migration of private capital to Hokkaido. In 1887, Hokkaido Governor Iwamura Michitoshi told fellow officials at the All-Hokkaido District Chiefs' meetings that "from now on, we will only settle wealthy people in Hokkaido" (Biratori Town 2006, 106). In 1888, a Wajin settler named Hatta Manshirou³¹ received government land leases for livestock farming and chromium mining operations in Biratori but the chromium would not begin to be mined there for more than thirty years (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 134).

By 1899, the Ainu were still the majority in Saru River Basin, at nearly eighty percent, although the Wajin population would continue to increase steadily as settlers began to build infrastructures and set up industries (Biratori Town 2006, 110-111). In 1909, an area near present-day Nukibetsu, along a tributary of the Saru called the Nukabira, was surveyed for a colonial land plot map (Biratori Town 2006, 109-110). There was a peak in colonial

³¹ Because I have only seen this person's name written in textual sources, without *furigana*, I have been unable to confirm its English reading, but this represents my best guess.

land division in the Biratori Town around this time (Biratori Town 2006, 110). By 1912, settlers were arriving as far inland as the Memu district (near the present site of the Biratori Dam) and around fifteen Japanese-style houses could already be seen in Nibutani (*ibid.*; Kaizawa 2010, 252-253). Between 1910 and 1918, while Ainu were still the majority in the villages of Nibutani and Nioi, the relative size of the Ainu population in the rest of Biratori declined by thirty percent (Biratori Town 2006, 112). In 1921, roads suitable for carrying chromium ore by horse-drawn carriage started to be built along the Saru River, connecting inland villages like Nioi, Furenai, and Horokeshi (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 134). The mining of high-grade chromite in the Saru region began around 1926, and by 1930, it was being mined in the Nukabira River Basin. (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 64). The Saru region's chromite mines enjoyed prosperity, despite high national unemployment in 1930s (*ibid.*). By 1936, the Biratori Chromite Mine at Niseu employed sixty-six workers (*ibid.*). Thanks to the Japanese military's need for chromite in the buildup to the Asia-Pacific War, this workforce grew to one hundred thirty workers by 1940 (*ibid.*).

Although the Niseu mine's workforce declined after Japan's surrender in 1945, it (Biratori Town 2006, 134), it later picked up again with the onset of the Korean War, reaching its peak in 1951, when it supported two hundred fifty-nine workers and a thriving community of more than one thousand people. (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 64-65; 134). By 1952, at least three other chromite mines were also operating in Biratori Town (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 65). This industrial expansion was facilitated by a new wave of Wajin settlement after 1945. War returnees and evacuees were settled in Biratori Town via offices and programs like the Hokkaido Collective

Returnee Reception Headquarters and the Northern Development Farming Corps (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 107). One notable example is that of the so-called Tokyo Pioneers who, from 1945, began settling in Memu in inland Biratori (*ibid.*). The Tokyo Pioneers steadily grew throughout the late 1940s and formed their own agricultural cooperative in 1948, and by 1954, more than one hundred households had settled in Memu, including twenty-four war-displaced households (*ibid.*).

But the Saru region's chromite mines began to be closed in 1954 (Biratori Town 2006, 134), and in 1961, trade liberalization and the import of cheap ore further contributed to the decline of the chromite industry (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 71). By 1963, only one chromite mine remained in operation, employing only eight workers (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 65). The population of the Tokyo Pioneers continued to decline with the advent of *gentan* (J: rice acreage reduction) policies in the 1970s (these are discussed in greater detail in Chapter VI). In 1975, their agricultural cooperative was dissolved and merged with Biratori Town's main agricultural cooperative (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 107). Memu's elementary school was shuttered in 1992 due to low population, and by 2002, only thirty-four households resided in Memu. As of 2019, only one household descended from the original Tokyo Pioneers remained in Biratori Town (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 105-107).

I. Conclusion

In this chapter, we reviewed the history of settler infrastructure construction in Hokkaido, from the earliest days of the Matsumae Domain, to the neoliberal era of the late 20th century. Throughout this entire period, the island that was once known to the Ainu as *Yaun Mosir* was continually pillaged by rapacious capitalists and used as a resource frontier

for the emerging nation of Japan. In order for the island of Hokkaido to be made into Japanese territory, it had to be subjected to the modernist order of the state. Hokkaido's wild nature was to be tamed and harnessed to provide fuel for capitalist industrialization and the enrichment of the imperial core. The use of forced labor was treated as essential to this project. The Ainu people, who were in the way of this project, were to be swept aside and assimilated out of existence. Japan's settler colonialism in Hokkaido unleashed destructive forces that had severe consequences on the island's environment and people that continue to be felt today.

Japanese settler colonialism did not end with its defeat and surrender in 1945. Colonial extractivism has continued in post-war Hokkaido. Although the extractive economy resulted in the creation of many thriving communities, these communities have been in decline due to deindustrialization and neoliberalization. In an effort to build its way out of such an economic downturn, the Japanese government has turned to a new wave of settler infrastructure construction in Hokkaido. In the next two chapters, I present a case study of settler infrastructure development in post-war Hokkaido, the Saru River Comprehensive Development Project (SRCDP), which involved the construction of two dams—the Nibutani and Biratori Dams. As we shall see, this project exemplifies what critics call Japan's "Construction State"—a political-economic system based in close, often collusive ties between politicians and developers that results wasteful construction projects with no real purpose other than to enrich private interests. But when Japan's Construction State set its sights on the sacred Saru River, local Ainu people stood up and said "no." Showing immense bravery, tenacity, and a keen sense of right and wrong, these River Protectors came together

to fight against the ongoing ruination of their homeland, culminating in a historic victory for Ainu Indigenous rights.

IV. RIVER PROTECTORS: DAM CONSTRUCTION AND AINU RESISTANCE

A. Introduction: Okikurmi Saves the Gods from the Evil Dam

This dissertation began by recounting the story of how the Divine Culture Hero saved humanity from starvation by delivering a message from the River Goddess, *Wakka-us-kamuy*, with instructions for how to live and use resources respectfully. Stories about the Divine Culture Hero have been passed down through Ainu oral narratives (A: *oyna*).³² In the Saru River Basin, the Divine Culture Hero is known as *Okikurmi-kamuy* (A: Sacred Okikurmi), as well as *Aeoyna-kamuy* (A: “the god we tell narratives about”) or *Aynu-rak-kur* (A: “the man who smells of humans”) (Strong 2011, 101-102; Philippi 1979, 186-189).³³ In these tales and songs, Okikurmi was a half-human demigod who, together with his sister-wife, *Tures-mat*, descended from the land of the gods to live among the humans and teach them proper ways to live.³⁴ In addition to his sister-wife, Okikurmi is sometimes accompanied by other family members, depending on the tale, like his brother and rival, *Samayunkur*,³⁵ or his son, Little

³² This designation includes the various genres of Ainu oral narratives including *yukar*, *kamuy yukar*, and *uepekere*.

³³ The etymology of *Okikurmi* was theorized to mean “the one who wears a leather robe with a shiny hem” by Chiri Mashiho, the younger brother of Chiri Yukie, who became a celebrated Ainu linguist in his own right. Philippi suggests that this may indicate a shamanic origin for the Divine Culture Hero figure (Philippi 1979, 149). Okikurmi is known by other names in other regions; for instance, in Noboribetsu, he is named *Okikirmui* (Strong 2011, 101-102).

³⁴ The full name Okikurmi’s sister-wife, *Okikurmi-turesi-mat*, literally means “Okikurmi’s (younger) sister-wife.” She was also known simply as *Tures-mat* in the Saru River Basin (Batchelor 1901, 40). In Noboribetsu, she was called *Okikirmui-kot-turesi*, meaning “the younger sister tied to Okikurmi” (Strong 2011, 101).

³⁵ On the etymology of the name *Samayunkur*, the celebrated Ainu linguist Chiri Mashiho (1952) argues that, although his predecessor Kindaichi Kyosuke proposed the name’s meaning as “a person close at hand,” this interpretation was incorrect based on both meaning and grammar. Instead, Chiri argues, based on linguistic evidence from different regions, that *Samayunkur* derives from *saman* (A: oracle or divine revelation) + *ye* (A: to say) + *kur* (A: leader), meaning “the leader who practices sorcery” (Chiri 1952, 63-64). Philippi (1979) has theorized that *Samayunkur* represents the dark or negative side of the Divine Culture Hero figure, although his and Chiri points out that his and Okikurmi’s roles are reversed in some stories from other regions (Philippi 1979, 186-187; Strong 2011, 157). In particular, *Samayunkur* is treated as the superior of the two figures in central and northeastern Hokkaido, according to Chiri.

Okikurmi (A: *Pon-okikurmi*), who is raised by Tures-mat and continues to have adventures after his father eventually returns to the land of the gods (Strong 2011, 102; 133 Batchelor 1901, 4).

Among the many tales and songs of Okikurmi's heroic labors, the ancients tell of how he once saved humanity and the gods themselves from an evil dam. Alright, that might be stretching things a bit—it was actually a fish trap, and it was Little Okikurmi who did it. But stories can shift and change with time and space and, as we shall see, sometimes seem to repeat themselves. Such is the case with one story, which I recount below. It was adapted from the version recited by Hiraga Etenoa in 1932 and recorded as *Oyna 7* in Kubodera (1977) and then translated English by Philippi (1979):

Little Okikurmi was raised by his foster sister, Tures-mat. Every day, he would carve wooden scabbards, and she would sow baskets of millet, and they lived on and on, uneventfully.

One day, Tures-mat appeared pensive. She turned to Little Okikurmi and said, "O god I have raised, o my divine nurseling, Young Offspring, listen well to what I have to say!"

She told Little Okikurmi how an evil deity, the Earth Crone³⁶ had become angry at the exceeding prosperity of the human homeland and stole away the souls of the food. Midway up the course of the *Sisirmuka* (A: Saru River), the evil Earth Crone erected a fish trap across the river with stakes made of tainted wood, which issued forth tainted water that killed the fish and caused a famine in the homeland of the gods and the homeland of the humans.

Tures-mat told Little Okikurmi how she had been assisting the humans by delivering them baskets of millet, but had run short of provisions and become hard-pressed herself.

"There is no one I can rely on but you," Tures-mat implored Little Okikurmi. "If you do nothing, the human homeland will be destroyed and the people of your country will die out, and you will bear this disgrace all your life. You must do battle against the Earth Crone!"

³⁶ The "Earth Crone" (A: *Mosir-kamuy*) is the name given by Philippi (1979) for an evil goddess with "hair hanging as if she were wearing a half-woven basket on her head" that lives at the bottom of the ocean (Philippi 1979, 195; 198). Philippi's description of the Earth Crone bears a strong resemblance to *Nitat-unarpe* (A: the old woman of the marshes), who is described in tales from the Saru River Basin as living in swamps and possessing hair that looks like a rope-woven bag (A: *ceoskesaranip*) (Ainu Language Archive, n.d.; Batchelor 1901, 41-46).

Hearing these words, Little Okikurmi took up his sword and donned his magnificent, shining robe and his elm-bark overcoat with its flaming hem, and left his *casi* (A: stockade) to confront the Earth Crone at her home at the bottom of the sea, midway between the Ocean of the *Yaunkur* and the Ocean of the *Repunkur*.³⁷ He hurled the Earth Crone into the underworld, where they did battle for six summers and six winters.

Finally, Little Okikurmi emerged victorious from the underworld and returned from the ocean to the mouth of the *Sisirmuka*. He continued upstream to the place, midway along the river's course, where the Earth Crone had erected her fish trap.

Little Okikurmi broke the evil fish trap and scattered its tainted stakes. As he did so, tainted water sprang forth, and yellowish water flowed down one side of the river, while blackish water flowed down the other side.

But after a while, the water began to clear, and then all the gods dwelling in the river came rushing to draw water. They told Little Okikurmi that, because of the Earth Crone's evil fish trap, they been unable to drink the water, and it seemed that they might perish of thirst at any moment. "But thanks to the Young Offspring, the mighty hero, we can now drink the water, and our lives have been saved!" they gratefully exclaimed.

Then Little Okikurmi went upstream along the *Sisirmuka* to its headwaters on the mighty Mount Poroshiri (A: *porosir-kamuy*).³⁸ He jumped from one end of the mountain peak to the other, sliding along on his silver snowshoes. From the tips of his snowshoes, small lumps of snow and large lumps of snow went flying up over the mountain slopes, which become herds of small deer and herds of large deer, who went skipping over the mountains. From the tips of his snowshoes, also, lumps of snow went flying up and fell into the fishing grounds of the *Sisirmuka*, and became fish that were so abundant that those on the bottom would rub against the rocks and those at the top would be scorched by the sunshine.

Seeing this, Little Okikurmi turned and went down from Mount Poroshiri and returned to his *casi*. Then he went to the home of his foster sister Tures-mat, who had already heard of his deeds. When she saw Little Okikurumi, this is what she said:

"Such deeds as those you have done, o god I have raised, O my divine nurseling, are exploits which win the praise of the gods!" (Adapted from Philippi 1979, 195-201).

³⁷ The Ainu-language word *Yaunkur* means "the people of the land" and refers to the Ainu of Hokkaido (A: *Yaun Mosir*). The word *Repunkur* means "the people of the sea" and may refer to any foreigner, though it likely refers to the Ainu of the Kuriles here.

³⁸ While modern hydrology considers the Saru River to be the main stem and the Nukabira River to be a tributary, traditional Ainu cosmology considered the Nukabira as the main stem and the Saru as its tributary. The source of the Nukabira River on Mount Poroshiri is therefore considered the source of the Saru River in this tale.

In this story, the Divine Culture Hero defeats the forces of evil and saves people and gods alike from the evil fish trap that polluted the river's waters. According to the ontology presented in the story, rivers are the basis for all life, relied upon by the people, animals, and gods alike. The story expresses an important moral lesson: the urgent need to protect rivers and the more-than-human entities that inhabit them. It is also meaningful that the river in the story, the Saru River, is threatened by outside forces that construct a piece of infrastructure on its middle reaches that pollutes the water and kills the fish. The story's original reciter of course could not have known that one day, not too far in the future, the same river would become threatened by another infrastructure project built on its middle reaches by outside forces that again pollutes the water and kills the fish. As this chapter will show, read in light of the Saru Ainu community's contemporary history of fighting to protect their ways of life in the face of massive, top-down river development projects, this story becomes even more meaningful.

In this chapter, I discuss the construction of the Nibutani Dam on the Saru River under the auspices of the Saru River Comprehensive Development Project (hereafter, SRCDP). In Chapter II, I showed how infrastructure construction becomes a key point of conflict in the politics of future-making in the context of settler colonialism. With that theoretical background in mind, I analyze the Nibutani Dam and the SRCDP in the context of Japan's overall political economic system surrounding infrastructure construction. Historian Gavan McCormack argues that "the centrality of construction" is the characteristic feature of Japan's postwar political economy (McCormack 1995, 26). He and other authors (e.g., Woodall 1996; Kerr 2002) have referred to this system as Japan's "Construction State." Through the case study of the Nibutani Dam, I add to the literature on Japan's construction

state by showing how it is constituted by and through the country's ongoing settler colonialism in Hokkaido. Although dams are often promoted as a source of local development by their boosters, the case study of the Nibutani Dam shows how the Saru River was ultimately extractive and colonial, specifically designed to exploit what was seen to be a peripheral area for the benefit of core areas. It was built to manifest a particular settler future that, as we shall see, did not end up coming to pass. I begin by describing the vision of the future outlined by the Japanese politician Tanaka Kakuei for the industrial development of Japan, which greatly influenced Japanese infrastructure construction in the postwar period. The SRCDP in particular, and Hokkaido in general, were meant to play a major role in Tanaka's vision. I then describe the political-economic system of infrastructure construction in Japan, the Construction State. Following that, I describe the history of the SRCDP, the Nibutani Dam's ongoing impacts, and the movement by local Ainu residents to oppose its construction. I end this chapter by gesturing toward a future whose inevitability is becoming increasingly clear: the ultimate removal of the Nibutani Dam. One way or another, the Saru River's powerful waters will one day breach the dam and flow freely once again.



Image: A view of the Nibutani Dam from downstream.

B. Tanaka Kakuei: Remodeling Japan

One summer day in 2025, I was given a day off from farmwork to serve as driver for my host father, Mici. He was set to speak to a group of college students about dam construction's impacts on local Ainu culture. The venue for his talk was to be the Nokapira Iwor Visitor's Center, a newly built Ainu museum and cultural center at the Biratori Dam, located about a 40-minute drive up the Nukabira River from Nibutani. As we drove, listening to Led Zeppelin from my rental car's stereo, Mici told me about the origins of dam construction in the Saru-Nukabira River Basin:

Now, you probably don't know this, but back in the 1970s, there was this Prime Minister named Tanaka Kakuei who launched this grand project to remodel the Japanese archipelago. As a result, they built the Nibutani dam on the Saru River. This was to advance the plan to create Japan's largest industrial base in East Tomakomai. Well, I don't know if you've been to Tomakomai, but no industrial base has yet been built there, more than half a century later. (Field Notes, August 6, 2025)

Tanaka Kakuei's book, *A Plan for Remodeling the Japanese Archipelago* (1973) (J: *nippon rettou kaizou-ron*) was a bestseller in Japan and also made waves internationally after being translated into English in 1973 (Tsuda 2024, 453-453). First published in 1972 (English edition 1973), just before Tanaka became Japan's Prime Minister, the book did two things. First, it described what Tanaka believed to be the greatest problem the country was facing: high urbanization in Japan's industrial core and depopulation of rural and peripheral areas. Second, it laid out Tanaka's plan for addressing these problems, namely by relocating industrial activity to rural and peripheral areas. Hokkaido was named as a place with wide tracts of available land and plentiful resources to support this plan.

Tanaka Kakuei was born in 1918 in a rural area and grew to become what Tsuda (2024) calls "a singular kind of leader, a self-made man who excelled by cultivating ties with

the grassroots as well as amassing personal power, often through money politics” (Tsuda 2024, 254). He rose to prominence within the Liberal Democratic Party (J: *jiyuu minshu tou*; hereafter, the LDP) during the post-war reconstruction boom in the 1950s and 1960s thanks to close ties to private capital in the construction, transportation, and real-estate sectors (Tsuda 2024, 460). He became the archetype of the *zoku-giin* (J: policy tribalist; a term for legislators associated with particular policy areas, or “tribes”) and the most prominent member of the LDP’s Construction Tribe (J: *kensetsu zoku*) (Tsuda 2024, 460; Woodall 1996, 34-36). Thus, infrastructure construction was central to the vision he outlined in his book. Thanks to his shrewd use of the media, Tanaka’s vision for “remodeling” was highly popular and he was able to cultivate populist appeal while maintaining clientelist politics for the benefit of big business, which rocketed him to the premiership in 1972. Although Tanaka only served as the head of Japan’s government for two years, and was ultimately ousted as PM in 1976 for his involvement in the Lockheed Scandal, the vision he laid out in his book still represents the settler future that the Japanese government is seeking to enact in Hokkaido.

According to Tanaka’s book, the greatest problem facing Japan was high urbanization in Japan’s core industrial areas, comprising the area of Honshu’s Pacific coast stretching from Osaka to Tokyo, and depopulation of rural and peripheral areas (Tanaka 1973, *iii-iv*; 38; 77; 217-219). Tapping into populist nostalgia for the image of the *furusato* (J: rural village; discussed in greater detail in Chapter VI), Tanaka identified the countryside as the source of the Japanese spirit and something to be restored by his plan for industrial relocation, writing that

I believe that the endless fountain of energy which has built today’s Japan derives from the cherished and respected rural homes from which all of us

have originally come. In this great enterprise of remodeling the Japanese archipelago, I am motivated by a strong desire to rebuild the home of the Japanese people, which has been lost and destroyed and is declining today but which, once restored, will again give to our society a sense of tranquility and spiritual enrichment. (Tanaka 1973, 217-218)

Tanaka's plan to remodel the Japanese archipelago and boost economic growth revolved around what he called industrial relocation, or a wide-reaching set of policy proposals designed to initiate urban-to-rural population transfers and to develop peripheral areas into "more viable economic entities" (Tanaka 1973, 144). He wrote of his belief that:

It is possible to transform Japan into a richer, less polluted, and more livable land than it is now. To do this, however, it is necessary to divert the historical trend concentrating industry, population, and culture in the major urban areas and to refocus the development emphasis on outlying regions. (Tanaka 1973, 77)

The expansion of infrastructure construction in rural areas was Tanaka's primary recommendation for supporting continued economic growth (Tanaka 1973, 60). Using the language of social overhead capital, he argued that a "lack of accumulated social overhead capital ...is now acting as a brake on national economic growth and the improvement of Japanese life" (Tanaka 1973, 18) and centered his policy vision around building "an infrastructure for production" in places where "land, water, labor, and power are available and in stable supply" (Tanaka 1973, 213).

Tanaka's plan revolved around the creation of "new mammoth industrial bases" in rural areas, chiefly in Hokkaido and along Honshu's Pacific coast (Tanaka 1973, 86). Because Tanaka envisioned these mammoth industrial bases as forming "the nuclei of huge new complexes," he wrote that "land needs will be substantial indeed" (Tanaka 1973, 86). The new industrial complexes that Tanaka envisioned were one part of a larger plan to "integrate the entire production cycle from raw material to finished product" by "processing

raw materials in the vast coastal industrial bases, manufacturing inland, and consuming nation-wide” (Tanaka 1973, 86; 92-93). Alongside the new industrial parks, Tanaka also called for the establishment of “energy parks,” involving “power plants with huge capacities” (Tanaka 1973, 102-104). He estimated that around US \$900 billion in social overhead capital investments would need to be made during the 1970s in order to achieve the same standard of living as other major players in the global economy (Tanaka 1973, 60). In order to foot the “enormous amount of money” required to create such facilities, Tanaka called for greater collaboration between the government and the private sector (Tanaka 1973, 7). “No longer should the government be the primary promoter of development,” he argued; rather, “the private sector should be called upon to contribute its energy and resources as well” (Tanaka 1973, 207). He proposed that “public operations that are profitable” could either be privatized or transferred to “a third sector of cooperation between the private and public sectors,” and suggested using an “interest-supplement system” to “channel” private capital into public works (Tanaka 1973, 207-208).

Additionally, huge amounts of industrial water would be required. Tanaka estimated that 57 billion tons of water would be needed annually for industrial purposes by the year 1985 (Tanaka 1973, 151). “Man cannot live without water,” he wrote, noting that the major early civilizations “all developed along rivers and watersheds” and that “nature’s bounty of pure water is indeed the very stuff of life” for Japanese civilization, which he saw as being based on wet-rice agriculture (Tanaka 1973, 149). He also argued that

The industrial development which was the driving force in building Japan into a modern nation after the Meiji Restoration was supported by plentiful water resources, just as the postwar economic recovery has been greatly helped by hydroelectric power and other uses of water. (Tanaka 1973, 160)

Tanaka's plan involved stretching Japan's water resources as far as they will go through intensive dam construction. He wrote that "If we are to utilize fully the water which nature provides, it is first necessary to trap this water" and called for the construction of "not only large-scale strategic dams but also the smaller local dams necessary to meet local needs" (Tanaka 1973, 150; 153-154). At the time of Tanaka's writing, there were 205 dams in Japan providing water for industrial purposes, but Tanaka argued that "we will have to build more than five times that number [1,100]" by 1985 (Tanaka 1973, 153-154).

Tanaka's plan for industrial relocation explicitly evoked a vision of a settler colonial future, as demonstrated when he wrote that "the future of Japan over the next hundred years depends on whether or not people born and brought up in urban areas will seek new frontiers in rural Japan and settle there to build a new Japan" (Tanaka 1973, 168). His plan specifically called for harnessing the land and waters in peripheral areas for the benefit of the nation's urban core. Hokkaido was attractive as resource to be exploited for its "plentiful" land, "abundantly available" water, and "excellent potential labor force" (Tanaka 1973, 94-95). Tanaka's plan also issued a call to shore up control over the island for geopolitical purposes, as "Hokkaido will become even more advantageous when Japanese-Soviet cooperation in developing Siberia gets going" (*ibid.*). Tanaka specifically singled out sites in East Tomakomai and the Kushiro Mire (the latter of which is discussed in Chapter X) as being priority areas for industrial development. (Tanaka 1973, 20). East Tomakomai in particular was "blessed with favorable sites for the construction of large-scale industrial bases," he wrote (Tanaka 1973, 83). By the time Tanaka's book was published, plans for the East Tomakomai Industrial Park were already being laid through a public-private partnership called the East Tomakomai Development Corporation (Tanaka 1973, 214). This proposed

facility which never came to fruition will be discussed further in Section D below, but first, let us consider the ramifications of Tanaka's settler colonial future vision in the context of the development of Japanese unique system infrastructure construction during the late 20th century, or what critics have referred to as Japan's Construction State.

C. Japan's Construction State: A History of Corruption

Buoyed by its successes during the immediate postwar years, the Japanese construction industry continued to grow in size and importance during the period of high economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s. During the term of Prime Minister Ikeda, from 1960-1964, the government's Income Doubling Plan signaled the formation of a social consensus around "the need to work, accumulate, invest, develop, and grow, as a means to achieve a decent, happy, fulfilled, creative life" (McCormack 1996, 32). In an effort to stimulate the target economic growth rate of 7.2 percent that would be needed to double the size of the economy within ten years, as the plan called for, the New Industrial Cities Policy promoted construction by offering special incentives to contractors. Further, preparations for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the 1970 Osaka World's Fair provided an additional boost, and construction firms "reaped handsome rewards" from the construction of stadiums and tourist facilities (Woodall 1996, 36).

From 1960 to 1990, the Japanese construction industry grew from 75,000 firms employing 2.5 million people to 500,000 firms employing 6 million people (McCormack 1996, 32). By the 1990s, the term Construction State (J: *doken kokka*) had come to be used by both commentators to describe what Japan scholar Jeff Kingston calls Japan's "cement industrial complex" (Kingston 2005, 39). Japan lays a preposterously large amount of

concrete. In 1994 alone, Japan laid 91.6 million tons in 1994 alone, compared to only 77.9 million in the US, which is 30 times larger than Japan (Kerr 2002, 40). Aside from the obvious environmental problems post such immense concrete consumption, the private social, political, and economic incentives that are institutionalized in the Construction State results in enormous waste of the public budget. For one thing, many of the construction contracts that are funneled to local communities provide little actual benefit in and of themselves. McCormack argues that where concrete is poured, and what it is poured for, are incidental to the primary goals of reproducing of power and the distributing profit (McCormack 1995, 28), and that the Construction State's "need to expand and replicate itself" drives construction activity in Japan more than any real social need for new infrastructure (McCormack 1996, 35). This mindset accords with the conventional wisdom of mainstream economists, such as Richard Koo of the prominent think tank, Nomura Research Institute, who once argued that "good projects are a luxury...How money is spent is not important. *That* money is spent is important" (Kerr 2002, 122). As a result of this attitude, Japanese bureaucrats and politicians are often more concerned with spending their budgets than improving living conditions for local people.

Concurrent with the rise of the Construction State, Japanese politics has seen the rise of an "iron triangle" of political clientelism, which Woodall defines as "the selective allocation of distributive policy benefits by public-sector elites in exchange for the promise of solidarity and mutually beneficial inputs from favored private sector inputs" (Woodall 1996, 9; 18). This situation has resulted in the formation of complex interrelationships between elected officials, unelected bureaucrats, and private firms. In Woodall's conceptualization, these structures and actors are linked together through a shared

motivation, namely, “the quest for a secure livelihood” (Woodall 1996, 18). Woodall argues that the formations of such networks of elites based on shared self-interest has served a crucial systemic function in postwar Japanese society, since the achievement of the postwar state’s developmental state goals harmonized with the profit-seeking motivations of clientelism, helping to “insulate Japan’s strategic policy market from partisan demands that might have sidetracked developmental goals” (Woodall 1996, 136).

After the end of the Allied occupation, in order to expedite the financing and construction of infrastructure projects, the Ministry of Finance instituted the Fiscal Investment and Loan Program (J: *zaisei touyuushi*), also known as *zaitou*, which enabled the allocation of project financing from investments of individual taxpayers’ savings deposited into the postal savings system (J: *yuubin chokin seido*).³⁹ This system would enable bureaucrats to fund construction contracts while skirting the National Diet’s official budget process (Kerr 2002, 124). By the 1990s, the *zaitou*, would come to be seen as “Japan’s second budget, the shadow budget,” and “the bureaucracy’s private piggy bank”: in 1999, ¥52.9 trillion in funds were disbursed for *zaitou*-related loans—a total equaling as much as two-thirds of Japan’s national budget (*ibid.*). Using *zaitou* funds, the MLIT (or, prior to 2001, the MOC) assigns contracts to firms that belong to officially recognized cartels in a process known as *dangou* (J: consultation) (McCormack 1996, 33). Firms that are able to participate in the *dangou* system reap economic benefit in that they are guaranteed favorable contracts with no need to deal with competition (McCormack 1996, 33; cf. Kerr 2002, 21-21). The officially recognized firms that comprise the *dangou* system include the so-called “Big Six,”

³⁹ The Japanese postal service was privatized in 2007, and management of the funds has since been transferred to Japan Post Bank (J: *kabushikigaisha yuuchou ginkou*). However, the *zaitou* program has continued to be used to fund public projects without parliamentary oversight.

which refers to six large general contracting conglomerates, or *zenekon* (J: general contractors),⁴⁰ several quasi-large scale *zenekon*, a designation that includes Nishimatsu Corporation, the company primarily responsible for the construction of the Nibutani Dam, and around half a million smaller firms (Woodall 1996, 32). While considerably smaller than the big six, second-tier *zenekon* like Nishimatsu are large enough to command the ability to construct large and expensive projects like super-high-rise buildings and offshore energy platforms, and are active in international markets (Woodall 1996, 32).

According to Woodall, *dangou* refers to “an institutionalized system of bid-rigging,” that involves “neatly dividing up and parceling out [the] construction market by a ‘gentleman’s agreement’” (Woodall 1996, 27). Based on ethnographic research, political scientist Robin LeBlanc (2009) argues that the relationships that form between men involved in Japanese politics are structured by popular ideals of masculinity and emphasize wordless “gentleman’s agreements” as a means of establishing important relationships among powerful men (LeBlanc 2009, 162; 179). In the construction industry, the gentlemen’s agreement that sets the lowest bid for a particular public works project is communicated through an unofficial channel known as the “voice of heaven” (J: *ten no koe*) (Woodall 1996, 39-40). With the low bid decided in advance, contractors are free to artificially inflate the cost of the contract and reap enormous profits. Kingston notes that contract bids are “almost always improbably close to 95 percent of the contract ceiling,” or the maximum amount the government is willing to spend, versus 70-85 percent in areas with targeted government oversight (Kingston 2005, 49). As a result of artificially inflated contract bids, construction costs in Japan are exorbitantly expensive: on average, around 50 percent more expensive than

⁴⁰The “Big Six” construction *zenekon* are Shimizu Corporation, Taisei Corporation, Kajima Corporation, Takenaka Corporation, Obayashi Corporation, and Kumagai Gumi (Woodall 1996, 30).

in the US (Woodall 1996, 48). In 1993, for example, Japan spent almost three times as much as the US on construction, and spent 43 percent of the national budget on construction projects (McCormack 1996, 33). Specific sectors are even more dramatically inflated in price, such as road construction, which costs almost nine times as much in Japan as in the US (McCormack 1996, 35).

In part because of the thick relationships that develop between the men of Japan's political elite, postwar Japanese politics has been plagued by endemic and pervasive corruption. Since the end of WWII, a major scandal has erupted practically every decade involving politicians and bureaucrats surreptitiously enriching themselves through their political connections. For example, in 1948, senior ministers of the Ashida government (including PM Ashida himself) were accused of accepting bribes in return for arranging low interest loans (Neary 2019, 53), while in 1954 there was a major shipbuilding scandal involving the LDP's general secretary that forced then-PM Yoshida to resign (Neary 2019, 71). The 1970s saw the international investigation of US aerospace giant Lockheed, which had given several million dollars to Japanese politicians, resulting in the arrest and conviction of then-PM Tanaka Kakuei (who had also previously served time for accepting bribes in the 1950s) (Neary 2019, 82-83). The 1980s and 1990s were rocked by a series of scandals, such as the Sagawa Express bribery affair and the Recruit-Cosmos scandal (Neary 2019, 93-97). In more recent years, the mismanagement of pension records resulted in the resignation of three ministers and the suicide of another, and both terms of the Abe administration endured accusations of cronyism and corruption (Neary 2019, 111; 122-124).

In the construction industry, the *dangou* system is responsible for creating extremely powerful incentives for “bribery graft, and other forms of corruption,” and Woodall notes that

almost a thousand construction firms are believed to have ties to organized crime (Woodall 1996, 48). Despite being illegal under Japanese law, bid rigging is sustained by institutional arrangements that incentivize lax enforcement and turning a blind eye to backroom dealings in pursuit of an idea of the greater good. Construction firms that violate *dangou* agreements about contract bids (J: *dangou yaburi*) are ostracized from industry associations and “barred from participating in future collusive accords” (Woodall 1996, 41). The system is further sustained by government complicity that includes lenient penalties and irregular enforcement of regulations (Woodall 1996, 47). MLIT bureaucrats look forward to post-retirement jobs in the industries they had only recently been responsible for regulating in a process called *amakudari* (J: lit. “descent from heaven”) that, like bid rigging, is illegal but largely unpoliced (Neary 2019, 163-164). Woodall argues that the “flow of ‘descended angels’ from the government bureaucracy into private business, public corporations, and elective politics serves as an adhesive element in the formation of enduring policy networks” (Woodall 1996, 69). The prospect of lifetime employment for career bureaucrats discourages them from blowing the whistle on illegal or unscrupulous practices (Woodall 1996, 42). In other words, the practice of *amakudari* works to “ensure that public and private sectors remain close” (Aldrich 2008, 121).

Meanwhile, such institutionalized corruption and inefficient budget allocation have also helped sustain the LDP’s “protracted hegemony” in Japan’s electoral politics, despite its possessing “the frailest of grassroots support bases” (Woodall 1996, 84; 133).⁴¹ As Kingston further explains,

Many of the 6 million Japanese workers employed in construction live in the politically important countryside where votes count more than in the

⁴¹ The LDP has been the ruling party for the vast majority of the postwar period: from 1955-1993; 1996-2009; and 2012 to the present (Saunavaara 2017, 133).

underrepresented cities. Delivering public works projects to local companies is how politicians have been able to mobilize votes and extract campaign funds in these areas. (Kingston 2005, 40)

McCormack writes that, as a result, “‘politics’ in the conventional sense” are irrelevant to the modern Japanese political system, wherein it is believed that the politician’s role is to “serve as broker, articulating the interest of various social groups,” rather than as an advocate for particular political issues or policies (*ibid.*). Similarly, international relations scholar Peng Er Lam (2005) writes that

governors, mayors, and conservative Diet members act as brokers to obtain public works funding from the political and bureaucratic center in Tokyo to stimulate the local economy, reward their supporters with business contracts and jobs, and win re-election. (Lam 2005, 71)

The LDP politicians who LeBlanc spoke with took pride in their role as broker on the basis of the masculine ideal of the breadwinner, believing that “the most important work they can do for their community is buttering up national-level elected officials and bureaucrats and acting as a ‘pipe’ directing public works projects and subsidies...from the national level down to the local community” (LeBlanc 2009, 9-10). In some situations, local politicians feel compelled to do so, as central government agencies such as the MLIT are said to use administrative pressure (J: *gyousei appaku*) to ensure local cooperation, such as withholding funding and operational support for local projects like road maintenance (Aldrich 2008, 60-61; 110-111). As a result, many rural communities—where support for the LDP is typically high—are completely dependent on continually hosting major construction projects in order to support the local economy (Kerr 2002, 18). LDP politicians with close ties to the construction industry are known as “construction tribalists” (J: *kensetsu-zoku giin*) (Woodall 1996, 9; 112-113). Among the most famous members of the LDP’s construction tribe was Tanaka Kakuei himself, who was ousted as PM in 1976 when indicted for his involvement in

the Lockheed scandal. Another noteworthy member was Kanemaru Shin, commonly known as “The Don” (J: *za don*), who served in the cabinet of PM Fukuda from 1977-1978, and continued to be one of Japan’s most influential political figures until his indictment in 1992 for evading taxes on more than ¥5 billion (\$50 million) in under-the-table contributions received from construction companies (an incident called the *Zenekon* Scandal) (Woodall 1996, 110-114; McCormack 1996, 34-36; Kerr 2002, 21). With Kanemaru’s indictment, the hidden world of the Construction State was brought into full view of the public, who were shocked to learn that construction-related bribes were costing Japanese taxpayers some ¥300 billion every year (McCormack 1996, 45). Kanemaru had presided over a system of collusion so institutionalized and routinized that, when the story of the *Zenekon* Scandal broke, one construction contractor was quoted by the *Asahi Shimbun* as wondering aloud, “was what we were doing really illegal?” (Woodall 1996, 135).

Cases such as these, in which allegations of construction-related corruption result in indictment or arrest, are the rare exception rather than the norm, and by all accounts such backroom dealing is commonly excused, if not endorsed. Indeed, LeBlanc argues based on her ethnographic fieldwork that the “politicization of public works contracting is one of the most widely practiced forms of political corruption in Japan” (LeBlanc 2009, 12).

Constituent-led electoral support groups (J: *kouenkai*), facilitate the exchange of undisclosed campaign contributions which help sustain LDP politicians despite the high cost of running for office in Japan (Neary 2019, 85-86). It is common for contractors to know the birthdays, hobbies, and interests of key bureaucrats and politicians, as well as their administrative assistants (Woodall 1996, 39). Gifts to politicians sometimes come not only in the form of cash, but also as in-kind donations such as gold bullion and expensive artwork, or rare

experiences such as an evening dining at a “no-pants *shabu-shabu*’ restaurant, featuring waitresses in the nude from the waist down” (Kerr 2002, 114-115).⁴² As a result of cozy arrangements like these, Woodall argues that “the construction industry serves as one leg in the LDP’s grand coalition,” noting that at least half the LDP’s total contributions come from the construction industry (Woodall 1996, 47).

While there were some attempts at reforming the public works sector following the *Zenekon* Scandal and again during the administration of PM Koizumi (2001-2006), the prospect of serious reform is discounted by most observers because “those in charge of reforming Japan are those who have benefited most from the existing system” (Kingston 2005, 52). This attitude was shared by a member of one of Koizumi’s reform advisory panels, who admitted that “in a nutshell, nothing will change” (Kingston 2005, 57). After the catastrophic Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in 2011 and the LDP’s return to power in 2012, the Abe administration pledged to spend ¥200 trillion on public works by 2022, especially those that build so-called “resilience” against disasters (Watts 2019, 5). As we shall see in Chapter X, Japan’s recent push for carbon neutrality and development of high-tech data centers and technological manufacturing plants has led to an increase in public works spending on “green” infrastructure like solar, wind, and hydroelectric power facilities.

⁴² It should be noted that, in the particular incident involving the “no-pants *shabu-shabu*” restaurant, the gift was received from the banking industry, not the construction industry. However, since, as Woodall points out, more than half of the bribery scandals that break out in Japan every year involve the construction industry, it is logical to assume that similarly inappropriate gifts have been given by construction companies (Woodall 1996, 39).

D. Damming and Damning the Saru River

Dam construction is one sector in which many of the most troubling implications of the Construction State can be observed. Political scientist Daniel Aldrich identifies dams as the “cornerstone of Japan’s ‘construction state’” (Aldrich 2008, 96). Examining the case of dam construction also highlights the utter disregard for local residents that characterizes the siting and execution of major infrastructure projects in Japan, as well as their harmful social and environmental effects. Today, Japan ranks fourth worldwide among member-states of the International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD), with a total of 3,178 large dams,⁴³ surpassed only by China (24,217), the United States (10,053), and India (4,489) (ICOLD n.d.). These figures make Japan one of the most densely dammed countries in the world, owing to its relatively small land area relative to other ICOLD member-states.⁴⁴ Dams were instrumental to Japan’s postwar rebuilding, where they helped to increase food production, generate hydropower, and ensure flood control (Takahasi 2004, 46; McCormack 1996, 44). By the late 1990s, when Japan’s last free-flowing river became obstructed with the completion of the Nagara River Estuary Barrage project, at least one dam or barrage had been constructed on every single river in Japan, to the tune of around ¥200 billion annually (Creighton 2003, 132; Kerr 2002, 25). By the turn of the millennium, Japan had the distinction of having the highest budget among the G-7 member countries for public works, including dams (Lam 2005, 87).⁴⁵ Since then, Japan has continued to build dams

⁴³ ICOLD classifies dams as “large” when they are greater than 15 meters in height or have a storage capacity greater than 3 million cubic meters (ICOLD n.d.).

⁴⁴ Japan’s land area is 377,962 km². By comparison, the land areas of China, the US, and India are 9,595,906 km²; 9,834,185 km²; and 3,286,695 km²; respectively. Taking a ratio of number of large dams to land area, Japan’s dam ratio is 0.0082, more than three times greater than China’s (0.0025), nine times greater than the United States’ (0.0009), and six times greater than India’s (0.0013).

⁴⁵ In 2000, the G-7 member countries were Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Germany, and Canada.

domestically at a rapid pace, building 2,000 more dams since the year 2000 (World Commission on Dams 2000, 9). This trend is expected to continue in the immediate future, thanks in part to lingering concerns over nuclear energy after the 2011 Triple Disasters and growing interest in renewable energy as a means of achieving carbon neutrality (discussed in Chapter X).⁴⁶

Initially proposed in 1969, the Saru River Comprehensive Development Project (J: *sarugawa sougou kaihatsu jigyou*; hereafter, the SRCDP) involves the construction of two dams in the vicinity of the village of Nibutani, located in the Biratori district of Hokkaido's Hidaka sub-prefecture: the Nibutani Dam and the Biratori Dam, (Maruyama 2012, 65-66). Some local landholders feared that the SRCDP would compromise these efforts, further exacerbating socio-economic hardship in the community, and began to express opposition to the project. This resistance culminated in an eight-year legal battle in the Sapporo District Court, *Kayano et al. v. Hokkaido Expropriation Committee* (hereafter, the Nibutani Dam case). Despite the high media profile of this resistance by Ainu landholders, cultural leaders, and activists, the Nibutani Dam on the Saru River was ultimately completed in 1997. A second dam, the Biratori Dam, was completed in 2022 on the Nukabira River, a tributary of the Saru upriver from Nibutani.

⁴⁶ Construction of large dams has been governed by the River Law (J: *kasen hou*) since its enactment in 1896, and in 1964 a major revision was made that enabled the Ministry of Construction to more easily build dams in order to spur economic development (Nakayama, *et al.* 2002, 2093). In 1962, the Japanese government issued the Outline of Compensation Standards for Losses Involved in the Acquisition of Land for Public Use (J: *koukyou youchi no shutoku ni tomonau sonshitsu hoshou kijun youkou*), a law that defined a national standard for financial compensation of private land needed for development projects, and that remains in effect today (MLIT 2008b; Hamamoto 2013, 155-156; Takesada 2009, 422). Additional standards and regulations were laid out in the 1967 Guidelines on the Standards for Public Compensation Associated with the Implementation of Public Works Projects (J: *koukyou jigyou no shikou ni tomonau koukyouhoshou kijun youkou*) (MLIT 1967; Matsumoto, *et al.* 2012, 110). Observers have noted, however, that the main purpose of these legal standards was not to aid in livelihood restoration, but instead to expedite the implementation of public works projects, which meant that insufficient public investment was made in communities residing near dam construction sites (Takesada 2009, 422; Matsumoto, *et al.* 2012, 109; Takahasi 1997, 182).

Like other sectors of the Construction State, critical observers have argued that many Japanese dams have been built simply to “line the pockets” of politicians, bureaucrats, and special interests, while providing few tangible benefits to local residents (Creighton 2003, 130). Projects like these are sometimes labeled “politicians’ dams” (J: *seijika damu*) or “boxed gift projects” (J: *hakomono jigyou*) (Creighton 2003, 130; Williams 2013, 968). Because the wings of the Construction State, including bureaucrats of the MLIT’s Water Administration Division (J: *mizu kanrika*), profit from dam construction, “dams go up by the hundreds” (Kerr 2002, 116). Ishii Takemasu, who headed the hydrological section of the Geological Survey of Japan, once remarked that “the construction companies, politicians, and elite bureaucrats...are conspiring to stuff Japan with dams” (McCormack 1996, 47-48). Many of these dams serve little to no technical purpose: while in 1978, water demand was predicted to increase to 131 m³ daily, the actual daily water demand in 1990 was only 78 m³ (Kingston 2005, 69-70). Kingston argues that the “huge—and deliberately engineered” discrepancy between projections and actual water use led to the construction of many unnecessary dams (*ibid.*). To make matters worse, many dams are soon rendered inoperable by river sedimentation “a shrinking capacity to serve the purposes of water conservation and regulation” for which they have been built (McCormack 1996, 45-46). The problem of river sedimentation has been well-known for decades. In 1951, scientist Nakatani Ukichirou observed that the Yasuoka dam was, only 15 years after its completion, operating at only 15 percent of its original capacity due to sedimentation (*ibid.*). By some estimates, Japan’s dams and reservoirs have become clogged with more than a billion tons of silt (*ibid.*). McCormack writes that there is no known technical solution to the problem of river sedimentation, which significantly shortens the operable lifespan of most dams in Japan (McCormack 1996, 46).

Under the 1968 River Act (J: *kasen hou*), the Saru River was designated as a Class I river, making it subject to the direct management authority of the national government, and the SRCDP was initiated the following year, in 1969 (Biratori Town 2006, 36; 49). When it was proposed in 1969, the stated intention was to provide industrial water to the East Tomakomai Industrial Park (J: *tomakomai toubu sangyou youchi*), the facility championed by Tanaka Kakuei and planned to be the world's largest steel and oil facility, located 60 kilometers away from Nibutani. In the early 1970s, the Hokkaido Development Bureau began implementing the Saru River Development Project in conjunction with the Hokkaido prefectural government and Nishimatsu Corporation—one of the quasi-large scale firms of the Construction State's *dangou* system.⁴⁷ Plans for the East Tomakomai Industrial Complex were announced in 1971, and the Hokkaido Development Bureau and Biratori Town agreed to a preliminary survey in under the condition that dam construction “shall absolutely not commence without consent of the town and affected residents” (Kaizawa 1999a, 29; Biratori Town 2006, 49). Biratori Town agreed to the dam project, using regional development grants totalling ¥2.1 billion, including 1.5 billion from the Biratori Town Regional Development Fund and 600 million under the Water Source Protection Special Measures Act (Kaizawa 1999a, 29).

However, due to the international oil crisis, the East Tomakomai project's scope had to be significantly limited after 1973. Although the Nibutani and Biratori Dams were no longer needed for their original purposes, behind closed doors, the Hokkaido Development Bureau secretly changed the stated purpose of the SRCDP from industrial water provision to

⁴⁷ Like many of Japan's largest companies, Nishimatsu Corporation was founded in Tokyo during the Meiji period (1874). In 1993, the company had 5,347 and reported a revenue of more than ¥600 trillion (Woodall 1996, 31).

flood control, river maintenance, municipal water supply, and hydropower generation (Levin 1999, 409-410; Maruyama 2012, 65-66). In 1983, Biratori Town received a ¥2 billion payout in regional promotion funds, including 900 million from the East Tomakomai project (Kayano and Tanaka 1999, 3). Although the collapse of the East Tomakomai project was not announced to the public until 1990, Biratori's municipal government had been aware of the project's collapse since March 1984, when it was revealed to be operating at a deficit of ¥60 billion. Nevertheless, the Biratori municipal government approved the SRCDP in September 1984 as a prerequisite for receiving a ¥2.1 billion grant from the government for local development and maintenance (Maruyama 2012, 75). Local politicians later confessed that they had been pressured into approving these dams under the threat of revocation of government subsidies for road maintenance and education (Maruyama 2012, 67). By 1989 the East Tomakomai project was in a state of complete disarray, with less than 10 percent of its land being utilized. No companies requiring industrial water had moved in, and the water needs of the companies that had moved in were being sufficiently met, either by the nearby Abira River or well water (Takahashi 1999, 4). "When this reason fell through, they just grabbed another reason," one resident told me, indicating to him that "they absolutely wanted that dam built" (Interview, June 1, 2024).

Although two impact assessments were performed by for the Nibutani Dam—one in 1975 and one in 1982—the cultural significance of the region to the Ainu people was not investigated, despite the siting of the dam in the heart of Nibutani (Maruyama 2013, 76).⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Three different sites were considered for the Nibutani Dam: one site located downstream of the village of Nibutani, near the mouth of the Saru River; one site located in the river's middle reaches directly adjacent to the village; and one site located upstream of the village. Ultimately, the middle site was chosen "because the place prevailed economically and physically, with a narrower river width, higher banks, stronger ground structure, and fewer obstructing properties" (Levin 1999, 405; Kayano and Tanaka 1999, 546).

Construction on the Nibutani Dam began in September 1986, though project approval would not be granted for another three months (Kaizawa 1999a, 29). In 1984, the Hokkaido Development Bureau began individual compensation negotiations with local landholders (Levin 1999, 400). Most of the affected landholders ultimately agreed to sell their land to the government due to financial hardship, but two Ainu landholders—Kayano Shigeru and Kaizawa Tadashi—refused to sell. Kayano Shigeru prevented surveyors from measuring the water level on his property, expressing his strong opposition to the project. Unlike other community members, who were in debt to the agricultural cooperative and felt they needed to sell their land, Kayano was debt-free and thus financially able to oppose the dam (Kayano 1999, 23). He was joined by Kaizawa Tadashi, a local farmer and longtime advocate for Ainu welfare, whose land was also threatened by the project. A public hearing on the Nibutani Dam was held in Biratori Town in 1988. At that hearing, Kaizawa Tadashi expressed strong opposition to the dam, contextualizing it within the history of settler colonialism and Ainu dispossession, and issued the following demands:

- 1) Because of the long history of suffering inflicted upon the Ainu people, compensation for lost agricultural land should be provided not just for one year, but for a hundred years.
- 2) Because the Ainu were a hunting people who were forcibly converted to agriculture, who are now having our land taken away just at the moment we had settled, we should be compensated by being able to make a living by hunting and fishing.
- 3) Because the land of Hokkaido was taken from the Ainu without compensation, all company-owned forests on the hills above the *kotan* along the Saru River should be returned to the Ainu. (Kaizawa 1999a, 29)

In spite of Kaizawa's and Kayano's impassioned objections, construction of the dam structure was completed in 1988 and their land in the planned reservoir zone was forcibly expropriated in 1989 (Okada 2012, 6; Maruyama 2012, 65-68).

E. River Protectors Rise Up: The Nibutani Dam Case

That year, Ministry of Construction officials visited the construction site and were met by Kayano and Kaizawa wearing traditional Ainu regalia (Kayano 1999, 25). During this act of protest, Kaizawa defiantly dug into the ground land with a shovel, angrily asking “Are you going to take this fertile land away from us *again*?” (Kaizawa 1999a, 29). The following year, in 1990, four people associated with the Nibutani Dam project arrived at Kayano Shigeru’s house with a check for ¥11 million, but he refused to accept it (Kayano 1999, 24-25). Determined to assert their right of refusal, Kaizawa and Kayano enlisted the help of attorney Tanaka Hiroshi and filed a lawsuit in the Sapporo District Court (hereafter, the Nibutani Dam Case). During the litigation, Kayano and Kaizawa were assisted by a team of fifteen attorneys and numerous expert witnesses (Kaizawa 1999a, 357; Stevens 2014, 205). Notably, their movement drew the support of 10,000 people, who signed a petition in support of the plaintiffs, alongside minor celebrities like the manga artist and author Yokoyama Takao (Pewre Utari Association 1988, 14-15).⁴⁹

The Plaintiffs of the Kayano and Kaizawa were indisputably pillars of the local Ainu community and had played an active role in Ainu cultural revitalization and efforts toward recognition of Ainu Indigenous rights since the 1960s. Kayano founded Japan’s first Ainu language school in 1983 (Maruyama 2014, 162) and also holds the distinction of being the second Ainu person to receive a PhD, having published a wealth material about Ainu culture and history in both Japanese and English (Maruyama 2012, 70). Throughout his life, he

⁴⁹ Yokoyama Takao’s interest in Ainu culture and history was likely deepened thanks to his marriage to Yokoyama (née Chiri) Mutsumi, the niece of Chiri Yukie, who is celebrated as one of the most important Ainu women in history for transcribing many Ainu oral narratives before tragically dying at the age of 19. Yokoyama Takao would go on to become the first chairman of the Chiri Yukie Silver Drops Memorial Museum, located in Noboribetsu, Hokkaido, with Yokoyama Mutsumi serving as its first director (Chiri Yukie Silver Drops Memorial Museum [*chiri yukie gin no shizuku kinenkan*]. n.d.).

advocated for the revitalization of the Ainu language through by broadcasting Ainu-language radio programs from 1987 to 1992 and publishing an Ainu-language dictionary in 1996 (Kayano 1994, 162; FRPAC n.d.). Kayano was also politically active, serving as a member of the Biratori Town Council from 1975 to 1992, and was elected to the Japanese Diet in 1994 as a member of the Socialist Party, making him the first (and so far, only) Ainu member of the national legislature (Kayano 1994, 162; Kawashima 2004, 37). Kaizawa Tadashi, for his part, served as the Vice President of the Hokkaido Ainu Association for twenty years (Maruyama 2012, 70). In this role, he was instrumental in forging political alliances between the Ainu and other Indigenous peoples throughout the world. On several occasions, Kaizawa traveled internationally to confer with the leaders of Indigenous and minority groups, traveling to China in 1973 and (with Kayano) to Alaska in 1978 (Maruyama 2014, 160). Kaizawa also traveled throughout Japan in order to build solidarity with other minority groups, such as the National Convention on Buraku Liberation (Siddle 1996, 159).



Image: Kayano Shigeru, circa 1980. Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum.

Nevertheless, despite their prominence, the Plaintiffs were treated with utter disregard by Construction Ministry representatives. On March 8, 1991, an appeal hearing was held before the Minister of Construction. Kaizawa Tadashi's son, Kouichi, recalls the painful memory of this hearing:

Held in a single room of the Ministry of Construction's joint government building, it was conducted behind closed doors on a cold day with no heating and no tea served. My father, who had undergone cancer removal surgery six months prior and was experiencing a recurrence, stood at that meeting. However, he was unable to complete his statement, so I took over partway through. Fortunately, Senator Inokuma, who had joined our legal team, took time out of his schedule to come and support us. Shocked by this cold treatment, he protested, which led to the hearing being temporarily suspended. Heating was turned on, and tea was served. But for my father, who never once complained of suffering or pain until his death, it must have been an agonizingly long ordeal. (Kaizawa 1999a, 29-30)

On November 16, 1991, though the officials stayed in Nibutani for only three hours Kaizawa Tadashi was readmitted to the hospital and told he had only a few months left to live. On that same day, another on-site inspection of the dam took place, though the officials stayed in Nibutani for only three hours (Kaizawa 1999a, 30). In January 1992, Kaizawa Kouichi promised his father Tadashi that he would take over the dam case after his death, which ultimately occurred on February 3, 1991 (Kayano 1999, 25). In 1993, the National Government of Japan filed an unprecedented motion to intervene in the Nibutani Dam case, which was permitted by the court (Takahashi 1999, 9). The Nibutani Dam was completed in 1996 (Biratori Town 2006, 478). At the Plaintiffs' final oral argument in the Nibutani Dam Case in 1996, Kayano Shigeru was allowed to speak for only fifteen minutes (Kayano 1999, 25).

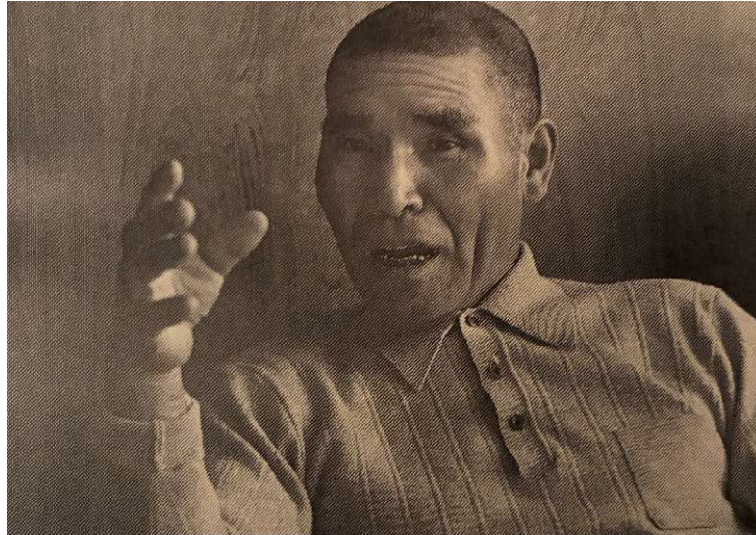


Image: Kaizawa Tadashi, circa 1980. Photo by Jefferik Stocklassa.

After abandoning the original purpose of the dam to provide industrial water for the now-defunct East Tomakomai project, the government now argued that the Nibutani Dam was necessary for flood control, pointing to several historic floods in the Saru Basin catchment area that had occurred during the 20th century (Levin 1999, 406-409). The Plaintiffs countered, noting that the majority of the floods cited by the defendants took place on the Saru River's upstream tributaries, and thus could not have been prevented by the Nibutani Dam, located downstream (Maruyama 2012, 74; Levin 1999, 406-409). They argued that, in fact, no significant flooding had occurred on the Saru River since the construction of the Saru River embankment in 1970 (discussed in Chapter VI), which the Hokkaido Development Bureau had previously promoted as sufficient to prevent the catastrophic floods that were expected to happen once every 100 years (Maruyama 2012, 73-74; Kaizawa 2005, 138). The Plaintiffs further argued that flooding on the Saru River, rather than being a purely natural phenomenon, had intensified as a direct result of Japanese colonialism and extractivism in the region, which had degraded the local environment's

natural capacity to cope with flooding and erosion. This argument, rooted in the Ainu's traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), was a matter of common sense for the Plaintiffs.

Kayano—already a notable scholar and leader at the time of the trial—had written in his 1980 memoir *Our Land Was a Forest* (1994) that, prior to Japanese colonization, Nibutani had been a densely-wooded area boasting trees more than two meters thick (Kayano 1994, 8).⁵⁰ Deforestation became a serious issue in the wake of colonial land-grabs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Maruyama 2012, 66-67; Howell 1995, 55-56; Simmons 1973, 284; Irish 2009, 130; Lie 2001, 91). Kayano argued that Japanese colonizers

came up with arbitrary “laws” that led to the destruction of the beautiful woods of Nibutani for the profit of “the nation of Japan” and the corporate giants... [and] half of the Nibutani region ceased to be a land of natural bounty. (Kayano 1994, 9)

Supplementing Kayano's narrative, fellow-plaintiff Kaizawa Tadashi wrote in his 1991 formal objection to the Nibutani Dam that

Japanese timber dealers...made a huge profit on logging timbers in the Saru River Catchment Area...[and] the mountains...were stripped of all vegetation...so that the lands in the Catchment Area allotted to the Ainu...suffered flood damages. (Maruyama 2016, 102)

These anthropogenic floods contributed to erosion and riverbed degradation, with the combined result of increasing the amount of sediment in local waterways. This became a serious issue on the Saru River, which was already known by local Ainu for its muddy waters. In the Ainu language, the Saru River was called *Sisirmuka* (A: *si* [truly] + *sir* [place] + *mu* [to become blocked] + *ka* [to cause]), referring to the frequent occurrence of the river becoming blocked and shifting its course due to sediment released after rainfall (Ainu

⁵⁰ Kayano also puts forward the theory that the name “Nibutani” actually derives from *nitay* (A: forest) (Kayano 1994, 8). Peng and Geiser (1977) link the name to *nipitani* (handle-making trees) (Peng and Geiser 1977, 47). Either case would support the argument that Nibutani had once been a densely forested area.

Language Archive, n.d.; Biratori Town 2006, 386; 418). This characteristic is even reflected in the Saru River's Japanese name, which is comprised of the characters for "sand" and "flow." As Mici explained to me,

The Saru River, as the name suggests, is a river where sand flows. Once the dam stopped the flow, the sand carried upstream just piled up and buried most of the reservoir. (Field notes, March 25, 2024)

Foreseeing that this sediment would build up behind the Nibutani Dam, the 1975 impact assessment predicted that the dam would be rendered completely unusable within twenty or thirty years (Maruyama 2012, 75). This assessment also stated that, since the dam was originally intended as a water supply and was built in a downstream part of the river, it clearly cannot control flooding in areas upstream (Maruyama 2012, 75). With regard to the controversial issue of regional flooding, the Plaintiffs' position was rooted in Indigenous TEK and an acute awareness of the region's history. In spite of these arguments, the Court nevertheless agreed with the defendants that "the Nibutani Dam is undeniably necessary for flood control," (Levin 1999, 408).

On March 27, 1997, after eight years of litigation, Presiding Judge Ichimaya Kazuo ruled that the Nibutani Dam had been constructed illegally, in violation of local Ainu's rights as an ethnic minority under Article 13 of the Japanese constitution and Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Levin 1999, 395; Miyajima 1998, 134). The court agreed with the Plaintiffs that the Nibutani Dam had flooded a sacred landscape that had been used by Ainu people for generations and deprived them of their ability to engage in important cultural traditions (Levin 1999, 425-429). This landmark decision was the first open acknowledgment of the Indigenous status of Ainu people by the Japanese government, set a precedent for acknowledging the loss of non-tangible aspects Ainu culture

through dam construction, and put pressure on the Japanese government to involve public participation in the planning development projects. However, attorney and legal scholar Georgina Stevens (2014) opines that the court's decision was "an aberration, rather than the beginning of a new jurisprudence on Indigenous or minority rights by courts in Japan" (Stevens 2014, 218-219).

However, the court also ruled that removing the Nibutani Dam would not be in the public's interest (Levin 1999, 429). In the end, the Plaintiff's arguments were not able to persuade the Court to order the removal of the by-then-completed Nibutani Dam, and the reservoir was allowed to fill in 1997 and flood the very same areas that had just been ruled to be culturally significant. That same year, water began flowing through a water conduit from the Nibutani Dam to the headworks of the rice irrigation network (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 145). Shinto water deities (J: *suijin*) were enshrined at the headworks and near each diversion structure, where annual prayers for safety and bountiful harvests are offered (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 145). Today, people in Nibutani still continually worry about the Nibutani Dam's impacts on the local environment, even three decades since its completion. "I definitely don't think the dam is good for the environment's health" one resident told me (Interview, April 30, 2024). Another resident told me that they think Nibutani Dam has placed a significant burden on the local environment, saying "I don't think it can be considered healthy as long as the dam remains" (Interview, June 1, 2024).



Image: An anti-dam banner from the time of the Nibutani Dam Case that still hangs by the side of National Road 217 today. Its text reads: “The Dam is A Waste. Safeguard Hokkaido Nature. Protect the Saru River.”

F. After the Flood: The Enduring Impacts of the Nibutani Dam

The Nibutani Dam stands 35 meters tall and 550 meters long and boasts a catchment area of 1,215 km² and a reservoir capacity of 27 million m³ (Maruyama 2016, 93; Environmental Justice Atlas 2019). It provides municipal water to the nearby towns of Biratori and Monbetsu. When it was opened, the Nibutani Dam’s hydroelectric power station had an energy potential of up to 3,000 kilowatts, or enough to provide power to around 1,000 homes (Levin 1999, 409-410), although it is highly questionable whether this generating capacity is more than a fraction of its former potential due to reservoir sedimentation. One resident I spoke with expressed his strong doubts about the Nibutani Dam’s current generating potential:

They say the dam generates power, but honestly, it’s not really a dam that can reliably generate electricity. Well, it’s an excuse, right? It’s a dam that generates power as an excuse. Sure, it has a hydroelectric plant with a maximum output of around 3,000 kilowatts, but in its current condition, it can’t be worth 3,000 kilowatts. They claim it generates power as a justification. This is just the government’s excuse, and whether the dam was

truly necessary is now highly questionable. (Field notes, March 25, 2024)

Significant problems have been caused by the buildup of sediment upstream of the dam, as predicted by both Ainu TEK and the 1975 impact assessment. This assessment had warned that sediment buildup would render the Nibutani Dam completely unusable within 20 to 30 years (Maruyama 2012, 75). This means that, at the time of this writing, the dam must be nearing the end of its usable lifespan. According to a 2009 article in the *Hokkaido Shimbun* which cited data from the Hokkaido Development Bureau, 41.1 percent of the reservoir's volume had already been filled by sediment—more than twenty times the amount estimated by the 1975 impact assessment (*ibid.*). At a rate of 1 million cubic meters per year, this buildup of sediment at the dam site has caused severe degradation to the riverbed and altered its elevation (Shimada, *et al.* 2006 1-9). This problem is especially acute after periods of heavy rain, which trigger frequent landslides on the area's deforested mountain slopes (Maruyama 2013, 76; Murakami, *et al.* 2008, 32-37; cf. Mouri, *et al.* 2016, 298; cf. Aipassa 1991, 406; cf. Ahn, *et al.* 2006, 330). In August 2003, Typhoon No. 10's record-breaking rainfall triggered thousands of shallow landslides throughout the Saru and Nukabira River basins, which dumped 2.4 million cubic meters of sediment into the Nibutani Dam's reservoir, at a rate of 6,000 cubic meters every second (Shimada, *et al.* 2006, 1-9; Murakami, *et al.* 2008, 30). As a result, the reservoir is actually filling with sediment at a rate much faster than that which was estimated by the 1975 impact assessment.

Many residents pointed to the buildup of sediments upstream of the dam, described as “sludge,” as causing numerous negative impacts to the river. Residents complained of negative impacts on the Saru River's water quality. “The river water is always murky,” one told me, “and I think the dam is a big reason for that” (Interview, May 20, 2024a). “It can't

be healthy if the dam only stores water in spring, right?” another mused, referencing the dam’s much-reduced water storage capacity due to the buildup of sediments (Interview, May 3, 2024). The reservoir has “really become like a swamp” due to this buildup (Interview, May 20, 2024a). Due this severe sedimentation problem, the flood control capacity was questioned by one resident, who called the Nibutani Dam “a dam that has lost its purpose” (Field notes, March 25, 2024). He worried about potential problems emerging in the future due to the dam’s sedimentation problems. “Just removing that sediment would require a huge amount of tax money,” he told me (Field notes, March 25, 2024). As for Mici, my farmer host-father, he felt prevented from improving his fields using the sediment collected by the dam:

Seeing the sediment piling up from upstream, as a farmer, I think, wow, if you made fields there, you could probably grow stuff. Ah, I envy them—I keep thinking, if only I could make a field there. But well, the government won’t allow it. That’s not what it was made for, after all. (*ibid.*)

In addition, flow conditions had significantly worsened, with one resident noting that the Saru River “now flows in a more dangerous state” (Field notes, March 25, 2024). Children playing in the river—a once-common sight recalled fondly by residents—are no longer to be seen, as parents now worry for their children’s safety. “When the dam was built, I thought, is this what will become of our children’s *furusato*? [J: rural village]” (*ibid.*; for a discussion of *furusato*, see Chapter VI). Residents noted changes in the Saru’s river course as a result of dam construction: “It feels like over these thirty years, the river has gotten much further away from my house” (Interview, April 30, 2024). Impacts are not confined to the river course, however, as oceanic changes have also been noted:

Now, if you go to the mouth of the river in Tomikawa, you see the sea has changed. This is because sediment is no longer supplied from upstream,

changing the estuary's landscape. Wow, how terrible, I think when I see it.
(Field notes, March 25, 2024)

The Nibutani Dam also had a significantly negative impact on the livelihoods of local residents. Its reservoir submerged an estimated 530 hectares of land—a full third of the village's livelihood zone (Levin 1999, 410; Maruyama 2012, 71). This included 200 hectares of agricultural land, or 37 of the 51 farms in the area. In addition, the findings of the impact assessments examined by the Sapporo District Court during the Nibutani Dam case estimated that approximately 50 households would be displaced (Levin 1999, 40). The land submerged by the Nibutani Dam included several plots which had been used by the Ainu as agricultural fields for up to 400 years, and represented one of the few areas where Ainu had maintained ownership after the postwar land reforms (Nakamura 2008, 432-433; Nakamura 2013, 29; Maruyama 2014, 160). However, at the time the expropriation negotiations with individual landholders living in the proposed dam site had begun, much of this agricultural land fell under the purview of the Acreage Reduction Policy (discussed in Chapter VI), thus preventing local Ainu from farming rice on it (Maruyama 2012, 65-66). As a result, many landholders who had borrowed money from the local agricultural cooperative for rice farming had fallen into crushing debt and were therefore eager to sell off their land to the expropriation committee in order to offset this debt. Cash compensation standards for the Nibutani Dam were determined through negotiations with individual landholders, as is the common practice in Japan. Although there is a lack of information about specific compensation amounts, anthropologist Millie Creighton (1995; 2003) has characterized the amounts as “large” enough to make settlement an enticing prospect for many residents (Creighton 1995, 94; Creighton 2003, 131). Nevertheless, Creighton notes that none of the Ainu she interviewed “actually said they supported the dam” (Creighton 1995, 84). Kayano

Shigeru and Kaizawa Tadashi attempted to resist the dam by filing a lawsuit, but the government exerted considerable administrative pressure in order to coerce them into “voluntarily” selling their land.

Once compensation amounts had been determined, it was decided that the funding allocated to compensate landholders who refused to sell their land would be held in a government account until all disputes had been settled, for a maximum of ten years, at which point the money would become forfeit (Creighton 2003, 131). However, after three years the money would not be considered compensation at all but would instead be treated as income; landholders would therefore be subjected to “huge amounts” of tax if the dispute took longer than three years to settle (Creighton 2003, 131). These burdensome regulations meant that it was too difficult and expensive for most landholders to resist the dam. One resident interviewed by Creighton described it as “kind of a scare tactic, if you don’t want to pay this huge tax on the land, then you feel you must sell” (Creighton 1995, 85; Creighton 2003, 131). These policies had the effect of profoundly pressuring many Ainu landholders to accept the expropriation of their land, and by 1994 only Kayano and Kaizawa Kouichi remained opposed. (Creighton 2003, 131). Most of the displaced landholders held the view that “no matter what they did, the government would build the dam, so they should fight for the best compensation they could get rather than just refuse the dam.” (Creighton 2003, 131). Plaintiffs Kayano and Kaizawa, who continued to resist, were subjected to further measures of economic coercion in order to silence their campaign against the Nibutani Dam. For example, because Kaizawa Kouichi still refused to accept payment for his land three years after the start of the dispute, the government levied a tax on the money and even withheld his previous year’s tax refund “because of his refusal to pay the income taxes on the payment he

still refuses to accept” (Creighton 1995, 86). It is not known whether this dispute was ever resolved, though one hopes that this burdensome and unjust tax was commuted in 1997 when the dam was ruled illegal by the Sapporo Court.

According to Maruyama (2012), “no one was required to be relocated due to the Nibutani Dam Project,” (Maruyama 2012, 65-66) but it is unclear what exactly this means in light of the facts presented above. Given that a significant number of houses and agricultural fields were surely submerged by the dam, it is possible to read this statement as “although people were forced to relocate, the government did not feel obliged to assist in this relocation.” People I spoke with in Nibutani confirmed to me that two impacted households had to move to the nearby community of Tomikawa to find new work (Field Notes, September 10, 2023). No funding for livelihood reconstruction was allocated under the Act on Special Measures for Reservoir Area Development (ASMRAD) because the number of displaced households was just shy 60 households to qualify for ASMRAD in Hokkaido—a threshold which is arbitrarily three times higher for Hokkaido than for other areas of Japan, where the threshold is only 20 households (Takahasi 2004, 38-39). In other words, no additional livelihood reconstruction measures, beyond simple cash compensation for the negotiated value of the land, were taken on behalf of displaced residents, though such measures were inarguably warranted in this case. Whether or not Nibutani residents were “required to be resettled,” the 50 households living within the reservoir zone must be considered to have been involuntarily displaced, since the choice to remain in place was not provided (cf. Muggah 2003, 10). At the very least, it is clear that these households were *economically* and *environmentally* displaced by the Nibutani Dam, whether or not their physical relocation was ultimately required (cf. Terminski 2014, 77; 223; 274; 368; 450).

In addition to residences and agricultural land, the Nibutani dam also submerged natural areas that provided important resources for Ainu residents' daily subsistence. Contemporary Ainu in the Saru Basin continue their ancestors' practice of gathering wild plants for cooking and production of crafts (discussed in detail in Chapter VII). Due to the loss of land for gathering these essential plants, the livelihoods of local Ainu residents have been adversely affected, as they must now travel further and spend more money to acquire them. Anthropologist Masami Iwasaki-Goodman (2013) notes that the use of gathered plant ingredients is one of the practices that distinguishes contemporary Ainu foodways from those of the Japanese majority, so in addition to the immediate livelihood impact, the loss of wild plants also threatens the transmission of Ainu TEK (Iwasaki-Goodman 2013, 226). In addition to edible plants, other plant resources that were submerged by the Nibutani Dam include cattails (A: *sikina*), reeds (A: *sarki*), and the Manchurian elm (*Ulmus laciniate*; A: *atni*), which are used in Ainu handicrafts and are "essential for the succession of Ainu culture for future generations" (Maruyama 2013, 77). "Wild vegetables are getting scarcer, especially on the opposite bank of the dam," one resident told me (Field notes, March 25, 2024). This is also partly because the dam's access road enables easier access to the forest on the opposite bank from the dam, resulting in overharvesting by outsiders: "People come in from Honshu, so there aren't really any wild vegetables left. We don't go to the opposite bank anymore." (*ibid.*). Residents also noticed impacts on wildlife. Some bird species that used to be common are now rarely seen: "I used to see kingfishers and stuff like that, but I haven't seen them for about twenty or thirty years" (Interview, April 30, 2024). Other bird species have become more common as a result of the dam:

Before the dam, there weren't any swans. I never saw them. After the dam was built, they just multiplied and multiplied. It was shocking. Now it's practically

become a pollution problem. At first it was ‘Wow, swans!’ but gradually it’s become “Oh, swans again?” (*ibid.*)

The Plaintiffs in the Nibutani Dam Case also emphasized its negative impacts on the Saru River’s salmon populations. Plaintiff Kayano Shigeru recalled that, prior to the dam, although “such great numbers of salmon no longer came up river” due to commercial overfishing, pollution, and the prior construction of the Iwachishi Dam in the 1950s “there were more than enough for us to eat every day,” (Kayano 1994, 18). Kayano and fellow Plaintiff Kaizawa Tadashi had both actively lobbied for the conservation of the Saru River’s fisheries based on their importance to Ainu livelihoods prior to their involvement in the lawsuit (Levin 1999, 415-416). Because Saru River salmon run was already near to failure, a 1982 impact assessment concluded that the Nibutani Dam would not pose a significant risk to fish populations, even though this finding contradicted that of a previous 1975 assessment, which had predicted that increased river sedimentation would damage fish numbers (Maruyama 2013, 77). Thirty years after the Nibutani Dam’s completion, however, its negative impact on fisheries is undeniable. Local residents have observed that the river upstream of the dam became “muddy and poor in both variety and population of fish” after the completion of the dam, and “sludge damaged fisheries at the mouth of the Saru River as predicted in the 1975 impact assessment” (Maruyama 2013, 77). Furthermore, the upstream migration of masu trout is now virtually non-existent as a result of the dam, (Kawashima 2004, 41).⁵¹ Although the Nibutani Dam included a fish ladder designed to help migrating fish, researchers have concluded that there are almost no masu trout fry in the Nibutani reservoir, and that only a few trout swim upstream each year (Maruyama 2016, 101).

⁵¹ Landlocked masu trout populations (J: *yamame*), which are not anadromous, can still be found in upland tributaries.

Furthermore, the majority of trout smolt that were experimentally released into the Nibutani reservoir were unable to pass downstream through the dam's fish ladder (Maruyama 2016, 101). Although researchers have confirmed the existence of spawning grounds in the Nukabira River and other upstream tributaries of the Saru River, only 28 mature masu trout were found in the Nukabira River in 2004 (Maruyama 2016, 101). Thus, the Nibutani Dam has clearly had an observable negative impact on Saru River fisheries. Chum salmon have fared a little better when it comes to navigating the fish ladder. When I asked one Nibutani resident how chum salmon were faring these days, he told me

“Well, when the Nibutani Dam was first completed, the salmon couldn't go upstream and I would often see them dying below the dam, but salmon are smart and figured out how to go upstream and spawn...Fish are smart too, you know.” (Interview, May 27, 2024)

As mentioned previously, the Nibutani area is highly significant to Ainu culture, being one of the few communities in Japan where Ainu make up the majority of the population. Nibutani is noteworthy for being the home of the culture hero Okikurmi, who, according to the *yukar* (A: sacred oral narratives), taught the Ainu how to build houses, raise crops, and fish for salmon (Kayano 1994, 7). As a result of this cultural heritage, many prominent tellers of *yukar* have come from the Nibutani area, whose knowledge of the Ainu language attracted the attention of Japanese scholars in the years following WWII (Levin 1999, 412; 424). According to Kaizawa Kouichi, “every corner of the ground” in Nibutani is imbued with “its own significance to us from generation to generation. Even a small stream and the spring-water are no exception” (Maruyama 2012, 71). In a 1995 statement to the Court in the Nibutani Dam Case, Plaintiff's expert and professor from Osaka's National Museum of Ethnology, Outsuka Kazuyoshi noted that “the Saru River and its surroundings such as topography, air and wind have nurtured rich oral epics” (Maruyama 2016, 95). In his

statement, Outsuka testified that, in Nibutani, the “Ainu [still] take salmon from the river, they [still] make food and other traditional things there. They [still] get medicines from the area, and know the trees” (Creighton 2003, 131). Outsuka further warned that “[w]hen the dam is finished this will all stop. The trees will be cut down, the water levels will change...The Ainu struggle to maintain their identity is focused around Nibutani, and this will suffer” (Creighton 2003, 131).

Many landscape features in the region are known by Ainu-language place names that denote their cultural significance and serve to transmit Ainu cultural knowledge across generations. Some of these places are known as *cinomisir* (A: lit. “places where we pray”) and hold special significance as locations for private spiritual practices as “holy places where they can place their souls at rest” (Levin 1999, 413). At least 23 places with Ainu names were predicted to be destroyed by the Nibutani Dam, including two *cinomisir*: *Pere-ure-pukka* and *Kankanrerekehe* (Levin 1999, 411). Because the location of *cinomisir* was traditionally known only known to members of certain lineages in order to prevent them from “being violated, harmed, or altered,” (Levin 1999, 413), the exact locations of these two *cinomisir* were not publicly known until their disclosure was necessitated by the legal proceedings of the Nibutani Dam case. Kayano and Kaizawa were so determined to fight the dam that they made the difficult and unprecedented decision to reveal the locations of the two *cinomisir* to the Court. Nibutani also boasts several noteworthy archaeological sites, including the remains of hillside fortifications, *casi* (A: palisades) that were likely built in the 17th and 18th centuries in response to increasing competition over trade resources demanded by the Japanese (Levin 1999, 412; Walker 2001, 123). *Casi* throughout Hokkaido have yielded valuable archaeological artefacts such as Japanese lacquerware, porcelain, ironware, swords,

and colored beads, and at least two such sites were predicted to be at least partially submerged by the Nibutani Dam: *Yuoy Casi* and *Poromoy Casi* at the time of the litigation (Walker 2001, 123; Levin 1999, 412-413). The court noted in particular that *Poromoy Casi*, an “important archaeological site for understanding the history of the Ainu people,” would be “completely destroyed” by the dam (Levin 1999, 412-413). For the Ainu, a people who adopted the use of writing only relatively recently, the destruction of these sites represents a loss of “precious irreplaceable resources in the quest for understanding Ainu ethnic culture” (Levin 1999, 425-426).

The village is also the location of the *Cipsanke* (A: canoe-launching festival), an important annual religious festival which takes place in dugout canoes (A: *cip*) on the Saru River (Levin 1999, 412). Initiated by Kayano Shigeru and held for the first time around 1969, the *Cipsanke* had been held annually since around 1972 (Fusakawa 1999, 12). The Nibutani Dam submerged the original site of the festival and it had to be moved after the dam was constructed. At the time of the trial, it was predicted that the Nibutani Dam would render the original *Cipsanke* launch site unusable (Levin 1999, 412; 428; Siddle 2002, 410; Maruyama 2013, 77). The 28th annual *Cipsanke* Festival in 1997 was the first to be held at its new location. Biratori Town contributed only ¥500,000 in fundraising for the event (Kaizawa 1999a, 32). Around this time, Biratori’s mayor Nakamichi promoted a competitor event, the Nibutani Dam Lake Festival, spending over ¥6 million on laser shows and other expenses. Only 20 percent of the money spent on the Nibutani Dam Lake Festival benefited the local community.

The Nibutani Dam also created division within the Nibutani Ainu community and disrupted its social cohesion. Creighton notes that the “Ainu did not all react to the Nibutani

Dam with a uniform voice,” and disagreement over whether or not to oppose the dam strained within the community relationships (Creighton 1995, 84). Ultimately, this had the effect of dividing the impacted households into two groups, based primarily on whether or not they were indebted, a result that was predicted in the 1975 impact assessment (Maruyama 2013, 76-77). Plaintiff Kayano wrote that, although “[n]o one here is happy about” the dam, “others stopped complaining when they were offered large sums of money as compensation” (Creighton 2003, 132). Plaintiffs Kaizawa and Kayano, who were relatively well-off compared to the rest of Nibutani’s landholders, were conscious of the fact that their financial situation enabled them to resist the dam when few others could afford to, and therefore decided not to express their resistance to the dam until after many landholders had already completed the expropriation procedure, a move which in hindsight may have exacerbated existing class tensions within the community and hindered efforts to present a unified front against the dam (Maruyama 2012, 65-66). Some landholders, who were eager to collect cash compensation for their land, “resented the attitude of wealthy and successful Ainu” like the plaintiffs, including one local resident who argued that “those of us struggling to make ends meet do not have time for such fooling around” as the *cipsanke* (Siddle 2002, 410). In a small community like Nibutani “where most people know everyone else,” disagreements like this one can permanently damage relationships and have a lasting impact on both individual and communal psychosocial wellbeing (Nakamura 2015b, 175).

Although some residents I spoke with expressed strong opinions about the Nibutani Dam, including worries about its ongoing impacts, personal stories of hardships caused by the dam, and hopes for its removal in the future, I got the sense during my time in Nibutani that views like these were openly expressed only by a minority of residents. The general

atmosphere in the community seemed to be a resignation and a reluctance to take a strong stance on the issue of dam construction to avoid confrontation. This viewpoint was expressed by one resident I spoke with as follows:

Maybe some people opposed it, but the dam's here now and it's a part of everyone's life, so I don't really have anything to say about it. But opposing something the government decided? That's pointless. Opposing something that's already been built just causes trouble. Even though I can't just forget about it, it feels like there's nothing I can do, so I try not to think about it. (Interview, May 2, 2024)

Aepakasnumat, an Ainu woman who had moved to Nibutani in order to learn more about Ainu culture, shared that she had also noticed an ambivalence from local residents in discussing the dam:

The Nibutani Dam issue has been a really huge event within the entire history of the Ainu people. Since coming to Biratori, I've wondered how the locals felt about it. Occasionally, I'd ask questions, trying to understand their thoughts. Everyone seemed resigned to it as something that had already happened. There wasn't really any strong movement to do something about it. (Interview, May 14, 2024)

Still, Aepakasnumat noticed offhand remarks that signaled a negative opinion toward the dam, particularly from elderly residents with strong memories of Nibutani before the dam:

Listening to them, I felt there were still many older folks who personally didn't want the dam. They'd say things like, "what good does it do?" or "we had more fish and the river was better before it was built." (*ibid.*)

Younger generations, who have lived most or all of their lives in sight of the Nibutani Dam, seemed to take it for granted as a part of Nibutani's landscape, a fact which surprised Aepakasnumat:

Young people have known the dam since birth, so while they know their elders fought against it, they just think it's normal to have it. Hearing that was kind of shocking. I wonder if all the young folks are just becoming indifferent to it. (*ibid.*)

Another resident, who has lived in Nibutani for more than 50 years, expressed similar concerns:

My generation and my children have the landscape without the dam deeply ingrained in us; it's the landscape of our homeland. But for children today, it probably isn't like that. I think that's scary. (Interview, April 30, 2024)

Indeed, during my time in Nibutani, I witnessed a very striking example of the way local children relate to the dam, which I will describe below.

One brisk autumn evening, I attended an Ainu language class at the Nibutani Seikatsukan, which was taught by two young language instructors in their twenties and was free of charge, paid for by funds from the Foundation for Ainu Culture. The classes were divided into two blocks, with a break in between, when instructors and students would usually watch YouTube videos together, sometimes related to Ainu culture, but sometimes not. The language class, which was open to anyone, was primarily designed with elementary school-aged children in mind, and although the overwhelming majority of the students who attended the same class as I did were adults interested in learning Ainu language, there was a local Ainu boy of about 10 years old or so, who would sometimes attend the class. During our breaks, this boy would often request that we watch videos about the Nibutani Dam. “Wow, he must *really* like dams,” one of our instructors mused, as the boy watched the video with a smile on his face. (Field notes, September 23, 2023).

The boy's love of the Nibutani Dam may be due in part the general appeal of dam tourism in Japan—with the Nibutani Dam being featured in TV programs and collectible trading cards designed to appeal to children, as well as active outreach by the Nibutani Dam office in children's education as well as Ainu community (Field Notes, July 2, 2023). For instance, one Nibutani resident explained that:

The dam holds these events for children several times a year. Things like river walks and tree plantings, or doing something like “forest restoration.” They even have a bit of Ainu culture, and maybe some food too, like *ohaw*. The kids just play the whole time. They do this two or three times a year. And honestly, kids who grow up like that, they’re never going to be against the dam. They’re raised without knowing about the dam’s negative side. (Field notes, March 25, 2024)

Additionally, the staff of the Nibutani Dam’s management office are regular attendees and participants at Ainu community events, particularly those related to the river. During my fieldwork, I witnessed Nibutani Dam employees laughing while hooking salmon with *marek* at the local *asircepnomi* first salmon ceremony, helping children to release young salmon fry into the Saru River during a school field trip, and reflecting on Biratori Town’s early history on a bus tour of Ainu placenames. Although nearly all of the dam’s office staff are specialists from outside Biratori Town, they are active participants in the local community, and this likely contributes to residents’ reluctance to incite confrontation and risk social disharmony by speaking out against the dam.



Image: Advertisement for a TV program and trading card featuring the Nibutani Dam that was hanging at the Nibutani Dam Management Office.

G. The Construction State Comes Home: An Uneasy Present

For local Ainu, the Saru River Development Project has continued a pattern of dispossession, discrimination, and neglect that has characterized Japan's project of settler colonialism since the government took a national interest in Hokkaido's development in 1868. With the construction of the Nibutani Dam, Ainu landholders were physically, economically, and environmentally displaced—just as previous generations of Ainu had been displaced prior to 1945. Through its lack of consultation with local Ainu during the project's initial planning and assessment phase, the government ignored local Ainu's needs and grossly undervalued their Indigenous TEK, employing economic coercion and administrative pressure to discipline those who resisted. Just as Meiji-era policies radically simplified Ainu social organization to accommodate an individual freehold taxation and wage-labor system, Japan's insistence on the use of individual negotiations in the expropriation process

undermines Ainu communal solidarity and hinders efforts for Ainu Indigenous rights and cultural revitalization. The net effect of the government's approach to land expropriation and compensation in this fashion has been to enforce a disciplinary state of atomization on Ainu landholders in order to weaken their resistance. Meanwhile, thanks to the political economic inertia of the Construction State, wasteful and destructive infrastructures such as the Saru River Development Project and other "politicians' dams" continue to be championed by politicians and bureaucrats.

Although the term exact Construction State (J: *doken kokka*) was not used by the people I spoke with in Nibutani, they were quite familiar with the concept and many connected it to the Nibutani Dam. When I asked one Nibutani resident her opinion on local infrastructure construction, she told me she thought some places were "overdoing it," and questioned who benefits from such construction:

Paving every single spot you go to in the mountains? That's a bit much. Sometimes I wonder if it's just for the construction companies. Is everything really necessary? Is it truly needed? (Interview, April 30, 2024)

Another expressed his belief that the Nibutani Dam's only true purpose was to enrich construction companies:

What the government was thinking of when they built the Nibutani Dam, and probably the Biratori Dam too, was fostering the *zenekon*. It's painfully obvious how much they're focused on nurturing big corporations. They say that openly. If they truly cared about ordinary citizens, they wouldn't do this. Since it's taxpayer money, the government spends it without a second thought. They waste money, even though there are still places where money could be put to good use. I wonder what they're thinking. Well, that's how it is. (Field Notes, March 25, 2024)

Other residents I spoke with expressed similar beliefs. One explained to me that:

As they say, building one dam means the construction companies, the big contractors, can prosper and rejoice for ten years. I think that's exactly right.

(Interview, June 1, 2024)

Another resident even recalled candid admissions of this fact by construction company representatives themselves during their site visits to Nibutani:

People from Nishimatsu Construction came. They said, “After the war ended, we went overseas for postwar compensation work, building bridges and ports. But that work dried up so now we need Japan to build ports and dams for us. If Japan starts construction on just one dam per year, we can survive.” Building one dam takes ten, twenty years. If they build just one such project per year, Japan’s major contractors can survive. That’s what they were saying. (Field Notes, February 5, 2024)

Other residents I spoke with were especially critical of the lack of environmental consideration in development planners. One expressed his frustration that “they just go ahead and build without thinking much about the long-term consequences. They just do whatever they want.” (Interview, May 21, 2024). Another resident linked the Nibutani Dam’s construction to corruption within the ruling LDP:

Since the LDP is so powerful, they pretty much do whatever they want. If they’re the dominant force, they can get involved in collusion and all sorts of things, right? Then problems start popping up everywhere. (Interview, May 20, 2024a)

Another resident expressed a sense of betrayal at the unfulfilled promises of development that construction companies tout about the benefits of large dams like the Nibutani Dam:

Back then, the selling point for dams was always the same: once the dam was built, a reservoir would form, becoming a place for relaxation, with leisure facilities popping up, and lots of visitors coming. They always made pamphlets like that back then. They made pamphlets like that everywhere, building dams all over Japan, all over Hokkaido. But it hasn’t happened like that in a single one of those places. Building dams, and then tourism booming after the dam, and all this wonderful development. Probably not a single town like that exists. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

The same resident questioned whether such projects could truly be considered economically profitable, instead describing them as simply moving money around:

They build, then after a few years, they tear it down, build again, tear it down, and that's how they generate profits. But that's not really profit. It's like elementary school kids playing in the mud—just repeating the same thing over and over. Money moves around, moves around, and you just feel like money's coming in by building things. What is that, I wonder? I think Japan has become a culture where we think that's a good thing. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

He also reflected on the history of booms and busts in local infrastructure development and bemoaned the impact that such history has had on the natural environment:

Take Lake Kanayama, for example. There was a mine there, and they said the mining industry would develop more and more. To develop that mining industry, they built railroads. To build those railroads, they needed stable river flow, so they built dams. The result now? The mines are closed, the railroads stopped running. So, they worked hard to build things, but what remains, the result of all that building, is just stuff that burdens nature. People just don't seem to learn from that. They think, "Let's build more," and then they build it somewhere else. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

H. Conclusion

Some Nibutani residents I spoke with expressed support for dam removal, citing what they saw as positive developments in other countries. "In America, they're actually starting to tear dams down now," Mici once told me, adding that

Japan is the only country building them with such fervor. I wish a movement could form where people would unite and say "Tear them down! Return the rivers to their natural state!" (Field Notes, March 25, 2024)

Smith (2020) notes that, as of 2019, around 1,600 dams had been removed in the US, especially in the states of California, Oregon, Michigan, and Wisconsin (Smith 2020, 215-216). One case that Smith mentions, the removal of the San Clemente Dam from California's Carmel River, bears a striking resemblance to the situation in Nibutani, as its reservoir "had lost more than 90 percent of its storage capacity" due to sediment accumulation behind the dam and "could no longer serve its original purpose of water storage" (Smith 2020, 214).

“Rather than retrofit an entirely useless structure,” the state of California, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the dam’s owner, a company California American Water came together “to devise a way to safely remove the dam and restore the Carmel River to a more natural free-flowing state” (Smith 2020, 215) But rather than being primarily motivated by environmental or social concerns, the San Clemente Dam’s removal, like most dam removal cases, was “initially motivated by economic concerns” (Smith 2020, 216). Some Nibutani residents I spoke with understood this fact, and hoped that the economic benefits of dam removal cases in the United States would catch the attention of Japanese construction companies:

Overseas, there are cases where they demolish dams as a business venture. I heard someone say, “wouldn’t it be great if we could do something like that in Japan, too?” And, you know, the *zenekon* earn income from building these dams. They build so many unnecessary things. If they could shift their business into tearing them down, that would be great. (Interview, May 14, 2024)

Certainly, if Japanese contractors were to enter the dam removal business, there are plenty of promising potential sites where they could begin, owing to Japan’s status as the most densely dammed country in the world. However, as will be shown in Chapter X, major players in Japanese politics and economy have signaled their intention to continue to build more hydropower dams, along with other so-called “green” energy infrastructures, as a means of combatting climate change and attaining carbon neutrality. For the Nibtuani Dam, however, the future of removal is inevitable, and many in the Ainu community look forward to the day when the Saru’s waters can once more flow freely, as foretold in the tale of Little Okikurmi and the evil fish trap.

V. A FUTURE FROM THE RUBBLE? RESTORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RIVER AND FOREST IN THE WAKE OF RUINATION

A. Introduction

I woke up one sunny morning in the log cabin. On that day, my host family was holding a *sinnurappa* memorial ceremony for their ancestors, and I had agreed to help out. I blarily donned my *nagabutsu* (J: “long boots”; rubber wellingtons) and made my way to the *omoya* (J: main house). When I arrived, Yupi was already outside and told me to ride with him in his kei-truck.⁵² We drove across the road and through the paddy fields to the top of the embankment, which we skirted for a time before pulling off next to a glade of trees along the Saru River.

“Alright, we’re here,” Yupi said, and we got out of the truck. Gesturing to the stand of trees nearest to the riverside, he said, “See those willow trees? Those are called *susu* in Ainu, *yanagi* in Japanese. We will use their branches to make *inaw* for the *nusasan*.” He handed me a pruning saw. “Take this and go get eight straight branches, about this long,” he said, holding out his arms to indicate the correct length. “I’ll get eight, too, so we’ll have the sixteen we need.” We walked down the side of the embankment and into the trees that crowded the flat land along the side of the river. I followed the river, looking for branches of the correct size and straightness. I spotted a good branch, and as I sawed, I glanced around. As it was still early spring, last year’s brown leaves still covered the ground, and had not yet been overtaken by new green, and the *susu* were still mostly bare. I looked upstream and could see the Nibutani Dam like an enormous green wall in the distance through the trees. After getting a couple branches, I moved near to where Yupi was working. “Are you finding

⁵² The term kei-truck refers to a type of small pickup truck that is ubiquitous in rural Japan.

any?” he asked. “Yes, I’ve found a few so far,” I replied. “It’s getting harder and harder to find the right branches,” he said, “because the dam makes the river downstream of it here flow faster, so they grow fatter and get all crooked. Those types of trees are no good for *inaw*.”



Image: Willow trees just downstream of the Nibutani Dam.

After a while, we found the sixteen we needed to make the *nusasan*—the outdoor altar for the *sinnurappa* ceremony. We put the willow branches into the back of the kei-truck and drove to the far side of the embankment before looping around and heading back to the house. When we got back home, we went into the workroom and started making the *inaw*. While Yupi used a knife to whittle down one end of each branch into a stake which would be stuck into the ground, he instructed me to use my own knife to cut notches into the front and sides of the branches. We then stripped bark from the willow branches using small, hooked knives. If done in the correct way, this results in a mass of several long, curly strands, which can then be clipped off in one piece, called *inawkike*. We took the *inawkike* and the willow branches outside and set up the *nusasan*. Yupi showed me where and how to space the

branches, and we stuck them into the ground in a row. He poured *tonoto* into a bowl and we dipped each *inawkike* into the *tonoto* before slotting them into the notches on the branches. We also dripped *tonoto* on the top of each branch. With that, the *inaw* had been consecrated and the *nusasan* was complete.

We then built a small fire to the left of the row of *inaw*, where the women's ceremony would be held. In the meantime, we went into the house. Yupi, his father, Mici, and I donned *attush* or *kaparamip* robes and *sapampe* crowns and sat to either side of the cast iron hearth in the *omoya*'s living room, where Hapo, Sapo, and a few other close female relatives had set up a *toma* mat and laden it with fruit, salt, crackers, and dried fish, and which Mici had flanked with *inaw*. We did the *onkami* gesture and began the *sinnurappa* prayer. Yupi chanted the words, as we all used *tukipasuy* to scatter *tonoto* from lacquerware *tuki* cups toward the hearth:

Goddess of Fire, the deity who rules the land. Please accept these offerings we present to you with, with words of prayer added to this cup, for those from our house who became gods in the divine realm. Even if only one cupful should reach the upper realm, it will multiply and overflow a great cup. It is said that the one who receives the cup in the land of the gods will invite their closest kin, and a splendid feast, a great banquet, is held. In so doing, we, the many relatives living after our ancestors who returned to the land of the gods, will forever prosper without the Ainu lineage ending. Then you yourself will continue to be revered as a deity. Among your many servants, I request that one possessing courage, eloquence, and swiftness be sent forth to deliver this cup and these offerings to the village of our ancestors. To the Fire Goddess, the revered deity, I offer my worship. (Field Notes, April 14, 2024)

Yupi's *sinnurappa* prayer expresses a strong desire to maintain a ritual continuity with departed ancestors for the sake of preserving his household's Ainu lineage. Yet, due to the ruination of the Saru River by dam construction, materials necessary for such important ceremonies have become more difficult to obtain.



Image: The hearth is prepared for the *sinnurappa* ceremony.

In his book *Rubble: The Aftermath of Destruction* (2014), Anthropologist Gastón Gordillo centers his analysis on the process of “ruination”— or the continual destruction of certain spaces as a prerequisite for capitalist accumulation. For Gordillo, ruination plays out in “disjointed and uneven ways, destroying some places more so than it does others and creating sacrifice zones” (Gordillo 2014, 80). Thus, for Gordillo, capitalism relies on the discursive production of certain spaces as “disposable,” resulting in the normalization of an unjust distribution of environmental destruction. He draws on Ann Stoler’s concept of “imperial disregard,” the attitude through which capitalist destruction can be openly acknowledged, yet “affectively neutralized” and therefore depoliticized (Gordillo 2014). Similarly, another scholar, Voyles (2015), argues that Indigenous lands and bodies are marked out as sacrifice zones which can be “wastelanded” for the sake of colonial economies. For authors like Voyles, Gordillo, and myself, the point of focusing on processes by which lands and bodies are ruined or wastelanded “is not simply to outline” the so-called “creative destruction” of capitalist expansion, but “to explore the positive reconfigurations that follow” as communities strive to rebuild desirable lives (Gordillo 2014, 83). In this

chapter, I explore the reconfigurations that have followed the ruination of the Saru River Basin due to dam construction under the SRCDP in Biratori Town, though the extent to which these developments are positive or negative is contested among residents. Nibutani was treated as a “sacrifice zone” by the Japanese government, in which important Ainu places were submerged in the name of the “public interest.” But as Gordillo notes, “everything that bourgeois society builds is built to be torn down” (Gordillo 2014). Dams are huge, destructive projects that have a maximum lifespan of only 30-40 years. Rather than being a long-term investment in regional development, they are built with only short-term interests in mind. Despite acknowledging the unequivocal cultural significance of the area to Ainu residents of Nibutani, the court ultimately ruled that halting the dam project would not be in the “public’s interest,” and allowed these lands to be flooded and destroyed anyway. The court expressed a clear sense of imperial disregard by acknowledging the significance of the area while simultaneously authorizing its destruction.

Floods on the Saru River were positioned as “natural” disasters that made dam construction necessary. Yet viewing Saru River floods as purely “natural” disasters depoliticizes them by ignoring the role of massive deforestation brought about by Japanese colonization in creating the conditions for disastrous floods in the first place. Today, Ainu people are actively involved in environmental restoration initiatives that center on the important relationship between river and forest. Some of these initiatives are run by the local government of Biratori Town, while others are being pursued by Ainu-led organizations directly. Although previous chapters have described the adversarial relationship that has existed between Ainu activists and the government, this chapter will show how this relationship is not always so adversarial. Together, Ainu are working together with Wajin

neighbors to collaboratively build a better future from the rubble of dam construction. I begin with a discussion of a groundbreaking impact assessment and report produced by Ainu residents of Biratori Town, the Biratori Dam Cultural Impact Assessment (CIA). I describe the content of the assessment's final report and show how its findings and recommendations continue to shape local governance and development in Biratori Town. I then turn to a discussion of a key term that emerged from this report, *iwor*, and how its use as a guiding principle for local conservation and development has been met with ambivalence by some Ainu community members. I conclude with an examination of an alternative approach being pioneered by the local Ainu-led organization, National Trust Cikornay.

B. Background on the Biratori Dam Cultural Impact Assessment (CIA)

The Nibutani Dam was, of course, only the first of two dams planned under the Saru River Comprehensive Development Project (SRCDP). Although progress on the construction of the project's second dam, the Biratori Dam, was significantly slowed by the Sapporo Court's Ruling in the Nibutani Dam Case, it was ultimately completed in 2022. It is located about 25 kilometers northeast of Nibutani on a tributary of the Saru River called the Nukabira River, and is even larger than the Nibutani Dam at 56.5 meters tall and 660 meters long. The reason its construction was delayed for so long was because the Sapporo Court had ordered a more comprehensive environmental and cultural impact assessment to be conducted, with the participation of local Ainu residents (Iwasaki-Goodman and Kaizawa 2004, 1; Kaizawa 2005, 138). In 1997, the same year as the Court's ruling, national law governing river management, the River Act (J: *kasenhō*) was revised, elevating the improvement and conservation of river ecology as a main objectives of river management, alongside flood control and water utilization (Biratori Town 2006, 26). Two years later, in

1999, the Ministry of Construction's River Bureau established the Basic Policy for Saru River Basin Improvement, which explicitly mentioned the importance of the region to Ainu culture for the first time (Biratori Town 2006, 50-51). Provisions for improving the environment for salmon and trout were also included in the above policy (Biratori Town 2006, 134-136; 478). Thanks to the Sapporo Court's ruling and the amended River Law, the Japanese government became legally obligated to involve the participation of local residents in development projects (Iwasaki-Goodman and Kaizawa 2004, 1; Kaizawa 2005, 138). As a result of this new requirement, the Hokkaido Development Bureau (now MLITT) created the Board of the Saru River Basin (hereafter, the Board), which began a review of the plan for the Biratori Dam in 1999 (Iwasaki-Goodman and Kaizawa 2004, 1).

From 1999 to 2002, the Board held nine closed meetings as well as a few hearings that were open to the public (Biratori Town 2006, 50-51; Iwasaki-Goodman and Kaizawa 2004, 1). The thirteen members of the Board were all appointed by the Hokkaido Development Bureau, and included local mayors, fishing cooperative executives, and experts in river engineering (Maruyama 2013, 78). However, Maruyama (2013) notes that Board-members were primarily chosen "from persons of learning and experience" who shared "the interests of the authorities through the construction of dam projects," and as a result, most of the discussions in the initial phase of the review focused on technical aspects like flood control (Maruyama 2013, 78). Only one of the Board's thirteen members was Ainu, and out of the nine meetings held by the Board, Ainu issues were mentioned only briefly at the sixth and seventh meetings (Maruyama 2013, 78). Nakamura (2008; 2013) argues that the Board's actions during this review shows that the participation of local Ainu was viewed as a "must-do action" by the government, who "did not seem eager to listen to Ainu voices at the initial

stage” (Nakamura 2008, 434). Nevertheless, in 2002, the Board released the Saru River Improvement Plan, stating that “Biratori Town is the only place in Japan that has preserved Ainu culture and traditions,” and expressed the need to ensure the preservation, transmission, and revitalization of Ainu culture, along with the preservation and regeneration of riparian forests alongside river banks, upon which Ainu culture relies (Biratori Town 2006, 50-51; 414). Yet, despite acknowledging the importance of preserving river ecosystems and Ainu culture, the Board’s 2002 decision included proceeding with the construction of the Biratori Dam, which was set to begin in 2006 (Iwasaki-Goodman and Kaizawa 2004; Maruyama 2013, 77).

In response to the Board’s decision, the Biratori Culture Department put pressure on the Muroran branch of the Hokkaido Development Bureau to conduct a more detailed investigation into the Biratori Dam’s potential impacts on Ainu culture, arguing that additional field research was necessary to determine adequate measures for protecting sacred sites and minimizing environmental impacts (Nakamura 2013, 31). As a result, the Biratori Dam Cultural Impact Assessment (CIA) was commissioned by the Muroran branch in May of 2003, and its execution was entrusted to Biratori’s municipal government (Biratori Town 2006, 52). According to Yoshihara Hideki, leader of the Ainu Cultural and Environmental Preservation Research Office (J: *ainu bunka kankyō hozen taisaku chōsa shitsu*; hereafter, the Research Office); the Biratori CIA represented the realization of Japan’s “responsibility to cooperate with Indigenous peoples in water development projects” (Nakamura 2013, 34). This assessment would become the first instance in Japan in which research into a proposed construction project was planned and conducted with community participation, as well as the

first case in which an Indigenous culture was considered (Kaizawa 2005, 139; Nakamura 2008, 428; Iwasaki-Goodman and Kaizawa 2004, 3-4).

The first phase of the Biratori CIA began in 2003 and concluded in 2005. That same year, the Biratori Branch of the Hokkaido Ainu Association was commissioned by Biratori Town to review Ainu cultural environment conservation measures (Biratori Town 2006, 738). A final report, compiling the results of the Biratori CIA and the Ainu Association's recommendations, was released in 2006 (Biratori Town 2006; Nakamura 2008, 435-436; Iwasaki-Goodman and Kaizawa 2004, 3). Field investigations were carried out by the Research Office, while another group called the Research Committee (J: *ainu bunka kankyō hozen taisaku chousa iinkai*) held final decision-making authority (Maruyama 2016, 99). While the Research Committee's membership did include a few local Ainu leaders, the majority of its members were Wajin government officials and experts in fields such as law, engineering, and anthropology (Iwasaki-Goodman and Kaizawa 2004, 3). The Research Office, meanwhile, was staffed exclusively by local residents, of whom a majority were Ainu (Nakamura 2008, 435; Maruyama 2016, 99). Nibutani Dam Case Plaintiff Kaizawa Kouichi was one of the members of the research office (Kaizawa 2005, 139). Between 2003 and 2005, the research office carried out field surveys of plant and animal species in the Biratori Dam site, interviewed local elders, conducted archival research, and developed simulations designed to model the predicted impacts of the Biratori Dam (Iwasaki-Goodman and Kaizawa 2004, 3; Nakamura 2008, 435; Nakamura 2013, 31). Local residents were hired by the research office as full-time and part-time employees for the three-year duration of the CIA and, through their involvement with the project, greatly deepened their knowledge and appreciation of local Ainu culture and history and developed research skills and technical

expertise they might not otherwise have acquired (Nakamura 2008, 440; Kaizawa 2005, 139). In practice, however, the Wajin-dominated Research Committee sometimes criticized the “unprofessional” methods employed by the research office, and local Ainu residents without academic backgrounds found it difficult to participate (Nakamura 2008, 438-439). Furthermore, the elephant in the room remained the fact that the decision to move ahead with the Biratori Dam’s construction had already been confirmed by the Board, and the CIA was therefore never intended to alter this ultimate outcome (Nakamura 2008; 440; Maruyama 2013, 77).

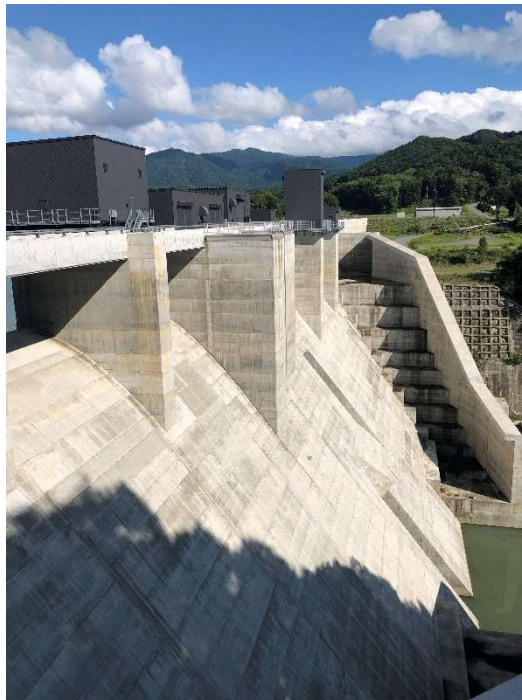


Image: The Biratori Dam.

C. The Content of the Final Report of the Biratori CIA

The 2006 report of the Biratori CIA is a monumental achievement of community-based research, a fascinating, 800-page tome that compiles the collective wisdom of local Ainu residents and presages developments in Biratori that would play out over the course of the next two decades. Plans for what would eventually become the Ainu Culture Promotion

Public Corporation (Kousha), the Iwor Cultural Exchange Center, and the Nokapira Iwor Visitor's Center first appeared in this report (Biratori Town 2006, 26-29; 741-748). An entire dissertation could be devoted purely to the information contained within the pages of the report, but I provide a short summary of the report's content below.

The report found that, as was true in the case of the Nibutani Dam, river sedimentation would be major concern for the Biratori Dam (Biratori Town 2006, 404). The Nukabira River, like its distributary, the Saru, is well known by local residents to have a naturally high sediment load, and the buildup of this sediment behind the dam was expected to make it unusable after thirty years (Maruyama 2013, 78). The report furthermore predicted that the Biratori Dam would have an adverse impact on the local ecosystem. Significant losses in local plant species were expected even at the lowest water level in the planned reservoir, including 59 tree species and 69 other species that are still used by local Ainu for food, medicine, and daily commodities (Biratori Town 2006, 260; Nakamura 2008, 437-438; Maruyama 2016, 100; Nakamura 2013, 33). Willow (A: *susu*) and bulrush (A: *sikina*) are two examples of culturally important plant species that the report predicted would be negatively impacted (Biratori Town 2006, 504). The loss of these plants was also predicted to have a negative impact on the Nukabira watershed's water quality and water retention capability (Biratori Town 2006, 453; Maruyama 2016, 100). Recognizing the crucial link between rivers and riparian forests, the report's authors argue that such forests can be thought of as "green dams" because they "mitigate droughts and floods, purify water quality, and prevent sediment runoff and landslides," while also serving "as a vital energy source for diverse wildlife" (Biratori Town 2006, 421). In particular, the harm posed to willow trees by the dam's construction, which would "block snowmelt runoff and the accompanying sediment

transport” that willow forests rely on, would “disrupt migration pathways for diverse flora and fauna and cause significant impacts on fish populations” (*ibid.*).

Because the dam would disrupt this important relationship between the river and the forest, the report predicted that animal species, such as bear, deer, sables, squirrels, foxes, hawks, owls, and falcons, would be negatively impacted due to habitat loss and stresses caused by alteration of their migration patterns (Biratori Town 2006, 22; 407; Maruyama 2016, 100-101; Nakamura 2008; Iwasaki-Goodman and Kaizawa 2004, 6-7). It predicted that an increase in agricultural predation and vehicular accidents due to alteration of deer migration patterns, as well as an increased risk of bear encounters (Biratori Town 2006, 22-23; 407-408). In addition to warning of these predicted problems, the report also emphasizes the need to ease regulations on hunting (discussed in Chapter VII) (Biratori Town 2006, 408). The report also predicted that the Biratori Dam would also negatively impact fish and make the restoration of salmon and trout populations, already damaged overfishing in the 19th century and by the construction of the Iwachishi and Nibutani Dams in the 20th century, all the more difficult to achieve (Biratori Town 2006, 20; 419; Nakamura 2008, 437-438). It also warned that disruption of local fish could worsen the problem of invasive species (Biratori Town 2006, 482). In addition to issuing these predictions, the report called for the construction of “fishways for all erosion control dams” (see Section E below) and the continuation of “detailed surveys” of fish populations that are “designed to ensure the active participation of local residents, including the Ainu people” (Biratori Dam 2006, 32-33; 423).

The environmental damage predicted to accompany the Biratori Dam was seen to have direct consequences for local residents’ livelihoods. The dam’s construction site is located in an area called Shukushubetsu, an important “treasure forest” rich in natural

resources regularly utilized by local Ainu (Biratori Town 2006; 141; Kaizawa 2005, 137-138). At the time the report was published, at least 39 Ainu individuals continued to use the area for hunting, fishing, and plant gathering, and the area is also important for pedagogical purposes, since children were commonly taken there to learn Ainu cultural knowledge and livelihood skills (Biratori Town 2006, 12; 249; 410; 493; Maruyama 2016, 100; Nakamura 2008, 436). At the time the CIA was conducted, much damage to Shukushubetsu had already been done, as the land had already cleared in the 1990s to make way for the dam's construction (Kaizawa 2005, 137-138). Like the Nibutani Dam before it, the Biratori Dam was predicted by the CIA to have a significantly negative impact on local Ainu culture. Culturally important livelihood activities such as hunting, fishing, and gathering would become impossible to continue in the planned site, and Nakamura (2008) opined that it would be unlikely that many of the local Ainu would continue these activities elsewhere (Nakamura 2008, 440). Ainu children would no longer be able to use the area as their classroom to learn cultural skills that rely on a healthy environment.

Irreplaceable sites were also predicted to be destroyed by the dam. The area where the Biratori Dam was slated to be built held special religious significance thanks to the views it affords of the sacred Mount Poroshiri, (A: *porosir-un-kamuy*) thirty kilometers away, which the report calls the “spiritual anchor of the entire Saru River Basin” (Biratori Town 2006, 15; Nakamura 2013, 32). The CIA identified nearly two hundred Ainu place names in the Nukabira River Basin, including around fifteen named sites predicted to be submerged by the dam (Biratori Town 2006; 17; 449; Maruyama 2016, 99-100). These sites possessed Ainu-language names that were related to Ainu spirituality and oral tradition, along with those related to animals, plants, and topographical features (Biratori Town 2006, 12). Many of

these names were first recorded by the 18th-century explorer and cartographer, Matsu'ura Takeshirou (Biratori Town 2006, 28-29). Yet some named sites were only revealed during the course of the CIA, because they were traditionally kept secret within particular Ainu lineages (Biratori Town 2006, 443). These included three *cinomisir*, a sacred spring, a site for *sinnurappa*, memorial ceremonies, and a site for performing *kamuynomi* prayer services for the River Goddess, *Wakka-us-kamuy* (Biratori Town 2006, 12-13; Maruyama 2016, 100). The report concludes that “the fact that the Ainu people cooperated with the survey and revealed these locations demonstrates their commitment to preserving their heritage and demands a sincere response” (Biratori Town 2006, 444). As “compensation” for the destruction of one of the three *cinomisir*—the rocky hillside that the Biratori Dam was literally built into—developers built an artificial replacement. Whether this action constitutes a “sincere response” to the destruction of Ainu sacred places is certainly debatable.



Image: The artificial replacement *cinomisir* built as “compensation” for the Biratori Dam.

The Biratori CIA also identified forty-seven archaeological sites in the Nukabira River Basin, including at least seven in the planned dam site, that confirm continuous human habitation in the basin for more than 12,000 years (Biratori Town 2006, 88; Maruyama 2016, 99-100). Additionally, the planned site is also known as the only source of the metamorphic rock greenschist (J: *aotora*), which was widely used in northern Japan during the Neolithic Period (Biratori Town 2006, 28-29; 88; Maruyama 2015, 99-100). As a result, multiple observers have opined that more archaeological sites probably exist in the planned site than those that were recorded by the CIA (Biratori Town 2006, 90-91; Maruyama 2016, 99-100; Kaizawa 2005, 137-138). The loss of these important cultural sites was anticipated to have a negative impact on the mental health and sense of identity of local Ainu (Biratori Town 2006, 448-449). According to geographer Nakamura Naohiro (2008), the destruction “of both tangible and intangible elements” of Ainu culture in this way will “physically and emotionally” harm local Ainu by striking a significant blow to their “pride and dignity” (Nakamura 2008, 437-438).

The Biratori CIA is remarkable not only for being a monumental undertaking of community-based research that recorded an astounding amount of detailed information on Ainu culture and spirituality and their links to the local ecosystem, but as a visionary document that articulates a future concept of Ainu cultural revitalization that in many ways continues to define the current paradigm of local development in Biratori. In addition to the findings summarized above, the final report of the Biratori CIA issues many recommendations for conservation measures to protect the “the foundational infrastructure of the cultural environment—essentially, the ‘traditional living infrastructure’” of the Ainu people (Biratori Town 2006). Throughout the report, this conception of the foundational

infrastructure of the Ainu people is used evoked by the term, *iwor* (Biratori Town 2006, 14; 22; 26). *Iwor* is an Ainu-language term that has become a common keyword in Ainu cultural revitalization and environmental efforts, gracing the pages of government reports and educational pamphlets on Ainu culture as well as the walls of museums. The final report of the Biratori CIA represents one early example of the term being used in an official government document. Although the term is nearly ubiquitous in both Japanese and English language documents, it has a complex history linked as much to bureaucratic decision-making as it is to Ainu ontologies, making subject of critique by local Ainu.

D. Defining *Iwor*

What is the meaning of *iwor*, how did it become a near-ubiquitous keyword, and what are the implications for the incorporation of Ainu ecological knowledge into policy? If you search for the term *iwor* in the dictionary of the Ainu Language Archive,⁵³ it returns fifty-four results. Four of these are entries for the word *iwor* alone, while the others are compounds that include *iwor*. The four definitions given for *iwor* are (1) deep in the mountains, (2), a valley between two mountain ridges, (3) the inside of something, and (4) a hunting ground (Ainu Language Archive, n.d.). Examples of compounds that contain *iwor* include *iworke* (A: a hollowed-out space, enclosed on both sides or all around), *nay-iwor* (A: an area of flowing water in a marsh), *pet-iwor* (A: a fishing ground), and *iworekasi* (A: “*iwor* grandfather,” the brown bear).

The term *iwor* was first made into a keyword of scholarly focus through the work of Japanese anthropologist, Izumi Seiichi, in his article “The *Iwor* and the Territorial Group of

⁵³ The Ainu Language Archive is a project launched in 2017 by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, a body of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology of the Japanese national government. Its goal is to collect and digitize all available, authoritative resources on Ainu language. It is currently managed by the National Ainu Museum.

the Saru Ainu” (1952). Izumi argues that “great importance is attached to the territorial group” in Ainu society and bases his understanding of Ainu territoriality around the concept of *iwor* (Izumi 1952, 213). According to Izumi, the *iwor* as “the arena of daily life,” was considered to be the exclusive territory of a particular group (Izumi 1952, 213). In recent decades, the term *iwor* has come to be widely used as a synonym for territory or living space, in part because of its use as a keyword in bureaucratic circles related to Ainu policy. In 1996, the “Utari Countermeasures Consultation Report” proposed the restoration of traditional Ainu living spaces (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 43). In 1997, the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act was enacted, which established the Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture (FRPAC) as the sole body authorized to carry out the duties prescribed by the CPA, including

- (1) promotion of comprehensive and practical research on the Ainu; (2) promotion of Ainu culture, including the Ainu language; (3) revival of traditional Ainu living spaces (*iwor*), and (4) awareness raising for Ainu traditions. (Yoshihara and Inoue 2018, 118-119)

Through discussions between the Ainu Association of Hokkaido and the government, a committee was formed to devise and implement a project for the revival of traditional Ainu living spaces (Shiga 2011, 24-25). The Basic Plan released by this committee became the foundation for a project that became known as the “Iwor Restoration Project” (J: *ioru saisei jigyou*) (Shiga 2011, 23-25).

The term *iwor* is also commonly used today by Ainu people themselves, at least among those who are actively involved in Ainu cultural revitalization initiatives. But some Ainu people I spoke with expressed a sense of discomfort over the use *iwor* as a development

buzzword, feeling the term as it is used in such contexts misunderstands the term's original Ainu meaning.⁵⁴ One person I spoke with told me that,

I don't have the sense that the word *iwor* was ever really that commonly used. I don't think I heard it that much growing up. It really only started getting used a lot in the last couple of decades. It's not a word that everyone was using back then. Then, someone started using it intentionally, and it got set up as this easily understandable word [by bureaucrats and civil servants]. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

This speaker critiqued the elevation of the word *iwor* from a descriptive, landscape feature, to a synonym for territory and something that can be actively created:

The original word *iwor* was just something people who lived in the relatively flat valleys between mountain ridges, would say. They just happened to live there, and the mountains from here to there felt like their own territory, a really good place for them. So they had places like that, and said 'this is where we live,' and later that place was called *iwor*. What I mean is, it just happened that way. If you happened to live there, if you were a member of the group, you decided, 'well, my family can live here, so let's make this our place.' And what naturally formed from that is *iwor*. It's not something you create. I used to be a civil servant, too, so I get it. When you're trying to do something, you like clear, easily understandable words, like slogans [J: *hyougo*], like buzzwords [J: *taitoru*]. But now the term *iwor* just seems like it's being used as a buzzword, with no substance. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

For this speaker, seeing the local government to go to such great lengths to "create" the *iwor* inspired feelings of discomfort. While he recognized the term's utility as a buzzword for helping acquire funding for Ainu cultural promotion initiatives based on his own past experience of having worked in a bureaucratic setting, he felt that such buzzwords missed the point of what could truly be learned about Ainu relationships with the land.

In addition to those critiques voiced by some people I spoke with, the practice of using *iwor* as a synonym for territory and, indeed, the Ainu conception of territoriality itself, has also attracted some scholarly critiques, although these critiques have been seemingly

⁵⁴ I am grateful to my colleague and fieldwork comrade, Dr. Silja Ijas, for fruitful conversations regarding this point during my analysis phase.

overlooked in the government's enthusiastic adoption of the term. Territoriality and its role in the traditional Ainu legal order is discussed in greater detail in Chapter VIII. Take, for instance, the following critique from Peng and Geiser (1977), which deserves inclusion here for its striking similarities to the opinion held by the speaker above. In short, as they explain, the Ainu concept of territoriality was well developed and too complex to be captured in a single term like *iwor*. They write:

There is one concept of territoriality which requires some clarification, because it has misleadingly been referred to as *iwor* in the literature. It has been reported that the Ainu in the Saru region tend to form local groups, each having [access to] different [salmonid] spawning grounds on the Saru River. However, many anthropologists have repeatedly gone further to assert that each such ground is called, claimed, or regarded as, *iwor* by each local group to the exclusion of other groups. As a matter of fact, even Chiri glosses *iwor* as *nawabari* [J: exclusive territory within the influence of a power]. While the tendency referred to just now is general, this meaning of *iwor* is no longer acceptable. There is no conclusive evidence which lends credence to the supposition that the Ainu of the past did indeed regard *iwor* as a *nawabari* and that, conversely, a territorial ground belonging to a local group was really called *iwor*. The contention here may seem to be a matter of semantics... What is at issue here is the common practice, among anthropologists, to treat *iwor*, a pure geographic epithet, on the same footing as a social unit, like a *kotan* or a settlement. To say that the Ainu of several *kotan* tended to regard the territory around or near them as their common hunting and/or fishing ground to the exclusion of the Ainu from other *kotan*, unless permission was granted in advance, is one thing which is not at issue. To say that such a territory was called, or regarded as *iwor* by the Ainu of such *kotan* is quite questionable... a clear distinction must be made between the concept of territoriality, that is, territorial collective ownership of an area, and the Ainu's use of the word *iwor*, which actually means "interior of a country." It so happens that the Ainu of the Saru region clustered around the branches of the river, giving the impression that the concept and the word are two sides of the same coin, especially when Ainu are known to have hunted in the interior of a country. However, the association of the concept with the word *iwor* is only ostensible, and therefore misleading if its surface value is taken too seriously. [However,] the concept of territoriality may exist without the word *iwor*... What is this concept of territoriality? There is, actually, no term for it in the Ainu language because the conceptualization of such behavior as claiming a territorial collective ownership was simply out of the Ainu's cognitive awareness. Thus, what is important is not a label but rather the concept, or the underlying principle, itself, and how it operates. (Peng and Geiser 1977, 44)

Despite such criticisms from both scholars and community members about the way the term *iwor*, “a purely geographic epithet,” has come to be adopted as a synonym for Ainu territoriality, the Biratori local government has enthusiastically adopted this buzzword in its Ainu cultural revitalization and conservation initiatives. The person I spoke with told me about the sense of unease he gets when seeing the enthusiastic, uncritical adoption of the *iwor* terminology, saying that

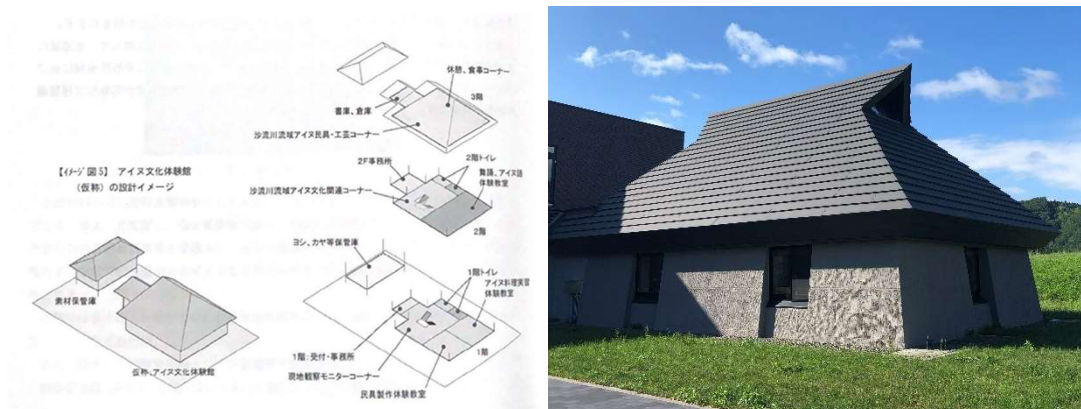
Creating the *iwor* has become a goal in itself, but there’s no life to it, you know. I think that’s kind of backwards, don’t you? It feels a bit off, doesn’t it? And what’s worse, creating the *iwor* is being talked about like it’s the most important thing for promoting Ainu culture. Isn’t that wrong? (Interview, June 1, 2024)

E. Restoring Iwor

In 2004, the Committee for the Promotion of Traditional Ainu Culture and Iwor Restoration was formed as a sub-committee of the Committee on Measures Concerning Ainu Cultural Promotion, which issued the Basic Plan and Implementation Guidelines of the Iwor Restoration Project in 2005. Shiraoi was chosen as the first site for the project and implementation began in 2006 (Shiga 2011, 24-25; Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 42-43). Meanwhile, the Biratori Town Promotion Council formulated its own Basic Plan for the Iwor Concept in the Saru River Basin (Biratori Town 2006, 35). The next year, in 2007, the Midterm Report on Development Policy for the Regeneration of Traditional Living Spaces was released based on the progress in Shiraoi, and implementation began at the project’s second site, this time in Biratori (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 6; 43). In 2009, Biratori Town established new regulations for forest utilization under the title, Biratori Town Ordinance Concerning the Iwor Forest (Biratori Town Nibutani

Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 97). Today, the Biratori Town government continues to use the term *iwor* to promote Ainu culture and tap into public grants and subsidies available via the 2019 Ainu Policy Promotion Act. Many present initiatives in Biratori Town center on environmental restoration of river and forest spaces and heavily use the term *iwor*.

Today, the work of *iwor* restoration in Biratori Town is entrusted to an organization called the Kousha (Full name: Ainu Cultural Promotion Public Corporation [J: *ainu bunka shinkou kousha*]) under the title of the “21st Century Ainu Cultural Heritage Forest Project” (J: *nijuuissseiki ainu bunka denshou no mori purojekuto*). Although the Kousha was created only after the passage of the Ainu Policy Promotion Act in 2019 made funding for Ainu promotion activities more readily available, calls for its creation appeared much earlier, in the Biratori CIA’s 2006 report, which advocated for the “establishment of a local center-type organization to tackle administrative issues and core projects relating to conservation measures” (Biratori Town 2006, 38). Today, the Kousha operates primarily out of two facilities in Biratori Town: the Iwor Cultural Exchange Center (J: *ioru bunka kouryuu sentaa*), located adjacent to the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum along the bank of the Saru River in the center of Nibutani, and the Nokapira Iwor Visitor’s Center (J: *nokapira iworo bijitaa sentaa*), located right next to the Biratori Dam along the Nukabira River in Shukushubetsu. Plans and artists’ renditions for both of these state-of-the-art facilities, which were built following the passage of the 2019 Ainu Policy Promotion Act and incorporate nods to Ainu culture and building methods in their architectural design, first appeared in the 2006 report of the Biratori CIA (Biratori Town 2006, 742-743; 748).



Images: Architectural concept (left) from the 2006 report, which would become the Nokapira Iwor Visitor's Center (right).

One Kousha employee I got to know, a young Wajin man named Yanagisawa who married into an Ainu household after moving to Biratori, explained his job to me as follows:

I'm working as a Forest Manager for the 21st Century Ainu Cultural Heritage Forest. Mainly, I collaborate with national forests to create gathering sites for traditional Ainu resources, called *iwor*. Essentially, we plant trees, including species used in Ainu culture, and teach woodcarving techniques using those trees. It's forest-related work: growing trees from seeds, collecting them, nurturing them, planting forests and such. I collect seeds from seedlings, plant them, grow the seedlings, water them, and make sure they're ready to be planted. When planting those seedlings, I lay down weed barrier sheets to keep weeds out. In the summer, we conduct vegetation surveys to see what trees are growing and what kind of forest we aim to create. (Interview, May 20, 2024b)

One of the motivations for creating such a forest is to promote the return of the endangered species, Blakiston's fish owl (*Ketupa blakistoni*; J: *shimafukurou*), which is revered by many Ainu as *Kotan-kor-kamuy*, the guardian god of the village. Despite its importance as a figure within Ainu oral tradition and a symbol of Ainu identity today, there have been no confirmed sightings of this large owl in Biratori since the 1980s, although residents occasionally reported seeing them or hearing their calls more recently (Biratori Town 2006, 294-296).



Image: A bas-relief of *Kotan-kor-kamuy* watches over the Nibutani *seikatsukan* (J: community center).

It is believed that the species became increasingly rare as the large trees it needed for nesting were logged and the salmon fisheries it relied on were harmed by overfishing and river alteration projects (Interview, May 27, 2024; Biratori Town 2006, 5). Yanagisawa told me that

We want to restore environments where species like *shimafukurou* can return, so right now, we're putting up artificial nest boxes. But naturally, they like to build their nests in the hollows of huge trees. I think it'll probably take around three hundred years for trees to grow large enough for the *shimafukurou* to reliably return. We also put up nest boxes for other owls like *ezofukurou* (J: Japanese scops owl) that eat mice, in order to prevent tree seedlings from being eaten by rodents without having to use poison. But since *shimafukurou* mostly eats fish, another thing we do is install fish ladders on *sabou* dams that are currently preventing fish from migrating upstream. (Interview, May 20, 2024b)

Sabou dams (J: erosion control dams) are small, earth-fill structures that are built to reduce the gradient of a river or stream prevent riverbed erosion and mitigate debris flow. Although this type of dam is much smaller than large dams like the Nibutani and Biratori Dams,

erosion control dams have profound environmental impacts wherever they are built. These dams completely block the upstream passage of migratory fish, such as salmon and trout, in addition to altering the ecological and hydrological conditions of the rivers. As of the year 2001, only 6.6 percent of Hokkaido's thousands of erosion-control dams had fish ladders installed (Fukushima, *et al.* 2007, 1514). My host mother, Hapo, once explained to me that many of these dams were originally built as employment initiatives for rural workers in the early-to-mid twentieth century:

There are erosion control dams on even the smallest streams. I think almost every stream has one. It seems it was a way to deal with unemployment. It probably seemed like a good idea back then. I think it probably helped some people who were struggling at the time. Sure, there were plenty of people at the top making a lot of money, but there are also lots of people working at the bottom, getting paid for the day's work. They were probably glad to get the money—would they have had work otherwise? But once a dam is built, it stays. It becomes trash. (Interview, April 30, 2024)

Many people I spoke with during my fieldwork were strongly critical of the construction of erosion control dams. One person cited their construction as evidence of the government's general disregard for the environment, reasoning that "if the government cared about the environment, they wouldn't build those *sabou* dams" (Interview, May 27, 2024).

Another resident told me that he believed that erosion control dams create "an environment that's really not very kind to plants and animals" (Interview, May 20, 2024b). Another resident and Kousha employee blamed erosion control dams for contributing to a reduction in salmon populations:

The scenes they used to talk about in the old stories, where there were tons of salmon and other fish, you can't see those scenes anymore. (Interview, May 21, 2024)

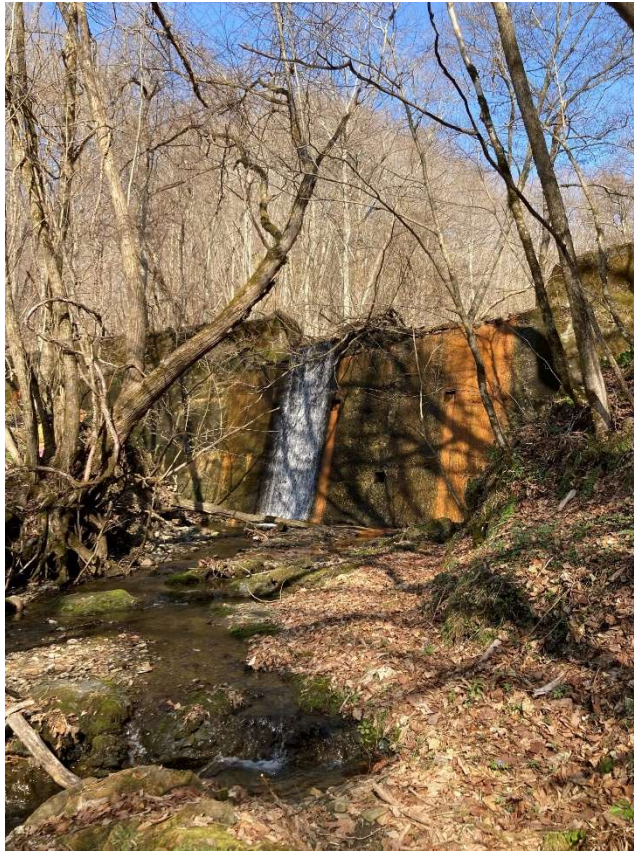


Image: A small stream flowing over one of Biratori Town's many *sabou* dams.

The Kousha's goal is to aid in the restoration of a natural environment in which such scenes can once again be seen again. As Yanagisawa told me,

If we can create an environment where these big fish can return, well, it would be like recreating the environment of the Ainu *iwor*. That's what we're actively working on. (Interview, May 20, 2024b)

A supporter of Ainu Indigenous rights, Yanagisawa believes that the Kousha's environmental restoration work has the potential to complement the political struggle for recognition, saying that

if salmon came upriver, traditional fishing and hunting, like using *marek*, would become easier to do. If there were more trees, more wild plants, more of that kind of vegetation growing, then it would become easier to practice traditional Ainu gathering. So, protecting the natural environment definitely leads to restoring indigenous rights. I think they're connected. (Interview, May 21, 2024b)

The residents of Biratori Town that I spoke with expressed varying opinions on the positives and negatives of the town government pursuing national subsidies for promoting Ainu culture through the establishment of organizations such as the Kousha and facilities such as the Nokapira Iwor Visitor's Center. Some participants cited the employment opportunities that have been created through government-sponsored projects such as the Iwor Restoration Project and the Kousha. "It's a positive change in that lots of the locals get employment through public funding and that enables them to talk about their culture and language and get involved in the management process," one person told me (Interview, February 17, 2024). Another resident expressed to me her belief that Biratori Town's adeptness at securing government subsidies and creating employment opportunities related to Ainu culture has enabled it to avoid being merged with neighboring municipalities due to low population under the *gappei* (J: merger) policy (discussed in Chapter VII). As she told me,

Here, because of Ainu culture, they've built quite a few facilities and created jobs, and I'm sure that's why the town hasn't merged. In the past, Monbetsu Town was merged with Hidaka Town, but Biratori Town refused the merger because of its Ainu culture and other things, and Hidaka Town ended up with mountains on one side and the sea on the other side, with Biratori Town sandwiched in between. Maybe they were able to avoid being merged because Biratori Town is bringing in finances related to Ainu culture. If they weren't, they probably would have merged with either Monbetsu Town or Hidaka Town. (Interview, May 29, 2024)

In contrast, other residents I spoke with expressed some trepidation about the construction of state-of-the-art facilities like the Nokapira Iwor Visitor's Center, seemingly questioning the utility of such facilities but also expressing a sense of resignation:

Last year, they built a new building at the Biratori Dam [the Nokapira Iwor Visitor's Center], and it seems that a lot of Ainu people got jobs working there. It's kind of a strange development, I thought. Well, I guess we just have to accept what's already been built and work together to spread Ainu culture there. It's kind of like, "what can we do now?" That situation surprised me,

too. I'm left with a murky mix of surprise and unease." (Interview, May 14, 2024)

Other residents, meanwhile, criticized the fact that Ainu funding is entrusted to the Biratori Town government rather than to Ainu people or groups directly, which runs the risk of commodifying Ainu culture:

While I think Indigenous rights are also part of culture, the easily recognizable cultural aspects like dances and performing arts are easy to turn into events, so money starts flowing in, big time. But the ones trying to sell Ainu culture in this way are the local government or the companies that get the contracts, which feels really twisted to me. (Interview, May 13, 2024)

Tellingly, one resident I spoke with, who is involved with the Kousha, questioned the Japanese government's understanding of what they are trying to achieve through their applications for funding. When I asked him if he thinks the government understands the Ainu community's needs, he replied, "No, I don't think they understand at all. I mean, they have no clue what kind of life we live or what our culture is like. I don't think they see any of it" (Interview, May 21, 2024). Another resident also expressed her belief that government employees involved in disbursing subsidies for Ainu programs are not doing it because of any particular interest or passion for Ainu cultural revitalization, but are simply following orders, saying:

I've never actually met or dealt with those people directly, so I can't say for sure, but generally speaking, I suspect people in government or bureaucracy mostly do it because it's their job. Like, say Nibutani submits an application saying they want to do this project. The paperwork comes in, and they check if it's technically correct, if the money calculations are right, and then they're like, "Well, it's fine, I guess," or "This calculation's wrong, do it over," or "We can't accept this, it's no good." That kind of thing. I wonder if they even grasp half of what the Indigenous people are really feeling when they submit these applications or make these requests. They're just doing what the law says, like, "We're supposed to give out subsidies, so we'll check what comes in." I think very few people working for the national government or Hokkaido prefectural offices are genuinely passionate about preserving culture or using this money to pass something on to the future. (Interview, May 9, 2024)

Still other residents felt that such Ainu funding amounts to little more than a shield designed to protect the government from criticism regarding inaction on Ainu Indigenous rights:

The government needs to clearly acknowledge the historical facts—that Japan took away the Ainu’s rights. But they won’t even apologize. They just scatter money around, like “good boys, good boys,” telling us to shut up. (Interview, May 27, 2024)

Thus, as these examples show, residents of Biratori Town hold a variety of views on the positive and negative aspects of government-sponsored cultural revitalization projects.

F. Helping the Forest to Restore Itself: National Trust Cikornay

In contrast to local government-led efforts like the Iwor Restoration Project and the Kousha, some local Ainu people have taken the matter of conservation into their own hands and founded their own, independent environmental organizations. One example is the non-profit organization, National Trust Cikornay. Cikornay’s mission is to conduct environmental restoration of the forest in Nibutani in order to promote the revitalization of Ainu culture, foodways, and spiritual relationships with the land. It was founded in 1994 by Kaizawa Kouichi, one of the Plaintiffs in the Nibutani Dam Case who would also go on to participate in the Biratori CIA as a member of the research office. The name *Cikornay*, which means “our river” in the Ainu language, was bestowed on the organization by local leader and fellow Plaintiff Kayano Shigeru. Kaizawa says that Cikornay’s name reflects an “Ainu way of thinking,” namely, “that forests are always tied to rivers” (Kaizawa 2018, 54). Kaizawa had previously written of the important role rivers played in Ainu ancestral lifeways:

Our ancestors, the Ainu people, believed that rivers brought them various goods from the ocean. Salmon and other fishes came to them along rivers from the ocean. Since rivers were the transportation routes through which boats and ships brought goods from other places to them, they believed that

the river brought them goods...that were essential to their lives. (Kaizawa 2005, 136)

Cikornay's work builds upon this knowledge and centers the strong relationships between rivers, forests, and the Ainu people in their work.

The model of Indigenous-led conservation and restoration work that Cikornay advocates represents an alternative to the top-down style of Ainu cultural promotion and environmental restoration that characterizes government-affiliated projects. Kaizawa has written that he considers his role in resisting the Nibutani Dam as well as his work with *Cikornay* to be two facets of the same overall goal of revitalizing Ainu culture (*ibid.*). In his 1996 testimony during the litigation against the Nibutani Dam, Kaizawa's father Tadashi had told the court that "[t]his concrete monstrosity has become a symbol of the environmental degradation of the peaceful land around Nibutani's Saru River" (Kaizawa 1999b, 358; Maruyama 2012, 72). For Nibutani residents like the Kaizawas, public investment in dam construction had failed to yield the promise of economic or social development and only led to the continual ruination of "the ground on which to succeed with our culture" (Kaizawa 2004, 8). But Kaizawa predicts that, one day,

the folly of the Nibutani Dam will finally be acknowledged. They will then open the floodgates, letting the *Sisirmuka* River return to its original state, and the dam will become a seventy-billion yen bridge. (Kaizawa 1999b, 358)

Kaizawa's impassioned plea, to anyone who will listen, calls for an end to settler colonial dispossession and state-sponsored, capital-driven environmental destruction: "Let's stop peeling the skin of the earth, cutting up the meat and shaving the bone of the earth," he writes (Kaizawa 2005, 138).

When Cikornay first started operating in 1995, "Nibutani was bald, with almost no trees," but by the end of that first year, Cikornay volunteers had helped plant 7,500 seedlings

(Kaizawa 2018, 55). Today, Cikornay manages around 70 hectares of land in the Nibutani area as well as in Furano, more than 150 kilometers away (*ibid.*). Although they are no longer seeking to expand their managed land-base through purchase, Kaizawa reported in 2018 that Cikornay was still receiving “ceded land” via donation (*ibid.*). Cikornay has mainly focused on “growing, planting and caring for the seedlings of local tree species which are intensively and regularly used in the Ainu way of life,” such as *atni* (A: Manchurian elm) (Kaizawa 2018, 55-57). Kaizawa hosts Cikornay’s two annual meetings every May and October at his home in Nibutani, where members meet to discuss business affairs, socialize, plant seedlings, gather plants, and learn from the Kaizawa family’s wealth of ecological knowledge (Kaizawa 2018, 56-57). In the future, Kaizawa hopes to open the lands managed by *Cikornay* to the community, as “a place where all...can experience, practice and enjoy Ainu culture” (Kaizawa 2018, 56-57).

Kaizawa’s vision for *Cikornay* include practical economic and environmental benefits to rival those gained from large construction projects like dams, and at a fraction of the cost, hoping one day to see a “comparison of economic benefits over ten and fifty years” between “managing rivers using natural forests and managing rivers using dams” (Kaizawa 2005, 138). During the run-up to the construction of the Biratori Dam, Kaizawa had written that “the budget that has been earmarked for construction of the Biratori Dam should be used for the conservation of the forest, hiring local people for the job” (Kaizawa 2005, 138). The Indigenous future that *Cikornay* is working towards involves a recuperation of reciprocal relations with future generations, with the land, and with the spiritual beings who inhabit it. Kaizawa writes that he has “come to understand that, traditionally, the Ainu have tried to become good friends with all beings in nature. Based on this idea, we Cikornay members try

to nurture and maintain our forest” (Kaizawa 2018, 56-57). Kaizawa passionately calls for an alternative approach to local development, one that is both environmentally sustainable and fosters Indigenous rights and cultural revitalization. He also expresses a far-sighted interest in the wellbeing of future Ainu generations:

This is a movement to recover the real forest in Hokkaido. Probably, after 200 to 300 years, the real forest in Hokkaido will come back. I am not able to witness that forest, but my grandchildren or great grandchildren or their descendants will look at that forest, and realize that the Ainu people constructed their culture in that real forest in Hokkaido. (Kaizawa 2004, 8)

Although he himself will not be alive to see it, Kaizawa has made it Cikornay’s mission to create the conditions that will enable the transmission of Ainu ancestral relationships to rivers and forests to future generations.

During my fieldwork, I became a member of Cikornay and participated at two of their annual meetings, including the Spring meeting of their 30th anniversary year in 2024. This Spring meeting took place over the course of three days during the spring holiday, Golden Week, in early May. About twenty-five members (both Ainu and Wajin) were in attendance, including local supporters from Biratori, regional supporters from around Hokkaido, and national supporters from places like Tokyo. In addition, besides myself, a few other foreign visitors participated for research or educational purposes, coming from Canada, Italy, and Scandinavia. Guests arrived in the evening of the first day and enjoyed a social gathering centering on a banquet of *cep ohaw* (A: salmon soup) and *chanchanyaki* (J: salmon fillets and vegetables covered with miso paste, cooked on a foil-covered baking sheet over a hot fire). After dinner, I was asked to entertain the other guests by giving an impromptu musical performance on saxophone and *tonkori*, a traditional Ainu stringed instrument which I had been learning since coming to Nibutani, and I happily obliged. Then a meeting was held in

which organizational business was discussed, before giving way to a celebration that continued until late in the night.

On the second day, we all arose early to gather by the Shikerebe (A: *sikerpe*) River, a small tributary of the Saru that flows through Kaizawa's land. There he led us in performing a ceremony in which alcohol was offered to the *kamuy* of the river, requesting safe passage through the forest and permission to gather wild plants from it. All of the men in attendance were expected to participate in this ceremony. Because I had by this point been living in Nibutani for several months and had already been taught the proper way to offer the liquor and anoint oneself using the *tuki* (A: lacquerware ritual cup) and *ikupasuy* (A: wooden libation wand), I was asked to demonstrate this for the other foreign guests. After the ceremony, we all hiked, or rode in the back of kei-trucks, along the dirt and gravel switchbacks leading up the nearby mountain. There we gathered edible plants like *pukusa* (A: wild garlic) and *pukusakina* (A: anemone) and toured the Cikornay Forest. We were shown Sakhalin fir trees (A: *hup*; J: *todomatsu*) that the late Kaizawa Tadashi, Kouichi's father, had planted more than sixty years ago. Cikornay's current president, Kouichi's son, Kaizawa Taichi, told us that after sixty years, these trees have a diameter of about fifty centimeters, much smaller than the trees in the Hokkaido forests of old, which must truly have been "like a Jurassic Park forest" (Field notes, May 7, 2024).

Interestingly, although we did plant a few token tree seedlings, tree planting was not a major focus of either of the two Cikornay meetings I intended. This is because Cikornay's focus has recently shifted from active afforestation to observation and management. As Taichi-san explained, after twenty-five years of attempting various afforestation techniques through trial and error, Cikornay's members came to one conclusion: "that no matter how

hard humans try, if the method isn't suited to the place, nature will reject it" (*ibid.*). With this realization, it became clear that Cikornay's ongoing mission should be to "help the forest restore *itself* through *its own* power," (*ibid.*). Although he acknowledges that this goal is still "a bit abstract because there's still so much we don't understand and we're still figuring out the specifics of how to do it," he says that it is "a different approach than saying 'oh, Ainu culture needs elm trees, so let's plant elm trees'" (*ibid.*). As Taichi-san explained, "it's not about human manipulation; instead, we observe how nature grows and then do activities that support that growth" (*ibid.*). In this new approach, Cikornay is letting the land take the lead. They center Ainu worldview in which natural phenomena like rivers and forests are inhabited by *kamuy* and endowed with agency and personhood. Cikornay's members strive to be attentive to the teachings of the forest and what it is telling them about whether particular management techniques are working or not. Thus, Cikornay's approach is truly from-the-ground-up, in contrast to the top-down model demonstrated by the Iwor Restoration Project.

G. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined multiple ways in which the people of Biratori Town have been attempting to build futures from the rubble of dam construction. As we have seen, much of this work was deeply influenced by the truly impressive amount of work that went into the community-based Biratori CIA. In different ways, the environmental restoration projects discussed here center on restoring the balance between rivers and forests. This balance was disrupted by the top-down model of infrastructure construction plainly evident in the history surrounding the construction of the Nibutani and Biratori Dams. Indigenous activism by members of the Nibutani Ainu community successfully challenged

this top-down model, and the politics of infrastructure construction were shifted to allow nominal Ainu inclusion, which led to the creation of the Biratori CIA's final report, which itself prefigured many of the current projects being pursued there today. This shows how Indigenous Ainu activism functioned as an assertion of temporal sovereignty which was strong enough to create a particular future. As in the past, Ainu people are still committed to protecting, maintaining, and transmitting to future generations, the important relationships they hold with their ancestral lands and waters.

From the present examples shown in this chapter, it can be seen that there exists a complex relationship between local Ainu and the government which belies the more straightforward antagonism that characterized Japanese policy prior to 1997. The relationship is more porous and open than that. Local Ainu today are deeply involved in government-sponsored projects like the Kousha and, as the example of *iwor* shows, have in some instances have adopted the terminology of Wajin anthropologists and bureaucrats, although this remains a subject of critique among some Ainu residents. At the same time, grassroots, Indigenous-led organizations also include many Wajin members. In other words, as shown in both the top-down and ground-up examples of Ainu environmental activism explored in these chapters, Ainu and Wajin are collaboratively making futures together.



Image: Cikornay participants tour the organization's forest.

VI. A HISTORY OF AINU LIVELIHOODS IN THE SARU RIVER BASIN

A. Introduction

In this chapter and the following chapter, I examine the changing shape of Ainu livelihoods in the Saru River Basin through by combining a historical analysis of Japan's agriculturalization policy in Hokkaido with my own experiences working as a laborer on an Ainu-owned family farm in Nibutani named Sikina Farm (a pseudonym). As I would learn during my time there, Sikina Farm represents a continuation of thousands of years of plant cultivation along the Saru River. In this chapter, I examine the history of Ainu livelihoods in the Saru River Basin, focusing primarily on cultivation practices, and how these practices were altered by Japanese agriculturalization policy in the decades following the Meiji Restoration. I show how rice functioned as a metaphor for Japaneseness, and how forced adoption of rice agriculture was enrolled in the overall project of assimilating the Ainu people out of existence. Ainu people in the Saru River Basin constantly strove to adapt and make the best of their situation, and some managed to become successful rice farmers while maintaining a strong sense of Ainu identity. However, recent changes in Japanese agricultural policy have proved challenging for Ainu farmers.

B. Early Agriculture in the Saru River Basin

Evidence of human presence in the Saru River Basin, in the form of fragmentary stone tools, stretches back more than 12,000 years to the neolithic period (Biratori Town 2006, 88). By the early Jomon Period, permanent settlements were established in the Saru Basin, leaving archaeological traces of pit dwellings, storage pits, agricultural fields, and

pitfalls for capturing deer (Biratori Town 2006, 88). Artifacts unearthed from Jomon-period sites included stone accessories made from the region's distinctive Aotora (green schist) stone, found only along the Nukabira River, a tributary of the Saru (Biratori Town 2006, 88). Aotora was used to make stone axes and other tools and appears to have been traded widely, as axes originating from the Saru River Basin have been across Hokkaido and as far south as present-day Aomori prefecture in Honshu (Biratori Town 2006, 88). Newer archaeological sites in the Saru River Basin are dated to the Epi-Jomon, Satumon, and Ainu periods, indicating that human habitation of the Saru River Basin has continued uninterrupted for at least 10,000 years (Biratori Town 2006, 10-11; Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 28). At a Satumon-era (10th to 11th century) site, a set of earthen embankments and moat-like ditches were discovered, along with valuable trade goods such as swords, knives, and bronze ingots from the Korean Peninsula (Biratori Town 2006, 88-89). This indicates the presence of a significant power center within the Saru River Basin at that time, which likely specialized in the production and distribution of high-value commodities such as furs and arrow feathers (Biratori Town 2006, 88-89). From the 14th century onward, archaeological findings indicate the emergence of many cultural elements that are recognized as characterizing Ainu culture. As those of Ainu in other regions, the *kotan* (A: settlements) of the *Sarunkur* (A: the people of Saru) were located along river banks on fluvial terraces near salmonid spawning beds and were distributed about four to eight kilometers apart (Watanabe 1973, 9). Many present-day settlements grew out of extant *kotan* during the early historical period (from the late 18th century) and are sited where the original *kotan* were located. For example, within the boundaries of present-day Nibutani, which encompasses the

locations of the historical *kotan* Niptani, Pipausi, and Kankan, multiple archaeological sites have been found near all three *kotan* locations (Biratori Town 2006, 90-91; 170; 254).

From the 15th to 17th centuries, during the Ainu period, the inhabitants of the Saru River Basin entered a period of intense construction of fortified structures that were usually sited on top of hills, called *casi* (A: palisades) (Biratori Town 2006, 89). More than 500 *casi* sites have been discovered throughout Hokkaido, with more than 60 percent concentrated in Eastern Hokkaido. In Western Hokkaido, they are clustered around the Saru River, the nearby Mukawa and Shizunai Rivers, and the Ishikari River near present-day Sapporo and Asahikawa (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 20). In the Saru River Basin, approximately 30 *casi* sites had been identified by 2006, and the possibility of discovering additional sites is considered to be high (Biratori Town 2006, 89).⁵⁵ While *casi* in other regions were typically sited at river mouths, those in the Saru River Basin are densely concentrated not only at the mouth and midstream but extending far upstream, indicating that numerous groups existed in the region (Biratori Town 2006, 114-115). *Casi* construction required a considerable investment of collective labor to level hilltops, dig foundations, and build embankments, indicating that whoever ordered their construction wielded considerable influence (Biratori Town 2006, 90). Ceramics and iron products excavated from the Yuoy and Poromoy *casi* sites before they were destroyed by the Nibutani Dam indicates that these sites were integrated into wide-reaching trade networks (Biratori Town 2006, 114-115). Most of these sites are covered by a layer of ash from the eruption of Mount Tarumae in 1667, indicating they were in use before that year, but some continued to be used immediately after the ash fall (Biratori Town 2006, 89). *Casi* are also mentioned in historical sources as being

⁵⁵ Twenty-five of these *casi* sites are within Biratori Town (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 20).

in use until the 1780s, including in Shakushain's famous war against the Matsumae Domain in 1669 (Biratori Town 2006, 90; Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 20). Their locations were known by local Ainu elders in the 20th century, even before being excavated by archaeologists, as narrated by one Ainu man from Nioi Honson, who learned of it from his grandfather (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 129).

Although the exact purpose of these structures is unknown, it is thought that they were fortresses, watchtowers, ritual sites, or residences of influential figures (Biratori Town 2006, 90). Excavation of the Poromoy *casi* site revealed two buildings—a residence and a metalworking workshop—surrounded by an earthen rampart and wooden palisade (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 21) The Nioi *casi* site, excavated in the 1960s, yielded *makiri* (A: knives) and a *surkiksuma* (A: stone mortar for making arrow poisons), suggesting its use in combat (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 128). Furthermore, Ainu oral tradition recounts tales of heroes and their clans operating from *casi* sites, which suggests that cohesive groups of a certain scale, centered around *casi*, were established throughout the Saru River Basin (Biratori Town 2006, 90). Many of these narratives describe *casi* as defensive strongholds against night raids (A: *topattumi*) by Ainu groups from other regions, which appear to have been common during this period (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 20). These stories tell of *topattumi* in the Saru River Basin by armed invaders from Tokachi, Kushiro, Kitami, Ishikari, and Yufutsu and (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 30; Ainu Language Archive n.d.). The resulting movement of Ainu groups between regions is said to have provided opportunities to establish kinship ties with distant areas (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 31). For that reason, Saru Ainu households that trace their lineage from other regions can still

be found in the region today. An elder from Biratori Town recounted this story featuring *topattumi*:

At that time, Yayoturi, a rogue from Nioi-*kotan*, was expelled from his *kotan*. Seeking revenge, he enticed the Tokachi Ainu to attack the Saru River basin, claiming it was rich in treasures. They crossed the mountain range and invaded in great numbers. Pikun, who was the *kotan-kor-kur* [A: headman] of Nioi-*kotan* at the time and was known for his eloquence, was persuaded to become the supreme commander of the *Sarunkur*. To demonstrate his authority to Ikouwe, he went to the Tokachi Ainu camp, engaged in a fierce *uko-caranke* (formal debate), and ultimately achieved victory, forcing the Tokachi Ainu to retreat. (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 30)

Another story featuring *topattumi* says the following:

Ainu men from Kushiro came to Saru villages on night raids. Then, many people also came from Tokachi to conduct night raids, but the Saru villagers saw through them, so they all lost. Those who could return alive did, and those who were killed were killed. Then, some women and men who survived settled upstream of the Saru villages, becoming relatives and living among the people who lived there.

Then, men from Tokachi also came, joining the night raid party, to the upper reaches of the Mukawa River. But those men were also found in the mountains, and they became kin to the people living upstream on the Mukawa River, joined their clan, and settled there. That is why descendants of Tokachi people also live upstream on the Mukawa River.

Then, in one Saru village, upstream on the Saru River, a pregnant woman was found. The headman felt pity for her, so he welcomed her into the village and gave her a husband. From that time onward, people tracing their origins to Tokachi also came to live in the upper reaches of the Saru, in the upper village (i.e. Nukibetsu). Thus, people tracing their lineage to Tokachi are also found there. (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 31)

Kayano Shigeru also traced his family lineage to the Tokachi region (Kayano 1994, 23-24).

These stories show that, although Ainu communal identity was strongly rooted in the community of the local river basin, it was also fluid, allowing intermarriage and adoption even between erstwhile enemy groups.

In the late 18th century, early Japanese written sources describing the Saru Basin and its people began to appear. Early Japanese sources from the 1780s describe the Ainu of the

Saru as “fierce and powerful” (J: *goukyou*) (Biratori Town 2006, 96-97). In particular, as one source describes, when Tobikarain, a powerful leader from the Oshima peninsula, visited the Matsumae authorities without permission, he was reprimanded by a Saru elder named Niherokuin and became “submissive” (J: *fukujuu*), showing that Niherokuin held significant influence over a large area (Biratori Town 2006, 97). Furthermore, when early efforts to assimilate Ainu took place during the period of direct control of the Edo Shogunate (1799-1821), Matsu’ura Takeshirou writes that the *Sarunkur* resisted them:

When a high-ranking official strictly instructed them to change their customs, they replied that this place was the Capital City of Saru [J: *saru no to*], the root of all *Ezochi* [J: *Ezochi no ichien no sou kongen*], and they would not comply. (Biratori Town 2006, 99)

The term Capital City of Saru appears in Matsu’ura’s writings more than once. In 1856, during a stay at the Monbetsu River *basho ukeoi*, Matsu’ura heard tales of Capital City of Saru, “the first place in Ezo to be settled since ancient times” (Biratori Town 2006, 96).⁵⁶ This led him to believe that the Saru River basin was “the original land of all things,” and that “the language here is understood everywhere” (Biratori Town 2006, 96). The authors of the Biratori Dam Cultural Impact Assessment theorized that

the abundance of natural resources extending to the headwaters of the Saru River and its tributaries, combined with food security through farming in the middle and lower reaches, allowed the prototype of Ainu society—based on hunting, fishing, gathering, and farming—to be relatively well preserved. This likely allowed pride in the “Capital City of Saru” to be sustained, along with the lifestyle, customs, and culture that this pride underpinned. (Biratori Town 2006, 115)

Even today, the Saru River Basin, and Nibutani specifically, is often seen as an Ainu capital of sorts due to its long history of Indigenous rights activism and cultural revitalization

⁵⁶ The Monbetsu River mentioned here is located in the Hidaka region, and is a separate river from the Monbetsu River located in Okhotsk region that is discussed in Chapter IX.

projects. Japanese and foreign researchers have long flocked there to learn about Ainu language and culture, contributing to a sense of “Saru Nationalism” that elevates stories and terminology from the Saru region above those from other regions. This has resulted in a standardization of lexicon and a “Saru-centrist slant” in the literature that “asserted authority over what constitutes proper traditional form” and “began claiming an expertise on cultural practice across the entirety of Hokkaido,” which lewallen (2006) argues represents a “a variant of regional nationalism” (lewallen 2006, 110). Kayano Shigeru himself once wrote of the intense regional pride he felt for being from the Saru region, opining that:

I believe it is to the Saru that Ainu culture can trace its origins... We, the Saru River Ainu, pride ourselves on being from the land where the god *Okikurmi-kamuy* was born. Whenever we greet other Ainu from neighboring hamlets, we first identify ourselves in the following manner: “I am so-and-so, living and working in the village to which *Okikurmi-kamuy* descended from the heavens and taught us our folk wisdom.” The other person would take a step back and welcome us respectfully, replying “Ah, you’re so-and-so of the village where the god *Okikurmi-kamuy* lived.” (Aoki, *et al.* 2006, 165)

In contrast to such regional nationalism, some Saru Ainu people I spoke with recognized that Nibutani’s privileged position within the literature on Ainu culture and language was a product of historical circumstance and emphasized the value of regional diversity. For example, one person told me that:

Because of how accessible it is and the abundance of materials, everyone talks about Nibutani as if it’s the place with the most authentic Ainu people. But that’s all just coincidence. This environment just happened to turn out this way. I think it’s important for everyone to be aware of that. By doing so, we can be kinder to other regions, too. I wish the people of Nibutani itself would say, “It’s not like that.” Precisely because we’re the most visible, there’s an obligation to act. It’s not that Nibutani is uniquely amazing. Nibutani is just one region. But saying things like, “Here, compared to other places, we have this much documentation left, this much information preserved,” while also saying, “But we’re still just one region,” I think that’s Nibutani’s role. But it’s really hard to do, you know? People end up saying things like, “Well, everyone’s struggling to make ends meet, and for me, selling well is the top priority.” Once you start selling well and your voice gets heard, then you can

say the right things. It's tough, you know. Saying things like, "We're the real deal," and then, "Well, we are the real deal, but there are plenty of other real deals out there too," is really difficult. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

One of the reasons that the Ainu of the Saru Basin appeared so powerful to Matsu'ura and other Wajin colonists was perhaps due to their concentrated, settled populations, made possible due to the Saru Basin's suitable conditions for plant cultivation. Although Ainu are today often described simply as hunter-gatherers, evidence unveiled by the Biratori Dam Cultural Impact Assessment shows that slash-and-burn agriculture, along with hunting, fishing, and gathering, was supporting Ainu livelihoods to a considerable extent by the 17th century, well before the area became known Wajin (Biratori Town 2006, 101-102; 170). Archaeological evidence proves that the *Sarunkur* were cultivating a wide variety of grain and vegetable crops, including barnyard millet (*Echinochloa esculenta*; A: *piyapa*; J: *hie*), foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*; A: *munciro*; J: *awa*;) proso millet (*Panicum miliaceum* A: *sipuskep*; J: *inakibi*), sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*; J: *morokoshi*) adzuki beans (*Vigna angularis*; A: *antuki*), hemp (*Cannabis sativa*; A: *hay*; J: *asa*), perilla (*Perilla frutescens crisp*a; J: *shiso*), rice (A: *siamamu*; J: *kome*), and buckwheat (*Fagopyrum esculentum*; J: *soba*; A: *sonpa*) (Biratori Town 2006, 12; 254). Much of this archaeological evidence is covered by the Mount Tarumae ash layer, proving that agriculture was widely practiced by the *Sarunkur* before 1667 (Biratori Town 2006, 101-102; 170).

Piyapa and *munciro* (barnyard and foxtail millet) were particularly important as staple foods and for brewing liquor, and were called *unurek haru kamuy* (A: the sacred married couple of food) (Field Notes, September 7, 2023; Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 78; Biratori Town 2006, 254). These grains also feature in Ainu oral narratives about Okikurmi, the Divine Culture Hero who taught the Ainu their way of life.

Okikurmi is said to have given *piyapa* and *munciro* to humanity when he stole it from the land of the gods and brought it to Mount Hayopira beside the Saru River, in present day Biratori-Honcho (Biratori Town 2006, 93). The strong association of Okikurmi with the Saru River basin may be related to the greater importance of millet cultivation in the region, compared to other Ainu communities (Biratori Town 2006, 114-115; Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 25). Historical records indicate that Ainu, both men and women, were engaged in millet cultivation in 1668 (Biratori Town 2006, 101-102). A third millet variety, *sipuskep*, was also cultivated, and although it was afforded less prestige than *piyapa* and *munciro*, it is the variety most commonly consumed in Ainu cuisine today, in the form of *sito* (A: dumplings) or *inakibi gohan* (J: millet rice).



Image: *Munciro*, *piyapa*, and *sipuskep* at the Kayano Shigeru Museum.

During his three visits to the Saru River region in 1845, 1856, and 1858, Matsu'ura noted agricultural fields in practically every settlement in the Saru River Basin, along with numerous place names related to agriculture (Biratori Town 2006, 93; 102). In addition to the three millet varieties, he reported in 1858 that the *Sarunkur* were also cultivating squash

(*Cucurbita maxima*; A: *kampocha*; J: *kabocha*), potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*; A: *emo*; J: *jagaimo*), pears (*Pyrus pyrifolia*; A: *nikaop*; J: *tenashi*), onions (*Allium cepa*; A and J: *tamanegi*); cucumbers (*Cucumis sativus*; J: *kyuuri*), cow peas (*Vigna unguiculata*; A: *sasanki* or *nikaye*; J: *sasage*), turnips (*Brassica rapa*; A: *atane*; J: *kabu*), radish (*Raphanus sativus*; A: *tayko*; J: *daikon*), and tobacco (*Nicotiana sp.*; A: *tampaku*; J: *tabako*) (Biratori Town 2006, 254). The *kotan* he visited in the Saru River Basin were unlike any Matsu'ura had seen in his travels throughout the island. Impressed, he wrote in 1858 that, “there are houses on both sides [of the Saru River], cultivated fields, and narrow mountain paths, giving it a feeling quite unlike that of a remote area” (Biratori Town 2006, 102).

The cyclical process of sediment deposition by the Saru River sustained Ainu cultivation in the area (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 78). The *Sarunkur* primarily farmed on the muddy, alluvial deposits along the Saru River and its tributaries after the retreat of the spring thaw floods (Biratori Town 2006, 255). These areas of flat, arable land along the river were called *nutap*. When an Ainu found a *nutap* that they wanted to cultivate, they marked it with a boundary marker called a *kuitakpe* (A: lit., “‘I speak’ thing”), made by lashing two sticks or pieces of driftwood into a cross and carving a sigil into it, which may have been an *itokpa* (A: patrilineal crest) or other symbol indicating the household that claimed it (*ibid.*). Other people were expected to respect the claim, which could be quite vast, encompassing “several *tan*” of land (1 *tan* = 991.7 square meters) (*ibid.*). The *Sarunkur* piled river mud into ridges called *pikutatoy* (A: sandbar fields) where they sowed millet and other crops (Biratori Town 2006, 255; Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 8). They manufactured farm tools out of natural materials, such as *kirausittap* (A: deer-antler hoe) to plow the fields and dig for root vegetables, *pipa* shells (A: freshwater

mussels) to harvest grain, and *porosaranip* (A: large baskets worn over the shoulder) woven from plant fibers to carry and store the grain (Biratori Town 2006, 151; 254). The vigorous cultivation of grains and other crops enabled a stable food supply capable of supporting a large population (Biratori Town 2006, 93). According to Matsu'ura, most households in the area were able to harvest 20 bales of grain each year, with some households topping 30 bales (although the size of one bale is uncertain) (Biratori Town 2006, 103).



Image: Millet in a *porosaranip* at the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum.

Despite their relatively advanced cultivation practices before Wajin settlement, like Ainu in other regions, the *Sarunkur* still relied heavily on fishing, hunting, and gathering for their subsistence. As a result, their livelihood strategies still underwent great transformation under Japanese colonization. In the 1870s, Ainu hunting and fishing were banned, and Ainu were forced to adopt Japanese-style agriculture, which placed a strong emphasis on wet rice cultivation. In the next section, I will explain the significance of rice agriculture in Japan's settler colonialism in Hokkaido.

C. Rice and Assimilation

Historian Amino Yoshihiko (2012) writes that “many Japanese today believe, almost as an article of faith, that at least until the Edo period Japanese society was agricultural” (Amino 2012, 3). However, rice was not a quantitatively important foodstuff in Japan until the modern period (Freiner 2019, 11). One scholar who might be charged with perpetuating the myth of Japan as an agrarian, rice-based society is the anthropologist, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (1993), who writes in her classic monograph on rice and Japanese selfhood that “no other historical event was as significant for the development of what is now known as the Japanese state” than the introduction of wet-rice agriculture to Japan from the Korean peninsula around 350 B.C., because “rice has served as a powerful vehicle for the Japanese to think about themselves in relation to other peoples” throughout history (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 30; 102). Writing three decades later, fellow anthropologist Paul Hansen (2024) observes that Ohnuki-Tierney’s work has many critics who feel that it is “an overreaching, essentialist metaphor...And, to be clear, I agree. Yet, it is a telling one...Ask a Japanese person anywhere...what represents Japan...[and] Japanese rice and its products will be the answer, at least it always has been the answer given to me” (Hansen 2024, 86-87). Like Hansen, I also frequently observed such associations between rice and Japanese identity during my fieldwork. For example, echoing the sentiment of Ohnuki-Tierney expressed above, an information sheet published by the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum writes that “the northward spread of Japanese rice is considered a miracle, something universally acknowledged as significant” in Japanese history (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d, 144). But scholars like Amino, Hansen, and—I contend—Ohnuki-Tierney

herself, have convincingly argued that the myth of agrarian Japan was a modern invention intended to serve political needs.

How did the notion of Japan as a society based on rice agriculture since ancient times become hegemonic, despite the fact that rice was not a quantitatively important food source until the modern period? The reason is related to an agrarian ideology that was strongly influenced by Confucian values adopted from China, developed over centuries, and used by successive generations of Japanese elites to establish and maintain centralized political control. The Ritsuryou state, the first true state in Japan, which arose following the Taika reforms beginning 645 CE, brought “economic changes that would channel the wealth of the country toward the center of political power” (DeBary *et al.* 2001, 64). The architects of the Ritsuryou state modeled their system after the tax system of Tang China, meticulously following its example by attempting to abolish private property, nationalize and redistribute the land, and enact a system of triple taxation based on land, labor, and crafts (*ibid.*). According to Amino Yoshihiko (2012), the Ritsuryou state “designated the rice paddy as the foundation of the state system” that centered on Nara in Western Honshu, under which each household was “allotted a specific amount of land, and on that basis the state collected taxes in rice [J: *so*] labor [J: *you*] and crafts [J: *cho*] (Amino 2012, 23). Amino argues that the Ritsuryou state’s taxation system “was an attempt to bring a state into being in a place that had not yet formed a centralized government, characterized by an overpowering will to treat all subjects as farmers, as producers of rice,” despite the fact that it was impossible to grow rice in the country’s many mountainous and coastal areas” (*ibid.*).

This system had long-lasting consequences on Japanese systems of taxation and administration throughout successive historical periods, strongly influencing later forms such

as the the thirteenth century estate system (J: *shouen-kouryousei*) and the Edo-period *kokudaka* (J: rice-yield as a measure of land valuation) system (Amino 2012, 24). “From the archaic” Ritsuryou state, Amino argues, “through the governments of medieval and early modern periods, the ruling class consistently took the stance that ‘agriculture is the foundation of the country,’ aggressively promoting an ideology of ‘agrarian fundamentalism’” (Amino 2012, 25; cf. Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 87; 104). In Edo Japan, social stratification and inequality were indexed by rice consumption. In 1642, the Shogunate directed farmers to eat miscellaneous grains such as millet and to use rice only for tax purposes. Thus, rice became the food of the upper classes; internal others became the “people without rice,” and external others became the people with “the wrong rice” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 10; 37; 133-134). From the Meiji Period onward, this “the agrarian ideology was ruthlessly used” to “represent the purity of the Japanese self” and “cleverly used for nationalistic purposes by the military elite who tried to establish Japan’s national identity and promote patriotism among the people” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 93). Rice continued to be linked to Japanese national identity in the post-war *Nihonjinron* genre of writing popularized by Japanese anthropologists like Ishida Eiichirou and Aida Yuuji (Yoshino 1992, 20; Freiner 2019, 2; 11). Through such works, rice became “Japan’s epic story,” as Hansen puts it, arguing that “rice, and the social and political discourses surrounding its production such as respect for four seasons, groupism, rural land, and so forth” is presented as “the valorized peak of an unchanging Japaneseness” (Hansen 2024, 87).

In her book, Ohnuki-Tierney argues that “the symbolism of rice is bifurcated: on the one hand, ‘rice as our food’ and, on the other hand, ‘rice paddies as our land,’ each reinforcing the other” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 4). She writes that rice paddies are “imbued

with aesthetics” that represent a “pristine past before modernity and foreign influences contaminated it” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 9-10). Rice paddies are commonly “portrayed in woodblock prints, paintings, and contemporary posters in travel agents’ offices to attract urbanites to ‘the countryside’” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, *ibid.*). According to Ohnuki-Tierney, rice paddies “are Japanese nature par excellence” in that they appeal to an ideal of “culturalized nature,” in which “‘nature’ has been thoroughly transformed yet from which all traces of human agents of creation have been removed so that it looks ‘nature’” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 125). Rice paddies also “embody Japanese space and time,” representing an idealized past” (Ohnuki Tierney 1993, 9-10; 125). In art, rice paddies have served metonymically as indicators of the seasons (for example, with flooded paddies to evoke spring and harvest scenes to evoke autumn), such that “these cycles of rice grown have become markers of the seasons for all Japanese,” including “nonagrarian people” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 90).

Today, rice considered is the staple ingredient of *washoku* (J: Japanese cuisine), which is recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible World Cultural Heritage and promoted internationally by the Japanese government to increase rice exports (Freiner 2019, *xvi-xvii*). Rice is also linguistically equated with food in Japanese: the term *gohan* means cooked rice, but also refers to a meal in general, in a similar way as a Westerner might refer to one’s daily bread (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 30). Rice byproducts are used in making fertilizer, pottery, writing brushes, hats, footwear, and tatami mats (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 14). As we shall see in the remainder of this chapter and the next, rice was central to Japan’s project to transform Hokkaido into Japan and to assimilate the Ainu people out of existence. However—and

perhaps somewhat ironically—rice would also go on to become a crop that helped ensure Ainu survival.



Image: The landscape of rice paddies at Sikina Farm.

D. Agriculturalization in the Meiji Period and Beyond

With rice serving as a metaphor for Japaneseness and rice paddies as a quintessential image of the Japanese landscape, transforming Hokkaido into a zone of rice cultivation was seen as essential to cement Japanese control over the island, deter Russian encroachment, and rapidly modernize the nation to achieve parity with the industrialized West. After 1868, the Meiji government established the *Kaitakushi* (J: Colonization Commission), which enacted sweeping reforms designed to develop the wilderness of Hokkaido into fuel for industrialization and to encourage Wajin settlement. As the colonial authority in charge of Hokkaido's development from 1869 to 1882, the *Kaitakushi* served as the primary source in the collection and distribution of what was considered to be authoritative knowledge regarding colonization efforts in Hokkaido. The *Kaitakushi* framed Hokkaido's development through the lens of Anglo-American settler colonialism, by soliciting the advice of foreign

experts from the United States and employing the logics of Lockean property rights, scientific agriculture, and Social Darwinism to enact and legitimize both the appropriation of Ainu land and the destruction of Ainu communities. Although the *Kaitakushi* was dismantled in 1882, only thirteen years after it was founded, the policies and practices it helped to establish have had a lasting impact on Japan's project of settler colonialism in Hokkaido (Lu 2019b, 40). During the period of *Kaitakushi* administration, Hokkaido's population quadrupled and the area of cultivated land increased twenty-five-fold (Irish 2009, 124). Efforts were primarily focused on exploiting and exporting Hokkaido's natural resources to fuel capitalist accumulation in Japan's urban core. This objective was made explicit by Kuroda Kiyotaka, hired to be the *Kaitakushi*'s director in 1870, with his assertion that "Hokkaido is Japan's coffer" (Mason 2012, 128). The Meiji government poured enormous expenditure into supporting the *Kaitakushi*'s colonization plans, accounting for an average of 4 to 5 percent of the entire national budget over the thirteen years of *Kaitakushi* administration (Jolliffe 2019, 5; Lu 2019b, 54).⁵⁷

To strengthen Japan's claim over the island, the *Kaitakushi* needed to transform Hokkaido, both discursively and physically, into inalienable state territory, and the Ainu into citizens who had "always been Japanese" (Jacobson 2008, 173; cf. Blaxell 2009). Both aims could be achieved by forcibly assimilating them into Meiji Japan's rice-based agricultural system. Ainu were dispossessed of their lands through its expropriation, enclosure, and commodification (Siddle 1996, 90-91). The goal of these policies was to establish an agricultural economy in Hokkaido and fully assimilate the Ainu into Meiji Japan's individual freehold system. *Kaitakushi* land surveys engaged in the "radical simplification" (Scott 1998)

⁵⁷ Lu notes that, in 1880, up to 7.2 percent of the national budget went to the *Kaitakushi* (Lu 2019a, 537).

of Hokkaido's landscape, which was "mapped, named, and claimed," imposing order "on the 'wilderness' in the form of gridlike blocks" (Siddle 1996, 57). Major land reforms enacted by the *Kaitakushi* in 1872 and 1877, as well as its successors in 1886 and 1897, defined all of Ainu territory as *mushu no chi* (J: unclaimed land), resulting in the near-complete dispossession of Ainu land by the Japanese government (Mason 2012, 69; Peng, *et al.* 1974, 731). Ultimately, this land would be redistributed to Wajin settlers and, after 1899, to individual Ainu freeholders who could prove Ainu ethnicity (see below). According to historian Katsuya Hirano (2015), the expropriation of Ainu land by the *Kaitakushi* and its later successors "displaced the Ainu from the conditions of their labor and commodified Indigenous means of production" (Hirano 2015, 209). Hirano further argues that "the establishment of private property in Hokkaido became increasingly synonymous with the evisceration of Ainu bodies and communities" (Hirano, in Grunow, *et al.* 2019, 601). The elimination of Ainu communal property regimes they brought about was seen as necessary to establish Japan's administrative control over Hokkaido.

Large areas of Hokkaido were surveyed and partitioned to be allotted as agricultural freeholds to settlers, which historian Richard Siddle (1996) argues was "an important step in the process of colonial legitimization through the remaking of Hokkaido in the image of the [Japanese] mainland" (Siddle 1996, 57). The rapid advance of Japanese settler colonialism during the thirteen years of *Kaitakushi* administration had dramatic consequences for Hokkaido's ecosystems, as well as for the Ainu people who had relied on them since time immemorial. Salmon and herring stocks plummeted due to overexploitation, which caused many Ainu communities to suffer from starvation (Walker 2001, 84, 119; Irish 2009, 131). In 1877, the *Kaitakushi* began establishing artificial salmon hatcheries in Hokkaido's

headwaters, while at the same time the central government in Tokyo instituted a ban on Ainu salmon fishing on the Ishikari River, its tributaries and, later, all other rivers throughout the island (Kosaka 2018, 71). When *Kaitakushi* officials expressed opposition to Tokyo's edict, warning that it would lead to starvation among the Ainu, they were told, "You should not adhere to residents' welfare. They may be driven to be farmers" (Kosaka 2018, 71).



Image: Hokkaido land surveyors, circa 1890. Historical Museum of Urahoro Town.

Populations of sika deer (*Cervus nippon yesoensis*; A: *yuk*) also crashed due to Wajin overhunting. These deer had been an important food source, both for Ainu communities and the Hokkaido wolf (*Canis lupus hattai*), which was known to the Ainu as *horkew kamuy* (A: the howling deity). Around 1870, about 5,000 deer were captured annually in the Saru River Basin to support the Ainu's subsistence needs (Biratori Town 2006, 22; 304). Early Japanese documents described Hokkaido's abundant deer herds as "an enormous brown carpet, covering a slope of a mountain," (Kosaka 2018, 74), but between 1873 and 1878 alone, more than half a million deer were slaughtered by Wajin hunters, their meat and skins destined for commodity markets in China, France, and the US (Hirano 2015, 206). A venison cannery was

built in nearby Tomakomai in 1878 (Biratori Town 2006, 304). In 1879, after heavy snow and cold in the Hidaka region decimated the already strained deer population, the Tomakomai cannery began canning salmon, trout, and fruit in addition to venison but would ultimately be shuttered in 1882, after just four years of operation (Biratori Town 2006, 304). Deer populations remained low, and in the winter of 1883, lack of deer and salmon forced some Ainu households in Biratori to resort to surviving on *aha* (A: ground beans; J: *yabumame*) and *niharu* (A: mistletoe; J: *yadorigi*) (Biratori Town 2006, 147). The food crisis remained dire for several years. In 1887, 73 out of 349 households in the Saru region were suffering from severe hunger (Miyajima 1998, 83).

In the absence of deer, packs of wolves seized upon the opportunity presented by Hokkaido's newly established cattle and horse ranches. Livestock production in the Hidaka region had begun in 1799, when 60 horses were brought by breeders attracted by the region's low snowfall (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 120). In 1872, Niikappu Imperial Ranch and Hidaka Stud Farm were established to raise cattle and breed military horses on 70,000 hectares of pastureland in Saru, Niikappu, and Shizunai (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 62; 120). In 1884, foreign horses were imported to improve the military's breeding stock, resulting in the development of the local Donsanko breed (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, n.d., 62, 120). Niikappu Ranch practiced industrial livestock breeding on a massive scale: it boasted 272 kilometers of fencing (greater than the circumference of Japan's largest lake, Lake Biwa), and processed over 1.7 million cattle between 1893 and 1902—a veritable feast for harried and starving wolves (Miyajima 1998, 104; Walker 2004, 256-262). In response to their predation of the Emperor's herds, American rancher Edwin Dun, who had been hired by the *Kaitakushi* to

oversee the establishment of ranches on the island, engineered the complete annihilation of the Hokkaido wolf by offering bounties on wolf pelts and promoting the use of strychnine-laced bait to poison wolves. Dun's pursuit of wolves—an old enemy from his time as a frontiersman in the US West—was relentless, and frequently extravagant: “we succeeded in getting enough [strychnine] to poison every living thing on the island,” he once wrote (Walker 2004, 264). By the end of the 19th century, the Hokkaido wolf was declared extinct.

Ainu were forcibly relocated in 1888 to provide labor for the Niikappu Ranch (Siddle 1996, 66; Kayano 1994, 37-41). Military horse production intensified starting in 1901, as tensions with Russia mounted (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 120). Cooperative pastures covering 6,600 acres were established at nine locations in Biratori Town in 1904 (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 120). In 1904, a settler named Oukura Kisaburou received a 10-year loan of almost 3,000 acres of state-owned land in Shiunkotsu for ranching. The Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum notes that Oukura may be related to the famous political merchant, Oukura Kihachirou (Biratori Town 2006, 113). In 1907, cooperative pastures were sold off to individual buyers to further promote livestock farming (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 120). Twenty-seven Ainu households from Nioi were forcibly relocated to Biratori's Kaminukibetsu (present day Asahi district) due to the expansion of the Imperial Ranch in 1915 (Biratori Town 2006, 11; 133-134). Military horses were grazed in the Memu district, near the present-day site of the Biratori Dam, using the method of woodland grazing whereby horses ate existing vegetation (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 57; 121). As a result, horses cleared out most of the understory, with the exception of the toxic lily-of-the-valley (J: *suzuran*). This flower's abundance in area led to its adoption as the town flower, and part of the former

woodland ranch in Memu remains a popular tourist destination as the *Suzuran Batake* (J: lily-of-the-valley field), where an annual viewing festival is held. In the absence of horses, human laborers are required to ensure that the flowers remain visible by mowing and trimming the understory, *sasa* bamboo grass, and tall *susuki* pampas grass. I was one of those laborers over a total of two weeks in November 2023.

After Ainu hunting and fishing were banned in the 1870s, the *Sarunkur* had no choice but to attempt to support themselves by becoming rice farmers. In the late 19th century, millet varieties were known as *aynu amamu* (A: Ainu grains), while rice was known as *sisam amamu* (A: Wajin grain). (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 80). The first rice paddy along the Saru River was created in 1876, the same year that Ainu hunting with bow traps and poison arrows were banned (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 134). Prior to the development of paddy land in the Saru River basin, the area from Biratori-Honcho to Nibutani was a fertile floodplain, supporting glades of willow, alder, and elm trees, as well as wetlands where reeds, cattails, and water caltrops grew in abundance. In the Meiji Period, the elm forests along the Saru's meandering course, which had excellent drainage and rich alluvial soil, were classified as Class A forests and were the first to be logged and turned into farmland (for a fuller account of logging in the Saru Basin, see Chapter III). The alder glades were next to be logged, and the wetlands were drained and converted into paddy fields. (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 49-50). In 1885, the prefectural government's ten-year plan grants agricultural tools and supplies to encourage Ainu to cultivate more land, and the *Sarunkur* were the first group in which this plan was implemented (Kaizawa 2010, 252-253). In 1899, the government ratified the Hokkaido Former Natives Protection Act (hereafter, the Protection Act), a landmark piece of

legislation, which remained the primary law guiding the Japanese government's Ainu policy for nearly a century.

Modeled on the US congress's 1887 General Allotment Act (also known as the Dawes Act), which had been introduced to Japan by intellectual and government advisor Nitobe Inazou and the English Missionary John Batchelor (Miyajima 1998, 93), the 1899 Protection Act held that Ainu hunting and fishing were to be replaced by individual freehold agriculture. The Protection Act officially allotted five hectares of farmland to each Ainu household (Iwawallén 2016a, 61). In the Saru Basin, such Meiji-era policies for encouraging agriculture among Ainu "were developed on the basis of *existing* slash-and-burn cultivation that had continued since the Edo period or even earlier" (Biratori Town 2006, 105; emphasis added). A 1902 map of Protection Act allotments in the Saru Basin shows a complex land division, with irregular polygons and triangles and extreme differences in area, suggesting that these allotments were not a large area of uncultivated land that had been systematically divided, but rather land that was already being cultivated by Ainu that was "granted" as allotments (Biratori Town 2006, 105). However, within a few years of allotment, much of the land allotted by the Protection Act was considered "abandoned" or had been rented to Wajin tenant farmers (Peng and Geiser 1977, 13).

Despite (or perhaps, because of) the fact that Ainu cultivation had been so well-established, Japanese agricultural techniques remained quite alien to the Saru Ainu way of thinking. John Batchelor, an English missionary, who lived in Biratori in the in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, recounts the following vignette with regard to Ainu agriculture:

We once had an old [Ainu] man in to do up our bit of garden, whom I asked to spread some manure on the ground he was digging up, for I told him that would enrich the soil. He stared at me and said he would not do so. When I accused him of idleness he told me that I was very unjust. "How so?" I asked

him. Said he, “you profess to be a teacher of religion, Sir; yet you would have me dishonour and insult the gods by offering them manure! Will they not of their own free will give you the increase they intend you to have? Do you think you can force their hands? Let the gods do as they will!” I really thought the old man was joking. But no, he was quite sincere. In the conversation which followed the above incident, it came out that this Ainu believed strongly in the particular and special providence of the gods, and was strongly of opinion that they ought to be left alone to attend to their own special duties after their own fashion. Human beings should not attempt to interfere with their dispensations and evince a desire to get more out of the earth than they intend freely to bestow. It is the place of the gods to look after the men and not of the men to look after the gods. Man may sow but the gods alone can give the increase. (Batchelor 1971, 77-78)

Just as Batchelor mistook the Ainu’s deeply held cultivation philosophy for mere idleness, the government would repossess 21.5 percent of Protection Act allotments within fifteen years for “abandonment” (Siddle 1996, 71; cf. Peng *et al.* 1974). Sources are somewhat divided in the particulars: whereas a 1977 study by Peng and Geiser states that the average Ainu household retained less than one hectare of allotment land by 1902 (Peng and Geiser 1977, 13), Miyajima (1998) states that an average 1.7 hectares were retained by 1916, although only 28 percent of this land was under cultivation (Miyajima 1998, 87). Peng and Geiser (1977) also state that, by 1923, Ainu retained 45 percent of their original allotments, with only 19 percent under cultivation (Peng and Geiser 1977, 13). The Protection Act was revised in 1946, abolishing tax exemptions on allotments and ending the provision of agricultural supplies, along with other welfare measures (Siddle 1996, 149). The same year, the Agricultural Land Readjustment Law and Special Law for the Creation of Freeholders result in the loss of 34 percent of arable allotment lands held by Ainu throughout Hokkaido (Siddle 1996, 149-151). By 1977, Ainu in households owned an average of only 0.75 hectares of land, compared to the 1899 allotment average of 3.5 hectares (Peng and Geiser 1977, 13).

Rice production cooperatives began to be formed in Hokkaido starting in 1896, the same year the first comprehensive map of the Saru Basin was issued by the Geological Survey Department (Irish 2009, 138; 220; Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 8). A 1902 law helped to promote irrigation associations and the construction of paddy irrigation infrastructure in Hokkaido (Irish 2009, 138; 220). An agricultural cooperative was established in Biratori in 1913, and 191 irrigation ditches (J: *suidou*) were constructed by 1916, leading to a dramatic increase in paddy acreage (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 144). Despite the government's efforts to promote rice farming in the region, most *Sarunkur* farmers continued to farm millet and other crops in the way they were used to, using *pikutatoy* (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 135). These deeply entrenched cultivation practices helped support *Sarunkur* households at a time when Ainu communities throughout Hokkaido were suffering from starvation. At that time, in the early 20th century, *pikutatoy* could yield thirty bales of millet per year (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 135). As Kaizawa Tadashi (born 1912) writes:

On that little bit of land, growing corn, millet, and sorghum meant we never went hungry. We paid with our labor, and the women did it like a side job to achieve food self-sufficiency. Eating those grains, we never suffered hardship. (Kaizawa 2010, 255-256)

Ainu women ground millet into flour using *nis* (A: large mortar) and *iyutani* (A: large pestle), which they used to make *sito* (A: millet dumplings), a beloved staple of Ainu cuisine, even today (Biratori Town 2006, 266). Potatoes and squash were also commonly eaten (Ito 2014, 125-126). While some Ainu did try creating rice paddies along the Saru River, they faced many hardships, including a great flood in 1922 that destroyed the newly created paddies (Kaizawa 2010, 11). White rice was seen as a luxury few could afford (Ito 2014, 25-28).



Image: Grinding millet into flour using *nis* and *iyutani*.

Saru Ainu began to eat more rice in the during the wartime 1940s, however, due to government rationing under the 1942 Food Control Law. In his memoir, Kaizawa Tadashi recalls the impact of rationing on local tastes:

Well, wouldn't you know it, rice tasted better than millet or sorghum. Plus, back then, because it was rationed, you could get it relatively cheap. That's how the Ainu of Nibutani got hooked on the taste of rice. (Kaizawa 2010, 255-256)

After the end of World War II, large-scale agricultural conversion was promoted as part of Japan's policies to increase food production and eliminate unemployment, and more Ainu farmers began to dream of paddies of their own (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 102). By 1963, 1,000 hectares of paddy were being cultivated in Biratori, although most of this land was owned by Wajin settlers (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, 144). Kaizawa describes the hardships faced by Ainu farmers at that time:

If we could harvest every year, we wouldn't complain, but the Saru River is a primitive river without levees. When the water comes, it sweeps away our hard-earned rice fields root and branch. And year after year, we'd invest only to have it washed away, toil and toil, and in the end, all that remained was debt to the agricultural cooperative... We bought engines, bought oil, bought machinery—the debt just kept ballooning... But we needed rice to eat, so come spring when farming started, we'd borrow rice from wealthier farmers. We'd borrow a few bags and then had to repay each bag of rice with three times as much soy. This only fueled the desire to cultivate paddy fields themselves. (Kaizawa 2010, 256)



Image: Biratori farmers and high school students, circa 1940. Historical Museum of the Saru River, Nibutani.

To protect farmer's paddies from the Saru River's cyclical floods, an embankment was constructed in Nibutani from 1965-1966, enabling land reclamation for paddy development along the riverbank (Kaizawa 2010, 210). When the embankment was completed, the Biratori Town government allocated paddy land to "only the most capable farmers from the Ainu community," while allocating the majority to Wajin, (Kaizawa 2010, 235). Four Ainu individuals were granted eight paddies each. The embankment was completed in 1966, and the entire riverbank was converted to "splendid paddy fields" (Kaizawa 2010, 210). A bridge was built in 1967, ending the need to cross the river by *cip* (Kaizawa 2010, 210). Many people borrowed money to convert dry fields to paddies after the

completion of the embankment, resulting in mounting debts (Kaizawa 1999a, 30). Ohnuki-Tierney argues that “farmers are not well-off financially because of the high cost of farm operation” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 18). She describes the financial hardship faced by one Hokkaido farming household in 1990, who were ¥62 million in debt thanks to high operating costs (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 18).

At an average of 20 hectares, farms in Hokkaido today tend to be larger than farms elsewhere in Japan, which average at less than one hectare (Freiner 2019, xv). In 1988, Hokkaido produced 763,100 kilos of Japan’s total of 9.888 million kg of rice. The second most productive prefecture was Aomori, at only 327,900 kg (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 20). By 2009, Hokkaido farmers were producing 8.5 percent of Japan’s rice, along with 93 percent of its kidney beans, 85 percent of its azuki beans, 70 percent of its wheat, 70 percent of its potatoes, 20 percent of its soybeans, 40 percent of its dairy products, and more than 90 percent of its racehorses (Irish 2009, 308).⁵⁸ Today, the total area of farmland in the Hidaka region, where Biratori Town is located, is around 41,000 hectares, of which 76 percent is pastureland, 17 percent is paddy, and 6.9 percent is dry field (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, n.d., 46).

E. Challenges and Changes Due to Japanese Agricultural Policy

Japanese government policy has a direct impact on farmers in Japan, and the shifts in agricultural policy due to national and global economic transformations have had a deleterious effect on the livelihoods of Saru Ainu farmers. In Hokkaido, agriculture “has been closely managed from the top down” since the *Kaitakushi* period (Hansen 2024, 69-70).

⁵⁸ Today, Hokkaido produces more than 50 percent of Japan’s dairy products (Hansen 2024, 75).

Hansen (2024) argues that agriculture has been Japan's "intervened industry," with such intervention justified by "the need for a secure food supply couched in the lack of national self-sufficiency" (Hansen 2024, 69). Freiner (2019) argues that some Japanese "view the costs of agricultural production as an insurance premium against the possibility of food shortages arising from any future breakdown in Japan's access to imported supplies," while others "view the farm sector as a residue of traditional Japanese culture and want to protect it" (Freiner 2019, 16). After the dissolution of the *Kaitakushi*, the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce was the main body regulating agriculture until 1925, when it was split into the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Commerce. The Ministry of Agriculture later became the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) in 1978, and remains the main governmental body responsible for setting agricultural policy today (Freiner 2019, 13, 22; Hansen 2024, 69-70).

Other important actors in the agricultural sector are the Agriculture Tribalists and the agricultural cooperatives. The Agriculture Tribalists are politicians from the ruling LDP representing rural districts with strong ties to the MAFF and the cooperatives who are affiliated with the party's "Agriculture and Forestry Tribe" (J: *nourinzoku*) (for a deeper explanation of LDP Policy Tribes, see Chapter IV). The agricultural cooperatives, made up of the national-level Central Union of Agricultural Co-operatives, known as JAZenchu and smaller regional cooperatives like Hokkaido's Hokuren, implement the MAFF's agricultural policy and "essentially function as 'go-betweens' for producers, MAFF (and so the government, and wholesale buyers such as food processors and supermarket chains" (Hansen 2024, 84; Freiner 2019, 22). MAFF bureaucrats loyal to the LDP's Agriculture Tribe in turn "act as gatekeepers to stave off the pressure of drastic policy reform" (Freiner 2019, 35).

Some scholars have likened the relationship between the MAFF, the Agriculture Tribalists, and the agricultural cooperatives as an “iron triangle,” with a strong “overlap between members of the LDP...with bureaucrats and high level business interests” (Freiner 2019, 5), in a very similar way that scholars have characterized Japan’s Construction State (see Chapter IV). Because of this iron triangle, “farmers themselves have virtually no voice in the sale of their products” (Hansen 2024, 84), although Freiner argues that “the combination of overrepresentation of rural voters and strong support for conservatives in the countryside has ensured a high responsiveness on the part of the LDP” to farmers’ concerns (Freiner 2019, 14).

The Rice Control Act of 1921 directed the government to purchase rice as a means of supporting farmers and to maintain a stable food supply (Freiner 2019, 12). It was revised three times in the early 1930s, resulting in an embargo of foreign rice and a price control system for domestic rice (Freiner 2019, 13). In 1942, the Food Control Law raised rice prices and incentivized paddy expansion, and after the war, the government “doubly subsidized rice farmers by subsidizing both farm land and rice production” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 16). Nevertheless, farm incomes began declining due to laws that imposed limits on farm sizes and the growth of non-farm incomes from sectors like the construction industry, and by 1960, farming household incomes were lower than those of non-farming households (Freiner 2019, 14). In an effort to protect rice farmers, the government increased rice prices several times in the 1960s (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 16). But rice consumption began to decline in the 1960s, due in part to an “influx of foreign dishes, including pizza and hamburgers” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 16). However, rice production continued to increase. As a result, “by 1970, the country was awash in an oversupply of rice” (MacLachlan and Shimizu 2022, 36-37). Bumper crops

were harvested in 1968-1971 and 1976-1979, prompting the government to buy back and store the rice surplus (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 16).

In 1970, the government instituted the Acreage Reduction Policy (J: *gentan*) to incentivize a reduction in rice production (Freiner 2019, 15-16). It also instituted a crop rotation (J: *tensaku*) policy to encourage farmers to grow other crops (Thompson 2003, 93). *Gentan* imposed production quotas for crops other than rice and “channeled subsidies via JA to those who fulfilled them,” while those who failed to fulfil them “risked significant penalties” (Maclachlan and Shimizu 2022, 36-37). Kaizawa Kouichi (1999) has written about the way Ainu were negatively impacted by national rice policy and *gentan*. “Just as they thought, ‘good, life will now be easier for the people of Nibutani’” with the completion of the Saru River embankment, “the national policy on food production shifted abruptly,” resulting in hardship for Ainu rice farmers (Kaizawa 1999a, 30). *Gentan* policies were highly unpopular with farmers and local cooperatives, who “balked at the notion of producing less rice when prices were so high,” (Maclachlan and Shimizu 2022, 37), so the government exempted farmers from the quotas if they could “implement ways to increase rice consumption” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 17). Freiner notes that instead of encouraging farmers to grow less rice, this policy had the result of reducing the total number of farmers, making some farmers grow rice more intensively. This is because rice was still more profitable than other crops due to price controls, and it was difficult for farmers to devote themselves to other crops while maintaining some rice fields (Freiner 2019, 15-16). *Gentan* policies continued into the 1980s and 1990s. In 1988, rice field acreage was ordered to be cut by 30 percent, and in 1993, more than a quarter of the total paddy acreage was lying fallow (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 17). Due to structural reforms in agriculture instituted from 1965

until the 1980s, farms were reorganized into larger plots more suited to tractor and combine usage, which only exacerbated the overproduction problem (Thompson 2003, 93). The number of full-time farmers also declined, with 85 percent of Japan's rice in 1993 being grown by part-time farmers (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 17). Between 1960 and 1990, many local agricultural cooperatives were merged, reducing the total number of agricultural cooperatives by around 70 percent (MacLachlan and Shimizu 2022, 34). By 2018, there were only 649 agricultural cooperatives in Japan (*ibid.*).

New land reclamation for paddy was prohibited with the institution of *gentan* and *tensaku* policies in 1970, incentivizing Ainu farmers to switch to farming other crops or to let fields lie fallow, instead of growing rice (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 58; 62; 144). Since the reduction in rice prices in the 1970s, the government has implemented *tensaku* incentives as a means to counter rural depopulation and prevent a reduction in tax revenue from agricultural land. Such incentives remain in place today. One farmer I spoke with explained the system in this way:

I know people who farm, but their own kids won't take over, and if no one in the family wants to be a farmer anymore and you just leave the farmland untouched, you end up having to pay taxes on it. So, people start giving up that farmland. That's a problem for the government, so to prevent that, they offer something called a *tensaku* incentive, meaning you switch what you grow. If you grow something other than rice and harvest it properly, they'll give you this incentive. In that way, they get farmers to keep their farmland and pay taxes. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

This also enables Japan to safeguard agricultural land to ensure food security:

The government doesn't really think reducing farmland is a good idea. They want to keep it available so it can be restored at any time. So, they give people who own farmland this crop rotation incentive money. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

From the farmers' perspective, letting paddies lie fallow as grassy pastures while collecting the *tensaku* incentive is attractive because it is much less labor intensive than growing rice:

Everyone had been pumping water with electricity to keep the fields flooded, but maintaining that on their own was tough. If they switched to pasture, they wouldn't need to pump water anymore, so they just let it fall fallow. Most people grow grass, because you plant the seeds, it grows on its own, and you can just harvest it at the end. That's why everyone grows grass. We're planning to grow grass, too. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

Some Ainu farmers in Biratori Town began experimenting with tomato cultivation after 1970, when a pilot program for tomato growing was launched involving 23 households (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 58; 62; 144). Within two years, there were around 2,000 vinyl greenhouses in Biratori Town, and Biratori's tomatoes were shipped to markets for the first time (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 58-59). Twenty-one more households joined the tomato cultivation program in 1973, and "full-scale tomato cultivation" began (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 59). In 1981, the Momotaro tomato varietal was introduced and spread rapidly to become the main varietal grown by Biratori farmers (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 58). A cooperative tomato sorting facility was established by growers in 1982 (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 59). In 1985, the Biratori Town agricultural cooperative began trial production of tomato juice under the brand *Nispa no Koibito*, which remains popular today. The brand capitalizes on Ainu culture in its name, which combines the Ainu and Japanese languages and means "the gentleman's lover," and in the accompanying story of a wealthy Ainu man who fell in love with tomatoes after falling ill and recovering by eating a single red tomato each day (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 59). Biratori's first dedicated tomato sorting facility opened in 1992 (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 59). Additional sorting and cooling facilities were added in 1996 and

1998 (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 59). In 2012, nearly 4 million Momotaro tomatoes were shipped from Biratori Town (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 59). Today, 10 percent of Japan's tomatoes are grown in Hokkaido, and the Momotaro is the most common tomato varietal, accounting for a cultivation share of 78 percent (Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum n.d., 58-59).



Image: Biratori Town's popular tomato juice brand Nispa No Koibito on a store shelf.

F. Conclusion

Despite showing flexibility in adapting to market realities in the wake of *gentan*, Ainu farmers have been hit hard by changes in Japanese agricultural policy in response to the global economy. Although Japan closely protected the domestic rice market from foreign competition in the immediate postwar years, international pressure has led to market liberalization, and farmers now have to compete with cheaper rice grown abroad. In 1994, the WTO required Japan to open its rice market to foreign competition, but at that time there was already an oversupply of rice and the government had been buying back rice surpluses

and paying farmers to grow other crops (Freiner 2019, 31). Local cooperatives began to support *gentan* as “their best bet for keeping rice prices high, even though high prices stood to weaken long-term consumer demand for rice” (Maclachlan and Shimizu 2022, 37). In 2003, the government released the Basic Plan for Rice Policy Reform and revised the Law for the Stabilization of Supply, Demand, and Price of Staple Foods, which “significantly and detrimentally affected the ability of small paddy farmers to survive, to earn a living growing rice and to pass on that living to their children” (Freiner 2019, 34). In 2025, the government of PM Ishiba released its Basic Policy on Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform, which announces the government’s intention to “review rice farming policies and develop specific measures” to address rice shortages and high prices (Asahi Shimbun 2025a).

Farmers I spoke with had strong feelings about the government’s treatment of rice farmers and critiqued it for harming Japan’s food security:

Japan isn’t really interested in protecting its own farmers anymore. They’re only concerned with diplomacy or whatever they want to do, so Japanese agriculture is steadily becoming insignificant. But weakening your own country’s resilience is actually pretty bad as a national strategy, you know. We’re basically creating an environment where we can’t even survive. It’s bad. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

Another Nibutani resident I spoke with expressed a sense of empathy for local rice farmers, and critiques Japan’s agricultural policy for neglecting farmers’ needs:

It’s just incredibly baffling how incredibly hard rice farmers are struggling. Japan’s staple food is rice, we eat rice every day, but then we import it or something. Even though Hokkaido grows tons of rice, the price doesn’t go up. (Interview, May 13, 2024)

How are Nibutani’s Ainu farmers managing to cope with such challenges? This question is explored in detail in the next chapter, which presents an ethnographic account of Sikina Farm.

VII. SOWING SARUNKUR SEEDS: AINU FARMERS TODAY

A. Introduction

One crisp Sunday morning in October, I arrived at the Nibutani Elementary School just before 9 A.M. with my host mother, Hapo, to attend the school's performance day event (J: *gakushuu happyou kai*). Crossing the grassy lawn to the school building, we entered, removed our shoes, and donned slippers emblazoned with the school's name. We headed down the hall toward the school's gymnasium, where the event was to take place, passing empty classrooms and bulletin boards full of photographs of students engaging in academic pursuits as well as various Ainu cultural activities, such as woodcarving classes led by local masters, Kaizawa Toru and Kaizawa Mamoru. Folding chairs were lined up in rows facing one end of the gym where, beneath the basketball hoop (currently folded up in its "put away" condition), was the stage where the performance would take place. Audience members had already started to fill the seats; local elders wearing half-length robes (J: *hanten*) embroidered with Ainu motifs sat alongside overall-clad young mothers (with toddlers in tow) and fathers bedecked in sharp, western-style suits. Soon, the school principal took the stage and made introductions, and then the performance began. It consisted of three short plays—the first performed by the second graders (J: *ninensei*), the second performed by the third and fourth graders (J: *san-yonensei*), and the third performed by the fifth graders (J: *gonensei*), along with two musical numbers sung by the entire student body (consisting of only fifteen children, total). Although the Nibutani Elementary School's performance day always includes one play relating to Ainu culture, as I was told later, the performance I attended was the first time Ainu culture was featured in two of the plays, a development which the people I talked were happy about (Field Notes, October 15, 2023).

One of the two plays was entitled *Chiri Yukie no Nokoshita Mono* (J: The Things Chiri Yukie Left Behind). It was a touching and surprisingly mature retelling of the story of Chiri Yukie performed by the fifth graders. Chiri was a famous Ainu woman who, at a young age, transcribed many important oral narratives from Ainu elders before her untimely death at only 19 years old. The students showed young Chiri standing up to discrimination against Wajin teachers as a schoolgirl, before moving to Tokyo as a young woman to work with the famous linguist Kindaichi Kyousuke. While there, a photographer comes to take her picture. Posing for the photo, Chiri puts up the first two fingers of her right hand in the “peace” sign” and says “Ni-bu-ta-niiiiii,” stretching out the final vowel to accentuate her broad smile. This drew laughter from the crowd, because everyone recognized it as the way people in Nibutani today commonly pose for photographs. “No, no,” the photographer says, “we’re not in Nibutani, we’re in Tokyo!” So, Chiri says, “To-kyo-uuuuuu”, drawing more laughter from the crowd. “No, no,” the photographer says, “just look at the camera and don’t say anything!” Cowed, Chiri sits back quietly, and just as the photographer snaps the photo, the famous image of Chiri Yukie flashes up on a projector screen behind the performers. This draws even more raucous laughter from the crowd. Despite this comedic scene, the play’s overall tone was solemn, ending with Chiri’s death as she struggles to transcribe just one more tape-recorded narrative.

The other play related to Ainu culture that the schoolchildren performed that day was entitled *Okikurmi no Bouken* (J: The Adventure of Okikurmi). In this play, the third and fourth graders reenacted the story of the Divine Culture Hero, Okikurmi, which has been passed down through Ainu oral narratives. As explained in Chapter IV, Okikurmi was a half-human demigod who, together with his sister-wife, Tures-mat descended from the land of the

gods to live among the humans and teach them the proper way to live. The children, wearing locally made Ainu *amip* (A: clothing), re-enacted how Okikurmi taught the Ainu how to hunt deer in the mountains, fish for salmon in the rivers, and sow millet in between. The moral lesson communicated by this play was to always afford the proper respect to food sources and the *kamuy* who inhabit them. Although the *form* of knowledge transmission may have changed, these two plays, taken together demonstrate that the *substance* of Ainu values are informing the upbringing of Nibutani's future generations.



Image: Nibutani schoolchildren performing “The Aventure of Okikurmi.”

As shown in the previous chapter, Ainu living in the Saru River Basin (A: *Sarunkur*; “people of Saru”) have a long history of cultivating various crops, particularly millet, which formed an important part of local subsistence alongside hunting, fishing, and foraging for wild plants. In this chapter, I examine present-day Ainu livelihoods in the Saru River Basin, with a focus on agriculture. This chapter draws heavily on my experiences at Sikina Farm (a pseudonym), the Ainu-owned family farm where I lived and volunteered as a laborer for nine out of my fourteen months of fieldwork. I provide an ethnographic description of life on Sikina Farm, including the labor-intensive process of rice farming and the continuing importance of wild plant foraging to Ainu agricultural livelihoods. I also present my findings

as to the major challenges that Ainu farmers face, including the negative impacts of infrastructure development and rural depopulation. Japanese colonization of Hokkaido brought massive changes to life in the Saru Basin due to the prohibition on Ainu hunting and fishing (discussed in Chapter VIII) and the forced adoption of Japanese-style wet rice agriculture (discussed in Chapter VI). Although some Ainu were able to persevere through these struggles and establish themselves as successful rice farmers in the postwar period, Ainu farmers today face many challenges due to infrastructure development, changes in Japanese agricultural policy, and the depopulation of rural areas. Alongside cash crops such as rice and tomatoes, contemporary Ainu farmers continue to express their Ainu identity by cultivating traditional crops such as millet, beans, and squash, and foraging for wild plants, a practice which is integrated with farm life. The revival of Ainu hunting has been proposed as a means of supplementing Ainu livelihoods, transmitting the Ainu's spiritual culture, and controlling the population of deer, a major agricultural pest.

B. Sikina Farm

The start of growing season is signaled by the spring thaw, around early April in Hokkaido, and begins with the preparation of equipment, greenhouses, and fields for sowing. The growing season finishes by the end of November, when the last of crops have been harvested, the greenhouses have been torn down, and the equipment stowed for Hokkaido's long winter. During my time on Sikina Farm, I participated in all farm activities, helping to sow, cultivate, and harvest rice, millet, adzuki beans, potatoes, shiso, tomatoes, peanuts, sweet potatoes, asparagus, and carrots. I helped set up, tear down, and repair greenhouses and deer fences, and spent many hours using push-mowers and weed-whackers to mow around

fields, paddies, and farm structures. While conducting these activities, I spent many hours with Ainu farmers and learned a lot about the challenges that farmers in Nibutani face.

The family that owns Sikina Farm is comprised of Mici, an Ainu man in his late 70s, his wife Hapo, a Wajin woman in her mid-70s who has been living in Nibutani since emigrating there in the early 1970s, along with Yupi, their unmarried son who lives with them and oversees the daily management of the farm. During my time there, the vast majority of farm labor was completed by these three individuals, with no additional full-time laborers, aside from myself. While Yupi does the majority of the work these days, his aging parents both work tirelessly as well—often putting this much younger ethnographer to shame. In addition, Yupi’s younger sister, Sapo lives in one of Hokkaido’s big cities but comes home periodically to help with farm work and participate in family events, and occasionally friends or extended family members will come help out on exceptionally laborious jobs like the rice sowing or millet harvesting, but Sikina Farm remains a mostly household-run operation, and having an extra hand, even one as untrained as my own, to help with farm work was greatly appreciated.

Mici and Yupi descend from a long line of Ainu farmers. In the time of Mici’s great-grandfather, Eraman-*ekasi* (born c. 1850), it was a time when “everyone had to grow something on their land just to survive” (Interview, June 1, 2024). Eraman-*ekasi*’s son, Yaysiporore-*ekasi*, was the first in the family to attempt to farm rice in the Japanese style but met with challenges as did other Ainu farmer of his generation. His son, Mici’s father, Rametok-*ekasi* (born c. 1912), was finally able to establish Sikina Farm as a successful rice growing operation after the construction of an embankment on the Saru River (previously discussed in Chapter VI), and later became a prominent leader and advocate for the Ainu

community. By the time Yupi was old enough to remember, he told me one day as he carved Ainu patterns into board of walnut while working a part-time job in the *cise* outside the museum, Rametok-*ekasi* “was already running around everywhere with the Ainu Association or something like that, so I hardly ever saw him actually farming” (Interview, June 1, 2024). Mici was the one doing most of the farming by then, and continued to do so until Yupi, who had graduated from university and had been working outside of Nibutani, decided to return to take over daily operations at the farm.

Before Yupi was born, when Hapo first married Mici and joined the household in the mid-1970s, Rametok-*ekasi* had already developed paddies along the Saru River and was successfully growing rice (Interviews, April 30, 2024; June 1, 2024). Hapo remembers rice cultivation’s intense labor demands at that time, before mechanization. “Back then,” Hapo told me, “there wasn’t much machinery, so working the fields was very hard. We would ask thirty or forty people from around the village to help us plant rice. We would start preparing the seedlings early, right at the beginning of spring, and then spend about two weeks at the end of May planting rice every day. We managed ten hectares of paddy, so spring was truly nonstop busy from April onward, working constantly” (Interview, April 30, 2024). It was during these times, planting rice with fellow villagers hired on as day laborers to help with the sowing, that Hapo first heard the Ainu language being spoken. In addition, the family kept various livestock, including a few horses for agricultural work and some chickens, pigs, and rabbits for home consumption. They also kept around twenty Holstein dairy cows—the largest herd they could manage to support on their limited land— but milking cows every day was “a hassle,” and it was difficult to justify the investment in expensive milking equipment, so they soon switched to raising a smaller herd of Wagyu (Interview, April 30,

2024). By the early 1990s, the family had ceased livestock production and were supplementing their income from rice with money made growing and selling tomatoes and other vegetables at the local farmers market (located in central Nibutani, in what is now the parking lot of the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum). Although the farmers market no longer exists, they still sell rice and tomatoes to the local agricultural cooperative and individual customers. In addition, they grow traditional Ainu crops like millet and squash to support Hapo's expert practice of traditional Ainu cuisine and regularly forage for wild plants to supplement the household's nutrition (see Section F below).

Sikina Farm sits along a major trucking road that leads into the Hidaka Mountains. Despite being a small, family-run operation, it is a modern, highly mechanized operation. Its two large, gambrel-roofed barns and associated sheds and other outbuildings are filled with modern equipment and tools. The larger of the two barns is the *torakutaa souko* (J: tractor barn), a long hangar-like structure that houses heavy equipment made by companies like Yanmar and Kubota, including multiple tractors, a rice-harvesting combine, a tipper truck, and other heavy equipment and tools, as well as Yupi's motorcycle. The smaller of the two barns is the *kome souko* (J: rice barn), which houses the rice silos, processing equipment, refrigerators, landscaping tools like Yanmar mowers and Maruyama weed-whackers, and it also features a gantry-mounted crane and storage loft. Yet despite its modern trappings, traces of the past can be seen at Sikina Farm, as well. Smaller sheds and outbuildings are used for storing materials for traditional Ainu crafts, such as the dried *sikina* (A: bulrush; J: *gama*) fronds Hapo uses to weave *toma* (A: rush mats; J: *goza*). One of these buildings, the *kayabuki koya* (J: thatch-roofed shed), is said to be one of the oldest buildings in Nibutani, containing rusty farm tools from the early 20th century alongside modern tools like vinyl ties and plastic

greenhouse clips. A disused fodder silo made from concrete blocks evokes the architectural look of early-20th century Hokkaido, adding to Sikina Farm's classic, bucolic atmosphere.

At the center of Sikina Farm stands the *omoya* (J: main house), a well-appointed, two-story farmhouse where Mici, Hapo, and Yupi live, tastefully landscaped around the outside with garden flowerbeds, small trees and shrubs, and decorative garden stones sourced from the Saru and Nukabira river basins. If not for the dried salmon carcass hanging on the side of the house, the bundles of *ento* leaves drying over the porch, or the curled *inaw* flanking the front door, it might look like any farmhouse in Hokkaido. While Sikina Farm has all the typical modern amenities, including electricity, central heating, and a washing machine, owning a drier is still somewhat uncommon in Japan, so the family's laundry, including modern t-shirts with sharp, Ainu-style designs, can often be seen hanging outside to dry. An outdoor workstation with a double-wide sink situated along the backside of the house is often festooned with buckets of freshly harvested vegetables from the farm or wild plants foraged from the nearby forest waiting to be washed. A woodshed stores logs split throughout the year in preparation for Hokkaido's long winter, when the *omoya*'s cast-iron wood-burning stoves are a welcome means of keeping heating bills down—these stoves are also essential to performing traditional Ainu ceremonies like *Sinnurappa* (A: ancestral memorial ceremony) at home, as the hearth is where *Ape Fuci Kamuy* (A: Sacred Fire Grandmother), the intermediary between the family, their ancestors, and the other gods is said to reside.

Arranged around the *omoya* and extending to the main road are vegetable fields and the metal ribs of three greenhouses. One of these, covered in vinyl during the growing season, houses two rows of tomato plants, but the other two are usually left uncovered, bare metal ribs open to the sky. Under the ribs of these two, the tall stalks of *sipuskep* (A: proso

millet; J: *inakibi*) droop under the weight of their ears of grain. The millet and vegetable fields are fenced off by green plastic netting to protect the plants inside from hungry deer. Across the main road from *omoya* the family's sweet potato field, and beyond that, along the course of the Saru River, are their rice paddies, divided by ridges (J: *aze*) and flanked by irrigation canals (J: *suidou*). At the far side of the paddies is an embankment (J: *chikutei*) that was built in the 1960s to protect paddy fields from the Saru River's periodic floods. On the opposite side, set in a small, wooded valley behind the house where a tributary of the Saru called Sikina Creek flows, is the log cabin where I lodged during my time in Nibutani. Beyond the cabin, the path ends at an erosion control dam (J: *sabou damu*), a four-meter-high concrete wall across the creek, which creates a small waterfall.



Image: A field of *sipuskep* (A: proso millet; J: *inakibi*) at Sikina Farm.

All around Sikina Farm, nature is close at hand. Along the farm's edges, the forest grows thick with huge butterbur leaves (*Petasites japonicus*; A: *korkoni*; J: *fuki*), hardy bamboo grass (*Sasa veitchii*; A: *hup*; J: *sasa*), and stinging nettle (*Urtica thunbergiana*; A: *kapay*; J: *irakusa*). Like much of the forest in the Saru River basin, the forest beyond Sikina Farm's property line is owned by Mitsui, and trespassing is forbidden, although no sign marks the boundary. Herds of deer (*Cervus nippon yesoensis*; A: *yuk*; J: *shika*) and families of foxes (*Vulpes vulpes schrencki*; A: *cironnup*; J: *kitakitsune*) are common sights here at the forest's edge. The songs of mountain turtle doves (*Streptopelia orientalis*; A: *kusuwep*; J: *yamabato*) and the cries of Eurasian jays (*Garrulus glandarius*; A: *eyami*; J: *kakesu*) can be heard. At night, the alternating A-flat octaves of the white's thrush (*Zoothera aurea*; A: *sipuyhawkus*; J: *toratsugumi*) herald the beginning of summer.



Image: The beauty of Sikina Farm at sunset.

C. A Year in the Life of a Nibutani Rice Farmer

Even with modern machinery, managing a rice farm is hard work. Rice production is more labor intensive than other grain crops such as wheat or corn (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 13), requiring both chemical inputs and the sweat from one's brow. During my time at Sikina

Farm, I participated in the entire process, from seedling preparation, to end-user delivery of packaged and polished rice. Our work began in early April, when we started preparing rice seedlings and getting the paddies in shape. We moved some of last year's rice from 20-kilogram paper bags into 10-kilogram mesh bags, being careful to keep the two varieties grown on the farm separate. We put these mesh bags into three large, blue germinating tanks, and then ran a hose to fill the machines with water. The machines would circulate the water and spray on top of the sacks from showerheads from above. The rice sacks were kept in the germinating tanks for at least a week. While the rice was germinating in the tanks, we had to prepare the paddies. First, we fertilized the paddies by spreading *keifun* (J: chicken shit) fertilizer. Then we had to rake out debris—mostly sticks and leaves—from the irrigation canals surrounding the paddies to ensure the water could flow freely. We transferred the mesh sacks of germinating rice into three old washing machines, where they were spun with water. While the rice sacks went through their spin cycles, we set up the greenhouses, stretching vinyl sheets across the top and securing them to the metal ribs with plastic ties, and installing heavy, vinyl-covered door frames on either end. With that done, the stage was set, and it was only a matter of letting nature take its course and waiting for the seeds to sprout.

By the end of April, the rice seeds were germinated and ready to be planted into soil. We laid out hundreds of black plastic nursery trays and wheeled out a long piece of equipment called a seed nursery machine. The seed nursery machine was a metal frame, about 15 feet long, with a conveyor belt and three motor-driven chutes. It takes about five people to operate efficiently. One person takes a nursery tray, covers it with a sheet of paper, and passes it into conveyor belt machine. A second person operates a forklift to suspend a huge, 500-kilogram sack of soil over the first chute, which covers the nursery tray with a

layer of soil as it passes on through the conveyor. A third person pours the germinated rice from the mesh sacks into the second chute, which scatters rice into the tray as it passes by. A fourth person operates a tractor with another 500-kilogram sack of soil hanging from its bucket over the third chute, covering the rice with more soil as the nursery tray passes through. On its route, the tray is sprayed with water by the machine to dampen the soil. A fifth person takes the finished tray from the end of the conveyor belt and stacks it into the back of a kei-truck. Once the kei-truck has been fully loaded with stacked nursery trays, we would take the truck to one of the vinyl-covered greenhouses and lay them flat on the ground. Above the trays, hanging from the center roof-bar of the greenhouse, we put up a rail with several pulley-wheel contraptions from which we hung a long garden hose. These wheels were hooked up to a computer-driven nozzle, which would slowly traverse the rail and spray water over the nursery trays at programmed intervals. This entire process process took three days before all the nursery trays were finished and left in the greenhouse to sprout.



Images: Rice sacks in a germinating machine (left). The seed nursery machine in action (right).

By early May, Hokkaido's short spring was in full swing and the grasses and other plants surrounding the paddies had grown tall. Over the next two weeks, while the trays of rice seedlings were left to sprout in their greenhouse, I mowed the grass around the paddies and on the *aze* (J: ridges) that crosscut them, a necessary measure to control the spread of weeds and limit hiding places for birds, insects, and other pests that predate young rice seedlings. As I pushed an articulated wing-mower machine along the *aze*, Yupi plowed the paddies using a tractor, after having gone to the Nibutani Dam's pump house to turn on the pump and begin filling the paddies with water from the Saru River. Another particularly backbreaking task was to fish out floating debris from the water-filled paddy using a rake while leaning out over the edge of the *aze*. By around the third week of May, paddy preparation was finally complete, and the rice seedlings (J: *nae*) had sprouted and grown to a height of around 6 inches, making the nursery trays laid out inside the greenhouses look like a fuzzy, green carpet.



Images: Nursery trays and watering set-up in the greenhouse (left); Fully sprouted rice seedlings ready for sowing (right).

At this stage, the rice was ready to be transplanted into the paddies. The whole family was involved in this labor. We placed a heavy, rectangular metal frame on the back of the kei-truck, which allowed Hapo, Sapo, and me to stack the nursery trays without crushing the *nae*. Yupi drove these trays out to the paddies, where we met him and unloaded them onto the *aze*, and then onto the deck of a motorized vehicle called a rice transplanter (J: *ta'ueki*). Mici drove the *ta'ueki* into the paddies, while I rode on its deck, removed the *nae* from their trays, which came out as a dense mat held together by the seedlings' roots, and placed these onto a sloped platform on the front the transplanter, called a shifter. The shifter uses gravity to slowly push the *nae* mats down toward forks at the front of the transplanter, which pinch off individual *nae* and quickly push them into the mud of the paddy at regular intervals. As Mici drove, I rode on the deck and fed the mats from trays onto the shifter to ensure the transplanting was able to continue without interruption. When we ran out of *nae*, we returned to the *aze*, where Yupi, Hapo, Sapo, and other extended family members loaded more trays. It took about a week for our small team to transplant all the rice into the ten-hectares-or-so of paddy, and we finally finished by around the last week of May. All-told, it took us almost two whole months to sow all of the rice, which is about how long it would have taken a team of thirty or forty people to do, prior to mechanization.



Image: The *ta'ueki* (J: rice transplanter).

Although we all celebrated once the rice was sown, it was not the end of our labors, as paddies require near-constant maintenance, including monitoring and regulating water levels, sampling rice grains for moisture content, mowing the *aze* around the circumference of the paddies, and building and repairing fencing to keep out the deer. The deer are a constant problem to contend with. Adept at finding the smallest hole in the fencing, they enter the paddies at night and sleep on the comfortable rice seedlings, needing only to turn their heads to strip young rice grains from their stalks as a tasty midnight snack. Yupi told me that damage to rice plants from trampling and predation by deer amounts to a huge expense, costing the household an estimated ¥1 million each year.

Rice harvesting begins around mid-September and is today done mostly by combine. Because Sikina Farm owns only one combine and one tipper truck, Yupi had to shuttle rice from the paddy to the *kome souko* (J: rice barn) one truckload at a time. There he dumped the grain into a grate-covered chute in the floor, which sends it up into the silos. Harvested rice is shelled by machinery and measured out from the silos, sometimes into huge, two-ton sacks that are sold to the agricultural cooperative, and sometimes into smaller five-, ten-, or twenty-kilogram bags, which are either packaged and sent to individual customers, or stored under refrigeration for home consumption. For customers who order white rice, the rice is passed through an ornately decorated polishing machine. This labor continues until the winter, when the focus shifts to planning for the next year, including allocating paddy space, ordering supplies, and maintaining equipment. Rice farming is labor intensive not only during the growing season, but year-round.



Images: Harvesting rice using a combine and a tipper truck.

D. Challenges Due to Infrastructure Development

One morning in late summer, Yupi took me to the Nibutani Dam's pump house. Sikina Farm and the other households who belong to the local irrigation cooperative had decided it was time to start draining the water from the paddies, so Yupi and I went there to turn off the pump. The pump house, which sits just downstream of the dam, resembles a concrete bunker, and its inside smelled of machine oil and reverberated with the deep hum of machinery. Yupi made some adjustments to the water level by turning huge, metal hand crank painted bright red, while I examined nearby equipment, including a grey pump with the year 1995 prominently etched on the side, connected to huge metal pipes, and a bank of two tall, locker-shaped Hitachi computer terminals with glowing lights and buttons, dials, and pressure gauges. I couldn't begin to explain how any of it worked, but Yupi controlled it expertly and finished the adjustments in only a few minutes.



Image: Equipment at the Nibutani Dam's pump house.

Yupi told me about how the construction of the Nibutani Dam altered the irrigation system for local farmers. Originally, farmers in Nibutani got irrigation water for their paddy fields from a small stream near the dam's present location. A controversy emerged when it was learned that the dam's construction would destroy the existing infrastructure serving the local irrigation cooperative, which was co-managed by local farmers. There was division between the farmers who would be directly impacted and other residents. As one Nibutani farmer told me:

Normally, after building a dam, you'd just let the accumulated water flow down to the rice fields and such. But apparently, sending that water down to benefit farmers, in other words, only *some* people, because not everyone is a farmer, right? That was deemed unacceptable. (Field notes, June 1, 2024).

In the end, it was decided to compensate for the destruction of the existing irrigation infrastructure with the installation of the current pump that serves the irrigation cooperative today. At the time, representatives from the dam proudly touted the benefits to be gained from such a “state-of-the-art pump” (*ibid.*). But Nibutani farmers were left with no other option—their paddies needed water somehow. “It wasn’t about them agreeing to it,” one

farmer told me, “they had no choice, so they had to accept it and put their *hanko* on it.”
(*ibid.*).

Nearly thirty years later, the once-state-of-the-art pump has started to show its age, and mechanical problems are increasingly common. However, the irrigation cooperative is currently comprised of only a few households, putting immense pressure on remaining members. Because the dam would submerge their land, some Nibutani residents had ceased farming and left the cooperative. “A lot of the land they originally owned was submerged by the dam, and they had no choice but to change jobs,” one farmer told me (Field notes, June 1, 2024). Now, the few remaining households are left to bear the expensive burden of replacing the aging irrigation system:

Machinery inevitably breaks down, and that machine has reached its limit. The pump itself is fine, but the electrical equipment controlling the pump has reached its limit. And now, they are saying it’ll cost ¥20 million or ¥30 million yen to fix everything that needs fixing. This year, we’re spending ¥8 million to fix one part. I make ¥1.5 million per year. Someone making that can’t afford ¥8 million to fix the machine. Plus, back when the dam was built, there were still six or seven households in the irrigation cooperative, but now it’s just us. Well, it can’t be helped. It costs money, but I spend it, I spend it.
(*ibid.*)

Back at the dam’s pumphouse, Yupi finished his adjustments and we locked up. Rather than heading straight back to continue mowing (a seemingly interminable job in the summer), we decided to take a break and sat on the low concrete wall overlooking the dam’s sluice gates. Yupi drew my attention to gravelly islands in the river downstream of the dam and the grassy islands across from us, in the middle of the river along the sides of the dam’s fish ladder and abutting structures. “In the old days, people called the river *Sisirmuka*, meaning that it was a muddy river that was often blocked by sand,” he told me. “Ignoring this, they decided to try to dam it anyway, and this is the result.” “What about those?” I

asked, indicated a wall of enormous, mesh-bags filled with large stones that were stacked on the bank beside us. “Those are used for ‘flood control’ but that’s just a pretense,” he told me. “They’re actually the rocks that have been dug up out of the reservoir, to keep it from filling up.” The Saru River’s naturally sediment-filled waters, well-known to the *Sarunkur* since time immemorial given the river’s ancient epithet, were made even murkier by extensive deforestation upstream and other environmental transformations. Sedimentation has been a huge problem ever since the Nibutani Dam was constructed, as previously explained in Chapter IV, but this issue’s particular impacts on farmers ought to be mentioned here. During my fieldwork at Sikina Farm, weed control was a near-constant job during the growing season. I regularly had to mow the *aze* (J: ridges) between fields and trudge through muddy paddies to trim the seedheads off of feral millet weed growing above the level of the rice, being careful not to decapitate the fragile rice shoots or crush them underfoot. Yupi told me that sediment stored and released by the dam contains plants seeds that end up being pumped into the paddies with the irrigation water, making the weed problem even worse.



Image: Grassy island abutting the Nibutani Dam (left); sacks of rocks for ‘flood control’ (right).

Nibutani farmers have been among the most outspokenly critical of the Nibutani Dam. One of the two Ainu plaintiffs in the Nibutani Dam lawsuit, Kaizawa Tadashi, was a farmer, and the farmers I spoke with during my fieldwork frequently complained of lingering impacts, nearly thirty years after the dam's completion. At the time the dam was first proposed, local farmers enticed with promises of local economic development. It has had the opposite effect, as one farmer expressed to me:

When building dams, there's an agreement—a promise—that they won't harm or destroy local industries. But thanks to the Nibutani Dam, the farmers in Nibutani are completely ruined. So, seeing that, the dam broke its promise. But since almost no one farms anymore, nobody cares." (Interview, June 1, 2024).

In addition to describing the Nibutani Dam's deleterious effect on farmers, his words also bring our attention to another major challenge they face today, the trend of declining populations in rural areas being seen all throughout Japan.

E. Challenges Due to Rural Depopulation

Hansen points out that, despite Hokkaido's rural image, the majority of its population is urban (Hansen 2024, 11). A declining rural population has been a major problem for small municipalities like Biratori Town since the end of World War II. In his 1972 book, *Remodeling the Japanese Archipelago*, former (then-future) PM Tanaka Kakuei lamented the fact that industrialization and urbanization in Japan had

bred increasing numbers of people who have never known the joys of rural life, chasing rabbits in mountains, fishing for crucians in streams, whose only home is a tiny apartment in some huge city. With such a situation, how can we pass on to future generations the qualities and traditions of the Japanese people? (Tanaka 1973)

Anxiety about the depopulation of rural areas has only increased in the decades since Tanaka's time. This is seen not only as a demographic crisis, but a crises of Japanese identity. McMorran (2022) argues that the agrarian ideology valorizing rural, rice-producing areas remains "deeply ingrained in the population," and that it has "served the interests of Japan's political, business, and cultural elites, who benefit from the idea that the country's agricultural past developed a unique, homogenous, group-centered, cooperative national identity" (McMorran 2022, 27-28). Concerns about rural depopulation are also wrapped up with larger demographic concerns in Japan, such as falling birth rate and aging population, which are objects "of nationalistic fears" and are "seen as threatening the future existence of the nation" (Knight and Traphagan 2003, 11). As a result, population management has become "problematized as the central, overriding task of local governments" (Knight and Traphagan 2003, 12).

The term *furusato* (J: lit. "old village") that was previously mentioned in Chapter IV is often used in discussions of rural places in Japan. It contains strong connotations as "a point of original and a place of deep emotional connection" that "often refers to one's birthplace" or to "the village of your ancestors, where your parents live(d) and the family grave is located," (McMorran 2022, 28). The *furusato* is "an emotionally charged place where your roots lie" and is seen as "a place that should be remembered and protected" (McMorran 2022, 28-29). Robertson (1998) argues that "the recognition of a place as *furusato* is possible only once that place is, or is imagined as, distant, inaccessible, lost, forsaken, or disappearing" (Robertson 1998, 117). Ohnuki-Tierney (1993) observes that the use of the term *furusato* reflects a "valorization of the countryside" connected to the image of rice paddies as a quintessential Japanese landscape (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 123). Today, the

furusato is “a romanticized image promoted by the government, the tourist industry” and “‘rural’ people who reconstruct and invent their traditions to suit tourists’ expectations” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 123). To counter rural depopulation, the government’s Furusato Creation Plan of 1988 granted ¥100 million to each of Japan’s 3,268 municipalities “to fund projects developed by local residents that would improve their lives and potentially attract tourists, such as hot spring facilities, museums, or centers to celebrate local crafts,” but such projects have largely failed to halt the depopulation trend (McMorran 2022, 30).

In response to the sharply declining population of rural districts, in the 1990s the government instituted a policy that aimed to cut the number of municipalities in half by 2005 by merging multiple towns into one in a process known as *gappei* (J: merger) (McMorran 2022, 31). As a result of *gappei* policies, the number of municipalities in Japan was sharply reduced, from more than 3,000 to only 1,730 by 2010 (McMorran 2022, 31). Such administrative mergers are described by Knight (2003) as a “threat” that “hangs over many of Japan’s depopulated municipalities,” because “the very survival of the municipality as a distinct entity depends on halting the depopulation trend” (Knight 2003, 112). As a result, there has been a strong backlash against *gappei*, “with many claiming that this would speed the disappearance of rural towns and villages” (McMorran 2022, 31).

People I spoke with continually expressed concern about rural depopulation and population aging in Biratori Town. One resident of Nioi (just upstream from Nibutani) told me that the main town of Biratori-Honcho has been especially hard-hit: “It’s become really lonely. It’s not a town anymore; it’s become a village. All the shops have their shutters down. Only a handful of places are actually open” (Interview, May 2, 2024). However, she noted that, thanks to Ainu cultural activities and the existence of jobs through the Biratori Ainu

Culture Promotion Public Corporation or the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, “Nibutani over there is livelier” (*ibid.*). Another long-time resident of Biratori, explained:

Looking at the population, it just keeps dropping and dropping. It’s lonely. The population has dropped to fewer than five thousand people, and a huge number of those are over sixty-five, so it’s massively aged. I wish we had more young people. (Interview, May 29, 2024)

She fondly recalled the lively Biratori-Honcho of her youth:

There were so many shops. Back then, there was a rice shop, a butcher, a fishmonger, and two little candy stores where kids would go to buy snacks and sweets with their allowance. And there were three or four shops selling supplies and clothing, including *kimono* as well as Western clothes. Plus, there were two pharmacies and there were quite a few restaurants too. So, it was really lively. Nowadays there’s just two grocery stores, two convenience stores, an electronics store, and a diner. (Interview, May 29, 2024)

However, over the course of her life, she watched more and more shops close:

Little by little, the owners were getting older, and there was an issue of succession—finding someone to take over. When there’s no one left to run the place, they have to close, right? That’s what happened to most of them. That’s pretty much the whole story. (Interview, May 29, 2024)

Although the Nioi resident above described Nibutani as being less affected by depopulation than surrounding communities, Nibutani residents themselves described how the village has been affected by rural depopulation. Hapo told me that it has shrunk considerably since its height during the Hokkaido tourism boom in the late 1970s:

There were two restaurants and souvenir shops, small folk craft shops. There must have been five, six, maybe even ten of them. Then there was the Hokkaido tourism boom, and it just kept growing. In the summer, tour buses would come here in droves. Way more people came than there are now. So there were lots of folk craft shops. They were small places, lined up in a row all the way along the road to where the museum parking lot is now. (Interview, April 30, 2024)

She also noted that shifts in the rural economy have led to the decline of industries such as charcoal production, which were once common occupations: “Back in the day, there were

more people in the countryside, like charcoal burners and stuff” (*ibid.*). She explained her belief that rural depopulation is a major concern for which few good solutions are readily apparent:

People aren’t living in the countryside anymore. That’s the biggest problem. In a place as small as this, it’s like that. I wonder what would make people want to live in the countryside. Maybe we need to utilize remote work and stuff, so that even if you live in the countryside, you can still have a city life. Honestly, I don’t know. What should we do? (*ibid.*)

Her son Yupi also linked depopulation to an increase in economic hardship after the end of the tourism boom:

Back then, Nibutani was really bustling with tourists. Buses would pull up constantly, there were tons of visitors, and carvings sold like crazy. And then, when the tourism boom ended and visitors stopped coming altogether, everyone was struggling, really struggling. (Interview, June 1, 2024)



Image: A craft shop in Nibutani at the height of the tourism boom, c. 1980. Biratori Town Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum.

Nibutani’s farmers feel the effects of rural depopulation even more acutely than most rural residents, due to the rootedness of agriculture in the village cooperative system. According to Freiner (2019), “the communal management of resources in Japan is a distinct feature of agriculture” (Freiner 2019, *xvi*), but thanks to rural depopulation, fewer active

farmers have had to bear a larger share of the burden of managing cooperative resources like irrigation infrastructure. As of 2020, Japan's farmers are the oldest in the world, with an average of 68 years (MacLachlan and Shimizu 2022, 10). By 1993, around 33 percent of farm families were headed by people older than 60, of whom 40 percent had no heirs (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 19). In addition, as farmers age and land is passed down to younger heirs, who may or may not have an interest in farming themselves, absentee landlordism has become a growing problem. One farmer explained to me that:

Back in the day, everyone would chip in together, but now that's just not feasible. It's not that it can't be done. Technically, they have the right to contribute, those people who own rice fields. But now, most of them are grandpas, or else it's people who don't even live here anymore. The kids have all moved to the city, the parents have passed away, and the kids hold the rights to the land, but if they're not living in the place, people don't feel invested in it. (Field notes, June 1, 2024)

F. The Continued Importance of Wild Plant Gathering

Gathering wild plants remains an important aspect of life for Ainu farm families and is integrated into daily farm life. Ainu plant knowledge has been studied for decades, with early researchers such as John Batchelor publishing books on the topic (e.g., Batchelor 1893). Ainu ethnobotanical knowledge remains both broad and deep today, as shown in the Biratori Dam Cultural Impact Assessment, which lists more than 135 species of culturally important plants that are still used by Ainu community members (Biratori Town 2006, 594-605). The Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Society regularly hosts foraging excursions and provides workshops on the use of wild plants in Ainu cooking and crafting. During my fieldwork at Sikina Farm, I was taught by my host family how to identify, gather, and process wild plants for use in cooking and traditional crafts, and was often sent out in search of them. Meals at the farm often featured seasonally available wild plants, either gathered personally

by members of the household or received as gifts from other community members. During my time at Sikina Farm, I personally harvested and processed 19 species of wild plant and additionally consumed 6 other species that I did not gather myself.

The species of plants that are gathered and consumed vary with the seasons. In springtime, *pukusa* (A: wild garlic; J: *gyouja-ninniku*) is one of the first new plants to appear among last year's detritus and leaf litter, making it easy to spot it sprouting from the wooded hillsides. *Pukusa* is highly prized in Ainu cuisine and has even gained popularity among Wajin foragers in recent decades. One day, Hapo sent Yupi, Sapo, and me out to the woods behind the farm to gather some *pukusa* “for the pot” (J: *nabe-you*). Strapping holstered camping knives to our belts and tying plastic grocery bags around our waists with a nylon string, we set off in search of patches of new green shoots. Sapo showed where to cut the *pukusa* shoots so as not to damage its perennial roots. “Only take one out of every two shoots,” she told me, “and only the fat ones. Leave the thin ones for next year.”



Image: Early spring *pukusa* (A: wild garlic) shoots.

As we moved around the valley of a small stream, we spotted large patch of *pukusa* high up on the hillsides. We clambered up the steep slope and used the trees to anchor ourselves as we filled our grocery bags. On our way back to the house, Sapo stopped and indicated a deep green plant with peculiar palmate leaves. “See that? That’s *torikabuto* and it’s extremely poisonous. Our ancestors used to use it to poison their arrowheads and hunt bears.” We stooped to examine the *torikabuto*’s (J: wolfsbane [*Aconitum*]; A: *surku*) peculiar palmate leaves more closely. “Yeah, this plant is so poisonous, that eating just a small bit of leaf would kill you. There’s like one person every year who dies from eating one of these.” I suddenly felt very thankful for Sapo’s deep ethnobotanical knowledge.

As spring progresses, other edible plants begin to appear, including *korkoni* (A: butterbur; J: *fuki*), *pukusakina* (A: anemone; J: *nirinsou*), and *turep* (A: giant lilly; J: *oobayuri*). At Sikina Farm, wild plant gathering peaks around Golden Week (usually the first week of May) and then falls into a bit of a lull during midsummer, when plants are at their toughest and least succulent. But gathering picks up again in late summer and with the arrival of fall, when many plants useful in making traditional Ainu crafts are gathered, such as *sikina* (A: bulrush, cattail; J: *gama*) and *sarki* (A: reeds; J: *yoshi*). New species of edible plants become available at this time as well, such as *aha* (A: ground beans; J: *yabumame*) and *pekampe* (A: water caltrops; J: *hishi no mi*), which are eaten with rice or millet, and *ento* (A: balm; J: *naginata kouju*), which is brewed as herbal tea.

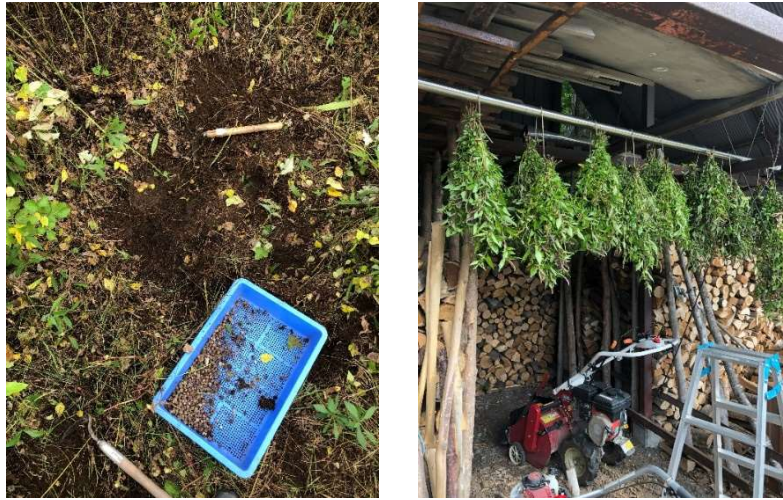


Image: *Aha* (A: ground beans) in a harvesting tray (left); *ento* drying in the woodshed (right).

Several important tree species are used for manufacturing cultural products throughout the year, as well, such as the branches of *susu* (A: willow; J: *yanagi*) and the inner bark of *atni* (A: Manchurian elm; J: *ohyou*)—although although in the case of the latter, harvesting is strictly controlled, and the community can only gather it on a designated day in the springtime. Additionally, wild mushrooms (A: *karush*) such as *boribori* (J: honey mushroom) and *matsutake* are prized, and although their appearance is more unpredictable and ephemeral, they are swiftly gathered as soon as they appear after a rainstorm.



Image: Stripping the bark of *atni* on the designated harvest day.

When I was living and working on Sikina Farm, Hapo once told me that gathering wild plants had been one of the great joys of her life. “I’ve lived in Nibutani for fifty years now, and I think I’ll probably die here,” she said. “Well, I’ve had a full life of gathering wild plants and mushrooms from the mountains, and I truly feel grateful for that. And, if possible, I really want the next generation to inherit that and keep it going” (Field Notes, March 25, 2024). But wild plant resources that were once abundant have been growing scarcer. Prime plant gathering areas have been destroyed due to infrastructure construction, as shown by the Biratori Dam Cultural Impact Assessment, and residents have complained of outsiders coming from as far as Honshu to gather plants in the area, leaving few for local residents (Biratori Town 2006, 13; 31; 260; 434-437; 453; 504; 510). Unfortunately, many of these outsiders do not possess local people’s entrenched conservation ethos that has been passed down from their ancestors. As Hapo pointed out, “We’ve been strictly told, you can’t take it all, only half and so on. We try to protect that, but there are quite a few people who don’t think that way, so plants are disappearing more and more” (Field Notes, March 25, 2024). Driving through Hokkaido in the springtime, it’s not uncommon to see cars parked alongside the road and people collecting wild plants, but many of these out-of-towners lack the deep plant knowledge of local people. As I was riding one day in a van full of Ainu women from the Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Society on an outing to gather plants, we spotted a group gathering *korkoni* by the side of the road. “Oh, look at those city folk,” one woman said, “Don’t they know those plants are no good anymore? Their stalks are already red!” Some people also pick wild plants for commercial purposes, which leaves few for local people who use them for home consumption (Field notes, May 11, 2024; Interview, April 30, 2024).

Despite these challenges, wild plant gathering remains integrated into daily life at Sikina Farm, often taking place in between farm jobs or in the late afternoon after most farm tasks had been completed. The following episode demonstrates the integration of foraging into daily farm life. It was early September, and Hapo was thinking about the rush mat she would weave over the winter. Taking a break from harvesting millet by hand using iron sickles (J: *kama*) and mussel shells (A: *pipa*), Hapo and I got into the kei-truck and drove out to the rice paddies to look for *sikina* (A: bulrush; cattail; J: *gama*) growing in the *suidou* (J: irrigation channels) around the paddies. There wasn't much to be seen, and Hapo expressed concern that it might be shaping up to be a bad year for *sikina* due to not enough standing water. When we finally found some, she determined they were about a week away from being ready to harvest based on the spread of its fronds. So, we returned to the farm to continue harvesting millet and to wait for the *sikina* to be ready.

Five days later, the millet was all harvested and laid out on blue tarps to dry inside a vinyl house. I woke up in the morning and found that it had rained and the vinyl had a few leaks, so I flipped and spread the millet using a pitchfork to encourage drying, and tried to drain the puddles from the tarp. When I had finished that, Hapo told me it was time to gather the *sikina*. I borrowed some *nagabutsu* (J: "long boots;" rubber wellington boots) as I didn't yet have my own pair, and some waterproof overpants and we headed out to the *suidou*. While Hapo stayed above to supervise, I clambered down into the ditch, which was filled with about a foot of water and mud that made walking difficult. The *sikina* stood tall around me, growing more than six feet tall. Hapo handed down a *kama* to me and told me my job, which was to select female *sikina* plants, ignoring the males with their sausage-like seedpods from which the English name cattails derives—"males are useless" was a common phrase I

heard applied jokingly, both to wild plants and to humans—and cut them with the *kama* from the bottom of the stem, the submerged part around from which the plant's fan-like fronds spread. As I cut them, I tossed them up to Hapo, who bundled them up and put them into the back of the kei-truck.



Image: A kei-truck full of *sikina*.

Suddenly, I heard Hapo shriek. She had been stung on her left hand by a *suzumebachi* (J: Asian giant hornet; A: *sisoya*). “I’m allergic to bees!” she cried, “We need to get Mici to take me the hospital *now*! Come on, you drive.” Heart pumping with adrenaline, I clambered out of the *suidou* as quickly as I could and got into the driver’s seat, only to realize that the kei-truck’s manual transmission made me unable to drive it. So, we switched places, and Hapo drove with her right hand while I held a tourniquet tightly around her left arm to slow the reaction. We made it to the house, but Mici wasn’t there; he was out in the paddies harvesting rice by combine. So, I switched to my car and drove there to get him and bring him back to the house but, in my haste, I got my car’s back wheel stuck in a ditch. So, I got out of the car and ran to Mici to tell him the situation, and he drove his combine back to

Hapo who was waiting in the car and drove her to the hospital while I waited for Yupi to come pull out my car using a tractor and winch.

After that debacle had been solved, Yupi took me to another area of the paddies, where he was showing a group of about 10 elementary school students (representing the entirety of the 4th and 5th grade classes at Nibutani Elementary) how to harvest rice by hand. Just as I had done earlier that day for the *sikina*, the kids laboriously stomped around in the mud to cut the rice from the bottom using *kama*. They harvested it and tossed it up onto the *aze* (J: elevated ridge of dry ground between rice paddies), where I bundled it up using hemp twine. After the kids had harvested a truckload of rice, we all went back to the house, where we hung the rice bundles upside down from the metal ribs of the greenhouse where the millet was drying. By then, Hapo had returned from the hospital and was right back to work, although her left hand was still massively swollen.



Image: Elementary school students harvesting rice at Sikina Farm.

We filled an enormous plastic tub with water and laid some two-by-fours across it. Then we took the *sikina* and laid them across the boards. We peeled each frond away from the central stalk and washed them in the tub to get off the mud, dirt, and sticky jelly-like substance from between the fronds. Then we laid the washed fronds on the back of the kei-truck, and when we had a nice bunch, we tied them into bundles, which Mici took by truck to the same greenhouse where the millet and rice were drying. After about two hours, all the *sikina* was washed, bundled, and hung, so we swept up the scraps and put them into the back of the kei-truck, which Hapo drove to a compost pile located in a ditch at the edge of the gravel path past the woodshed. Then, just as I had done in my rental car earlier, she managed to get *her* back wheel stuck over the lip of the ditch, and Yupi had to be called to perform his second tractor-rescue of the day! While not exactly a typical day on the farm—most days would go by without a car accident or major medical emergency (despite chronic stress injuries being worryingly common for my host family)—the way that wild plant gathering was integrated with agricultural work in the daily life of Ainu farm families was typical of my experiences during fieldwork.



Image: The *sikina* being washed (left) and hung to dry (right).

G. Conclusion

Despite the many challenges that Ainu farmers in the Saru River Basin face, they are determined to continue to make their living from the land as their ancestors have done since time immemorial. In the case of Sikina Farm, Yupi told me he is driven by a sense of obligation to protect the land he inherited from his *Sarunkur* ancestors, saying:

There's this...this feeling, this strong desire to protect this place, to keep it safe. But when it comes down to it, can I really protect it? That's really tough, you know. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

He expressed feelings of regret and frustration with regard to the struggle to make a living as a farmer:

Thirty years ago, I never imagined that farming would just keep declining and declining. But since then, farming has become an unpopular profession, and now it's clearly in a state of decline. I should have thought that this might happen. It's become a situation with no future. I wonder if I should keep trying in a situation with no future. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

How can one live in a situation with no future? This is a question the Ainu of the Saru River have been forced to ask multiple times throughout history thanks to Japan's colonization of Hokkaido. The *Sarunkur* were forced by the Japanese colonizers to give up their long-practiced livelihoods, developed over generations through keen observation of their riparian environment's natural cycles. They were told these ancestral ways had no future and were forced to toil for decades for the sake of adopting Japanese-style wet rice agriculture. Just when some Ainu had finally managed to become successful rice farmers, irresponsible infrastructure development, the whims of Japanese agricultural policy, and national population trends have rendered their situation precarious once more. It is becoming increasingly difficult for small family farmers to survive under current conditions.

If Hokkaido's environment can be allowed to recover, Yupi dreams of a day when Nibutani's Ainu community can once again practice a self-sufficient lifestyle.

My dream for the future, which might only be possible after fifty or a hundred years, would be to create something like permaculture, like self-sufficiency. Right where our house is now, we could gather wild plants from the area, hunt deer that come here, and so on. And then, we could live off that, you know; create an area where we could live a minimal lifestyle. It would be so interesting if we could do that. My generation probably won't be around to do it, but in the generations after us, if we could have maybe two or three houses here doing that—not exactly permaculture, but a truly self-sufficient lifestyle—then people could see, “Oh, the Ainu people live like this, they can survive on such a minimal lifestyle.” And then, in a sort of evolved form of *iwor*, it could be one way in Nibutani, and another way in Shiraoi, and yet another way in Akan, taking different forms in various regions. I think if we could express that feeling of “this is how we want to live,” it would show how the Ainu truly lived in diverse ways across many regions. That's one reason why I keep protecting Sikina Farm. It doesn't have to be me, or my children, or my bloodline. It doesn't matter who does it. If someone who feels the same way lives in a way that's connected to the land, maybe in a way it becomes easier to understand the Ainu perspective. By doing that, I think we could express that Ainu culture is adaptable. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

What will Ainu livelihoods in the Saru River look like in the future? It is impossible to know what the future holds, but a revitalization of small producers in the agricultural sector seems unlikely, based on national and regional trends. Short of some innovative new venture, the depopulation trend seems unlikely to be reversed, although the creation of local institutions related to Ainu culture are providing a model of how that might be achieved (see Chapter V). One of these, the Biratori Ainu Culture Promotion Public Corporation (hereafter, the Kousha), is exploring the possibility of reviving traditional Ainu hunting as a means of supplementing Ainu livelihoods and transmitting traditional Ainu culture and spiritual values. Ainu hunting was banned in the 1870s to force the Ainu to agriculturalize, and deer populations were decimated by bad weather and overhunting by Wajin for commercial interests. Thanks to the extinction of their natural predator, the wolf, and strict regulations on

hunting, which persist today, the deer population dramatically rebounded. By the 1950s, Biratori residents were already seeing larger herds of up to 150 deer, and the total deer population today is about ten times higher than it was in 1940 (Biratori Town 2006, 304). As a result, farmers throughout Biratori Town are constantly troubled by deer (Biratori Town 2006, 432). Because of the complicated permitting process for deer hunting, and the extinction of their main predator, wolves, deer populations remain high, causing damage to farmers' fields and posing traffic hazards.

Reviving Ainu hunting would therefore directly benefit Ainu farmers. At Sikina Farm, deer are a constant problem, an even more troublesome pest than Hokkaido's plentiful rats and mice. At night, deer would find or create holes in protective nets and take shelter in the rice paddies, eating the rice and crushing its fragile stalks, making paths and wider areas that look like alien crop circles. Sikina Farm's total expense caused by deer damage was around ¥1 million (US \$6,365) per year. So, another periodic job on Sikina Farm was checking and repairing the fencing and netting around the paddies and vegetable fields. Despite our best efforts, some deer always managed to slip past these defenses. But it was no easy feat for them, and they too suffered casualties for their efforts. One morning, I awoke to find a dead deer, its lacerated throat horribly mangled by the fence.



Image: Rice paddies trampled by deer (left); carcass of deer killed by getting caught in netting (right).

Deer hunting is strictly regulated in Hokkaido today, and lack of available hunting land poses a major hurdle for the revival of Ainu hunting. Regional forestry offices issue hunting permits only for certain limited areas of national forest; therefore the vast tracts of privately-owned forest surrounding Nibutani, such as the forest owned by Mitsui Corporation, are completely off-limits. Even within national forest land, hunting is off-limits in many areas due to the potential danger to forestry workers; for example, hunting is permitted in only one-third of Biratori Town’s Nukabira National Forest, (Biratori Town 2006, 513). Japanese law requires the use of special clothing and headgear, and hunters must not fire their weapons in certain areas, such as near forest roads. Hunters are required to keep meticulous records of every use of ammunition, including where the shot was fired, and must undergo an annual firearms inspection. One hunter told me that “It’s really strict. Honestly, there are so many parts of the law that I don’t even understand myself” (Interview, May 21, 2024). The use of traditional Ainu hunting methods, like bows and arrows, as well as certain kinds of traps, are strictly prohibited in all locations (Interview, May 21, 2024).



Image: Ainu hunter using licensed rifle and mandated safety equipment. Nokapira Iwor Visitor's Center.

The Cultural Impact Assessment for the Biratori Dam found that many local residents wished regulations on deer hunting would be relaxed to allow them to cull animals that cause damage to agricultural fields (Biratori Town 2006, 408). Many of the farmers I spoke with expressed similar desires. Other people expressed a sense of injustice at the fact that the Ainu's traditional hunting and gathering practices are subject to restriction by the Japanese state in the first place. The hunter from before expressed such a perspective, saying:

Normally, we'd just gather the things we need from around here and use them, right? But now, we can't do any of that. I can't stop wondering why they won't acknowledge our rights at all. Taking this land away, even changing the laws, it just becomes unforgivable, you know? We can't use traditional hunting methods. We can't just go out and take what we want. (Interview, May 21, 2024)

Some local organizations have been working on projects that seek to advance the restoration of Ainu traditional hunting as a long-term goal. For instance, the Biratori Ainu Culture Promotion Public Corporation (Kousha) has hired local specialists to research, recreate, and test traditional Ainu hunting tools such as bows, arrows, and traps. As one Kousha employee told me, "traditional hunting methods have kind of fallen out of practice these days. So,

we're starting from making the tools, then actually trying them out to see what they're like" (Interview, May 21, 2024). There have even been discussions of sending Kousha employees overseas to places where bow hunting is allowed, in order to give opportunities to test the tools. As I sat in his workshop, he showed me the wooden and bone arrowheads he had created, and the skins of animals he had hunted or trapped. Empty ammunition cartridges sat on the table. For as a long-term goal, he told me "I really want to reclaim spaces where traditional hunting can happen. If we ever get to the point where traditional hunting is possible again, we have to be ready to do it" (Interview, May 21, 2024). He expressed a sincere desire to be able to live a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, saying "As a modern Ainu, I'd like to be the first person to try hunting using a traditional bow and arrow. That's what I want to work toward" (Interview, May 21, 2024). Another Kousha employee told me that:

Going forward, we want to make it possible for us to do bow hunting. We're working on plans for that. I think there are lots of people thinking like this, people involved with Ainu culture. (Interview, May 20, 2024b)

As will be shown in Chapter IX, it is no easy feat to change the laws regulating Ainu hunting and fishing practices, antiquated and unjust though they may be. Although uncertainty and plenty of obstacles remain, it seems clear that Ainu people in the Saru River Basin will never stop working to envision and enact the future of Ainu livelihoods.

VIII. SALMON AND THE AINU LEGAL ORDER

A. Introduction

In this chapter and the next, I examine the Ainu's relationship to salmon fishing. Specifically, I focus on the ways that salmon fishing has served as a basis for expressions and articulations of Ainu sovereignty historically and in the present day. In this chapter, I describe the traditional Ainu legal order and the role of salmon within it. I begin with a discussion of Indigenous legal orders through an examination of the literature on legal anthropology and Indigenous jurisprudence. I then reconstruct an illustration of the Ainu legal order as seen through the physical and cosmological movements of salmon. I end with a discussion of the impacts of Japanese settler colonialism on the relationship between Ainu and salmon, and describe how Japanese overfishing coupled with an unjust ban on Ainu fishing caused the collapse of the Ainu legal order. Then, in the next chapter, I show how salmon remains a central target of grassroots Ainu legal activism for the recognition of Indigenous rights in Japan. In 2020, an organization called Raporo Ainu Nation filed a lawsuit in Sapporo District Court against the governments of Japan and Hokkaido (Japan, Case No. 22 of 2020; *Raporo Ainu Nation v. Japan and Hokkaido*; hereafter, the Raporo case) seeking recognition of their Indigenous right to freely catch salmon in the Urahoro-Tokachi River. Raporo Ainu Nation is comprised primarily of Ainu fishers from the village of Atsunai in Urahoro Town, along with their families. On April 18, 2024, the Sapporo District Court issued its final verdict in the Raporo case, refusing to recognize the Plaintiffs' Indigenous salmon fishing rights.

During the fourteen months of fieldwork for this dissertation, I conducted daily participant-observation and semi-structured interviews with Ainu activists and community members. Because I conducted these interviews while the Raporo case was ongoing, many of

my interview participants shared their thoughts on the case. Although I did not have the opportunity to interview members of Raporo Ainu Nation, I conducted participant observation at several events during my fieldwork in Hokkaido in which I interacted with Raporo Ainu Nation members, attorneys, and supporters. Relevant participant observations are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Participant Observations with Raporo Ainu Nation			
Type	Event	Location	Date
Ainu Ceremonies	<i>Icarpa</i> (A: Ancestral memorial ceremony)	Kitami-Monbetsu	August 12, 2023
	<i>Asircepnomi</i> (A: First salmon ceremony)	Urahoro	September 9, 2023
	<i>Icarpa</i>	Kitami-Monbetsu	August 12, 2025
	<i>Icarpa</i>	Urahoro-Atsunai	August 17, 2025
	<i>Asircepnomi</i>	Urahoro	September 7, 2025
Court Hearings	Hearing in Raporo case	Sapporo	October 19, 2023
	Hearing in Raporo case	Sapporo	February 1, 2024
	Hearing in Raporo case	Sapporo	April 18, 2024
Press Events	Post-hearing press conference	Sapporo	October 19, 2023
	Reporting Event on Raporo Symposium	Obihiro	January 27, 2024
	Post-hearing press conference	Sapporo	February 1, 2024
	Post-hearing press conference	Sapporo	April 18, 2024
Other Events	IWGIA (International Working Group on	Urahoro-Atsunai	August 15, 2023

	Indigenous Affairs) Survey and Workshop		
	IPETCA (Indigenous Peoples Economic and Trade Cooperation Arrangement) Symposium	Victoria, Canada	May 22-23, 2025

I also worked with Raporo Ainu Nation prior to conducting my fieldwork as a volunteer contributor to the website, AinuToday (<https://www.ainutoday.com>). Founded by the Ainu scholar-artist, Dr. Kanako Uzawa in 2020, AinuToday is the world's first Ainu-led, English-language portal for Ainu art, scholarship, and activism. At AinuToday, I worked on initiatives related to the Raporo case since 2022, when I was asked to translate several Raporo case documents into English. These translations were later published online by the Shimin Gaikou Centre, a Japan-based advocacy organization. I also served as a remote member of the translation team for the International Indigenous Symposium that Raporo Ainu Nation hosted in Urahoro town in May, 2023 (discussed in the next chapter). More recently, in 2025, I published an English translation of the Sapporo District Court's ruling in the Raporo case on AinuToday, and later assisted in translation and interpretation during Raporo Ainu Nation's trip to Victoria, Canada. Since then, I have continued to examine primary documents related to the Raporo Case, namely, twenty issues of the newsletter *Utaspano Uoupekare*, going back to the year 2017. This publication is the primary communication outlet for the Raporo case's support network, the Hokkaido University Information Disclosure Research Group (HUIDRG; discussed in the next chapter).

B. Encountering Indigenous Legal Orders

The story of the Raporo case is a story of encounter along multiple valences. It is a story of the colonial encounter, surely, but it is also a story of legal encounters, including: (1)

the encounter between the Ainu legal order and the Japanese legal system; (2) the encounter between the Japanese legal system and international human rights agreements; and (3): the encounter between Ainu and other Indigenous communities abroad. In this section, I will briefly survey the concept of legal encounter, drawing from literature within the field of legal anthropology, before discussing Indigenous legal orders. First, a brief note on terminology. Following Napoleon (2012), I use the term “legal system” to refer to the apparatus of law in settler colonial states, where law is managed by legal professionals in institutions that are separate from other social and political systems,” whereas I use the term “legal order” to refer to Indigenous legal traditions and protocols that are “embedded in non-state social, political, economic, and spiritual institutions” (Napoleon 2012, 231).

In their review article on ethnographies of encounter, Faier and Rofel (2014) define encounters as “engagements across difference” (Faier and Rofel 2014, 364). Ethnographies of encounter examine “how cultural meanings take shape through self-consciously cross-cultural engagements” (Faier and Rofel 2014, 364). Many such engagements have been productively engaged through the lens of legal anthropology, which examines encounters (Nursoo 2018, 56), articulations (Fabris 2023, 1665), hybridizations (Thornhill, *et al.* 2018, 2018) or translations (Gómez Isa 2014, 734) between different legal systems. These approaches have all been variously influenced by the concept of “legal pluralism” as explored in formative works by Griffiths (1986) and Merry (1988). Merry (1988) defines legal pluralism as “a situation in which two or more legal systems coexist in the same social field” (Merry 1988, 870). This definition is wide, and the term legal pluralism has been applied to understand, for example, the relationships between national law and local law (Syahrial Haq 2025), between domestic law and international law (Merry 2014), and between

state law and non-state law (Michaels 2015). Within the latter example, legal pluralism has been used as a lens for examining the relationship between Indigenous legal orders and settler colonial legal systems (McKerracher 2023; Upton 2022; Gómez Isa 2014).

Historical encounters between settler law and Indigenous law have raised important questions about the nature of sovereignty. Sovereignty has “long been a key politico-legal principle and, often, a household term” for Indigenous communities (Cattelino and Simpson 2022, 366). This has especially been the case in the US and Canada, where Indigenous sovereignty has been based on treaties, which are understood to be agreements between two sovereign nations (at least, officially). Cattelino and Simson (2022) argue that settler colonialism was “mediated through the idiom of sovereignty” as “the legal holdover from the treaty era and the primary means for dealing with nation-states that are predicated upon Indigenous movement away from land” (Cattelino and Simpson 2022, 369). Unlike other settler colonies, however, Japan does not recognize any treaties with any Indigenous nations, including the Ainu. Viewing the Ainu through lens of scientific racism, the Japanese government considered them to be “deficient in their capacity for sovereignty” (Hirano 2024, 129) when it unilaterally annexed Hokkaido in 1869 (Hirano 2024, 129). Historian Katsuya Hirano (2024) argues that the Enlightenment-era concept of national sovereignty was foundational to Japan’s violent settler colonialism of Indigenous Ainu territory. He traces the concept’s origin to the foundation in 1648 of the Westphalian system of international law, with its “core principle” of national sovereignty becoming the basis for “the most universal and fundamental of all political forms inherent to our modern world,” the nation state (Hirano 2024, 125).

Other discussions of sovereignty are also productive to consider here. Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) became "ubiquitous in anthropology" in the early 2000s, making sovereignty a household term in the academic humanities and social sciences (Cattelino and Simpson 2022, 366). In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben argues that sovereign power operates through the production of states of exception "in which the normative judgment of right and wrong is suspended" (Hirano 2024, 134). In states of exception, certain groups are excluded from the legal order and reduced to a "bare life." Those living bare lives are described by Hirano as "dehumanized beings who could not be considered the victims of crimes" (Hirano 2024, 134). Agamben's concept of states of exception in which bare life abounds has influenced studies of settler colonialism. Historically, settler colonies created states of exception through a strategic application of the theory of *terra nullius*, which presented Indigenous territories characterized by non-capitalist modes of production as empty land for the taking by "civilized" nations. The theory of *terra nullius*, introduced to Japan in the late 19th century, was applied to the island now known as Hokkaido through the use of the term *mushuchi* (J: unowned land), which was seen to justify its annexation by the Meiji government in 1869 (Hirano 2023a, 2023b, 2024).

Related to the concept of national sovereignty is the ideology of legal monism, also known as legal centrism, which views law as "an exclusive, systematic and unified hierarchical ordering of normative positions" (Tamanaha 2021, 5). As Nursoo (2018) explains, the role of the liberal judicial system is to serve as a check on law's proliferation: "Courts suppress law. In choosing between laws, declaring the legitimacy of laws and declaring the rule of law, they impose a hierarchy and order upon the multiplicity of laws" (Nursoo 2018, 67). Constitutionalism is the quintessential example of legal monism. As

Tusseau (2020) argues, a constitution “closes the legal system” by defining “the characteristics that all the other elements of the system must exhibit” (Tusseau 2020, 3). Moreover, he writes, a constitution “presents itself as a superior norm because of both its active capacity to repeal other norms and its passive capacity to resist being repealed by other norms” (*ibid.*).

Griffiths (1986) explores how legal pluralism is generally expressed in one of two forms that he calls “weak legal pluralism” and “strong legal pluralism.” Weak legal pluralism is seen in settler colonial societies through the “recognition” by the sovereign state of pre-existing customary laws (Griffiths 1986, 5). But McKerracher (2023) argues that weak legal pluralism is in fact “not legal pluralism, but legal centrism,” as it is premised upon the recognition of other legal orders by the “one rule of law under which all abide”—the state—as “the guarantor of basic rights and freedoms” (140-141). Michaels (2015) argues similarly that such a situation is “not really legal pluralism at all” because “the dominance of the state is not challenged” (Michaels 2015, 52). In this way, constitutionalism based on Westphalian notions of national sovereignty and legal monism “provided key justifications” for “a multitude of dubious assertions and actions” by settler states (Tamanaha 2021, 7-8), such as the conquest of Ainu land and the attempted destruction of the Ainu’s Indigenous legal order by Japan.

Yet despite efforts by settler colonial governments to dismantle Indigenous law and establish legal monism under a constitutional system, Indigenous legal orders have not been eradicated, and some have gained legal recognition in other settler colonies (Nursoo 2018, 66). But the reason that Indigenous law is, as McKerracher argues, “unquestionably, factually law,” is not because its legitimacy depends “on recognition by the state” (McKerracher 2023,

138). Rather, Indigenous legal orders “identify authoritative decisionmakers, contain substantive rights and obligations,” establish “procedural safeguards for the protection of individual and community well-being,” just as settler legal systems do (McKerracher 2023, 137). They also “assist in finding answers to legal questions, set standards and generate criteria for making sound judgments” (McKerracher 2023, 137).

Each Indigenous society developed its own legal order based on its own history, and it is difficult to make general statements about Indigenous legal orders because of their diversity, but Indigenous legal orders “tend to be decentralized, discursive, and relational” (McKerracher 2023, 135). A strong emphasis on relationality, which foregrounds “human and nonhuman relations and obligations that are rooted in precontact social organization and governance structures” can be seen in many studies of Indigenous legal orders (Cattelino and Simpson 2022, 368). For example, C. F. Black (2011) identifies the “Law of Relationship” as a shared foundation of the Indigenous legal orders she that explores in her groundbreaking book on Indigenous jurisprudence (Black 2011, 15). Similarly, Nursoo (2018) argues that Indigenous legal orders are “instilled with a relational philosophy in which human, animal and plant ancestors connect people to the law” (Nursoo 2018, 61). Other Indigenous scholars also emphasize the importance of relationality in other domains of life besides law, such as the economy. Trosper (2022), for example, centers the concept of relationality in his book on Indigenous economics. For Indigenous peoples, “living well means supporting and enhancing relationships,” Trosper writes (Trosper 2022, 16). He contrasts this focus on relationships with the focus on the “rational individual” in traditional economic studies:

Indigenous economics cannot start with either individuals as the main focus or as economic man as that type of individual because so many Indigenous people emphasize that relationships are fundamental to social

organization...When relationships matter, the character of individuals must consider the importance of relationships. (Trosper 2022, 41)

In place of the usual economic actor, the “rational individual,” Trosper situates the “relational agent” (Trosper 2022, 18). Each relational agent “is a creation of their unique relationships”; therefore “each person is unique,” and because they value such uniqueness, “relational societies are more respectful of individual autonomy than are individualistic societies” (Trosper 2022, 41). In other words, relationality in this sense should not be misinterpreted as reiterating the flawed dichotomy between “individualist” and “collectivist” societies.

When I accompanied the members of Raporo Ainu Nation to the IPETCA (Indigenous People’s Economic and Trade Cooperation Agreement) symposium in Victoria, Canada, we listened to speakers who emphasized the importance of relationality to Indigenous law and economic cooperation. IPETCA is a 2021 international trade agreement between Canada, New Zealand, Taiwan, and Australia that establishes a definition of Indigenous trade and investment and seeks to foster it. According to IPETCA’s definition, Indigenous trade and investment is “relational” and “aims to build long-term networks of exchange” by incorporating “Indigenous laws and values, including reciprocity, care, trust, respect, and generosity” (Field notes, May 22-23, 2025). It also operates within an “intergenerational framework,” and emphasizes “the responsibility of Indigenous peoples to protect their lands, resources, and the spiritual relationship of the human and natural world” (*ibid.*). One speaker at the symposium, a Maori attorney from Aotearoa (New Zealand), explained that “Maori law is very different to British common law. It is based on relationships” (*ibid.*). Because of this, he told us he believes that “relationships are more important than transactions” (*ibid.*). Another speaker, this time from the Mohawk nation,

used the example of the two-row wampum to emphasize the importance of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and settler states:

Relationships are most important: relationships with earth, with kin, with other nations. All these relationships are preserved in stories and ceremonies. Take the example of the two-row wampum. It is a depiction of our trade relationship with the European crown, and now, the Canadian government (*ibid.*)

A delegate from an Indigenous nation in Taiwan agreed with these two speakers, stating that, for his people, too, “development means strengthening relationships to achieve a good life” (*ibid.*). This statement echoes Trosper when he writes that “development means enhancing relations, with the result of ‘living well through relationships’” (Trosper 2022, 16).

Such an emphasis on the importance of relationships is commonly shared among Indigenous legal orders and tends to be concentrated around relationships within and between three dimensions: kinship, territory, and cosmology. McKerracher argues that legal rights and obligations are apportioned through “kinship-based governance structures” (McKerracher 2023, 135; 137). Trosper (2022) agrees, writing that “kinship is the central model for relational agents at all levels” (Trosper 2022, 92). But relationality also rests upon “a distinct political theory of the link between sovereignty and territory,” which puts Indigenous peoples’ lands and waters “at the relational center of Indigenous activism and flourishing” (Cattelino and Simpson 2022, 368; 373). Coulthard (2014) argues that that Indigenous territoriality can be understood as “an ontological framework for understanding relationships” and “a field of ‘relationships of things to each other’” (Coulthard 2014, 60-61). Under Indigenous legal orders, “land is held not by individuals but by relational subjects that include nonhumans” (Trosper 2022, 104-105). This differs markedly from territory as private property, which reigns supreme under settler legal systems. For Trosper, private property

“describes a weak system of relationships regarding land compared to the Indigenous idea in which humans create strong relationships with land,” as it “allows humans to dominate their own parts of the landscape, without requiring attention to connections among components of the landscape” (Trosper 2022 106-107). A relational understanding of territory thus entails not only rights, but also obligations:

Holders of land are responsible for maintaining the health of the relationships with the land; they cannot do anything they want. The surplus generated by relationships with land must be shared among other persons in a variety of ways, including sharing with nonhuman persons. (Trosper 2022, 105)

Other scholars have made this point forcefully, such as C. F. Black in her groundbreaking 2011 book, *The Land is the Source of the Law*, who writes of “an ancient, but repressed and continuously ignored, paradigm in legal theory—a *logos* posited in the land” (Black 2011, 167). Alongside kinship and territory, Indigenous legal orders are rooted in cosmology. Black (2011) argues that “a people’s cosmological Creation story and events define their principles, ideals, values and philosophies, which, in turn, inform the legal regime” (Black 2011, 15). Customary rules and protocols are “based on long-standing beliefs and understandings of the world and of the universe” (Bunikowski and Dillon 2017, 42). As Nursoo argues, “Indigenous Law is lived...[it] is a way of life” (Nursoo 2018, 61). Knowledge of the law “is acquired through living, singing, story-telling, dancing, eating, painting and walking” the land (2018, 61). This involves relationships with nonhuman actors, including plants, animals, ancestors, and spirits, which are shaped by certain ancestral protocols (Cattelino and Simpson 2022, 363).

This does not mean, however, that Indigenous law is “frozen in the past,” argues McKerracher, “nor is it a static set of rules; rather it is adaptable, deliberative, reasoning and reasonable” (McKerracher 2023, 137). Napoleon similarly argues that “it is not about trying

to go back in time, but about drawing on the strengths and principles of the past to deal with modern-day problems and situations” (Napoleon 2012, 44). In other words, as Tamanaha writes, Indigenous law “consists of continuously evolving bodies of legal norms, values, principles, and practices suitable for contemporary circumstances” (Tamanaha 2021, 101). Indigenous legal orders are vibrant and alive, able to provide insight into contemporary problems faced by Indigenous peoples. As I will show in the next chapter, Raporo Ainu Nation’s case draws upon traditional Ainu understandings of salmon and fishing rights, forcing an encounter between the Ainu legal order and Japan’s legal system. In so doing, they also force an encounter with international law. But first, in the remainder of this chapter, I draw from historical and ethnographic data to describe the Ainu legal order and the importance of salmon within it, before turning to a discussion of its complete disruption by Japanese settler colonialism.

C. Salmon and the Ainu Legal Order

According to archaeological evidence, the ancestors of the Ainu have inhabited the island of *Yaun Mosir* for at least 20,000 years (Irish 2009, 16; Siddle 1996, 26-27). Ainu ancestors engaged in a wide diversity of livelihood strategies and developed distinct material cultures over time. Early settlement sites seem to have been located in inland areas, but this would change starting around 1200 CE, when inland sites were abandoned in favor of sites alongside major salmon-spawning rivers, and Ainu lifestyles during this phase became “increasingly salmon-centric” (Swanson 2022, 168-169). As Raporo Ainu Nation’s then-president, the late Sashima Masaki, explained, salmon was “a very special fish” for the Ainu (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2024, 234). Salmon was the staple food for Ainu

communities and was known as *sipe* (A: the real food) and *kamuy cep* (A: sacred fish).⁵⁹ The latter name reflects the Ainu belief that salmon were a gift provided by the *kamuy*. The first salmon caught each season was dedicated to the *kamuy* in a ceremony known as *asircepnomi* (A: new salmon ceremony). Ainu cuisine was characterized by salmon-centered recipes, many of which have been passed down and are widely consumed in Ainu households today, such as *cep ohaw* (A: salmon soup) and *citatap* (A: minced salmon paté). Salmon eggs, bone, offal, and skins all had their uses; for example, the skin was used to make *cep keru* (A: fish shoes) and *cep ur* (A: fish robe). Salmon was also an important trade good in maritime commerce, which became increasingly important to Ainu society after 1200 CE. *Yaun Mosir*'s geographic location made the Ainu powerful brokers of maritime trade in the North Pacific. They traded with Wajin lords as well as with China, Korea, and Indigenous peoples in the Amur region, Kamchatka, and the Aleutian Islands (Walker 2001, 20-27; Miyajima 1998, 40). In her groundbreaking ethnography of Hokkaido salmon fishers (2022), anthropologist Heather Swanson argues that salmon was likely a primary trade good being given by Ainu in exchange for foreign goods (Swanson 2022, 168-169).

⁵⁹ The word for fish, *cep*, is thought to derive from *ci + e + p* (A: we + eat + thing), i.e., “the thing we eat,” emphasizing the importance of salmon and fish in general to the Ainu diet (Ainu Language Archive n.d.).



Images: *Cep ur* (left) and *cep ker* (right) at the Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum.



Image: Salmon-centric Ainu cuisine.

The Ainu relied on primarily on two species of salmonid fish throughout the year: the chum salmon (*Oncorhynchus keta*, also known as dog salmon; A: *kamuy cep*, *sipe*, or *meorun cep*; J: *shirozake*) and the masu trout (*Oncorhynchus masou*, also known as cherry salmon; A: *sakipe*, *icanuy*, or *icaniw*; J: *sakuramasu*). Most Ainu settlements (A: *kotan*) were located on fluvial terraces at sites whose “most important factor” was their proximity to salmonid spawning beds (Watanabe 1973, 9). Although *kotan* were generally distributed about four to eight kilometers apart, along the left bank of the Tokachi River, where the Raporo Ainu

Nation's people came from, salmonids were so abundant that there was a *kotan* every four hundred to six hundred meters (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2024, 230-231).

The fishing season began with the arrival of the masu trout run in July or August. This season was marked by an *asircepnomi* (A: first salmon ceremony, also called *petorun kamuynomi*), which was “one of the major events in the whole cycle of their seasonal activities, for it marked the opening of a new season devoted to fishing,” in which “no regular hunting was undertaken” (Watanabe 1973, 26). During the fishing season, which usually lasted until the end of January, Ainu used a diverse array of tools and techniques suited to the behavior of salmonids during different times of the season. The harvest schedule was coordinated among the various *kotan* living on shared waterways (“river groups,” discussed below) and there were certain taboos against the use of some tools at specific times of the season, which functioned to manage salmonid populations sustainably. The masu trout run was also intimately linked to the lifecycle of *pipa* (A: freshwater mussels; *Margaritifera laevis*) which, in their larval form, take shelter in the safety of a trout's gills to develop and grow for a while before dropping off and spreading to new areas of the watershed (Field notes, July 27, 2025). *Pipa* were also eaten by the Ainu, and their shells were used as tools to harvest millet. This tool was so effective at stripping millet ears from their stalks that blacksmiths in Hokkaido were still making metal versions of the same shape at least until the mid-20th century (Field notes, September 9, 2025).



Image: Masu trout.



Images: (Left) *Pipa* shell being used to harvest millet (Photo by Uzawa Kanako). (Right) Artificial *pipa* tool made of metal.

Upon completion of the *asircepnomi* for masu trout, cooperating households would set up *tes* (A: weirs), which were woven out of willow branches to guide ascending fish to a certain passage where they could be caught. According to customary rules, one end of the *tes*

was always left open so that some fish could continue upstream (Watanabe 1973, 23). In areas where the river was deeper and broader, such as the lower Tokachi, men and women from two or more or more households cooperatively used *yasya* (A: trawling nets) by pulling them between two *cip* (A: dugout canoes) (Watanabe 1973, 25-26). Watanabe notes that, in the lower Tokachi river, using nets in this way “was the most efficient mass technique” (Watanabe 1973. 25). Other nets (A: *ya*) were used during trout season, such as *yaroshikiya* (A: two-handled bag-nets)⁶⁰ and, in the lower Tokachi, *cham ya*, (A: fixed gill net)⁶¹ (Watanabe 1973 23, 27). Nets like these were made of plant fibers and were made and maintained using *apari* (A: netting needles). Some nets were used by individual households, while others were shared cooperatively among multiple households (Watanabe 1973, 23-25). Such nets were often operated by women (Watanabe 1973, 23). By August, trout began to spawn in small tributaries, so Ainu women set up *uray* (A: conical basket traps; also called *raomap*) and *ya uray* (A: net traps) at the mouths of these streams to catch trout after they spawned and were returning downstream (Watanabe 1973, 24, 27). Each household built a *worun cise* (A: peep hut) in time for the end of the masu trout run,⁶² where Ainu men speared trout using *marek* (or *marep*) and *ap* (A: two types of hooked harpoon).

⁶⁰ Watanabe’s term does not conform to modern Ainu orthography, and I was unable to verify this word in the Ainu Language Archive, but it may have been *yarur sik ya* (A: mesh net with handles or net with handles that fills up).

⁶¹ Watanabe’s term does not conform to modern Ainu orthography, and I was unable to verify this word in the Ainu Language Archive.

⁶² Watanabe notes that fishing using *worun cise* was not practiced in some areas, indicating regional variation in fishing practices (Watanabe 1973, 27).



Image: *Apari* at the Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum.

The chum salmon run began in September and continued until December or January. Its beginning was marked by another *asircepnomi*. In the earlier part of the chum salmon season, the use of nets was taboo, but women continued to set basket traps and men continued to fish using harpoons, either in a *worun cise* or from the shore (Watanabe 1973, 21-29). In October, chum salmon in their silvery form (A:*meorun cep*; J: *akiaji*) began to arrive, and fishing intensified. The taboo on using nets was lifted, and women used these to catch fish that escaped the men's harpoons (Watanabe 1973, 27). Additionally, men began using torches to enable them to continue spearing fish by night. The *meorun cep* season was a time of plenty that Ainu prepared for all year round, and was remembered as being a time when the rivers ran silver with salmon, which ascended in such numbers that “the backs of those swimming near the surface [were] scorched by the sun, and the bellies of those swimming near the bottom of the water nearly scraped off by rocks” (Kayano 1994, 18).



Image: Chum salmon during the early-season run (left) vs. late-season salmon their silvery form (right).



Image: Dried salmon at the Nokapira Iwor Visitor Center.

Most of the salmon that Ainu households needed to survive the cold winter and lean spring months were dried during the *meorun cep* season (Watanabe 1973, 29-30). According to Swanson (2022), most of the fishing took place after the fish had spawned, when the fish were lower in fat, making them better suited to drying (Swanson 2022, 170). She argues that, since most of these salmon “had already reproduced and were on the verge of death,” Ainu households could catch “a large number of fish without endangering future generations of

salmon (Swanson 2022, 170). At the end of the chum salmon run, usually in December or January, another ceremony was performed to mark the end of the fishing season (Watanabe 1973, 30).

As the above account shows, Ainu life revolved around salmon for more than half the year, from July to January, and the fish continued to sustain them through the winter and spring. Ainu communities were intentionally sited near salmon spawning grounds, and salmon was truly “the real food” (A: *sipe*) for Ainu communities, accounting for up to 30 percent of their total diet (HUIDRG 2023, 2). But in addition to its role as *sipe*, it was also regarded as a gift from the gods in the form of *kamuy cep* (A: the sacred fish). Watanabe explains that, within the Ainu worldview, salmon “takes the form of a fish but is not a fish of common order,” but is rather “the food forwarded to the Ainu” by the salmon’s master, *Atuy-kor-kamuy* (A: the god who holds the sea), who “lives in a house similar to that of the Ainu somewhere in the sea” (Watanabe 1973, 72).⁶³ When they came upriver, the salmon spirits came as guests carrying salmon meat as gifts, and Ainu were expected to treat them according to a specific ceremonial protocol.⁶⁴ This ceremonial protocol was transmitted via oral tradition, such the *kamuy yukar* presented in the Prologue of this dissertation, the Song of the River Goddess. This protocol included using a specially carved willow branch called an *isapakikni* (A: head-striking rod) to mercy-kill caught salmon, as well as offering the first fish caught each season to the goddess of the hearth, *Ape-fuci-kamuy* (A: sacred grandmother fire), tying its mandible to an *inaw* (A: sacred shaved willow branch) and tossing it into the

⁶³ Watanabe states that *Atuy-kor-kamuy* was also known as *chepatte kamuy*, but I was unable to verify this term in the Ainu Language Archive. In the story related in the prologue of this dissertation, the name *Cep-kor-kamuy* is used.

⁶⁴ Philippi (1979) notes that, in the story retold in this dissertation’s prologue, the verb used to refer to salmon coming upriver means “to come to transact business,” indicating the Ainu view of salmon as a valued trading partner.

river, and offering *inaw* to the salmon spirits by burning them in the hearth, so that their spirits may return to the sea. (Watanabe 1973, 72-73). *Ape-fuci-kamuy* observes how the salmon are treated as guests of the Ainu, and reports this to River Goddess, *Wakka-us-kamuy*, who conveys her message back to *Atuy-kor-kamuy*. (Watanabe 1973, 72). If the Ainu fail to observe these protocols, *Atuy-kor-kamuy* will stop sending the salmon upriver, resulting in famine and the dissolution of Ainu society



Image: Sending off the spirit of the salmon with *isapakikni*.

Salmon therefore played a crucial role in what can be understood to be the Ainu traditional legal order, a model of which is possible to reconstruct based on published data and conversations with living Ainu knowledge-keepers. As in other Indigenous legal orders, the Ainu legal order can be understood as a network of relationships, including kin relationships, territorial relationships, and cosmological relationships. Just as the salmon was a lynchpin in Ainu worlds, I take the salmon as my entry point into the Ainu legal order. Just as the salmon traverses to the ocean from the river and back, the salmon traverses the

domains of the Ainu legal order and connects kinship, territory, and cosmology to one another. This framework is summarized in Diagram 1 and explained in further detail below.

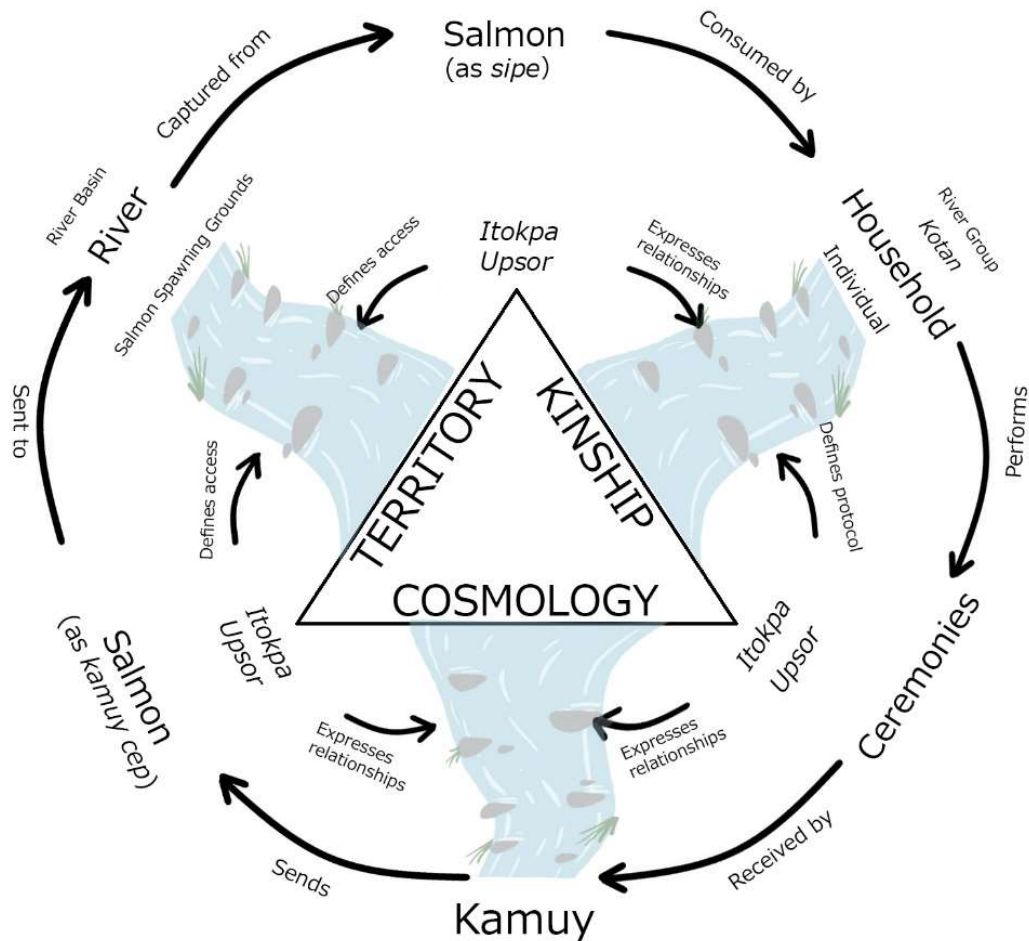


Diagram 1. An illustration of the Ainu Legal Order through the example of salmon.

Prior to its disruption by Japanese settler colonialism, the household was the basic unit of Ainu life (Interview, September 25, 2025; Watanabe 1973, 7; Peng and Geiser 1977, 42). The Ainu household typically consisted of a nuclear family: a man and his wives, as well as their unmarried children. Groups of ten or fewer households, who were usually related by blood or marriage, would live near to one another, forming settlements, *kotan* (Watanabe 1973, 9). *Kotan* were often named after the stream on which they were located (Watanabe

1973, 9). Ainu kinship reckonings were based on a system of bilateral descent, in which men traced their lineage patrilineally and women traced their lineage matrilineally. These lineages were represented through the use of symbols and material objects which were passed down along these lineages. Patrilineal descent was represented through *itokpa*, a crest or emblem which was passed from father to son(s) and carved into common tools and ceremonial implements.⁶⁵ Men belonging to a particular lineage were referred to as *sine itokpa uko kor utar* meaning “people possessing one *itokpa*” (Watanabe 1973, 15), as well as *sine ekasi esap utar*, meaning “relatives descended from one male elder,” while the group itself was referred to as *sine ekasi ikir*, meaning “one male-elder’s blood-related joints” (Peng and Geiser 1977, 18; 21; Watanabe 1973, 13).

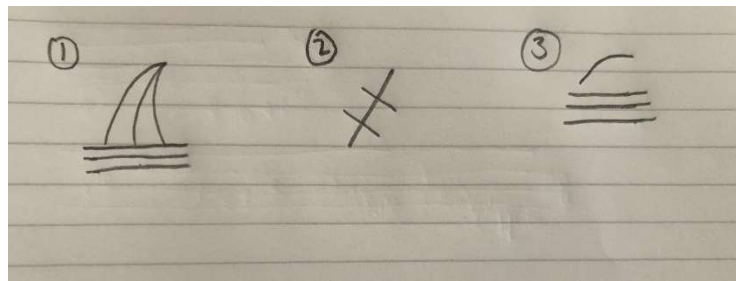


Image: Three examples of *itokpa* I encountered during my fieldwork.

Matrilineal descent was represented through *upsor* (also referred to as *kut*, *ponkut*, and *upsorkut*), a woven belt-like undergarment that, along with *huci korpe* (A: grandmother’s treasures), was passed from mother to daughter (Iwawallen 2016a, 102; Peng and Geiser 1977, 118). Women belonging to a particular lineage were referred to as *sine huci esap utar*, meaning “relatives descended from one female elder” (Peng and Geiser 1977, 121), as well as *sine upsor uko kor uta*, meaning “people possessing one *upsor*” (Iwawallen 2016a, 101), while the group itself was known as *sine huci ikir*, meaning “one female elder’s blood-related

⁶⁵ *Itokpa* was also known as *sirosi*, an Ainu pronunciation of the Japanese term *shirushi* (J: mark). When it was carved into arrows, it was known as *Aysirosi* (A: arrow mark) (Miyajima 1998, 35).

joints” (Peng and Geiser 1977, 121; lewallen 2016a, 105). This bilateral kinship system determined marriage rules such that exogamy was ensured: a man was not allowed to marry a woman bearing the same *upsor* as his mother or sister, and a woman was not allowed to marry a man bearing the same *itokpa* as her father or brother. Upon marriage, children would usually leave their parents’ household to establish their own. Because kinship was understood to reside in relational symbols like *itokpa* and *upsor*, rather than as an essential trait of an individual, the Ainu kinship structure was a fluid system and people could be and often were adopted into different lineages by being given their adoptive parent’s respective *itokpa* or *upsor*. This fluidity helped enable the continuation of patriline and matriline and served to ease restrictions on marriage when necessary (lewallen 2016a, 101).

The *itokpa* and *upsor* were operative relational symbols in multiple ways. They not only express kin relationships, but also cosmological and territorial relationships. Members of an *itokpa* group were understood to have a unique relationship to particular cosmological entities, *kamuy*, who resided in rivers, mountains, and other topographical features. This relationship between kinship and cosmology determined appropriate protocols for dealing with local *kamuy* through ceremonies. Thus, only a member of the appropriate *sine itokpa* group was allowed to conduct ceremonies for local *kamuy*. Watanabe writes that “only the people having the aboriginal *itokpa* associated with the river, observing the associated ritual for local deities and living in the river valley, were regarded the real people of the river who were entitled to be guardians of the river valley and of the deities that were believed to live there” (Watanabe 1973, 16-17). The *sine upsor* also functioned as a mediating symbol between kinship and cosmology, for it was only the women of the *sine upsor* group who were entitled (and, indeed, expected) to perform an *icarpa* (A: memorial service) for the departed

ancestors—kin who had become *kamuy*. Because Ainu settlements were established near the spawning grounds of their primary food source, salmon linked territory to kinship, as these spawning grounds enabled the social reproduction of Ainu kinship networks. These relationships were expressed symbolically through *itokpa*, which also determined who had the right to access particular spawning grounds. Only those belonging to a particular *sine itokpa* group were entitled to exercise exclusive and monopolistic control over particular spawning grounds. Salmon also linked Ainu kinship and cosmology. Ainu kinship groups performed ceremonies such as *asircepnomi*, whose protocols were determined by cosmological relationships with the local *kamuy* of a given territory, expressed symbolically through *itokpa*. Each *sine itokpa* group was usually represented by an elder man who was responsible for officiating the ceremonies and observing the proper protocols; such household heads were also responsible for settling disputes within families (Interview, September 25, 2025). In return for the proper adherence to ceremonial protocols by the correct members of the *sine itokpa* group, the *kamuy* sent the gift of salmon, in the form of *kamuy cep*, from *Kamuy Mosir* (A: the divine world) to *Ainu Mosir* (A: the human world) where, upon its appearance at the spawning grounds, it became *sipe*. In this way, salmon can be seen to traverse the entire structure of the Ainu legal order across the three domains of territory, kinship, and cosmology.

If a dispute arose between members of different households, a *kotan* would come together to hold a *caranke* (A: tribunal) officiated by a headman (A: *kotan-kor-kur*) (Interview, September 25, 2025).⁶⁶ In addition to the obligation to adhere to proper ceremonial protocols, the *kotan-kor-kur*'s responsibilities included maintaining order through

⁶⁶ The position of *kotan-kor-kur* was usually hereditary, but elder members of the *sine itokpa* group (A: *ekasi*) could elect a new *kotan-kor-kur* if the heir was deemed incompetent (Peng and Geiser 1977, 261).

the application of criminal law, including issuing punishments using *sutu* (A: a wooden club used for punishing offenders), as well as resolving disputes over rights to territory, including salmon fisheries (Hirata, *et al.* 2020, 254). If a dispute occurred between multiple settlements, each *kotan* was represented by its own *kotan-kor-kur*, who was ideally the “best orator, who was considered expert in verbal artistry” (Peng and Geiser 1977, 182). Residents of all the nearby *kotan* would gather at a meeting place and watch the event “more or less as referees” or jurors (Peng and Geiser 1977, 182). Orations made at *caranke* were highly symbolic and often referenced stories and songs of from oral tradition. The most persuasive and well-spoken orator was usually judged the winner, and headsmen who were able to resolve disputes through such peaceful means as *caranke* were afforded great respect within Ainu communities (Interview, May 13, 2024; Peng and Geiser 1977, 182).

On occasion, the Ainu had cause to coordinate as a larger group of “all the regional communities living together along a particular river” (Miyajima 1998, 37), into a political unit that Watanabe calls the “river group”. Each river group regarded its particular river basin as its own territory, “claiming exclusive rights to exploit all its resources, which they defended against the trespass of outsiders” (Watanabe 1973, 16). Members of the river group called themselves *sine iwor ukokor utar* (A: the people jointly possessing one and the same *iwor* of the river valley). River groups shared not only “economic interests” but also “a deeply rooted cosmological background,” namely, that “only the people having the aboriginal *itokpa* associated with the river, observing the associated ritual for local deities and living in the river valley, were regarded as the real people of the river who were entitled to be guardians of the river valley and of the deities that were believed to live there and look after them” (Watanabe 1973, 16-17). The political association of the river community also enabled

Ainu communities to coordinate the harvest of salmon to ensure sustainable replenishment (Levin 1999, 4111; Heinrich 2012, 140; Peng and Geiser 1977, 45; 69).



Image: Painting of Ainu men fishing with *marek* by Kido Takeishi. Historical Museum of Urahoro Town.

Besides being responsible for holding negotiations between different Ainu communities, *kotan-kor-kur* also conducted negotiations with the earliest Wajin settlers in Yaun Mosir (A: Hokkaido). Prior to the mid-19th century, Japanese maps depicted the island as a *terra incognita* which lay outside the northernmost territories of the feudal Japanese polity (Walker 2001, 1-3). In 1550, Kakizaki Suehiro negotiated an agreement with two *kotan-kor-kur*, Hasitaynu and Cikomotanyu, which created an area under Wajin control called *Wajinchi*, encompassing only the southernmost tip of the Oshima Peninsula. (Miyajima 1998, 48; see also Peng and Geiser 1977, 260). At the beginning of the Edo period (1603-1868), the Kakizaki clan were awarded the Matsumae Domain on the southern tip of the Oshima Peninsula and granted exclusive control over trade with the Ainu (Howell 2005,

132) In the early years of Matsumae rule, the majority of the island remained under Ainu control, and was known as *Ezochi*. Over the course of the next three centuries, raw materials that were harvested in Hokkaido were shipped elsewhere for processing and use, “in the classic colonial manner” (Irish 2009, 141). In the next section, I re-examine the history of Japan’s settler colonialism of Yaun Mosir, this time focusing on the severe effects it had on salmon populations and Ainu communities alike.

D. Japanese Settler Colonialism and its Impacts on Ainu and Salmon

Because Edo-era Japan’s feudal system relied on tributes based on rice yields, incorporating Hokkaido into this system presented a problem as rice could not (yet) be grown there. In the early 18th century, the Matsumae domain developed a unique tributary system that capitalized on Hokkaido’s rich fisheries, as well as on Ainu labor and commerce. As summarized in the Sapporo District Court’s ruling in the Raporo case:

Since rice could not be grown in *Ezochi*, in lieu of the common tributary system based on rice yields, the Matsumae clan divided the coast of *Ezochi* among its vassals and gave them the exclusive right to control trade in these areas (called trading posts)... At the beginning of the 18th century, merchants began to conduct trade directly at the trading posts, paying a fee to the landlord. This system, called the *basho ukeoi* system, was unique to *Ezochi*. Local contractors, as the merchants involved in this system were called, paid a special business tax to operate at the trading posts, which were called “taxable places” or “meeting places”. By the mid-18th century, most of the trading posts had shifted to this type of contract system ... These new landlords established themselves in Ainu hunting and fishing areas (known as *iwor*) that were occupied by various Ainu villages. A landlord would purchase goods that were in high demand by Ainu, such as rice and liquor, from the Japanese mainland and exchange them for products from *Ezochi*, such as animal skins and dried salmon, which he then sold to merchants who had set up shop at Matsumae Castle... While the original purpose was to create equal profits for the landlords and the merchants, eventually the merchants began to manage fisheries themselves in order to increase their profits. Local contractors developed new fisheries, improved fishing methods, and developed management organizations, and the Ainu people became a labor force to be

employed in the fishing industry. (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 2(1))

Under the contract fishery system (J: *basho ukeoi seido*), merchants parasitized salmon fishing territories and exploited Ainu communities for labor and commerce. Ainu were conscripted as slave laborers (Irish 2009, 50), and their communal and territorial systems based around salmon spawning grounds were disrupted. In order to compel them to work in the fisheries, Ainu were prohibited from raising crops and from buying seeds and farm tools (Irish 2009, 50). As a result, the contract fishery system “sent shock waves through Ainu society” (Miyajima 1998, 51).

Because of the central importance of the annual salmon run to Ainu livelihoods, “time spent working in the *basho ukeoi* was time not spent catching, preparing, and storing surplus salmon for the long northern winter” (Loy 2015, 70). In the *basho ukeoi*, Ainu men worked in squalid and abusive conditions for meager wages, often separated from their families for indefinite periods of time. Ainu women became especially vulnerable to sexual violence in the absence of husbands and fathers and were frequently raped and subjected to other forms of abuse by Wajin. In 1799, Matsumae officials enacted the so-called “Local Wives Policy,” which coercively paired Ainu women with Wajin laborers. Anthropologist lewallen (2016b) argues that the Local Wives Policy “amounted to state-sanctioned sexual assault and in many cases precipitated the breakdown of Ainu families” (lewallen 2016b, 37). Around this same time, Matsumae officials began issuing the first edicts prohibiting Ainu from hunting and fishing independently, because they “might have competed with the labor needs of the fishing grounds” (Loy 2015, 70-71). The squalid conditions of the *basho ukeoi* and the abuse of Wajin managers sometimes caused the Ainu to take up arms in resistance, such as the

Menashi-Kunashir war of 1789.⁶⁷ The greed of Japanese fisheries operators decimated Ainu society. For example, in the Saru River region, “all the capable Ainu adults from the Saru River area, both men and women, had been indentured” by 1858, according to Japanese cartographer Matsu’ura Takeshirou (Miyajima 1998, 63). Some Ainu went to great lengths to avoid working at the fisheries. One of the people conscripted from the Saru region was Totkaram, the grandfather of Ainu elder and former Member of Parliament, the late Kayano Shigeru (Kayano 1994, 28). At age 11, Totkaram attempted to avoid conscription by cutting off his own finger, and when that proved unsuccessful in persuading Wajin officials to release him, he coated his body with bile from poisonous fugu fish to make himself appear jaundiced, convincing officials that he had “contracted a terrible disease,” in order to return home (Kayano 1994, 33-34).

The contract fisheries were mostly located at river mouths, which prevented salmon from migrating upstream to spawn. By 1855, catches of salmon along the northeast coast of Hokkaido were already dwindling (Loy 2015, 72-73). Anthropologist Christopher Loy (2015) posits that reduced salmon harvests were a direct result of the unsustainable fishing practices employed by the contract fisheries during the Edo period (1603-1868) (Loy 2015, 72-73). Such overfishing would eventually lead to the near-collapse of Hokkaido’s salmon fisheries in the mid-20th century (Irish 2009, 131; Swanson 2015). In addition, the complete collapse of Hokkaido’s herring fisheries (culminating in the final herring run in 1958) has been attributed to this widespread use of unsustainable fishing practices at the *basho ukeoi*

⁶⁷ Tahara Ryoko, deputy director of the Sapporo Ainu Association and founder of the Ainu Women’s Association, notes that the Menashi-Kunashir war was “directly triggered by the fact that two Ainu died unnaturally after eating their meals at a *banya* or workshop and lodging for [Wajin]. Against the backdrop of the war, the Ainu were forced to work for fisheries under daily threats and violence, and Ainu women were explicitly exposed to sexual violence by the [Wajin] merchants who ran the fisheries” (Tahara 2018, 152). More than 70 Ainu and 70 Wajin each were killed in the fighting, and an additional 37 Ainu were later executed by Matsumae authorities for their role in the war (Walker 2001, 172-174; Tahara 2018, 152).

(Howell 1995, 2). As a result of Ainu men's displacement from subsistence fishing, overfishing by the contract fisheries, and overhunting of deer by Wajin during this period, many Ainu communities experienced starvation (Walker 2001, 84; 119). Statistics from 1887 show that 83 out of 349 households in the Saru River region suffered from severe hunger (Miyajima 1998, 83).

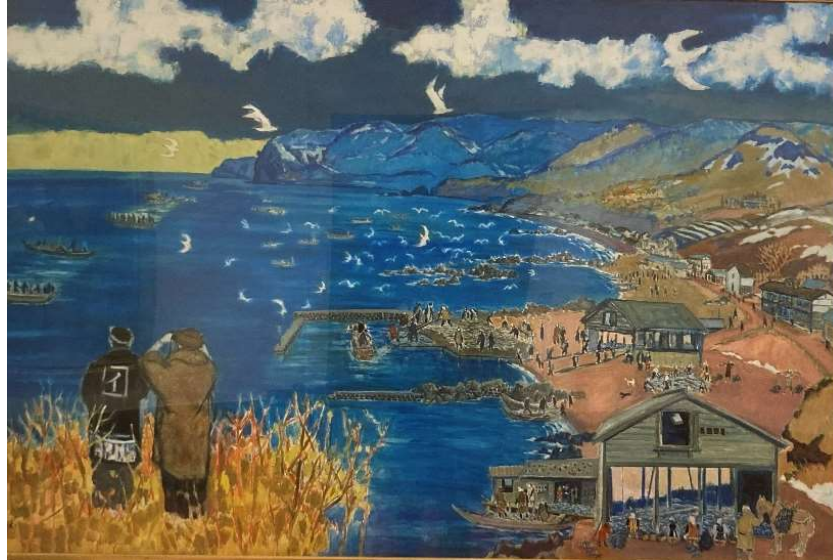


Image: Painting of a *basho ukeoi* by Kunimatsu Noboru. Akarenga Building, Sapporo.

The rapid advance of Japanese settler colonialism after 1868 had dramatic consequences for Hokkaido's ecosystems, as well as for the Ainu people who had relied on them since time immemorial. The staple food of Ainu communities and known in the Ainu language as *kamuy cep* (A: sacred fish) and *sipe* (A: the real food), salmon stocks plummeted due to overexploitation, which caused many Ainu communities to suffer from starvation (Walker 2001, 84, 119; Irish 2009, 131). Furthermore, the construction of dams as well as river straightening, rerouting, and channelization projects that were first initiated under the recommendation of the *Kaitakushi's* American advisor, Horace Capron, altered the conditions that salmon need to survive and ensured that few salmon could successfully spawn upriver (Swanson 2022, 61). To date, a total of at least 190 large dams have been constructed in

Hokkaido, in addition to thousands of small erosion-control dams (J: *sabou damu*) (Japan Dam Association n.d.; Fausch, *et al.* 2010, 124). They have altered the flow regimes of Hokkaido's rivers and streams and contribute to sedimentation and river channeling that, combined with industrial pollution, add additional strain on salmon populations (Irish 2009, 297; 322). As noted in Chapter V, even Hokkaido's small erosion-control dams have been linked to negative impacts on native species of anadromous fish, since only 6.6 percent of them had fish ladders installed as of 2001 (Fukushima, *et al.* 2007, 1514).

Recognizing the immense economic value of Hokkaido salmon, Capron hired specialists to oversee the establishment of a canning industry (Swanson 2022, 54-55). Ulysses S. Treat, who had overseen the establishment of canneries in the United States, arrived in Hokkaido and observed the Ishikari River's salmon run, writing that it was "one of the largest yet known," with a catch of 1.8 million fish in some years (Swanson 2022, 54). Treat, along with fellow cannery man T.S. Sweat, opened Hokkaido's first cannery in 1877. Although initially relying on wild salmon for the canneries, Treat and Sweat also established Hokkaido's first artificial salmon hatchery in 1877 (Swanson 2022, 58; Kosaka 2018, 71). That same year, the government announced a ban on riverine salmon fishing, beginning with places where hatcheries were located, such as the Ishikari River and the Chitose River, but later applying to all rivers and streams throughout the island (Kosaka 2018, 71). This ban continues to this day in the form of the Act on Protection of Marine Resources, which the Raporo Ainu Nation seeks to overturn. Although the ban was claimed to be necessary to preserve salmon populations, Swanson (2022) argues that this "was a ruse," as, since "Ainu people typically harvested salmon after they spawned, their fishing activities had minimal impacts on salmon populations" (Swanson 2022, 175). In actuality, it was dam construction,

commercial overexploitation, and the artificial hatcheries themselves that posed the greatest threat to salmon. These hatcheries featured “weirs that spanned rivers bank to bank, funneling all migrating salmon into holding pens for hatchery use...which blocked most salmon from swimming upstream and spawning on their own” (Swanson 2022, 61).

The ban on river fishing technically applied to all people, but Japanese fishing operations were concentrated at river mouths and only Ainu communities fished for salmon at their spawning sites, upriver (Swanson 2022, 170-171; 174). In other words, the ban on river fishing was “a barely veiled attempt to eliminate Ainu lifeways, and did nothing to conserve fish” (Swanson 2022, 174). As Swanson writes, “the Japanese government recognized that as long as the Ainu had continued access to salmon and other resources, they were not likely to accede to state plans” (Swanson 2022, 174). Indeed, when some *Kaitakushi* officials expressed opposition to Tokyo’s edict, stating that the Ainu “live in a mountainous area, so it is difficult for them to subsist other than by fishing,” the central government responded, with cold logic, that:

we expect artificial breeding will bring about economic benefit in the future. When you take total gains and losses into account, the damage to the minority can be ignored. You should not adhere to residents’ welfare. They may be driven to be farmers. (Kosaka 2018, 71)

Ainu who continued to fish at spawning grounds in order to feed their families were criminalized and arrested as “poachers.” Kayano Shigeru’s father, the son of Totkaram mentioned above, was one such Ainu who was arrested for “poaching” salmon (Kayano 1994, 57). As Kayano writes, the ban on river fishing “was as good as telling the Ainu, who had always lived on salmon, to die” (Kayano 1994, 59).

E. Conclusion

Despite the legal prohibition of riverine salmon fishing and the challenges posed by artificial hatcheries and dam construction, salmon remains a special fish for Ainu communities. Salmon continues to be widely consumed in Ainu households, and salmon symbols adorn many Ainu cultural spaces. For example, when you enter the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, you are greeted by a wood-panel salmon painted in red, white, and black Ainu motifs. Across the island, in the first gallery of the Sunazawa Bikky Museum in Otoineppu, where many of the famous artist's pieces are housed, you can see an elaborately engraved and articulated wooden salmon. Traditional oral narratives concerning salmon continue to be recited and passed down in Ainu communities. The *asircepnomi* or first salmon ceremony, which had not been practiced publicly since the 1877 ban on river fishing, was revived in 1982 and is currently practiced in many Ainu communities throughout Hokkaido. Swanson argues that *asircepnomi* ceremonies “implicitly challenge the idea of ‘culture’ as separable from rights” and that salmon themselves “create a slippage between *bunka* (culture) and *kenri* (rights) that is important to Ainu movements, as well as to the salmon themselves” (Swanson 2022, 178). Past episodes in the struggle for Indigenous rights, such as the Nibutani Dam lawsuit, have been greatly motivated by a strong desire by Ainu communities to protecting their cherished relationships with salmon. In the next chapter, I show how Raporo Ainu Nation's salmon fishing rights lawsuit provided an opportunity for Japan to engage with the Ainu legal order, although it is one opportunity that the government has so far refused to pursue.



Image: Painted salmon motif at the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum.



Image: Salmon carving by Sunazawa Bikky.

**IX. WE WANT TO TAKE BACK THE RIVER, TAKE BACK THE SALMON,
AND TAKE BACK OUR LIVES: RAPORO AINU NATION'S FISHING RIGHTS
LAWSUIT.**

A. Introduction

I first met Mr. Sashima Masaki and the other Raporo members in 2023, when I traveled to Kitami-Monbetsu, located in Okhotsk Subprefecture on the northern, Okhotsk Sea coast of Hokkaido, to attend an *icarpa* (A: memorial ceremony). I got a ride from Sapporo with a Hokkaido University professor, along with another graduate student. In order to get to the ceremony on time, we had to leave very early in the morning. Although the sun rises remarkably early in the Hokkaido summer due to the island's northern latitudes, it was still dark when I awoke in my room at the Sapporo share-house at 3:45 A.M. The trip from Sapporo to Monbetsu took about five hours—very long by Japanese standards—taking us through the Ishikari Plain, a wide expanse of relatively flat land which has become the heartland of Hokkaido rice cultivation. Leaving the city and its satellite areas behind, our route bent toward the northeast, opening up a vista of the white peaks of the distant Daisetsuzan National Park. We followed National Route 5, one of the largest expressways in Hokkaido, which traces the path of the “Muroran Highway,” also known as the “Sapporo Main Road,” which was established by Horace Capron in the 19th century. The shocking green of the summer vegetation adorning the hillsides contrasted with the deep golden ears of specially developed, cold-resistant varieties of rice, like *Yumepirika* (a name combining Ainu and Japanese languages, meaning a pretty dream), and *Nanatsuboshi* (meaning seven stars in Japanese). Skirting the metropolis of Asahikawa, Hokkaido's second largest city, along National Route 39, which connects it with Abashiri, we soon got on to National Route 273

and found ourselves driving along winding roads through a fog-shrouded forest. Route 273 was built nearly one hundred years later than Route 5, and the increasing numbers of the National Roads we traveled to get there, from 5 to 39 to 273, helps to illustrate the peripheral status of our destination relative to Hokkaido's administrative and population centers.

Monbetsu's geographic and administrative peripherality belies its centrality to both Japan's fishing industry and to the Ainu Indigenous rights movement. Okhotsk Subprefecture is home to Hokkaido's most productive and lucrative fishery. According to statistics from the Hokkaido Department of Fisheries and Forestry, Okhotsk's fisheries output was more than 300,000 tons in 2023, valued at ¥76.5 billion (Hokkaido Department of Fisheries and Forestry 2023). 2023's catch included more than 36,000 salmon (Hokkaido Department of Fisheries and Forestry 2023; Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries 2023a; 2023b). The venue for the *icarpa* ceremony was a boathouse, a tan-colored concrete structure with a gray, corrugated roof emblazoned with the words "Hatakeyama Satoshi Fishing," located a few stones' throws from the Okhotsk Sea coast. The area surrounding the boathouse was once the Ainu settlement of *Mopet-kotan* and has seen intensive transformation of its coastline due in part to the development of local attractions, like Okhotsk Tower and the Tokkari Center, an aquarium featuring captive seals (Koizumi and Hirata 2024).⁶⁸ The owner of the boathouse, Mr. Hatakeyama, who appears later in this chapter, is a well-respected Ainu elder and advocate for Indigenous fishing rights who has worked as a commercial fisherman all his life. Hatakeyama-san traces his ancestry from the local *kotan-kor-kur* (village leader), Kikenispa (b. 1832). (Koizumi and Hirata 2024).

⁶⁸ The Tokkari Center's name is derived from *totkari*, an Ainu-language word for seal.

We arrived at around 11 A.M., while preparations were still being made. A marine layer of low clouds gave things a greyish cast, and the smell of the sea was strong on the light breeze. Some kind of corvid called in the distance, while volunteers made their preparations both inside and outside the boathouse. A small group of three or four women, led by Mrs. Hatakeyama—a surpassingly kind and welcoming matriarch—crowded into the boathouse’s small kitchenette and prepared plates of sliced fruit, rice crackers, and other foods, which were to serve as offerings in the ceremony. Meanwhile, five or six men set about setting up the outdoor hearth and *nusasan*, led by an *ekasi* (A: male elder) who had come from Sapporo to serve as the ceremony’s *saishi* (J: officiant). Adorned in a black ballcap embroidered with the English words “Native Pride”, he sat shaving on a tarp *yomogi* (J: willow branches) into *inaw* while other volunteers, mainly non-Ainu supporters including academics and a freelance journalist, helped set up more tarps, awnings, and chairs. Not wanting to get in the way and, as this was quite early on in my fieldwork, not yet confident enough in my Japanese to offer my help effectively, I milled about, examining the *cip* (A: dugout canoe) out in front of the boathouse and the *itoamacip* (A: plank sea-going canoe) inside, sitting alongside modern fishing gear. Soon, two full cars pulled into the boathouse’s parking area, and out of those cars, came the members of the Raporo Ainu Nation.

The Raporo delegation consisted of Mr. Sashima Masaki and eight others—seven men and one woman. Eager to stretch their legs after the long drive from their home village of Atsunai, they greeted the other volunteers and immediately set about helping with the preparations, cracking jokes while doing so. Other cars arrived, bringing media crews and Ainu community members from around Hokkaido—including Mici, who would later become my host father. When it was time for the ceremony to begin, participants and onlookers alike

began to don cotton or barkcloth robes embroidered with characteristic, flowing Ainu motifs. Sixteen men removed their shoes and arranged themselves on either side of the makeshift hearth, an area of tilled earth flanked by two four-by-four boards, and carried out the ceremony. Although this was actually my first time seeing an Ainu ceremony be performed, it was very similar as the other ceremonies I would go on to witness and participate in, as described in the previous chapters. After this ceremony, we all gathered in the boat house to eat scallops, abalone, and fish gifted by Raporo Ainu Nation, and I had my first conversation with Sashima-san. He was a soft-spoken but straightforward, seeming to choose each word carefully. “Thank you for your support,” he told me, “let’s continue to do our best.”



Image: *Cip* and *inaw* at the boathouse.



Images: Raporo members help prep for the ceremony (left); the ceremony in action (right).

B. History of Raporo Ainu Nation

In order to understand the significance of Raporo Ainu Nation’s salmon fishing case, it is important to learn the story of its origin as a rights advocacy organization. Raporo Ainu Nation was formerly known as the Urahoru Ainu Association. Sashima Masaki served as the *kaichou* (J: president or chairman) of the Urahoru Ainu Association “for many years” and was Raporo’s guiding intellectual until he sadly passed away in 2024 (HUIDRG 2021a, 1). Under the direction of Sashima, then in his 60s, the Urahoru Ainu Association allied with Ainu organizations from other regions in a lawsuit against Hokkaido University, seeking the return of ancestral remains that had been exhumed and stolen for research purposes. They successfully reached a settlement in 2016, and their ancestral remains were returned to Urahoru in 2017 and 2018. With the conclusion of the repatriation lawsuit, the Urahoru Ainu Association began to organize around salmon fishing rights. They changed their name to Raporo Ainu Nation on July 20, 2020. The name Raporo is derived from Ouraporo, the

original name of Urahoro in the Ainu language (Raporo Ainu Nation 2022a). Reflecting on the name-change, Sashima said that it was “due to our resolve to become an organization with the right to catch salmon and the right to self-determination” (HUIDRG 2021a, 3). They also amended their bylaws to include “the aim of acquiring Ainu Indigenous rights, beginning with salmon fishing rights; to establish the dignity of the Indigenous Ainu People, to overcome all barriers based on race and ethnicity, to improve their local status, and to preserve, transmit, and develop their culture” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 2, Subsection 2B). As Sashima would later state in Court, Raporo’s goal as an organization is “to take back the river, take back the salmon, and take back our lives” (Raporo Ainu Nation 2022a).

Participating in the repatriation case was a major turning point for Raporo as a community and as an organization. It also relates to the history of anthropology in Ainu communities, something I had occasion to meditate deeply on in the run up to and during my fieldwork and that deserves attention here. The discipline of anthropology had been introduced to Japan from the West during the Meiji period (1868-1912) and flourished during the pre-WWII years. One of the earliest examples of Western physical anthropology involving materials from Japan was British scientist George Busk’s “Description of an Aino [Ainu] Skull,” which was published the same year as the Meiji Restoration, in 1868. Tsuboi Shugoru became the first Japanese anthropologist after studying in London and founded the anthropology department at Tokyo University in 1893. Tsuboi is considered be a “pioneer” of “Ainu Studies” (J: *ainugaku*), a multidisciplinary field devoted to understanding the Ainu’s racial origins (Morris-Suzuki 2014, 65). Despite the field’s name—and in keeping with the tendencies of colonial anthropology across the world—Ainu themselves were given very

little editorial input on the development of the field, its research objectives, methodologies, and its ethical protocols. Some anthropologists pursued their research to the extreme with no regard for ethical treatment of Ainu as human beings. Ainu were treated by these scholars as mere “research material,” according to Ainu author Konobu Kotarou, who wrote that:

We have nothing against research in itself, but I want to express profound regret at the way in which scholars have in the back of their minds an image of us as research material, as though we were animals. Excuse my pointing this out, but we are human beings. We are not physical material for research. (Konobu, quoted in Morris-Suzuki 2014, 56)

Beginning during the Meiji period and continuing until at least 1956, archaeological teams under the leadership of anthropologists such as Koganei Yoshikiyo of Tokyo University and Kodama Sakuzaemon of Hokkaido University repeatedly looted burial sites over the strong protests of local Ainu. In total, the remains of at least 1,637 named Ainu individuals were shipped to universities throughout Japan during this period, sometimes even before the flesh had fully decayed; even more found their way into European and US institutions (Shimizu 2018, 117; lewallen 2007, 515-516; Siddle 1996, 160). These execrable actions were carried out with the blessing of local law enforcement and polite society more broadly. Maruyama (2020) notes that “hospitals, police, and even stationmasters across Hokkaido were made part of a local network collecting body measurements and Ainu remains” (Maruyama 2020). In one noteworthy episode of grave desecration, municipal police shielded anthropologists while they excavated Ainu grave sites, removing protestors by force as they attempted to protect the bones of their family members (lewallen 2007, 516; Siddle 1996, 160).

Living Ainu were also subjected to incredibly invasive research practices, which were carried out without their informed consent. Shimizu Yuuji, an Ainu community leader and founder of the Urakawa-based organization, *Kotan no Kai*, which lobbies for the dignified

repatriation of Ainu ancestral remains held by Japanese institutions, recalls being subjected to such research practices: “I have memories from childhood of having my skull measured for survey purposes, and my blood drawn for specimens” (Shimizu 2018, 117). Sometimes, Ainu had their bodies measured “as demonstrations in front of classes of medical students” (CEMiPoS 2020a). In other instances, Ainu people who suffered from extreme poverty and poor health were tricked and cajoled into selling their blood to unscrupulous researchers disguised as medical doctors (Kayano 1994, 98-99; Iwawaki 2007, 515; Siddle 1996, 160). In his 1980 memoir, Kayano Shigeru describes how such behavior made him “despise” and “hate” researchers as a young man:

In those days I despised scholars of Ainu culture from the bottom of my heart... Professor K.⁶⁹ of Hokkaido University was one at whom I snarled many times... Each time they came to Nibutani, they left with folk utensils. They dug up our sacred tombs and carried away ancestral bones. Under the pretext of research, they took blood from villagers and, in order to examine how hairy we were, rolled up our sleeves, then lowered our collars to check our backs, and so on. (Kayano 1994, 98-99)

In contrast to Kayano’s somber reflection, Koganei Yoshikiyo, the so-called “father of physical anthropology in Japan,” expressed “schoolboy enthusiasm” about grave-robbing in a 1935 essay. As Roellinghoff (2020) explains, Koganei callously reminisced:

about his days of robbing Ainu graves in the dead of night ‘while joking with his laborers about ghosts’. Caught in the act by local Ainu, Koganei ‘hastily constructed a makeshift altar and went through the motions of appeasing the dead’. Another time, he bragged, he unearthed a recently buried body, rather than bones, and washed it ‘clean of flesh and skin in a nearby stream’ before hauling it away. (Roellinghoff 2020, 300)

For decades, Ainu organizations have worked tirelessly to lobby for the repatriation and respectful reburial of stolen ancestral remains, but activists’ demands have been met with foot-dragging and obfuscation by Japanese institutions (CEMiPoS 2020a). In the 1980s, the

⁶⁹ “Professor K.” most likely refers to Kodama Sakuzaemon.

Ainu Association of Hokkaido lobbied Hokkaido University (“Hokudai”) to return ancestral remains, most of which had been stolen by Kodama Sakuzaemon (Field notes, May 22-23, 2023). Between 1985 and 2001, thirty-five sets of human remains were returned to five branches of the Ainu Association of Hokkaido. Although these particular bodies were returned to Ainu communities, the main result of the negotiations was the construction of a charnel house on Hokudai’s campus, with the promise to host an annual *icarpa* ceremony (Siddle 1996, 187). With the opening of a new, state-sponsored repository at the National Ainu Museum in Shiraoi (Upopoy), many of the remains previously held at the Hokudai location have been moved to there.

In 2008, an Ainu man from the Kineusu district of Urakawa named Ogawa Ryukichi began organizing for the repatriation of Ainu remains that were at that time being held at Hokudai and made a request for documentation on these remains under the Information Disclosure Act (Hirata *et al.* 2020, 245). This movement attracted the support of Ainu from other regions, as well as the support of non-Ainu lawyers, scholars, and journalists. Ogawa, together with fellow Kineusu resident Shimizu Yuuji, Shin-Hidaka resident Kuzuno Tsugio, and non-Ainu supporters, formed a group called the Hokkaido University Information Disclosure Research Group (hereafter, HUIDRG) (Hirata *et al.* 2020, 245). Originally formed to examine these documents, HUIDRG also began publishing a newsletter, *Utaspano Uoupekare*, which continues to serve as the main public-facing organ of the Raporo salmon lawsuit’s support group. Based on its analysis of Hokudai’s documents, HUIDRG demanded that Hokudai provide “a detailed explanation of the collection of human remains” and open “a sincere dialogue with Ainu” (Hirata *et al.* 2020, 245). They received no response from the

university and, when in 2012 Ogawa and others attempted to meet with Hokudai's president, they were refused by security guards (Hirata *et al.* 2020, 245).

That same year, Ogawa, Jonoguchi Yuuri, and other Ainu from Kineusu filed a lawsuit seeking the return of remains held by Hokudai to Kineusu (Field notes, May 22-23, 2025; Hirata *et al.* 2020, 245). The Plaintiffs were represented by a legal team comprised of Lead Counsel Ichikawa Morihiro and other Wajin attorneys. Because many of the remains were unidentified, Hokudai responded that it was “unaware that the plaintiffs may be the descendants with the right to conduct religious circumstances” (Hirata *et al.* 2020, 246), and would only authorize the return of the remains to a recognized descendant under Japan's Civil Code (Hirata *et al.* 2020, 249). Ichikawa argued that the Plaintiffs, as descendants of the *kotan* of Kineusu, “still have the right to manage in a variety of ways the human remains that were interred in Kineusu *kotan*” based on the findings of a Cabinet Report by the Council for Ainu Policy Promotion—a wing of the central government—that “in the past it was the *kotan* that was the entity that conducted religious services” (Hirata *et al.* 2020, 249). In 2015, after Jonoguchi passed away in the midst of the lawsuit, Ogawa created the organization *Kotan no Kai* with about twenty other Ainu people from the Hidaka region, where Kineusu was located, in order to emphasize their status as a successor organization of the Ainu *kotan* in the region. Early leadership positions were held by Shimizu Yuuji, Kuzuno Tsugio, and Jonoguchi's younger brother, Yamazaki Yoshio (Hirata *et al.* 2020, 251). Hatakeyama Satoshi of the Monbetsu Ainu Association later joined the lawsuit after learning of four sets of human remains that had been stolen from Monbetsu by Hokudai researchers. Raporo Ainu Nation, under the leadership of the late Sashima Masaki, would soon become involved as well.

Although he wasn't fully aware of the history of the Raporo Ainu remains that were held at Hokudai, Sashima began reading about the circumstances of their disinterment and "came to believe the remains were stolen." (Field notes, May 22-23, 2025). Reflecting on the repatriation case in a film self-produced by Raporo Ainu Nation and presented at the 2025 IPETCA symposium, Sashima recalled attending the *icarpa* ceremony at the university charnel house and feeling *iwakan* (J: a feeling of discomfort or out-of-place-ness) when facing the nondescript boxes that held his ancestors (Field notes, May 22-23, 2025). Hearing that the government was planning to move the remains to a new repository that was being constructed in Shiraoi, Sashima felt that doing so would be "nothing but humiliation," while Ogawa, for his part, said that having to travel to Shiraoi to conduct *icarpa* "is suffering for us" and vowed that "no matter what happens we will fight until the remains are returned to each community" (*ibid.*). Throughout negotiations, the repatriation advocates became frustrated by the bureaucratic requirements of identifying remains and linking them to a living relative. Sashima's nephew, Sashima Hiromasa, who later succeeded his uncle as Raporo's *kaichou*, recalled feeling a strong resentment toward the university's procedures in this regard. "There's a number on the box," he had fumed, "can't you tell us their names?" (*ibid.*). He was told that the name could not be disclosed, in order to protect the deceased's personal information. "But that's a rule that's supposed to protect individuals," he countered, "and what you are doing completely disregards that!" (*ibid.*)

In 2016, the repatriation advocates reached a settlement with Hokkaido University, and sixty-three sets of ancestral remains, along with grave goods, were returned to Urahoru on August 19, 2017, after more than eighty years, and others were returned to Urakawa and Monbetsu (*ibid.*). No official apology was given by Hokkaido University. A *kamuynomi* (A:

prayer service) and *kuwa* (A: funeral) were held, with Sashima Masaki serving as the *saishi* (J: officiant) for the services. When he received each box of remains, he was struck by the weight of each box, describing it as a sensation he never imagined, and thought that what he felt must have been the weight of his ancestors' souls (*ibid.*). The next year, thirteen more sets of ancestral remains were returned to Urahoro. An *icarpa* memorial ceremony was held on August 19, 2018. At the ceremony, Sashima Hiromasa said "I feel a responsibility to care for these graves. We have an obligation to protect their history we must protect them ourselves" (*ibid.*). His uncle, Masaki, saw this moment as a turning point for Ainu Indigenous rights. "I feel like we have taken a step forward as an Indigenous people," he said. "We received the remains not as individuals, but as a collective group. We exist together with our ancestors." (*ibid.*). He also said that he hoped "to share these feelings with other Ainu communities" in the future (*ibid.*). Recently, other Ainu communities have launched their own repatriation movements and seem to be following *Kotan no Kai's* and Raporo Ainu Nation's example. For example, in 2025, the Otaru-based group *Inkarusipe no Kai* won the return of nineteen sets of remains from Upopoy and one set from the Otaru City Museum, and the Shizunai Ainu Association recently renamed itself Shibechari Ainu Tribe and is preparing to launch its own repatriation lawsuit.

Raporo's present salmon case was inspired in part by fellow repatriation activist and fellow professional fisherman, Hatakeyama Satoshi, who had also been waging a struggle to assert his right to catch salmon from the Monbetsu River—an act which is currently proscribed under the Hokkaido Inland Water Fisheries Adjustment Regulations (hereafter, the Regulations).⁷⁰ Hatakeyama has been keen to point out the government's hypocrisy, stating in

⁷⁰ The Monbetsu River mentioned here is a separate river from the Monbetsu River mentioned in Chapter VI. Its name is sometimes alternatively romanized as Mobetsu or Mombetsu.

an interview that, while on the one hand, the government passed the 2019 Ainu Policy Promotion Act and opened *Upopoy*, “on the other hand it neglects our fishing rights. It is inconsistent in terms of promoting Ainu culture” (CEMiPoS 2020b). As a result of his highly publicized refusal to abide by the government’s ban on fishing, Hatakeyama has been “harassed and interrogated” by local police (CEMiPoS 2020c). Despite the police’s attempted obstruction and the difficult circumstances caused by COVID-19, Hatakeyama and the Monbetsu Ainu Association were successful in hosting an *asircepnomi* in 2020. Kaizawa Kouichi from Nibutani was in attendance and spoke about “the importance of coming together in the fight against the Japanese government for human and Indigenous rights” (*ibid.*).

Buoyed by their victory in the repatriation case, Raporo Ainu Nation filed a lawsuit against the governments of Japan and Hokkaido in 2020, seeking recognition of their Indigenous right to fish for salmon in the Urahoro-Tokachi River. All of Raporo’s members are residents of Atsunai, a small fishing village in Urahoro Town, located in the Tokachi District on Hokkaido’s south-eastern coast. Nearly all of Raporo’s twelve-or-so members are commercial fishers and members of the local fishing cooperative. One Raporo member, referred to affectionately by his comrades as *Sendo* (J: “the Captain”), owns a fleet of three ships, and most of the other members work on one of these ships, catching salmon in the ocean just offshore using enormous fixed gill nets, in the approved method for commercial salmon fishing. Although the form of the activity is drastically different, Raporo Ainu Nation still makes its living through salmon fishing, just as their ancestors did. In Hokkaido, commercial fishing rights were initially determined in the Meiji period and then reorganized in 1952, but generally follow the same system as the rest of Japan (Swanson 2022, 127). The

fisheries output of the Tokachi region, where Atsunai is located, is modest in comparison to Okhotsk's: in 2023, it was around 90,000 tons in 2023, valued at ¥10.6 billion, and only 1,284 salmon were caught commercially (Hokkaido Department of Fisheries and Forestry 2023; Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries 2023a; 2023b). Commercial fishing rights are hereditary, cannot be sold, and must be renewed every five years (Swanson 2022, 127). Rights-holders are members of the local fisheries cooperative, and must maintain residence in the town where their fishery is located (Swanson 2022, 123-124). The rights are also tied to specific boats.

In its lawsuit, Raporo Ainu Nation asserts that its Indigenous fishing rights apply to within four kilometers of the mouth of the Urahoru-Tokachi River. The Urahoru-Tokachi River used to be the main stem of the Tokachi River until the 1950s, when the Tokachi River was diverted to Toyokoro “due to watershed development projects” (Raporo Ainu Nation 2022a). Before the diversion, the main stem of the Tokachi River was more than 200 meters wide, but the Urahoru-Tokachi River “has become a narrow river of only 50 meters wide since its division from the upper reaches of the Tokachi River,” and today, the river “discharges only nine cubic meters of water per second” (*ibid.*). As a result of watershed development projects and the salmon hatchery system, Sashima acknowledges that few salmon use the river to migrate upstream (*ibid.*).



Image: The harbor in Atsunai.

But prior to the Meiji period, the lower Tokachi River area was an extremely populous and productive area for Ainu and salmon alike. Sashima explains that “in olden days” there were Ainu *kotan* every 400 to 600 meters, a density much higher than that observed by Watanabe (every four to eight kilometers) (Raporo Ainu Nation 2022a; cf. Watanabe 1973, 9). “So,” he explains, “there were lots of Ainu people living alongside the Tokachi River and all of them, I must say, must have caught salmon to make a living” (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2024, 230). Some of the Ainu *kotan* located near the mouth of the Tokachi River were the communities of Tokachibuto and Aiushi (Raporo Ainu Nation 2022a). It is from communities like these that the Raporo member trace their ancestry. One member, Nagane Kouki, recited his genealogy to the Court: “My father, Kiichirou, was a long-time member of the Urahoru Ainu Association...My paternal grandmother, Kiyono, came from the *kotan* of Chiroto in Makubetsu. My Paternal grandfather, Genjirou, was Tokachibuto Ainu” (Raporo Ainu Nation 2022b). Sashima Masaki also told the court that “My mother is Tokachibuto Ainu and my father is Shiranuka Ainu” (Raporo Ainu Nation

2022a). Rooted in these genealogies, the members of Raporo Ainu Nation believe that “the salmon are a precious inheritance from our ancestors” (Raporo Ainu Nation 2022a).

The Ainu who were living in the *kotan* along the Tokachi River were “forcibly relocated” to Atsunai and other places further away from the river sometime in the late 19th or early 20th centuries. According to the 2020 census, Atsunai had a population of 203 people. Sashima believes that the vast majority, more than 190 people, are Ainu. This draws comparisons with another village in Hokkaido, Nibutani, which many English-language sources cite as the *only* community in Japan with a majority-Ainu population. Yet, when I first visited Atsunai in August 2023, I was struck by the differences compared to Nibutani. Whereas Nibutani’s identity as a former Ainu tourism town and a current leader in Ainu cultural revitalization is reflected in architecture, promotional materials, museums, and craft shops, Atsunai is conspicuous in its lack of any visible sign of Ainu presence. Unlike the Nibutani *seikatsukan* (J: community center), which is adorned with Ainu symbols within and without, the Atsunai *kouminkan* (J: another type of community center) instead looks like a public building anywhere in Japan, its interior decorated with displays and memorabilia related to the local fishing industry and the residents’ service in past wars.

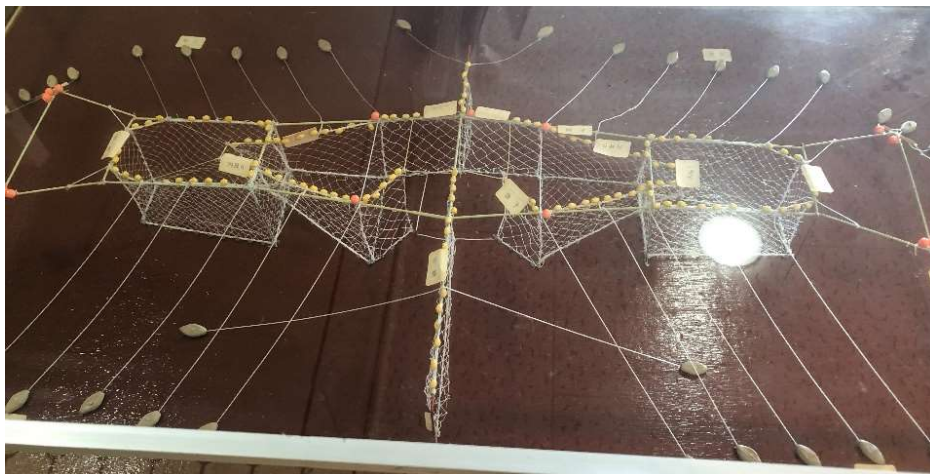


Image: Scale model of a fixed gill net at the Atsunai *kouminkan*.

The lack of overt symbols of Ainu culture on display in the Atsunai *kouminkan* may correspond to the community's historical disconnectedness from Ainu culture. In a talk given to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan, Sashima Masaki explained that "there are only a few spots in Hokkaido where you can find Ainu communities in areas such as Shiraoi or Nibutani, and there the Ainu customs still have been passed on in a feeble manner" (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2024, 231).⁷¹ In Atsunai, Ainu culture was not passed on at all due to severe anti-Ainu discrimination from the surrounding community. "My parents tried to hide that they were Ainu," Sashima told the Court, "but they could not hide it" (Raporo Ainu Nation 2022a). For children, school was a locus of discrimination: "When I was in middle school, anything considered Ainu was violently bullied. As a child, I thought this was outrageous, but I couldn't do anything about it" (*ibid.*). For adults, discrimination was often expressed in the workplace, and for those working in primary industries like fishing, this discrimination extended to the apportionment of resource rights: "Although my father had obtained the right to catch salmon using a fixed shore net, he was harassed by the other Wajin fishermen, who took many of the fishing spots (*ibid.*). As a result of such discrimination and harassment, Sashima stated that "including myself, none of the Raporo Ainu Nation members has learned the Ainu way of life from our parents, nobody, and this is because Ainu communities have been decimated for decades" (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2024, 231). In his middle adulthood, Sashima realized that he "was basically hiding away from all sorts and all forms of discrimination," until one day he finally thought to himself, "why should I live like this? Why should I put up with this?" (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG

⁷¹ A written, English-language transcription of Sashima's remarks are provided in Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2024. The full video of the talk can be watched here: <https://youtu.be/Ggaq0zi0kmo?list=LL> . Accessed April 14, 2026.

2024, 231). His decision to express his Ainu identity openly and advocate for Ainu rights came about as a result of this realization.

Another Raporo member named Nagane Kouki, who has also served as *kaichou* of the organization, reconnected with his Ainu heritage when he took a job on Sashima's fishing boat after graduating high school and spending a few years working on a dairy farm (Raporo Ainu Nation 2022b).⁷² Nagane told the court that, "although I have always known on some level that I am Ainu, that does not mean I have always lived with a particular consciousness of what it means to be Ainu" (*ibid.*). As a member of Sashima's crew, he became increasingly aware of his Ainu heritage. When I became a fisherman," he told the court, "I learned that all the fishermen carry a small knife at their lower back, called *makiri*," which was one of his first encounters with Ainu culture (Raporo Ainu Nation 2022b). But it was through the process of working with Raporo Ainu Nation on the repatriation lawsuit that he came to fully embrace his Ainu heritage:

As we felled thin willow [branches] to shave into *inaw* and practiced for the *kamuy nomi* and *icarpa* ceremonies [for the remains that were repatriated], I gradually came to reflect on the long history, culture, and traditions of the Ainu. As a result, I became more strongly self-aware that I am Ainu, and how amazing it is to live as Ainu. (Raporo Ainu Nation 2022b)

Since the repatriation, Raporo Ainu Nation has continued to host an *icarpa* ceremony each year, and also hosts an annual *asircepnomi*, which requires them to successfully obtain a Special Harvest Permit that allows them to catch up to 100 salmon (see Section D below). Because of events like these, Ainu culture is becoming much more visible in Urahoro, and is attracting interest from younger generations. Among Raporo's youngest members, current vice president Ichikawa Kaito, told reporters from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation

⁷² For an excellent ethnographic account of Tokachi dairy farms, see Hansen 2024.

that “I used to think that I shouldn’t say anything about being Ainu because I was told not to. But now, I think it’s cool that it’s out in the open and we’re fighting in court” (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2023). When I attended Raporo’s *asircepnomi* in 2023 and 2025 and its *icarpa* ceremony in 2025, I saw children in traditional Indigenous regalia playing with others wearing slick Raporo Ainu Nation T-shirts. Young people performed traditional Ainu dances, such as *emus rimse* (A: sword dance) and *ku rimse* (A: bow dance). Raporo’s activism seems to have invigorated Ainu pride in and around Atsunai.



Image: The sign for Raporo Ainu Nation’s *asircepnomi*.

Raporo’s efforts have also resulted in building transnational solidarity with other Indigenous communities. In 2017, Sashima organized a nine-day trip to visit Native American communities on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. He was accompanied by his nephew, Hiromasa, along with attorney Ichikawa Morihiro and four other non-Ainu

members of the Hokkaido University Information Disclosure Research Group. Their purpose was to meet with representatives from the Makah, Quinault, and Lower Elwha Klallam Nations, as well as officials from the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission, to learn about strategies for pursuing fisheries rights claims and establishing Indigenous co-management regimes. They also met with the legal scholar, the late Dr. Charles Wilkinson, a well-known specialist on Indian Law at Colorado University's law school. Their activities during this trip are detailed in a book entitled *Salmon People*, self-published in 2021 (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2021).

During the trip, the two Sashimas learned about US legal battle known as the "Fish Wars," a series of conflicts over Indigenous fishing rights waged both in and outside of court in Western Washington for more than thirty years, culminating in the so-called "Boldt Decision" of 1974 (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2021, 16-19; Wilkinson 2024). Later upheld by the Supreme Court in 1979, the Boldt Decision recognized the tribes' unceded rights to up to 50 percent of all salmon caught and guaranteed tribal co-management of fisheries. In his testimony before the Sapporo District Court in 2020, Sashima reflected on the profound impact this trip had for him:

I learned that our predecessors were working tirelessly to protect their rights in the US, as well. Today, Native Americans are working with both state and federal governments to maintain riparian ecosystems and preserve salmon stocks. I too believe that we must conserve the Tokachi River's ecosystem and protect its rich natural environment, beginning with salmon stocks. (HUIDRG 2021a, 2)

In 2023, Sashima Hiromasa spoke with reporters about the trip. He told them that the trip made him critically re-evaluate the Ainu's situation:

We visited the Native Americans, and they were very proud. I don't feel any pride as Ainu in the current situation. They were doing traditional fishing and running a business. It was a world of difference. We can't do that. (Australian

Broadcasting Corporation 2023)

In order to further build solidarity with other Indigenous peoples, Raporo organized and held an international symposium on Indigenous rights in May 2023 in Urahoro. Speakers hailed from Indigenous nations in Taiwan (Ami, Tao, and Seediq peoples), Australia (Yuin Nation), Finland (Sami people), Canada (Haida Nation), and the US (Choctaw Nation). The symposium attracted Ainu listeners from around Hokkaido, as well as non-Ainu supporters and media attention. Raporo self-published the proceedings of the symposium in *Sharing Story: Indigenous Struggles in the World* (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2024). The book says that Raporo's purpose for organizing this symposium was to learn from "progressive Indigenous peoples of the world about the state of their Indigenous rights recovery and the progress of their struggles," but that during the symposium they realized "that the various problems being experienced by the Raporo Ainu Nation are common ones" for other Indigenous peoples (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2024, 240-241). In response to this realization, Raporo and the other Indigenous participants in the symposium decided to issue a joint statement called the Raporo Declaration, which "calls attention to the on-going struggles of Indigenous peoples to regain the rights eroded by colonization" (*ibid.*). This declaration sets forth the following provisions, among others:

Indigenous rights to land and resources are not rights which have been created by Constitutions or laws of colonial governments, but are rather inherent rights of each Indigenous group founded in tradition and custom. We demand that each country confirm these inherent rights of Indigenous peoples by stipulation in their constitution, and that they provide for the specific content in law.

When implementing the law, in order not to violate the inherent rights of any Indigenous group, law enforcement officers in each country must fully understand and respect the content of Indigenous rights.

We Indigenous peoples possess the right to practice, maintain, protect, as well as revitalize and develop the traditions and customs of each of our Nations. No country can violate this right.

Each country, when using natural resources, must act in accordance with the traditional wisdom of Indigenous peoples, who possess profound knowledge about the biological diversity in their territories.

States may not deprive Indigenous groups of their inherent right to natural resources on the grounds of, or under the guise of, resource protection if alternative conservation measures are possible. (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2024, 241-242)

International engagements such as their trip to the US and their international symposium have been instrumental in the further development of Raporo Ainu Nation's political consciousness as an Indigenous organization. They were also highly meaningful moments for the participants and organizers. Writing of the symposium, Sashima says that when "our foreign guests came out of the bus, when they arrived in our village, I was so touched. I felt nothing will make me happier than this" (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2024, 233).

C. Raporo Fights in Court

Although I had reviewed documents from the Raporo case and started to get to know the group's members, I wasn't sure what to expect when I arrived at the Sapporo District Court to attend my first hearing in the case on October 19, 2023. The Sapporo District Court is a sterile gray building across from Odori Park in the city's Chuo Ward. I had driven there from Nibutani with my host father, Mici. During the drive, I asked him what he expected the outcome of the case to be. Mici told me that he expected Raporo to lose their case because "the government doesn't want to think about Indigenous rights" (Field Notes, October 19, 2023). I pressed him about Ainu activists' past legal victories, such as the Nibutani Dam and repatriation cases. "Hopefully we will be surprised again," I said. "Yes, but I don't think so," he quietly replied. We stopped at a *michi no eki* (J: rest stop) at Wattsu, where we by chance met two Raporo members, who were also on their way to the courthouse. "Drive carefully and see you there," Mici told them. When we arrived at the courthouse, we passed through

the metal detector and milled about in the lobby, before heading up to the courtroom on the 8th floor. Raporo members donned their Ainu regalia and filed into the front row. I took a seat in the second row on the right side, and Mici sat somewhere behind me. A famous activist, artist, and beloved *huci* (A: female elder) sat in her wheelchair one row ahead of me, next to the *ekasi* who had served as the *saishi* at the Monbetsu *icarpa*. Other Ainu and non-Ainu supporters and news crews filled the rest of the room.

The three judges sat on an elevated platform at the front of the courtroom, faces hidden behind surgical masks. To their right sat no fewer than eleven defense lawyers, whose faces were also hidden by masks. To the left sat four Plaintiffs' lawyers led by Ichikawa Morihiro, whose faces were kept uncovered. The defense side included counsel representing a dizzying array of nested agencies within the national government—including the Ainu Policy Office of the Cabinet Secretariat, the Management and Coordination Division of the Resource Management Department of the Fisheries Agency, the Cultivation and Aquaculture Division of the Department of Propagation and Promotion of the Fisheries Agency, and the Policy Division of the Ministry of Agriculture and Water)—and the Hokkaido prefectural government—including the Documentation Division of the Administration Bureau of the Hokkaido General Affairs Department, the Ainu Policy Division of the Ainu Policy Promotion Bureau of the Department of Environment and Lifestyle, and the Fisheries Management Division of the Fisheries Bureau of the Department of Forestry and Fisheries) (HUIDRG 2021a, 3). Given that masks were not required in the courtroom and were only worn by representatives of the Japanese government, it may not be overly dramatic to remark that this scene encapsulated the very image of a faceless, bureaucratic state.



Image: NHK News broadcast of the hearing on October 19, 2023 (Photograph of television).



Image: *Ex tempore* courtroom sketch from my field notes, October 19, 2023.

The hearing began. Judge Nakano, the presiding judge, removed his surgical mask, and we observed two minutes of silence, as is the custom at Japanese court hearings to enable the press to capture film and snap photos before the hearing itself, during which recording is not allowed. After these two minutes of silence, Judge Nakano replaced his mask and heard witness testimony. On that day, Kayano Shiro, the son of Kayano Shigeru and the current director of the Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum, had come to testify as an expert witness. He explained the uses of salmon by Ainu and its spiritual and cultural significance. He talked about salmon's importance as a trading item, along with the history of the contract

fisheries and the ban on Ainu fishing during the Meiji period. He also testified about his own family history with respect to salmon: how his great-grandfather Totkaram had been conscripted by the fisheries and mutilated himself trying to escape, and how his grandfather had been arrested for “poaching” salmon to feed his family. He shared the wisdom he received from his ancestors, that salmon is a gift from the gods “for all life to use, including animals like bears, not just for humans, whether Ainu or Japanese” (Field notes, October 19, 2023). During all this testimony, the Defense attorneys did not ask a single question, and the judges looked like they were falling asleep. The entire hearing was over in about 20 minutes.

Kayano’s testimony echoes lessons found in the Ainu’s oral tradition, such as the *kamuy yukar*, “The Otter and the Fox” (A: *esaman cironnup*)⁷³ and “The Fox’s *Caranke*” (A: *cironnup aynu kocaranke*).⁷⁴ Kayano had previously written about learning of these stories from his father Shigeru, who had learned them from his grandmother, Tekatte. Tekatte referenced these stories when condemning the government for arresting her son for salmon fishing:

Tekatte is recorded as saying the following. I will read in the Ainu language:
*“Sisamkarape chepnewahe kupohoutwa kamuyeparoiki koeturenno
 pohoutaraerep akopakhawetaan wensisam uthianat somoapathawetaan.”*
 “Salmon are not a thing made by Wajin,” she said. “My son caught them and fed them to the Gods, and at the same time, fed them to his children. How dare he be punished for that, when the bad Wajin who catch them are not punished? It’s utterly baffling.” No matter how you think of it, what Tekatte is saying is the most correct and legitimate argument. “Salmon is not a thing made by Wajin, nor is it a thing made by Ainu. But the Ainu offer the first fish

⁷³ “I am a fox who lived near Sikot [Lake Shikotsu]. As a familiar of the fire god, I often helped Ainu who had troubles by discreetly carrying messages to the gods. In spite of that, one Ainu youth condemned me for eating a tiny bit of fish and banished me to the land of the bad gods. I went away in a huff and ran into an otter god, who said ‘I was also sent here as a punishment for stealing some fish from an Ainu place.’ Because we were so angry, the two of us got revenge by causing an epidemic in the Ainu villages. So said the fox god.” (Kayano n.d. (a)).

⁷⁴ “I am a fox living near Sikot [Lake Shikotsu]. The Ainu do not send the salmon upstream nor do they make them multiply. It is said that the god of the Iskar (Ishikari River) summons the salmon, so why is it that I am to be punished for eating just one salmon?” Someone had a dream and heard a fox god arguing his point in this way with some Ainu. It is said that after talking it over the Ainu apologized to the fox god.” (Kayano n.d. (b))

they catch every year to the gods, and take care of the children and the elders, and what's wrong with that? ...If such humanity is wrong according to the law, then the law must be changed.” (Kayano 2022, 100)

In his writing, Kayano also criticized the government's stance on Ainu fishing:

When you catch a lot of fish in a fixed net as a commercial activity and exchange it for money, no one, Wajin or otherwise, scolds you for it. The reason is that our current system says that only those who have fixed-net fishing rights should profit from this activity. That system was not established through consultation with Indigenous Ainu people. The Meiji government unilaterally imposed it, and the resources were divided among the members of fishing cooperatives. That's it in a nutshell. I always wonder, is this really the right way of doing things? I can't help but think there's something strange about this. (Kayano 2022, 105)

Kayano also expressed support for Raporo's cause, saying,

As an Indigenous person, I am advocating that animals and humans should equally be able to use resources, and that salmon is a resource to be shared by all, not selfishly monopolized by the state. So, I believe that what Raporo Ainu Nation is doing is in line with this fundamental idea. And because it's a right we originally had, it's a natural and just thing to do. (Kayano 2022, 104-105)

In their complaint, the Plaintiffs sought confirmation of their right to fish for salmon in the area within 4 kilometers of the mouth of the Urahoro-Tokachi River, as well as confirmation that Article 28 of the Act on the Protection of Marine Resources, which bans salmon fishing in Hokkaido rivers, is invalid as far as the Plaintiffs' fishing rights are concerned. The Plaintiffs based their legal case on international agreements to which Japan is a party, domestic laws including the 2019 Ainu Policy Promotion Act and the Constitution of Japan, customary law, and what they called the principle of reason. The Plaintiffs made a sophisticated legal argument. With regard to domestic laws, they based their claims on Article 4 of the Ainu Policy Promotion Act and Articles 13, 14, 29, and 20 of the Constitution

of Japan.^{75 76 77 78 79} Drawing on the history of the Ainu's close relationship with salmon, the Plaintiffs argued for Ainu fishing rights to be recognized as collective rights. They argued that the members of the Plaintiffs' group had inherited "monopolistic and exclusive control" over salmon spawning grounds in the target area from their ancestors who, according to genealogical records, lived primarily in four *kotan* on the lower reaches of the Tokachi River prior to the Meiji period (HUIDRG 2022a, 2). These ancestors "shared common ties" and "communally levied sanctions on intruders who violated this control" (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Subsection 1, Part B). They argued that, because the *kotan* in the area were mostly small in scale and each *kotan* was "engaged in a cooperative relationship with other *kotan*," the Plaintiffs were historically constituted "as a class in the present day" who possesses a collective right to the salmon fishery in question. In other words, their argument asked the court to recognize their salmon fishing right as a collective right, based in the logic of the Ainu legal order:

The salmon fishing right claimed by the Plaintiffs is a collective right of the Ainu as an Indigenous people. The collective in question refers not to the Ainu people as a whole, but to the group commonly referred to as *kotan* that fished for salmon. (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Subsection 1)

⁷⁵ Act No. 16 of 2019, [Act on Promoting Measures to Achieve a Society in which the Pride of Ainu People Is Respected, Article 4](#): "It is prohibited for any person to discriminate against Ainu people or commit any other act that infringes upon the rights or interests of an Ainu person for being Ainu."

⁷⁶ [Constitution of Japan, Article 13](#): "All of the people shall be respected as individuals. Their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness shall, to the extent that it does not interfere with the public welfare, be the supreme consideration in legislation and in other governmental affairs."

⁷⁷ [Constitution of Japan, Article 14](#): "All of the people are equal under the law and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin. Peers and peerage shall not be recognized. No privilege shall accompany any award of honor, decoration or any distinction, nor shall any such award be valid beyond the lifetime of the individual who now holds or hereafter may receive it."

⁷⁸ [Constitution of Japan, Article 20](#): "Freedom of religion is guaranteed to all. No religious organization shall receive any privileges from the State, nor exercise any political authority. No person shall be compelled to take part in any religious act, celebration, rite or practice. The State and its organs shall refrain from religious education or any other religious activity."

⁷⁹ [Constitution of Japan, Article 29](#): "The right to own or to hold property is inviolable. Property rights shall be defined by law, in conformity with the public welfare. Private property may be taken for public use upon just compensation therefor."

On the question of Article 13 of the Constitution, which the Defense argued enshrines the principle of “respect for the individual” and thereby precludes recognition of collective rights, the Plaintiffs argued that this principle “is a concept that disavows totalitarianism at the expense of the individual, not one that prevents communality in Indigenous cultures” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Subsection 3C(c)).



Image: Raporo members fishing in the Urahoro-Tokachi River estuary.

One of the objectives of the Plaintiffs’ strategy was to press the governments of Japan to formally admit or deny whether the Ainu possessed the fishing rights in question prior to the Meiji period. Attorney Ichikawa Morihiro discussed this strategy at the Plaintiffs’ debriefing session after the Second Oral Arguments, saying:

In this case, immediately following the Meiji Restoration, the land was dispossessed and the rights to access various natural resources, including salmon fishing rights, were snatched away. Do you admit or deny these facts? Is there some justifiable basis for stripping the Ainu of these rights? We believe the government’s side has an obligation to answer these questions. (HUIDRG 2021a, 4-5)

At the same session, he also criticized what he saw as a narrow-minded proceduralism characterizing Japanese legal thinking:

The Japanese government, and especially their legal researchers, are awful; they always tend to first want to talk about whether a given right exists or not. This is a uniquely Japanese way of doing things. For instance, even in a nuclear power plant lawsuit, the first thing they do is to confirm that “people have rights,” before issuing a request for an injunction against restarting...but instead of this way of thinking, we ought to be asking questions of historical fact, like “what happened?” and “what kinds of rights were exercised?” If those rights don’t exist now, why did they disappear? Is there a legitimate basis for the process through which they were made to disappear? This is what we are asking. (HUIDRG 2021a, 6)

He further argued that the Japanese government willfully ignored international standards on dealing with Indigenous people over land claims, which were communicated to Kuroda Kiyotaka, head of the *Kaitakushi*, in a report by Horace Capron:

The *Kaitakushi* fully understood (based on Capron’s report) the kinds of Indian policy that the whites used to colonize the US, and that federal land was not considered public land unless it was legitimately purchased from the Indians. They understood it, but they disregarded it. For this reason, I contend that it was an invasion. They knew what they ought to do, but they ignored it and unilaterally declared that “*Ezochi*” was now “Hokkaido,” established the *Kaitakushi*, and declared every district throughout the country to be state-owned land. This is what we would generally call an invasion, isn’t it? I don’t know if I will mention these things about North America next time, but I would like to make this argument. (HUIDRG 2021a, 7-8)

But the Defendants refused to make a confirmation or denial of these historical facts. “The Defendants’ side is completely ambiguous and neither confirm nor deny anything, and they don’t even mention it,” Ichikawa Morihiro complained (HUIDRG 2021a, 4-5). As Plaintiffs’ attorney Mouri Takashi explained at the Plaintiffs’ debriefing session after the Eighth Oral Argument on May 26, 2022, Japan’s Code of Civil Procedure (Article 159) stipulates that “failure to disclose an admission or denial of a fact shall be deemed to be a confession” (HUIDRG 2022a, 3). Mouri argued that “since the Court must execute the case in accordance with the law,” it “has an obligation to encourage the Defendant to admit or deny” these historical facts (HUIDRG 2022a, 3).

When Raporo filed their lawsuit in 2020, their case was initially assigned to Judge Takagi Katsumi, who had seemed receptive to the Plaintiffs' strategy in this regard, pressing the Defendants about the fact that "neither the national government nor the Hokkaido government are clear about whether or not the Ainu people freely fished salmon" prior to the Meiji period (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2024, 235). As a result, the Plaintiffs were optimistic. As Sashima explains, "I thought, well, this is a good beginning" (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2024, 235). But then, in what would become a major turning point in the case, Judge Takagi was reassigned and replaced by a new presiding judge, Judge Nakano Takuro, in 2021 (Takada 2023). According to a lawyer close to the Raporo case, the reason for this change of judges was because Judge Takagi's three-year term ended in 2021 (Field Notes, October 15, 2025). After the switch, Judge Nakano seemed much less sympathetic to the Plaintiffs' position than Judge Takagi had. At a press conference following the Eighth Oral Argument, Ichikawa Morihiro told the press that:

The Court's response was, "Well, this is a moot point. Since this is a right that is not recognized under current law to begin with, it goes without saying that there is no need to discuss the historical process. Therefore, we will decide whether the acts claimed by the Plaintiffs are recognized as rights or not in light of current international and domestic law." He even said, "so do you want to settle the case now?" (HUIDRG 2022a, 2)

At the same press conference, Mouri Takashi told the press that:

I felt that the judge was trying to reach a settlement, like "Okay, that's it, then." But if we were to say that parties don't have to admit or deny the facts, no one would ever admit or deny anything. I found it very strange that the government was openly saying in an official forum something so serious that it threatens the entire civil litigation system. (HUIDRG 2022a, 2-3)

Judge Nakano's position, which seemed to disregard Japan's Code of Civil Procedure in favor of a hasty dismissal, was a discouraging development for Raporo Ainu Nation. As Sashima told the Foreign Correspondent's Club of Japan in 2023:

the new judge who came in called our argument against the national government and Hokkaido government a sort of useless argument where there is no winner or loser so to speak and so that showed me that this is not going to be an easy litigation. (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2024, 235)

And although Judge Nakano would ultimately go on to write the ruling in the Raporo case, he was not even in the courtroom to read it on the last day of the trial on April 18, 2024. Instead, a new judge named Judge Onose Akira read the verdict. When I asked a lawyer close to the case why this change of judges occurred, he explained it to me this way:

In Japan, a district court judge usually works for two years in one court before being reassigned to another court. In the Raporo trial, the judge was, by coincidence, reassigned just before the verdict was delivered. This gave the impression that the previous judge seemed to have escaped from reading the verdict in the courtroom in front of the Ainu Plaintiffs. (Field notes, October 18, 2025)

With regard to international agreements, the Plaintiffs based their claims four United Nations (UN) agreements to which Japan is a signatory, including: Article 27 and General Comment 23 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),^{80 81} Article 15 and General Comment 21 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR),^{82 83} Articles 1 and 5 and General Recommendation 23 of the

⁸⁰ [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#), Article 27: “In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.”

⁸¹ For the full text of General Comment 23, see: [General Comment 23](#) of the United Nations Human Rights Committee on the interpretation of Article 27 of the ICCPR.

⁸² [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights \(ICESCR\)](#) Article 15: “1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone: (a) To take part in cultural life; (b) To enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications; (c) To benefit from the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author. 2. The steps to be taken by the States Parties to the present Covenant to achieve the full realization of this right shall include those necessary for the conservation, the development and the diffusion of science and culture. 3. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activity. 4. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the benefits to be derived from the encouragement and development of international contacts and co-operation in the scientific and cultural fields.”

⁸³ For the full text of General Comment 21, see: [General Comment 21](#) of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on the interpretation of Article 15 of the ICESCR.

International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

(ICERD),^{84 85 86} and Articles 25 and 26 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of

Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).^{87 88} They argued that, because Japan has signed on to each of

⁸⁴ [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination \(ICERD\)](#), Article 1: “1. In this Convention, the term “racial discrimination” shall mean any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life. 2. This Convention shall not apply to distinctions, exclusions, restrictions or preferences made by a State Party to this Convention between citizens and non-citizens. 3. Nothing in this Convention may be interpreted as affecting in any way the legal provisions of States Parties concerning nationality, citizenship or naturalization, provided that such provisions do not discriminate against any particular nationality. 4. Special measures taken for the sole purpose of securing adequate advancement of certain racial or ethnic groups or individuals requiring such protection as may be necessary in order to ensure such groups or individuals equal enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms shall not be deemed racial discrimination, provided, however, that such measures do not, as a consequence, lead to the maintenance of separate rights for different racial groups and that they shall not be continued after the objectives for which they were taken have been achieved.”

⁸⁵ [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination \(ICERD\)](#), Article 5: “In compliance with the fundamental obligations laid down in article 2 of this Convention, States Parties undertake to prohibit and to eliminate racial discrimination in all its forms and to guarantee the right of everyone, without distinction as to race, colour, or national or ethnic origin, to equality before the law, notably in the enjoyment of the following rights: (a) The right to equal treatment before the tribunals and all other organs administering justice; (b) The right to security of person and protection by the State against violence or bodily harm, whether inflicted by government officials or by any individual group or institution; (c) Political rights, in particular the right to participate in elections-to vote and to stand for election-on the basis of universal and equal suffrage, to take part in the Government as well as in the conduct of public affairs at any level and to have equal access to public service; (d) Other civil rights, in particular: (i) The right to freedom of movement and residence within the border of the State; (ii) The right to leave any country, including one’s own, and to return to one’s country; (iii) The right to nationality; (iv) The right to marriage and choice of spouse; (v) The right to own property alone as well as in association with others; (vi) The right to inherit; (vii) The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; (viii) The right to freedom of opinion and expression; (ix) The right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association; (e) Economic, social and cultural rights, in particular: (i) The rights to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work, to protection against unemployment, to equal pay for equal work, to just and favourable remuneration; (ii) The right to form and join trade unions; (iii) The right to housing; (iv) The right to public health, medical care, social security and social services; (v) The right to education and training; (vi) The right to equal participation in cultural activities; (f) The right of access to any place or service intended for use by the general public, such as transport hotels, restaurants, cafes, theatres and parks.”

⁸⁶ For the Full Text of General Recommendation 23, see: [General Recommendation 23](#) of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination with respect to Indigenous peoples.

⁸⁷ [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#), Article 25: “Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard.”

⁸⁸ [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#), Article 26: “1. Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired. 2. Indigenous peoples have the right to own, use, develop and control the lands, territories and resources that they possess by reason of traditional ownership or other traditional occupation or use, as well as those which they have otherwise acquired. 3. States shall give legal recognition and protection to

these four agreements, they are obligated to implement them under Article 98 of the Constitution,⁸⁹ stating:

In our country, treaties ratified by the national government have domestic effect by promulgation alone, and take precedence over other laws (Constitution of Japan, Article 98, Paragraph 2). Laws must therefore be enacted, interpreted, and applied in conformity with treaties, and the Court must reject their application insofar as they conflict with treaties... As a signatory, our country is obligated to protect those rights and to return them if they have been taken away. (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Subsection 3(d))⁹⁰

In response to the Plaintiffs' arguments on international law, the Defendants responded by arguing that the General Comments of the UN Human Rights Committee that the Plaintiffs relied on with regard to the interpretation of the ICCPR, ICESCR, and ICERD are "not legally binding on State Parties, including Japan," do not obligate Japan "to follow" them, and that "each State Party is allowed to decide individually how to interpret and implement the provisions" of these international agreements (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants' Arguments, Subsection 1B). At a Plaintiffs' debriefing session, attorney Nagaoka Masue reacted to the Defense's position:

So far, under Japan's very Galapagos-style domestic judiciary, the court has been proceeding in a manner that is far removed from international law, and far removed from the Constitutional order, saying, "International law is irrelevant," and "no matter what international human rights law says, Japanese law is the law." But international law and treaties are above domestic laws. That is already determined by the Constitution. How can we make the courts recognize what international human rights law has accumulated? (HUIDRG 2022a, 3)

these lands, territories and resources. Such recognition shall be conducted with due respect to the customs, traditions and land tenure systems of the indigenous peoples concerned."

⁸⁹ [Constitution of Japan, Article 98](#): "This Constitution shall be the supreme law of the nation and no law, ordinance, imperial rescript or other act of government, or part thereof, contrary to the provisions hereof, shall have legal force or validity. The treaties concluded by Japan and established laws of nations shall be faithfully observed.

⁹⁰ It is worth noting that Japan is not a party to the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 69, the strongest binding international agreement on Indigenous rights.

The Defendants further argued that “the wording of Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights... only stipulates the rights of individuals to participate in cultural life and does not obligate State Parties to guarantee the ‘fishing rights’ of ‘ethnic minorities’ as a ‘group.’” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants’ Arguments, Subsection 2B). Moreover, the Defendants characterized the UNDRIP as “merely a recommendation, not a legally binding obligation” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants’ Arguments, Subsection 3A). They also presented as evidence a joint statement to the UN General Assembly by “Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Mexico, Thailand, and other countries” that expresses their position that UNDRIP:

does not grant Indigenous peoples the monopolistic or exclusive right to own and use [land and resources], and the manner in which such rights are exercised shall be interpreted under national law and shall not infringe the rights of third parties who already have legal rights. (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants’ Arguments, Subsection 3B(i))

The Defendants did not, however, review the national laws of the countries that signed that statement or make a good faith inquiry into the ways that signatories have implemented Indigenous land and resources rights in their own country. If they had, they would have seen that all of the countries they explicitly named as having signed that statement—Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Mexico, and Thailand—have, to varying extents, recognized Indigenous rights or title, created a legally pluralistic system for adjudicating Indigenous resource claims, and provided for the legal self-determination of Indigenous communities. Japan, however, has not.

With regard to customary law, the Plaintiffs cited Article 3 of the General Rules Act,⁹¹ which holds that customs “not provided for in the law” have the same force as law, as long as they are not contrary to “public order or good morals” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Subsection (3)D). They argued that:

During the Edo Period, the right of an Ainu group to harvest salmon was recognized and controlled by Ainu custom... This custom was established as a norm that bound Ainu groups together, not only when settling disputes among themselves (*caranke*), but also when the Matsumae clan settled disputes over hunting and fishing rights. Therefore, the Plaintiffs’ customary right to catch salmon... continues to have binding force in the present day. Moreover, it is clear that such a custom is not contrary to public order or good morals as referred to in Article 3 of the General Rules Act, since it is neither detrimental to the interests of the state or society, nor contrary to general moral principles... the fact that Article 28 of the Act on the Protection of Marine Resources does not recognize any right to catch salmon... [means that] the Plaintiffs’ right to catch salmon therefore qualifies as a matter not provided for in the law. (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Subsection (3)D)

The Defendants countered the Plaintiffs’ argument on customary law, stating that “even if we allow for the establishment of customary law as a source of administrative law... such establishment must not be contrary to existing law” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants’ Arguments, Subsection 1A). Moreover, they argued that:

the Plaintiffs’ customary practice of catching salmon in specific rivers... is clearly in conflict with the wording and intent of Article 28 of the Act on the Protection of Marine Resources, which prohibits, in principle, the harvesting of salmon from rivers and other inland waters. (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants’ Arguments, Subsection 1A)

They also claimed that Ainu fishing harms salmon conservation efforts because “harvesting salmon who have returned to a river before they have spawned will prevent the next generation of fish from that river from reproducing and deplete salmon stocks” (Sapporo

⁹¹ Act No. 78 of 2006, [Act on General Rules for Application of Laws, Article 3](#): “Customs which are not against public policy have the same effect as laws, to the extent that they are authorized by the provisions of laws and regulations, or they relate to matters not provided for in laws and regulations.”

District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants' Arguments, Subsection 1A).

Furthermore, they argued (without relying on any scientific analyses or expert witness testimony, as far as I can tell) that "it is infeasible to achieve the objective of salmon resource protection by prohibiting their harvest only in certain areas or for certain targeted species" (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants' Arguments, Subsection 6(2)A).

In addition to the aforementioned domestic, international, and customary laws, the Plaintiffs also based their claim on the principle of "reason" (J: *yakuri*), which refers to "general and universal principles that serve justice" (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Subsection 3E). Attorney Mouri from the Plaintiffs' legal team explained the logic as follows at the Fourth Plaintiffs' Counsel Debriefing Session on June 17, 2021: "If there is no law, we follow custom, and if there is no custom, we follow reason" (HUIDRG 2021b, 3). They argued that the aforementioned international agreements, "can be said to express universal principles that transcend national borders," and that "'reason' is recognized as this type of universal principle of justice" Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Subsection 3E). From the Plaintiffs' perspective, the state's complete ban on Ainu salmon fishing violated the principle of reason given salmon's importance to Ainu communities as a staple food and trade good with a strong spiritual importance. "The total prohibition of the Plaintiffs' salmon fishing rights by the Japanese government in 1883, without any reasonable justification and without any substitute measures being taken," they contended, "was an injustice of the highest order committed by the state" Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Subsection 3E).

The Defendants responded to the Plaintiffs' argument on "reason" by acknowledging that reason "refers to principles that are considered to be naturally applicable even if no

written legal source exists,” but argued that in cases where “the principles of administrative law are deemed to be valid, it should not generally be permissible to alter a conclusion drawn from the law based on reason” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants’ Arguments, Subsection 5). The Defendants argued that “there is no way to surmise that reason conflicts with” existing laws regulating salmon fishing for Ainu, in the form of the Act on the Protection of Marine Resources (Article 28), the Hokkaido Fisheries Adjustment Regulations (Article 52), and the Ainu Policy Promotion Act (Article 17) (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants’ Arguments, Subsection 5).⁹² ⁹³ ⁹⁴ They pointed to the fact that, although Article 28 of the Act on the Protection of Marine Resources prohibits the harvest of anadromous fish from Hokkaido rivers in principle, Article 52 of the Regulations provides for the ability to apply for a “special harvest permit” from the Governor of Hokkaido, as long as “the purpose is the transmission or preservation of traditional ceremonies or fishing methods or the dissemination of knowledge and education related to

⁹² Act No. 313 of 1951, [Act on the Protection of Marine Resources, Article 28](#): “In freshwaters, among anadromous fish, salmon must not be caught or gathered; provided, however, that this does not apply to the case where persons who have obtained a license for fishery, or persons who have obtained permission of the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries or prefectural governor pursuant to the provisions of Order of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries or the Rules based on the provisions of paragraph (1) or (2) of Article 119 of Fishery Act or paragraph (1) of Article 4 of this Act harvest under the license or the permission.”

⁹³ Hokkaido Regulation No. 94 of 2020, [Hokkaido Fisheries Adjustment Regulations](#), Article 52: “The provisions of these Regulations concerning restrictions of prohibitions on the species or size of aquatic animals and plants, the period or area of harvesting aquatic animals and plants, or fishing gear or methods used, shall not apply to the harvest of aquatic animals and plants for experimental research, educational training, supply (including self-supply) of seeds and seedlings (including fish eggs) for aquaculture enhancement, or the transmission and preservation of traditional ceremonies or fishing methods relating to fishing in inland waters or dissemination and education of knowledge concerning these matters (hereinafter referred to as ‘experimental research, et cetera,’ in this Article), by persons who have obtained permission from the Governor.” My translation.

⁹⁴ Act No. 16 of 2019, [Act on Promoting Measures to Achieve a Society in which the Pride of Ainu People is Respected, Article 17](#): “When permission is required as provided for by Order of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries or the prefectural rules based on the provisions of Article 119, paragraph (1) or (2) of the Fishery Act or Article 4, paragraph (1) of Act on the Protection of Marine Resources (Act No. 313 of 1951) regarding the implementation of an inland waters salmon collection project included in an approved regional plan for the promotion of Ainu measures, and the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries or prefectural governor is requested to give the permission, they are to give appropriate consideration so that the inland waters salmon collection project will be smoothly implemented.

these matters” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants’ Arguments, Subsection 6B). The Defendants argued that Article 17 of the Ainu Policy Promotion Act makes the process of applying for a special harvest permit even “simpler than the general procedures” for obtaining such a permit (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants’ Arguments, Subsection 6B). As a result, the Defendants urged the Court to conclude that “the fishing rights in question should not be recognized based on reason.” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants’ Arguments, Subsection 5).

Sashima Masaki did not need to be lectured about the procedures for receiving a special harvest permit by the Defendants, as he was already quite familiar with the process himself, and it is anything but simple. Raporo Ainu Nation hosts *asircepnomi* ceremonies every autumn at the mouth of the Urahoro-Tokachi River. As he explained during the talking circle at the Raporo Symposium in 2023, Raporo Ainu Nation “obtained a permit from the Hokkaido Governor,” which set the catch limit to 200 fish. But they were also required to gain the approval of the local fishing cooperative and salmon hatchery association and, “after consultation with these local entities, the limit was reduced to 100 fish” (Raporo Ainu Nation and HUIDRG 2024, 208). The Plaintiffs argued that the existing regulations on obtaining a special harvest permit from the Hokkaido Governor for the purpose of “the transmission or preservation of traditional ceremonies or fishing methods or the dissemination of knowledge and education related to these matters” were too restrictive. They argued:

Presently, when the Plaintiffs harvest salmon under a special harvest permit, they are instructed to use a log canoe and a unique Ainu harpoon called a *marek*, and they are not allowed to sell the salmon they catch. (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Subsection 2)

In their complaint, the Plaintiffs claimed the right to fish using a gill net and a boat with an outboard motor (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Subsection 2).⁹⁵ For the government, which reserves the power to determine the scope of Ainu “tradition” in this matter, Ainu fishing is not “traditional” unless it involves the use of *marek* and *cip*. But, as is obvious based on the information presented in the previous chapter, this is a vast oversimplification of the diverse methods and tools that Ainu people used to fish, of which the *marek* and *cip* were only two examples.

This is not some hidden fact; but ought to be common knowledge to anyone familiar with the Ainu, since collections of fishing tools used by the Ainu are on display at such museums as the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, the Kayano Shigeru Museum, and even the National Ainu Museum at Upopoy, including *ap* (A: a type of harpoon), *ku* and *peraa* (A: bow and fishing arrow), *kite* (A: another type of harpoon), *yasya* (A: scoop net), *tes* (A: weir), *uray* (A: weir trap), *raomap* (A: basket trap), and *apari* (A: netting needle).

Furthermore, the Ainu had always incorporated new fishing technology received through trade with their neighbors. It has been proven that Ainu living near the mouth of the Tokachi River used gill nets to fish for salmon (Watanabe 1973, 23-27). Two wooden *apari* (A: netting needles) were among the grave goods repatriated to Urahoro in 2017 and 2018.

Sashima Masaki testified to the Court that, “based on the size of the netting needle, we think it was likely used as a tool for repairing nets used to catch salmon in the river” (Sashima Oral Argument).

⁹⁵ A gill net is a type of fishing net which is set up vertically such that fish swimming through it will get caught by their gills if they are of a certain size.



Image: Ainu fishing tools at the National Ainu Museum (Upopoy).



Image: Ainu fishing tools at the Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum.



Image: *Apari* on display at the National Ainu Museum (Upopoy), Shiraoi.

The Plaintiff's side pushed back against the way the government uses the temporal trap of "tradition" to try to tell the Ainu what constitutes a valid expression of their own culture:

the Ainu continued fishing for salmon throughout the Edo period until it was illegally banned during the Meiji period, and if it had not been banned, they would of course still be fishing for salmon today using new technology, such as fishing boats with onboard motors, nylon nets, et cetera. (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Subsection 2)

During the first Plaintiffs' debriefing session after the First Oral Argument, the following exchange occurred when an audience member stood to ask a question:

Floor: I am a former police officer who was in charge of dealing with poachers under the Hokkaido Fisheries Adjustment Regulations. Is there a problem with the Regulations that needs to be changed?

Ichikawa Morihiro: Since the Meiji period, the law of Japanese fisheries has been that the government decides everything. All fishing is done by permit from the government, and the government does not grant fishing rights to those who do not have permission to fish. After the Nibutani Dam trial, the Hokkaido Governor permitted the taking of salmon to carry on the traditional rituals and culture of the Ainu. But what we are claiming is that there shouldn't be any government permission involved in the first place. Japan is free to place restrictions on the Japanese, but the sovereign rights of Ainu nations in *Ezochi* shouldn't be affected by Japan's nationalization of Hokkaido, should they? That would be an illegal invasion, wouldn't it? That's why we are demanding that these rights be restored. (HUIDRG 2020, 4)

D. On the Ruling; or, Settler Colonialism is One Hell of a Drug

Regrettably, Sashima Masaki passed away on February 6, 2024, without being able to hear the final decision in the Raporo case (HUIDRG 2024). The Sapporo District Court would not deliver its verdict until two months after Sashima's death, on April 18, 2024. On that day, I arrived at the courthouse two hours early in an attempt to secure a seat in the courtroom, only to find it already crowded with supporters and press hoping to attend the hearing. Because many more people had arrived than could fit in the courtroom, in order to ensure fairness to all (including late comers), each person hoping to attend the hearing was

asked to draw straws (which were, in actuality, disposable bamboo chopsticks) about 20 minutes before the hearing to determine who could enter. Unfortunately, I drew the short straw and could not enter the courtroom to hear the verdict being read. Instead, I waited outside the courthouse with the press for the parties to emerge. After 20 minutes or so, the Plaintiffs emerged, wearing Ainu regalia, and flanked by their legal team. Without speaking, they headed straight across Odori Park to the Sapporo Teacher's Union headquarters, which was to serve as the venue of the post-hearing press conference. They seemed intent to keep us all in suspense as to the result. As he passed the cameramen standing next to me, lead attorney Ichikawa Morihiro flourished his fingers in a V-shape, flashing the "victory" sign. This is a good sign, I thought. Thinking this must mean the Plaintiffs had won their case, I said "congratulations" to the Raporo members as we all piled into a cramped elevator up to the conference room. Unfortunately, my optimism turned out to be misplaced.



Images: Plaintiffs' Lead Counsel Ichikawa Morihiro poses for the press (left); Raporo member on the walk to the press conference (right), April 18, 2024.

As it turned out, the Sapporo District Court under Presiding Judge Nakano Takuro ruled in favor of the Defendants on nearly every point. It rejected all of the fishing rights claimed by the Plaintiffs, upheld the ban on salmon fishing under the Act on the Protection of Marine Resources, and ordered the Plaintiffs to bear the court costs. Although the Court recognized salmon fishing in rivers as “an important part of Ainu livelihoods, traditions, and culture,” it found that “the fishing rights claimed by the Plaintiffs have a spiritual component...as well as a property rights component (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 4(1)). It further explicated its reasoning with regard to the “property rights component,” stating that:

The fishing rights claimed by the Plaintiffs are not limited to enjoying the unique culture of the Ainu, but have a strong component as an exclusive property right to fish in rivers under the authority of and management by public law. The permissibility, scope, conditions, et cetera for the exercise of such property rights must be left to legislation and management policies for public property, taking various conditions into account, such as the natural environment, the situation in which the resources are located, and food supply conditions. (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 6(2))

Because the rights claimed by the Plaintiff are the right to fish “freely” for salmon, without limitation by the state, to use tools aside from the mandated “traditional” *marek*, and to be able to sell their catch, the Court ruled that these rights “exceed the scope” of cultural preservation. Consequently, it ruled that:

In light of the clear fact that the purpose and methods of the fishery claimed by the Plaintiffs exceed the scope of transmission and preservation of traditional ceremonies or fishing methods or dissemination of knowledge related to such matters, the property rights component ought to hold sway in this case. (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 4(1))

The Court used this “property rights component” to reject the Plaintiffs’ arguments based on the ICCPR, ICESCR, and ICERD.

Moreover, based on the wording of Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, along with General Comment 23, it cannot be said that the Article inherently recognizes the exclusive right of minority groups to fish in rivers under the authority of and management by public law, beyond the scope of their traditional activities. There is no ground to conclude that such rights are recognized under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Therefore, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights should not be accepted as a legal basis for the fishing rights in question. (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 6(2B))

The Court's logic and the language used to describe this logic was the same for the ICESCR and ICERD. With regard to UNDRIP, the Court ruled that the declaration "is not in itself legally binding, and should therefore not be accepted as a legal basis for the fishing rights in question" (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 6(2E)). The Court further rejected the Plaintiffs' characterization of their fishing rights as inherent, saying:

Even taking into consideration that the salmon fishing should be respected to the maximum extent possible in relation to the right of Ainu persons to enjoy their culture, we cannot recognize that the Plaintiffs have the fishing rights in question as inherent rights or as part of the right to enjoy their culture. (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 6(2A))

The Court also rejected the Plaintiffs' arguments on the Constitution of Japan. It found that the rights claimed by the Plaintiffs "exceed the scope" of rights granted by the Constitution, and used the "property rights component" to reject the Plaintiffs' claims based on Articles 13, 14, and 20 (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 6(2F)). Although Article 29 "guarantees not only the system of private ownership, but also the individual property rights of citizens which are the basis of social and economic activities," the Judge cited a 1987 Supreme Court case that found that the state may "set restrictions on property rights in the interest of society as a whole" (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 6(2A)). The Court also found that, because rivers have "been used by the general public in [their] natural state since ancient times," they are "public property and subject to the

direct authority of and management by the national government or the local public entity in which the river is located,” and “cannot be exclusively owned by any specific person”

(Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 6(2A)). It clarified, saying that:

It is not that exclusive fishing rights in rivers and streams cannot be established due to their inherent properties, and it is understood that the government can establish such exclusive rights to a designated area via administrative actions, but whether or not to establish such rights is a matter of legislation. (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 6(2A))

The Court also ruled against the Plaintiffs on the basis of customary law. “Because the fishing rights in question cannot be recognized under current law,” the Court writes, “they do not constitute something permitted by law; nor do they constitute something...not provided for by laws or statutes because current law can be understood to prohibit the fishing in question” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 6(2)A). Furthermore, it accepted the Defendants’ assertion that “it is infeasible to consider the exclusive fishing right of a specific person or group of persons as a customary right...even if limited to a certain area” because “salmon are anadromous fish...that are not confined to a specific area” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 6(2)G). The Court also sided with the Defendants on the basis of “reason”:

It must be said that whether or not to establish rights such as the fishing rights in question is a matter of legislation. Moreover, the fishing rights in question are not recognized by our country’s legislation. Therefore, “reason” should not be accepted as a legal basis for the fishing rights in question. (Sapporo District Court, Section 5, Subsection 6H)

The Court also ruled that the present permitting process regulating Ainu salmon fishing, as provided by the Hokkaido Fisheries Adjustment Regulations (Article 52), and the Ainu Policy Promotion Act (Article 17), is adequate because “a special harvest permit to catch salmon may be granted” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 3).

Furthermore, the Court wrote that, since “it is understood that such exceptional treatment is done in consideration of the right to Ainu persons to enjoy their culture,” the ban on salmon fishing under the Act for the Protection of Marine Resources (Article 28) “cannot be interpreted as an unreasonable restriction on the right of Ainu persons to enjoy their culture” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 5, Subsection 3).



Image: Ichikawa Morihiro (right) discusses the ruling alongside Raporo members and supporters at the Plaintiffs’ press conference, April 18, 2024.

Language is inextricably connected to power, and the words that those in power use have strong importance. In the Sapporo District Court’s ruling, even the words that are chosen to describe the Ainu themselves strongly shape the parameters of the court’s legal interpretation and exemplify Japan’s denial of Ainu Indigenous peoplehood. Throughout the Raporo Ainu Nation salmon lawsuit, the Plaintiffs’ side consistently emphasized the Ainu’s collective peoplehood through their use of the term *Ainu minzoku* (J: the Ainu people). However, the government’s side never refers to *Ainu minzoku*, instead using the term *Ainu no hitobito* (J: Ainu persons), i.e., “individuals who are Ainu,” despite the government’s token

acknowledgement of the Ainu as an Indigenous people in 2008. In its ruling, the Court adopts the Defendant's language, enabling it to sidestep the issue of the Ainu's collective rights as a *people* by arguing that the rights of *individuals who are Ainu* are adequately recognized under current law. This move is in keeping with the government's continued insistence that Japanese law cannot recognize collective rights, but only individual rights. This also enables the government to maintain its longstanding position that Japan is an ethnically homogenous nation, as exemplified by the Japanese UN delegation's 1980 assertion in its first report on the ICCPR that "minorities of the kind mentioned in the Covenant do not exist in Japan" (Dietz 1999, 361). The use of "individuals who are Ainu", rather than "the Ainu people," by representatives of the Japanese government and the court system is inexcusable exposes the bad faith nature of Japan's ratification of UNDRIP and its 2008 acknowledgment of the Ainu as an Indigenous people.

Not only is Ainu peoplehood denied in the ruling, but Ainu are not even allowed to define the culture and traditions of their own community. Acting through legislation and the courts, the government wields the ultimate power to define what Ainu tradition is. The ruling under discussion here provides a perfect example of this. Although Raporo Ainu Nation made the case that the Ainu people utilized a wide variety of fishing tools and techniques and constantly adapted their fishing practices and adopted new technologies as the situation arose—a fact readily apparent in the displays at major museums like Upopoy, the Kayano Shigeru Museum, and the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum—the Court arbitrarily ruled that fishing using *cip* and *marek* is the *only* form of Ainu fishing that can be considered "traditional." But when I visited Raporo Ainu Nation's *asircepnomi* ceremony, I witnessed local fishermen blending Ainu traditions with modern technology. The ceremony was held

just upstream of the mouth of the Urahoro-Tokachi River, on the banks of a stream that connects to the river via a large floodgate. In the water of the stream, Raporo members had docked a vessel unlike any I had seen. A traditional dugout canoe, *cip*, was lashed, pontoon-style, to the side of a small, white motorboat. The boat contained assorted tools, including nylon nets, brightly colored buoys and life preservers, and anchors. Boarding this strange craft, the Raporo members cruised to the Tokachi and then turned downstream, where they began hauling up small gill nets. They caught 15 salmon that day using nets. Presumably, this was done with the blessing of a special harvest permit. Was the lashing of the *cip* to the motorboat a clever form of passive resistance, intending to skirt the government's narrow view of Ainu "tradition"? I do not know, but I would not be surprised to learn that there was a *marek* somewhere among the cargo as well. If this is the case, it would be a demonstration of Ainu resilience, ingenuity, and determination to practice salmon fishing as their ancestors did.



Image: Raporo's boat blends ancient and modern elements.

The Court's ruling with regard to this point flies in the face of all available evidence, including the evidence presented at the official, government-sponsored National Ainu Museum. It also exemplifies the attitude that the Ainu people are a static, dying race, and enables the government to deny that Raporo Ainu Nation are "real" or "authentic" Ainu fishers. The current law applies the same restrictions to Ainu fishers as it does to any recreational fishers, and as Plaintiff's attorney Mouri Takashi argued in Raporo's 11th Oral Argument on March 23, 2023, "the very idea of equating the rights of recreational anglers with those of Indigenous peoples is seriously problematic" (HUIDRG 2023, 3). This has brought it under criticism from observers, like one person who told me that:

That way of doing things seems wrong. As I understand it, Ainu people are insisting that they should be allowed to take salmon freely as part of their Indigenous rights. If anyone is allowed to take salmon from the river with a permit, whether or not they are Ainu, that means they aren't granting Indigenous rights. (Interview, May 9, 2024)

The Court's ruling that existing law, which provides for the application of a Special Harvest Permit, enables Japan to skirt the issue of Indigenous rights completely, by being applicable to anyone regardless of whether they are Ainu or not. Furthermore, the Court's ruling that selling salmon commercially likewise "exceeds the scope" of Ainu culture makes no sense, considering the historical importance of maritime trade to Ainu culture and the prominent role that salmon played in that trade. My friend Omappoho was also at the courthouse on the day the ruling was delivered, and described to me his reaction upon hearing about the ruling's content:

You were also at the trial the other day, right, Mike? I've been thinking about that day a lot. When I heard the details of the ruling, I thought it was so strange. Like, wait, so we're allowed to catch salmon for the sake of culture, but not for the sake of our own economy? But economic activity is such an important part of culture! Doesn't every culture have its professionals, by which I mean people who are paid a certain amount of money and who are

able make a living? Like professional musicians—they’re doing something cultural, right? But, isn’t music also an economic activity, since you get paid for it? The way they separated culture from the economy was just so strange. Like, why was Ainu salmon fishing “cultural” and not “economic”? If you ask them, “were the Ainu catching salmon for economic purposes?” and their answer is “no, it wasn’t that”—then, well, what the hell was it? The Ainu caught salmon for commerce, drying it and trading it with their trading partners for other goods. So, I think it’s really weird to separate culture and economy. (Interview, May 13, 2024)

Although the primary justification for the present restriction on taking anadromous fish from rivers and streams is to conserve fish populations, the government engages with this conservation argument in bad faith and ignores the science of salmon population management. Without engaging with the evidence, the Court uncritically accepted the Defense’s argument that “harvesting salmon who have returned to a river before they have spawned will prevent the next generation of fish from that river from reproducing and deplete salmon stocks” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants’ Arguments, Subsection 1A) and that “it is infeasible to achieve the objective of salmon resource protection by prohibiting their harvest only in certain areas or for certain targeted species” (Sapporo District Court 2024, Section 4, Issue 2, Defendants’ Arguments, Subsection 6(2)A). In Raporo’s 9th Oral Argument on September 1, 2022, Plaintiffs’ attorney Koba Tomonori argued that “there is no rationale” based on conservation for a blanket ban because “granting the Plaintiffs the right to take salmon would not affect the protection of salmon resources” (HUIDRG 2022b, 4). In Raporo’s 11th Oral Argument on March 23, 2023, Plaintiffs’ attorney Mouri Takashi elaborated further, explaining that the government’s position constitutes a “logical leap between the purpose and the means” (HUIDRG 2023, 2). He pointed out that “theoretically, it is possible to avoid salmon ‘resource depletion’ by means other than a blanket ban on fishing in rivers, such as a partial ban, or restricting fishing in coastal areas”

(HUIDRG 2023, 2). He also referred to a 2022 study on Hokkaido salmon catches that showed that “approximately 4.07 million fish were caught at the mouths of rivers for artificial hatching and release projects, and approximately 29.4 million fish were caught in coastal fixed net fishing and other methods. These statistics show that approximately 90 percent of all salmon are caught in coastal areas, and that approximately 90 percent of the salmon that should be swimming up rivers have already been caught in coastal areas. From the perspective of salmon resource conservation, there is no rationale in the extreme regulatory approach of allowing ‘unlimited’ catches in coastal areas, while at the same time ‘uniformly prohibiting’ catches in rivers” (HUIDRG 2023, 2-3). Therefore, he argued that because “it is clear that alternative means of recovery remain to avoid the damage,” (HUIDRG 2023, 3), “there is a clear leap in logic between the means of a ‘blanket ban’ on fishing in rivers and the objectives of the law” (HUIDRG 2023, 2).

In fact, Raporo members have been strident conservationists, which is apparent in their court documents and their public statements. Sashima Masaki observed first-hand the ways that Indigenous peoples are active in salmon conservation abroad, and wrote that “I too believe that we must conserve the Tokachi River’s ecosystem and protect its rich natural environment, beginning with salmon stocks” (HUIDRG 2021a, 2). Sashima’s conviction in this matter was based in his deep, first-hand knowledge of salmon ecology as a professional fisherman:

Regarding salmon fishing, catches have been continually poor. I am wondering if perhaps the reason is that juvenile salmon are not reproducing well. Why is this happening? What is the condition of the river? When the juvenile salmon migrate from the river to the ocean, what kind of environment do they leave behind? I have been thinking, don’t we need to reconsider what is happening right before our eyes and think back on what we have done to the salmon fry? For example, every year, we salmon fishermen release salmon fry into the river, but since these are artificially released fry, they can be

completely wiped out after a single rain. Even so, salmon fry still swim from the river to the ocean one after another. I have been watching the river intently, wondering if these fry might be naturally-spawned fry. It may have been beneficial to artificially manage the entirety of salmon production up until now, but I think those of us living along the coast should now be discussing what to do in the future. (HUIDRG 2021a, 7)

Fellow fisherman and Raporo member Nagane Kouki also testified as to the condition of the river during Oral Arguments:

Lately, I have been thinking a lot about the conservation of salmon stocks. Some years ago, there was a severe rainstorm. The increasing volume of the river during the storm caused almost all of the juvenile salmon fry that had been released into the river to be washed away. However, even after the heavy rain, naturally-spawned salmon fry could still be seen in the river. At a glance, you can tell the difference between a salmon fry that has been released and one that has spawned naturally, because of the difference in size. At that time, I also found that, as I predicted, the survival rate of naturally spawned fry was higher. From that point on, I began to wonder whether the proliferation of the commercial hatchery industry has really been good for salmon. While I continue to study this, I would like to think about how Raporo Ainu Nation can promote the conservation of salmon stocks. (Raporo Ainu Nation 2022b)

This type of attitude is shared by Ainu from other communities, like Omappoho, who told me that:

What we really want is a situation like in the US, where fishing rights are divided fifty-fifty under Federal Indian policy. I've seen somewhere that the local Indigenous people and the non-Indigenous people share fifty-fifty of the responsibility and, well, I think that system is good...That's why Ainu and Wajin should work hand in hand, not only to fish for salmon, but also to make rules about how to manage it as a resource that can be passed on to the next generation (Interview, May 13, 2024) ⁹⁶

Clearly, Ainu fishermen are knowledgeable about the condition of the salmon and have a vested interest in conserving salmon populations for future generations. The Court's finding that Ainu Indigenous fishing rights cannot be recognized in light of conservation needs is a bad-faith argument that ignores copious evidence to the contrary.

⁹⁶ Omappoho was likely referencing the system of co-management that resulted from the Boldt Decision.

The Sapporo Court's ruling also shows that Japan does not take international law and agreements seriously. Although it has entered into UN Covenants such as the ICCPR, ICERD, and ICESCR, and has adopted UNDRIP, it maintains that such agreements are not legally binding on signatory countries and refuses to use judicial means to address legislative shortcomings in adhering to the spirit of international law. This demonstrates that Japan participates in international lawmaking as a means of appearing progressive without the need for actual legislative redress. It also completely disregards Ainu legal traditions and fails to engage in legal pluralism in even its weakest form. To the extent that the Court engages with the Ainu legal order at all, it does so by treating it as evidence rather than as a source of the law (c.f. McKerracher 2023, 142). In other words, whether the Ainu had a legal order which defined rights of access to salmon in particular locations along particular rivers is treated by the Court as fact to be proven through evidence, rather than as an extent, Indigenous legal order. Yet even while treating Ainu fishing rights as a fact to be proven, the Court abrogates its responsibility to establish whether or not it is a fact that the Ainu possessed salmon fishing rights prior to the Wajin invasion. Plaintiffs' Attorney Nagaoka Masue argued that:

By refusing to acknowledge or deny the facts, the government is saying that it does not take seriously the actions it has taken against the Ainu people. It does not even clarify whether or not it approves or disapproves. It is an extremely dishonest attitude, isn't it? But the court says, "Well, we will go ahead with the trial without an admission or denial." (HUIDRG 2022a, 3)

Furthermore, the Court's failure to establish the facts of the case is a clear violation of Article 159 of the Code of Civil Procedure, which stipulates that the failure of a party to admit or deny a fact equates to an admission. In other words, the Court's ruling not only fails to engage seriously with international law or Ainu legal traditions, but also seems to disregard even Japan's own laws when convenient.

Many Ainu observers were frustrated by the ruling. Much of this frustration stems from Japan's disregard of the Ainu worldview and legal order. Rimsemat told me that, in court cases like this one, there is a "contradiction or clash between Indigenous cultures and colonial thinking about the legal system. Ainu are fighting over something that makes sense from an Ainu perspective. But because it doesn't fit into the legal system or legal thinking, we are always the one to lose" (Interview, February 10, 2024). At the Plaintiff's press conference on the day of the ruling, one elderly Ainu woman who was present expressed a similar frustration:

What I've been feeling is that the whole culture 'system' is completely different. The Ainu had their own circumstances which made us Ainu. Our condition was shaped by such important things as Ainu spirituality. We would talk intensely to each other about such things. In so doing, we would understand each other. Why do we have to raise this lawsuit? Don't these people have any humanity? Some people just follow what is written in the Six Codes and don't think about Ainu culture.⁹⁷ I knew it would be wrong to say so out loud, but a voice in my head kept thinking, is this the Wajin way of doing things? It fills me with frustration. This ruling is infuriating. What's wrong with this dirty government? What's wrong with these dirty bastards? That's how I felt. (Field notes, April 18, 2024)

A Wajin supporter of Ainu Indigenous rights expressed similar frustration with the outcome, and critiqued the system of majority rules that makes it extremely difficult for Ainu-focused legislation to be passed, forcing Ainu activists to seek judicial redress:

Regarding Indigenous rights, the number of people who want recognition versus those who think it doesn't matter or don't care either way is inevitably much larger. Unless we change the system itself, or unless we can get people who aren't Ainu, and people who know nothing about Indigenous rights, and aren't interested or are confused, to vote yes, then politically, it just won't work. Unless we change the system of majority rules, it's hard for Indigenous peoples to get their voices heard. (Interview, May 9, 2024)

⁹⁷ The Six Codes is a common way of referring to the legal system in Japan, and is comprised of the Constitution of Japan, the Civil Code, the Code of Civil Procedure, the Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Commercial Code.

Meanwhile, my friend Omappoho told me that the outcome left him bitter and depressed about the fact that Ainu have to continually fight for their rights only to be ignored by the government:

Fundamentally, I don't think it's the Ainu who should be having to strive to reclaim those Indigenous rights. The struggle to reclaim indigenous rights stems from the clear historical fact that Ainu history and culture were halted. It's the Japanese government that must properly guarantee and ensure that. But because they still pretend not to see it, we have no choice but to raise our voices. And even when we do, it often doesn't reach them. That's incredibly sad. (Interview, May 13, 2024)

For his part, then-president Sashima Hiromasa, who sat behind a framed photo of his late uncle during the press conference, stated simply that “Frankly, I’m not happy with the decision. It’s not what Masaki would have wanted” (Mainichi Shimbun 2024).



Image: Launching point for the Raporo *asircepnomi*.

E. Conclusion

Despite the Court’s devastating ruling against, Raporo Ainu Nation is determined to keep fighting for Ainu Indigenous rights. They are presently appealing the ruling in the Sapporo High Court—with a final ruling in that appeal slated for July 2026—and seem

prepared to take the case all the way to Japan’s Supreme Court if they have to (HUIDRG 2025). They have also remained outspoken in their criticism on Japan’s Ainu-related policies. For example, in June 2025, Raporo released a joint statement with the Shizunai Ainu Association, entitled “Implementing Policy for Ainu, by Ainu” (J: *Ainu ga motomeru Ainu no tame no seisaku jisshi wo*), penned by Raporo’s present *kaichou*, Tanno Rumika, with Tsutomu Takatsuki of Shizunai. In the statement, they issue seven recommendations for the five-year review of the Ainu Policy Promotion Act, mandated in Article 9 of its Supplementary Provisions.⁹⁸ They challenge the narrow definition of Ainu culture favored by the government, stating that their Ainu culture “encompasses an inherited way of life” that involves “the use and utilization of natural resources” (Raporo Ainu Nation and Shizunai Ainu Association 2025, Recommendation 1). They argue that “the inability to freely catch salmon, so vital to the Ainu, runs counter to the promotion of Ainu culture,” and demand that “laws that contradict this principle must be amended promptly” (Raporo Ainu Nation and Shizunai Ainu Association 2025, Recommendation 1). They also remind the government that “Ainu culture is not something to be exhibited; rather Ainu communities possess the right to maintain, protect, and develop the expression of their culture in the past, present, and future.” (Raporo Ainu Nation and Shizunai Ainu Association 2025, Recommendation 5, citing UNDRIP Article 11, Paragraph 1 and Article 31, Paragraph 1).⁹⁹ ¹⁰⁰ Additionally, Raporo has

⁹⁸ Act No. 16 of 2019, [Act on Promoting Measures to Achieve a Society in which the Pride of Ainu People Is Respected, Supplementary Provisions, Article 9](#): “When five years have passed since the enforcement of this Act, the government will review the status of enforcement of this Act and, if it finds it to be necessary, will take required measures based on the results of the review.”

⁹⁹ [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#), Article 11, Paragraph 1: “Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.”

¹⁰⁰ [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#), Article 31, Paragraph 1: “Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional

remained active in collaborating internationally with other Indigenous peoples. For instance, three members traveled to Victoria, Canada to attend the IPETCA symposium in May, 2025. I joined them there to help interpret for them during the panel discussions and other events.

While many aspects of Indigenous law, trade, and economic cooperation were discussed at the IPETCA meetings, the phrase, “the future of the world is Indigenous,” was a common theme that arose continually from various participants. The future, and temporality more broadly, are important elements of law. Merry (2014) argues that “understanding the global legal order requires attending to its temporality” (Merry 2014, 109). Benda-Beckmann (2014) argues that:

Law connects the present with the past and future either implicitly or explicitly in a variety of ways, for instance, in basic legal concepts, in specific regulations, and in claims to concrete property objects. Legal orders also define the temporal and spatial validity of regulations, decisions or institutions in normative terms. (Benda-Beckmann 2014, 5)

Settler legal systems are typically contrasted with Indigenous legal orders based on a binary between the traditional (past) and the modern (present). Settler colonialism “produces its own temporal formation, with its own particular ways of apprehending time, and the state’s policies, mappings, and imperatives generate the frame of reference” (Rifkin 2017, 2). To settlers, Indigenous peoples are viewed as a so-called “dying race” belonging to the past, while settlers are viewed as representing the future (Tuck and Yang 2012; Weiss 2018). In Indigenous scholar Nick Estes’s (2019) examination of the NO-DAPL anti-pipeline movement, he argues that settler colonialism “has robbed us of a viable future by trapping us

knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.”

in a past that never existed” (Estes 2019, 22). When settler states dispossess Indigenous peoples of their lands, it is never “merely about surrendering one’s lands, but also surrendering one’s future relations to that land” (Estes 2019, 117).

Settler colonialism is a structure of genocidal, ecocidal, and epistemocidal violence premised on the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous land and the elimination of Indigenous peoples as sovereign entities (Wolfe 1999; 2006; Voyles 2015; Gilio-Whitaker 2020; 2021). Eliminating Indigenous legal orders is a precondition for enacting settler future on Indigenous land (Tuck and Yang 2012). Under settler colonialism and the settler legal system, Indigenous law is treated with, to use Benda-Beckmann’s turn of phrase, “the broad-brush use of terms such as custom, tradition, or traditional law to unequivocally suggest that such normative orders were relics of an enduring past,” which is contrast to settler law, which derives “its validity not from tradition but from legislation” (Benda Beckmann 2014, 2). But Indigenous legal orders are not relics of the past, but exist in the present and will endure into the future. As one IPETCA participant said, Indigenous legal orders “can be transformative for other legal systems as well” (Field notes, May 22-23, 2025). Such Indigenous futurity is an assertion of temporal sovereignty that “unsettles” settler notions of legal monism (Weiss 2018, 184). As Rifkin (2017) argues, “the notion of temporal sovereignty seeks to open room for further engaging with how shared ways of experiencing time—continuity, change, and relations among the past, present, and future—help give substance and direction to Native peoplehood” (Rifkin 2017, 188). In doing so, Indigenous futurity “carries the potential for the strategic reiteration of the settler present” (*ibid.*).

When Indigenous peoples and environmental activists came together under the banner of “Mni Waconi” (Water Is Life) to protest the construction of the Dakota Access oil pipeline,

they “didn’t just imagine a future without settler colonialism and the oppressive institution of the state,” writes Nick Estes (2019), but created that future in the here and now” (Estes 2019, 177). Weiss (2018) explores Indigenous people’s future-making potential further through his ethnographic work with the Haida people of present-day British Columbia, as presented in his book *Shaping the Future on Haida Gwaii*. According to Weiss, Indigenous future-making is so unsettling because it challenges “the possibility that there could be any single, coherent settler future” (Weiss 2018, 190). But the significance of Indigenous futurity is greater still because of the potential it presents for conceptualizing and enacting futures not only for Indigenous society, but for settler society as well. As Weiss explains, because Haida people have been “incorporated within the Canadian settler state,” they “have no choice but to make futures for it” (Weiss 2018, 190). In other words, “in Haida future-making we find the implicit assertion that Haida people can make futures that address the dilemmas of Haida and settler life alike” (*ibid.*). Furthermore, Weiss’s examination of Haida future-making pushes us to consider the implications for Indigenous people’s struggles for sovereignty that Indigenous futurity entails:

If it is a sovereign action to envision an opening of possible futures for Haida people, then this very openness might also exceed the boundaries of sovereignty as a problematic for Indigenous people even as it responds to them. Which is also, perhaps, why Haida futures seem so consistently to sketch out social, ecological, and political fields that encompass non-Haida—more, that are futures for Canada as well as for the Haida people living within the nation-state’s borders. What would it mean to figure an Indigenous sovereignty that speaks beyond itself, one that promises to invert the order of settler domination through reconfiguring the shared futures of Indigenous and settler peoples? ... [Doing so] would position Indigenous practices of anticipation, aspiration, certainty, and anxiety at the forefront of contemporary modes of political imagination. (Weiss 2018, 187-188)

Through their grassroots political activism, Raporo Ainu Nation shows that the Ainu legal order still has power in the 21st century. They reject the settler legal system’s claim to

legal monism and seek to force Japan to encounter other forms of law, including Indigenous law as well as international law. They do so by building on the legacy of Indigenous activism in Japan, such as the Nibutani Dam case and the repatriation movement, and by working internationally with other Indigenous peoples. While it's uncertain what the result of their present appeals case will be, Raporo Ainu Nation shows how Ainu people continue assert temporal sovereignty: drawing on the lessons of the past to envision and enact Indigenous Ainu futures in the present.



Image: Raporo members with the author at the IPETCA Symposium in Victoria, Canada. Photo by ann-elise lewallen.

X. CONCLUSION: A MORE WONDERFUL WORLD?

A. Introduction

The day is bright and hot, the sky a brilliant blue, and *Kotan-kor-kamuy* watches over all the land. A scene unfolds that evokes a story that author Shitaku Tomoko recalls being told by her grandmother, which she adapted into the picture book *The Tale of the River Otter* (2005) with illustrations by Suzuki Ryuuichi. The Great Owl blinks his golden eyes as he perches atop a towering Ezo spruce, a guardian keeping vigil over a vast, green landscape. A great river along with smaller watercourses knit this landscape together into the place we know today as the Kushiro Mire (J: *kushiro shitsugen*), the largest wetland in Japan. Suddenly, something glinting in the distance catches *Kotan-kor-kamuy*'s eye. Is it *Esaman*, the river otter, back to once again cavort and taunt as he used to do in the olden days? If so, I'll have to teach him another lesson, *Kotan-kor-kamuy* starts to think. But no, it can't be *Esaman*; the river otter has not been seen in this land for nearly a century, having been driven to extinction due to overhunting and habitat loss (Ando, *et al.* 2007; Irish 2009, 17). Perturbed, *Kotan-kor-kamuy* spreads his great wings and heads off. Perhaps it might be becoming time to quit this land, he thinks, for he knows that the shining object in the distance portends an uncertain future for the wetland and its more-than-human inhabitants.

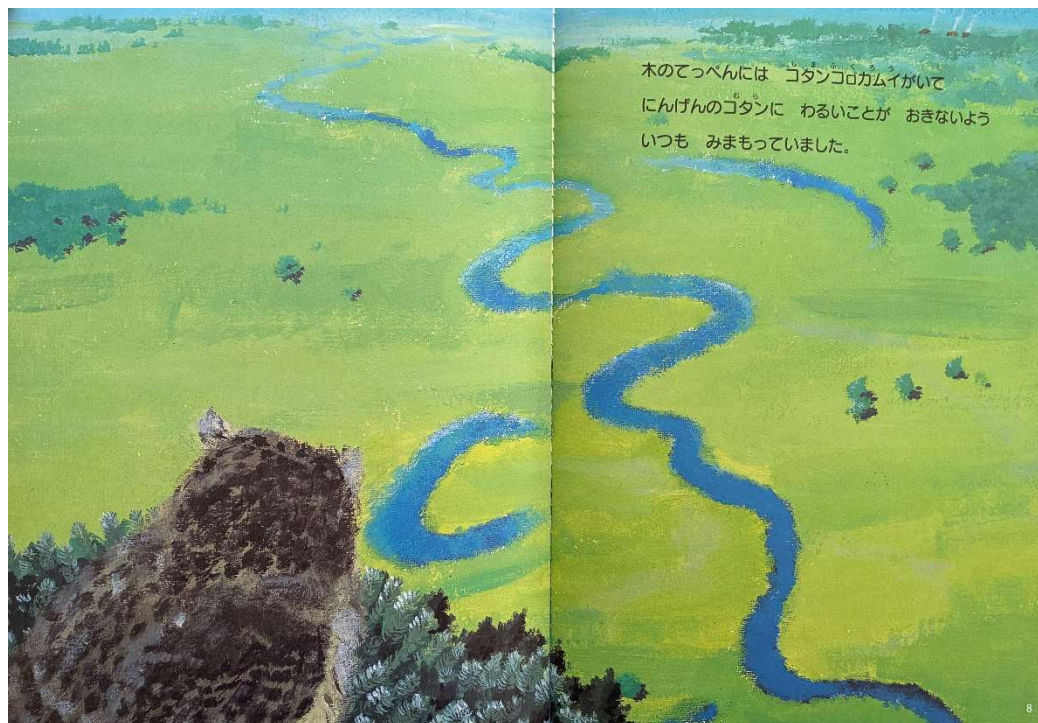


Image: Kotan-kor-kamuy watches protectively over the Kushiro Mire. Illus. Suzuki Ryuichi. From Shitaku and Suzuki (2005).

Soaring aloft on his mighty pinions, *Kotan-kor-kamuy* flies across the great peaks of the Hidaka Mountains to the other side of the island, where another scene unfolds. A red Nissan minivan navigates the curves of National Route 237 as it winds its way south along the Saru River. Inside the car are a collection of Ainu and Wajin activists and one American anthropology graduate student, on their way back from a relatively long road trip (by Japanese standards) to participate in an *icarpa* memorial ceremony in northern Hokkaido. Having reached the home stretch of their journey, their destination close at hand, the folks in the car have settled into a comfortable silence, gazing with admiration at the beautiful Saru River as it rolls by or dozing off in their seats. Suddenly, the driver's voice breaks the reverie. "Well, would you look at that," he says. "Mr. Kurokawa has decided to build solar panels on *his* land, too." The passengers all look out the window to see an array of solar panels that blanket a section of the hillside. The trees have evidently been removed to make space for the

contraption. The driver sucks his teeth and shakes his head, and the group lapses back into silence. They continue onward toward home and, if they can make it in time, the promise of a nice, hot soak at the local *onsen*. They try to focus on this immediate future, for they know that the longer-term horizon is dimmer and more uncertain. Although the passengers in the minivan may not consciously realize it, *Kotan-kor-kamuy* follows them from above, watching over them until they arrive home safely. Then he continues on his way. He does not land here; he knows that the waters of the *Sisirmuka* no longer churn with the schools of big, tasty salmon he once knew. Instead, rising on the wind, he flies off in search of a place where mighty rivers flow freely, filled with salmon so densely packed that the scales of those above are scorched by the sun, and those of the fish below are scraped by the rocks.

This chapter is about climate change and the increasing certainty of a hotter future. I discuss the worrying trend of increasing summer temperatures that has been observed in Hokkaido in recent years. I explain how this reflects broader changes to the Earth's climate at a global scale, and how Indigenous peoples have been at the forefront of climate change's impacts. I then discuss Japan's response to climate change, which is characterized by an enthusiastic embrace of renewable energy infrastructure. Focusing on the case studies of solar and wind energy development projects, I show how the development of renewables in Hokkaido is continuing to repeat colonial patterns and represents a business-as-usual approach for Japan's Construction State, and reflect on the strong critiques of renewables development expressed by the Ainu people I spoke with during my fieldwork. Finally, I conclude by discussing visions of an alternative future that are being pursued by contemporary Ainu activists, centering on restoring the balance between people and rivers.

B. Bellwether of a Hotter Future

“*Netchuushou ni ki wo tsukete ne*” was a phrase I heard people say a lot during my time in Hokkaido. It is perhaps a surprising phrase to hear this far north, as it means “beware of heatstroke.” Shortly after I first checked in to my Sapporo share-house in July 2023, the island was stricken by a record-breaking heatwave that established that summer as Hokkaido’s hottest on record. People I interacted with constantly referenced how uncharacteristically hot it was (Field notes, August 24, 2023). At that time, most buildings in Hokkaido did not have air conditioning, because it was never much needed in the past, but this year, it was sorely missed, as record-breaking heat and humidity continued through the night, making it difficult to sleep. These types of nights are called *nettaiya* (J: tropical nights) in Japanese, and the number of tropical nights in 2023 that never got below 25 degrees Celsius was difficult for many Hokkaido inhabitants to bear. It was hotter in Sapporo than in Tokyo on some days (Tandler 2023). One of Sapporo’s largest department stores, the Mega Don Quixote (“Mega Donki”) located in the city’s famous Tanuki Koji shopping arcade, completely sold out of fans as people desperately sought relief (Field notes, July 30, 2023). A man was even arrested by Sapporo Police for indecent exposure after stripping naked and lying in the grass in a public park; when confronted, he “defended his actions saying the was just feeling hot” (Tandler 2023). On August 23, 2023, an eight-year-old girl in Date died of heatstroke after collapsing during her physical education class, prompting more than 700 schools to suspend classes a few days later (Tandler 2023).¹⁰¹ The heat got so bad that it even claimed the life of one of Sikina Farm’s beloved farm cats, who sadly succumbed to heat stroke and dehydration after spending too much time outside (Field notes, August 28-August

¹⁰¹ The Japanese schoolyear includes the summer.

29, 2023). Even after the extreme heat broke, it remained warm well into the autumn months, which people I spoke with described as unseasonable and strange (Field notes, October 6, 2023). For many people I spoke to during my fieldwork, it was obvious that climate change had begun to be felt in Hokkaido, and how to adapt to this new normal was a near-constant topic of discussion. People had noticed that the heat was having an adverse effect on wild plants such as *sikina* (A: bulrush), *sikerpe* (A: cork tree), and *kutci* (A: hardy kiwi) (Field notes, September 15, 2023; October 19, 2023; November 1, 2023; December 11, 2023). After 2023's extremely hot summer, Yupi had an air conditioner installed at Sikina Farm's *omoya* for the first time—and not a moment too soon, as the summers of 2024 and 2025 would each go on to tie or break the record set in summer 2023 (Japan Meteorological Agency 2026).

In 2024, summer temperatures tied the previous year's record (Tang 2024). In Hokkaido, 955 people were hospitalized for heatstroke (Margolis 2024). On August 24, one of that summer's hottest days, more than 125 schools were closed as a precaution (Margolis 2024). Although Sapporo's mayor, Akimoto Katsuhiro, had announced the installation of air conditioning units at hundreds of schools following last year's record-breaking heat wave, only 16.5 percent of them had been installed by the following summer, and it is estimated that the installation will not be completed until 2027 (Margolis 2024). In February 2025, the Japan Meteorological Association said it was “unlikely” that that summer would see a repeat of the extreme heat of 2023 and 2024 (Rikimaru 2025), but they could not have been more wrong. That year, 132 out of the total 153 weather stations operated by the Japan Meteorological Agency recorded average summer temperatures that were higher than any previously recorded since statistics began to be kept in 1946 (Japan Meteorological Agency 2026, 1-2).

The Agency observed that, in northern Japan, the 2025's summer was 3.4 degrees Celsius higher than Japan's average summer temperature (Japan Meteorological Agency 2026, 2). New record high averages were recorded at fifteen weather stations in Hokkaido, while six other stations recorded temperatures that matched the records previously set in 2023 and 2024 (Japan Meteorological Agency 2026, 3). In addition, record low summer precipitation was recorded for Hokkaido's Pacific coast in 2025 (*ibid.*), while Toyotomi Town on the island's Japan Sea Coast received more than a month's worth of rainfall in just twelve hours on August 26 of that year (The Straits Times 2025). Shattering previous local records, temperatures on July 24, 2025 reached 38.8 degrees Celsius in Obihiro and 39 degrees in Kitami—a full 13.5 degrees higher than city's the thirty-year average (NHK World 2025; Otake 2025). Rikubetsu Town, which claims the title of Japan's coldest town, recorded its highest temperature ever at 36.6 degrees (Otake 2025). On that day and the following day, July 25, the regional rail operator JR Hokkaido suspended sections of the Kushiro-Sapporo and Abashiri-Kamikawa railway lines due to concerns of tracks warping due to extreme heat (Otake 2025). On July 24, NHK World anchor Aoki Midori told viewers that:

I have lived here for two years now and I have never felt heat like this. We're in the Tokachi region, which has been under a heatstroke alert for three straight days. But today is definitely the worst so far. The sun is especially strong.... I don't know if you can tell on camera, but I can't stop sweating! It feels like my skin is burning. I can't overstate how crazy it is—to have heat like this in Hokkaido, of all places. (NHK World 2025)

As of 2025, 40 percent of the homes in Hokkaido still did not have air conditioners (Otake 2025). Although air conditioning may be more common in the rest of Japan, those areas have fared little better than Hokkaido. Temperatures in Tokyo exceeded 35 degrees Celsius for ten consecutive days during the country's hottest July on record, and in Isesaki, Gunma Prefecture, Japan recorded its highest temperature ever at 41.8 degrees Celsius (The Straits

Times 2025). More than 8,400 people were hospitalized due to heatstroke throughout the country and 12 people died (*ibid.*).

The past three summers seem to be heralding the beginning of a new era of hot summers in Hokkaido and Japan more broadly. Indeed, that symbol of Japanese culture, the famous Mount Fuji, experienced its longest recorded period without any snow in 2024 (*ibid.*). But the stresses of extreme heat have not only been Japan, however, but represent an extremely concerning global trend. New global temperature records were set every month between June and January 2024, according to monitoring agencies (Margolis 2024). Evidence that industrial activity driven by the burning of fossil fuels, land change due to industrialized agriculture and development, and global militarization are having a profound impact on the Earth's climate is overwhelming. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) writes that:

Human activities, principally through emissions of greenhouse gases, have unequivocally caused global warming, with global surface temperatures reaching 1.1°C above 1850-1900 in 2011-2020. Global greenhouse gas emissions have continued to increase, with unequal historical and ongoing contributions arising from unsustainable energy use, land use and land-use change, lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production across regions, between and within countries, and among individuals. (IPCC 2023, 4)

It has also been observed that the effects of climate change are disproportionately impacting Indigenous peoples and local communities (Reyes-García, *et al.* 2024). The Iñupiat community of Shishmaref, Alaska in the US is one striking example of the changing climate's impacts on Indigenous peoples, as it is literally being washed into the rising waters of the Chukchi due to the rapid melting of Arctic sea ice (Marino 2015). Held hostage by the interests of private capital, international governments have been unable to reach any semblance of consensus in how to respond, with responses ranging from outright denial and a

self-destructive re-entrenchment the petro-economy, to an uncritical embrace of so-called “renewable” energy sources, such as hydroelectric dams, which may themselves cause devastating environmental impacts that end up actually contributing to climate change.

As a result of the lack of concerted international action on climate change, some climate tipping points have already been surpassed—for example, the complete collapse of coral reef ecosystems is all but assured at this point (Pearce 2026). The world’s Indigenous peoples find themselves in the middle of a polycrisis not of their making, as the threat of ecosystem collapse due to a warmer world has been caused by the global expansion of enduring structures of colonial capitalism, premised upon the ceaseless pillaging of land, labor, and life for the enrichment of an ever-shrinking cadre of global elites. But, just as Indigenous peoples have never been passive victims of settler colonialism, continually resisting it and asserting their Indigenous rights, neither are they merely passive victims of climate change. Their long-standing relationships to their homelands have enabled them to become keen observers of the impacts of the unfolding polycrisis, and yet their perspectives are routinely ignored by policymakers. I contend that climate change will not be solved by building more and building larger; nor will it be solved merely by extracting Indigenous knowledge and using it to greenwash capitalism—an attempt to rationalize an irrational system fixated on infinite economic growth. Instead, I contend that seriously attending to the embedded knowledges of Indigenous peoples such as the Ainu can prompt a shift in values, enabling us to see the world around us not merely as a collection of inert natural resources to be exploited, but as a network of spiritually connected agents whose relationships to each other are out of balance.

C. Japan Goes “Green”: The Role of Renewables in Japan’s Energy Strategy

In 2020, then-Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide announced Japan’s intention to attain net-zero emissions and become a “carbon neutral society” by 2050 (Lies 2020). The Japanese government plans to increase the share of renewables to 36-38 percent by 2030 and to 40-50 percent by 2040 in order to meet its net-zero target in 2050 (Kyodo News 2025a; Toyota Tsusho Corporation 2023). Japan plans to increase solar’s share in Japan’s energy mix to 14-16 percent by 2030 (Otake 2024). Government funding for infrastructure development is provided to municipalities that commit to the 2050 goal (Mizorogi 2020). Koizumi Shinjiro, who was the Environment Minister at the time, described “transitioning to a carbon-neutral society” as the “centerpiece” of the LDP’s “growth strategy” (*ibid.*). The LDP is also promoting electric vehicles “as a form of social infrastructure,” he says, seeing them as “mobile batteries” (*ibid.*).¹⁰² In 2024, Japan’s energy mix was made up of the following sources: 67.5 percent from fossil fuels, 9.5 percent from nuclear, and 23 percent from renewable sources. Of the 23 percent from renewable sources, 43 percent came from solar power, 32 percent from hydropower, 18 percent from biomass, 5 percent from wind, and less than 2 percent from geothermal (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry 2025). The director of the Tokyo-based Renewable Energy Institute stated that Japan needs to expand renewable energy generation by 80 percent in order to meet net-zero targets for 2035, including 35 GW of onshore wind and 45 GW of offshore wind, at a rate of at least 5 GW per year (Coca 2025).

As of 2023, Hokkaido’s share of renewable energy was 40 percent, nearly double the national rate, and it had already surpassed Japan’s 2030 target of 36-38 percent, so the

¹⁰² When I returned to Nibutani for a follow-up visit in 2025, I was surprised to see that several electric vehicle charging stations had been installed in the parking lot of the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum.

Hokkaido government set its own target of 60 percent (Johnston 2024). Data from Hokkaido Electric Power showed that, of the 12.3 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity generated from renewable energy in 2023, 15.6 percent was from hydropower, 10.4 percent from solar, 8 percent from wind, 6.6 percent from biomass, and 0.3 percent from geothermal (*ibid.*). In July 2024, Hokkaido Governor Suzuki Naomichi and Sapporo Mayor Akimoto Katsuhiko requested assistance from the national government in expanding and strengthening Hokkaido's electricity grid to accommodate new renewable energy sources, including offshore wind (*ibid.*). They also asked the government to fast-track construction of a cable, connecting Hokkaido with Honshu, that will enable 2 GW of Hokkaido's energy to be used throughout the rest of Japan by 2030 (*ibid.*).

Hokkaido's goal of 60 percent renewable energy usage by 2030 connects to the prefectural government's vision for a new, high-tech industrial corridor, called "Hokkaido Valley." Modeled after California's Silicon Valley, Hokkaido Valley is envisioned to stretch from Ishikari to Tomakomai and—powered by green energy—to host data centers and high-tech manufacturing facilities. These include a semiconductor plant currently under construction in Chitose by a company called Rapidus (*ibid.*) and a data center being planned in Ishikari that will supposedly run entirely on renewable energy (Mizorogi 2020). Governor Suzuki told the press that "Along with the expectations regarding renewable energy in Hokkaido, we must make Rapidus a success at all costs" (Johnston 2024).

Environmental sociologists Pellow and Park (2002) describe semiconductors such as the ones that Rapidus will produce as "the brains of electronics components and a host of consumer goods today," without which "our radios, cars, watches, computers, airplanes, refrigerators, clocks, and cell phones would not operate properly" (Pellow and Park 2002,

112). As a result, semiconductors “are central to the production of the global economy” (Pellow and Park 2002, 112). However, Pellow and Park’s work reveals that semiconductor production comes “at a dear price for the people who manufacture them” (Pellow and Park 2002, 112). They observe that “the depletion and pollution of human bodies, air, land, and water is endemic and occurs without fail wherever high-tech clusters locate” (Pellow and Park 2002, 192). In spite of the environmental and social costs generated by the high-tech sector, “high technology is often presented as a panacea for many of the world’s ills” and its global advancement “has been accepted as inevitable” (Pellow and Park 2002, 169; 173).

Writing about Silicon Valley, Pellow and Park write that

While typically lauded as the engine of the high-tech global economy and a generator of wealth for millions, Silicon Valley is also home to some of the most toxic industries in the nation, and perhaps the world. Next to the nuclear industry, the production of electronics and computer components contaminates the air, land, water, and human bodies with a nearly unrivaled intensity. (Pellow and Park 2002, *ix*)

They note many of Silicon Valley’s “dubious distinctions” with regard to the environment, which include:

hosting the highest density of federally designated toxic Superfund sites anywhere in the nation and consistently ranking among the top cities in the United States with regard to urban sprawl patterns, average time spent driving on the freeway, and auto-related smog. (Pellow and Park 2002, 19)

In addition to being a major source of environmental contamination, Silicon Valley is “also a site of extreme social inequality” (Pellow and Park 2002, *ix*). While Silicon Valley boasts the highest concentration of millionaires in the US, it

has also experienced some of the greatest declines in wages for working-class residents of any city in the nation. Homes are bought and sold for millions of dollars each day, yet thousands of fully employed residents live in homeless shelters in San Jose, the self-proclaimed “Capitol of Silicon Valley.” Silicon Valley also leads the nation in the number of temporary workers per capita and in workforce gender inequities. Moreover, the region has an entirely non-

unionized workforce and is as racially segregated as most big urban centers.
(Pellow and Park 2002, *ix*)

Despite these negative qualities, the vast amount of wealth Silicon Valley's high-tech industry generates has caught the eyes of observers in other countries who are keen to follow its model. Pellow and Park note that "[h]eads of state and ministers of finance from all over the world regularly visit Silicon Valley to learn from the top high-technology firms...with the ultimate hope of replicating the Valley in one form or another" (Pellow and Park 2002, 18).

As a result, Silicon Valley has become

the model for postindustrial, post-smokestack, high-technology economic development, with replicas such as Silicon Hills and Silicon Prairie in Texas, Silicon Desert in Arizona, Silicon Mountain in Colorado, Silicon Glen in Greenock, Scotland, and the clusters of electronics firms springing up in Ireland, Germany, Taiwan, South Korea, and other places around the world.
(Pellow and Park 2002, 18)

Although the Japanese government's vision for the future of Hokkaido in the form of the Hokkaido Valley promises "sustainable" development in pursuit of a carbon-neutrality, it seems likely that it will actually end up replicating the same environmental and social ills that high-tech corridors have consistently generated wherever they have been sited.

D. Solar Swamp: Solar Power Development in Hokkaido

Solar's share in Japan's energy mix has greatly increased in the years since the shutdown of the country's nuclear reactors in the wake of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011, and the subsequent nuclear accident at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi power plant (Japan Energy Summit and Exhibition n.d.). Solar's growth was also aided by feed-in tariffs (FIT), a system established in 2012 in which utility companies agreed to purchase electricity for a fixed rate from privately owned renewable energy facilities (Kikuchi and

Nakamura 2025). The high FIT rate of ¥42 per kWh in 2012 enticed many companies to begin building solar facilities (Japan Wetlands Action Network [JAWAN] 2024). To encourage small-scale operators to enter the solar energy market, regulations were simplified and the FIT rate was set higher for small-scale facilities (Mutou 2025). In 2017, the FIT system was revised to disqualify solar operators who do not follow regulations and to encourage them to consult with local residents, although there is no penalty stipulated for failing to do so (Otake 2024). In 2022, the FIT system was replaced by the feed-in premium (FIP) system, which offers solar operators a premium on top of market rates, instead of a fixed rate (*ibid.*). Of the 8,481 solar power facilities approved in Hokkaido since the FIT program began in 2012 until May 2025, 86 percent are under 50 kW (Mutou 2025).

The Japan Petroleum Exploration Company (JAPEX) has been building mega-solar facilities in Tomakomai since 2011 (JAPEX n.d.).¹⁰³ Its two currently operating facilities were both completed in 2014 and have a generating capacity of 1.8 MW and 130 MW, respectively. The first facility, located on the site of the company's district office, is 3.87 hectares in size, while the second, larger facility is 30 hectares (JAPEX n.d.). The company cites Tomakomai's "unique set of advantages preferable to solar power generation" including "longer sunlight hours, less snow, and lower temperature" (JAPEX n.d.). In 2025, JAPEX began work on a new, 13 MW mega-solar facility on 17 hectares of a former construction material storage area in Tomakomai, which is planned for completion in 2027 (PVKnowhow 2025). In 2015, a one-hectare, 0.4 MW solar facility went online in Horokeshi, Biratori Town (about 12km upstream along the Saru from Nibutani), developed and operated by the Kobe Bussan corporation, owner of the Gyomu Super supermarket chain (Nikkei Business

¹⁰³ In Japan, a mega-solar facility is defined as one having a capacity of 1 MW or more.

Publications 2015). It was anticipated to provide 426,000 kWh annually, enough to power 120 households, valued at ¥17 million (Nikkei Business Publications 2015).

According to a 2024 survey by Japan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 40 percent of the municipalities that responded to the survey (which was about half of the total number of municipalities in Japan), reported experiencing problems related to solar facilities (Kikuchi and Nakamura 2025). From 2012 to 2022, there were 89 public disputes over solar power projects (Otake 2024). More than 300 local governments had issued ordinances to regulate renewable energy facilities by October 2025 (Kyodo News 2025a).¹⁰⁴ In response, the Ministry of Environment indicated that it would be holding discussions on the possibility of creating national legislation on the issue (Kyodo News 2025a). In December 2025, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry joined the Ministry of the Environment in announcing plans to revise the Electricity Business Act in 2026 to require the safety of solar facilities to be certified by a third-party organization (Kyodo News 2025b). The word “mega-solar” now has such negative connotations for many Japanese that some solar promoters suggest using a different term for large-scale facilities. (Otake 2024). Some have expressed concerns that mega-solar facilities may contribute to increased risk of landslides (Kyodo News 2025a; Otake 2024). Some people living near solar facilities complain about light pollution caused by glare (Otake 2024). A 2020 law requires solar facilities with an output of 40 MW to go through an environmental impact assessment, though as one critic noted:

the environmental assessment law can only minimize environmental impact after the location is decided...It is not designed to deal with complaints such as, “Why should we set up a wind power facility on this nature-rich

¹⁰⁴ Biratori Town is one such municipality that has established regulations for solar power development projects (Biratori Town 2025).

mountain?” and “Why do we have to cut down trees to make space for this solar farm.” (*ibid.*)

Some have suggested one possible solution could be to install solar panels on farms abandoned by depopulation (*ibid.*). Another proposal, called “agrivoltaics,” involves integrating solar power production into agriculture, such as by using vertical solar panels as fencing to keep livestock in or deer out (*ibid.*).



Images: Mega-solar facilities like these are becoming an increasingly common sight in Hokkaido.

In a July 28, 2025 post on Instagram, one of the most recognizable Ainu celebrities, *tonkori* player and recording artist Oki, shared a spreadsheet listing green infrastructure development projects that are underway in Hokkaido, including 8,481 solar power projects, 1,46 wind power projects, and 43 hydropower projects. In the post, he seemed to question the efficiency of solar as a power source and raised concerns about solar panels’ environmental impact: “20 percent becomes electricity, while the remaining 80 percent is released as heat” and “the amount of green space equivalent to the panel area is reduced,” he wrote. This was not the first time Oki had expressed opposition to energy infrastructure projects. Oki is also a long-time anti-nuclear activist. He has spoken of the dangers of nuclear power at the UN and

collaborated with the Japanese reggae deejay Rankin Taxi to produce a version of the anti-nuclear anthem, “You Can’t See it and You Can’t Smell it Either” (J: *Dare ni mo Mienai, Nioi mo Nai*). He has also been outspoken in his opposition to plans to site nuclear waste in Hokkaido (Lee 2025). In a 2025 interview, Oki told Deutsche Welle Radio’s “Living Planet” program that “Nuclear is totally against the Ainu philosophy,” arguing that “we need to make some harmony in between people and nature...I think this is not only an Ainu issue, [but] everybody’s issue” (Lee 2025). Later, on August 9, 2025, Oki made another Instagram post, in which he shared a screenshot of a July 30, 2025 article from the *Hokkaido Shimbun* newspaper entitled “Hidden Mega-Solar Facilities Proliferate,” written by Mutou Satomi (Mutou 2025), and posted the following message:

Currently, there are 10,000 projects planned within Hokkaido alone. The figure of 312 problematic sites is far too low an estimate. The METI regional office dismisses it as “a cat-and-mouse game with contractors,” acting as if it’s someone else’s problem. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry created this flawed system in the first place. The renewable energy sector has become a haven for shady contractors. (Instagram post, August 9, 2025)

Mutou’s investigation for the *Hokkaido Shimbun* found at least 312 instances of a practice called “splitting” (J: *bunkatsu*), in which solar developers exploit a peculiar loophole that enables them to skirt regulations while achieving a higher payout. Developers “split” a larger solar complex into several small-scale facilities (50 kW or less) owned by different cooperating companies in adjacent lots. Not only does this enable developers to reap higher feed-in premiums but it also enables them to skirt government regulations applied to larger facilities, such as detailed maintenance inspections and consultation with nearby residents, in what Mutou describes as the latest play in a “cat-and-mouse game” (J: *itachigokko*). The *Hokkaido Shimbun*’s investigation found at least 17 locations in Tokachi where developers had used splitting to avoid being categorized as “mega-solar,” which entails a lower FIT rate

and stricter regulations (Mutou 2025). Mutou’s investigation focuses on rural Tokachi, where what appears to be a single 250 kW facility is actually five facilities of less than 50 kW each, with the first, third, and fifth facilities being owned by one company, and the second and fourth being owned by another. (Mutou 2025). The government banned splitting in 2014, targeting multiple building applications on one plot owned by a single landowner. Mutou’s investigation found that, in response, developers engaged in widespread attempts to disguise separate facilities by installing fences around them. The government tightened regulations in 2017, but new cases emerged in which companies applied to build on non-adjacent plots, as in the Tokachi region. The government again tightened regulations in 2019 and 2022, but developers have continued to seek new loopholes to exploit, such as installing multiple facilities but leaving empty land in between. (Mutou 2025).

Residents of the Kushiro region, meanwhile, have expressed concern about a growing “sea of mega-solar farms” spreading throughout there (Asahi Shimbun 2025b). Kushiro is flat, receives long hours of sunlight, and boasts relatively low land prices, making it an ideal location for solar development (Kikuchi and Nakamura 2025). In 2014, there was only one mega-solar facility in Kushiro—defined as those with a generating capacity greater than 1 MW (JAWAN 2024). Between April 2014 and September 2023, the number of solar facilities in Kushiro City increased from 82 to 631 (Asahi Shimbun 2025b). By September 2024, Kushiro City had received permit applications for solar installation from 16 different companies. As of November 2024, there were 27 mega-solar power plants in Kushiro. The number of facilities with a generating capacity of 10 kW or more increased from 116 in 2014 to 771 in 2024 (JAWAN 2024). A Kushiro city official told the Japan Wetlands Network that:

if you include the smaller ones, it’s impossible to grasp just how many [solar facilities] there are. Last year alone, we received several hundred inquiries

about building solar panels, and this year the number is even higher. Many of these inquiries are from foreign companies. (JAWAN 2024)

On October 28, 2020, then-Environment Minister (current Defense Minister) Koizumi Shinjiro had announced that the government would ease regulations on the installation of renewable energy plants within national parks, to help Japan reach its goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 (Nihon Keizai Shimbun 2020b). He vowed that the government would “change its thinking” on national parkland “to one that balances protection and utilization” (*ibid.*). Koizumi also announced that the government will subsidize the construction of power-hungry data centers if they use renewable energy for their electricity (*ibid.*). In sum, Koizumi outlined “a transition to a decarbonized society as a pillar of Japan’s growth strategy,” calling it a “historic turning point” (*ibid.*).

Straddling the towns of Shibechea and Tsurui in Kushiro City is Japan’s largest wetland, the Kushiro Mire, where we began this chapter. It was formed about 10,000 years ago and is more than 11,300 hectares, or the size of about 6,000 Tokyo Domes—a common point of size comparison in Japan today (Kumamori Kyoukai 2024). In 1980, the Kushiro Mire’s central 7,863 hectares became the first area in Japan to be registered under the intergovernmental Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, and most of the rest of the wetland was designated as Kushiro-Shitsugen National Park in 1987. The park that *Kotan-kor-kamuy* watches over today encompasses 22,070 hectares, stretching 36 kilometers from north to south and 25 kilometers from east to west (Asahi Shimbun 2025b; Kumamori Kyoukai 2024; Johnston 2025). It is home to more than 2,000 species of plants and animals, including the red-crowned crane, which is designated as a Special National Monument species, and the white-tailed eagle and Siberian salamander, which are rare in Japan (JAWAN 2024; Johnston 2025). But the Kushiro Mire has been making developers salivate ever since Tanaka Kakuei

published his famous book in 1972, *A Plan for Remodeling the Japanese Archipelago* (previously discussed in Chapter IV), which had identified the Kushiro Mire as a prime location for industrialization alongside the East Tomakomai Industrial Park (Tanaka 1973; Kono 2024; Goto 2025). By the year following the book’s publication, the land prices in the area around the wetland tripled (Goto 2025). One contemporary observer remarked that “While protecting the cranes in the wetlands is important, there’s no need to preserve them all” (Goto 2025). Much of this land, which was sold to individual landowners in the 1970s through the “wilderness sales” program for ¥20,000 to ¥30,000 per *tsubo* (1 *tsubo* = approx. 3.3 square meters), is now being sold to solar developers for as little as ¥500 per *tsubo* (JAWAN 2024). The Japanese environmental advocacy group, Kumamori Kyoukai, released a statement in November 2024 on its website describing a “rush to build mega-solar plants in the Kushiro Mire” (Kumamori Kyoukai 2024).

Kushiro City passed regulations on solar power construction, which went into effect in July, 2023. These regulations stipulate that the area around the Kushiro Mire is considered “inappropriate for construction of power farms” according to 25 relevant laws and ordinances, including the National Parks Law and the Forest Law (Asahi Shimbun 2025b). However, they provide no penalty for offenders (*ibid.*). Restrictions on solar panel construction apply within the boundaries of the national park, but the wetland itself surpasses the park’s boundaries, and is designated as a “non-urbanization zone” where buildings are prohibited. However, due to a quirk in the law, solar panels are not regarded as “buildings” under the Building Standards Law (*ibid.*). Furthermore, Kumamori Kyoukai reports that solar facilities have even been built within the national park with permission from the Ministry of the Environment, going over the heads of local officials (Kumamori Kyoukai 2024). The

organization held a site inspection in 2024, where it measured the panels' surface temperature at 70 degrees Celsius in the summer, and it also found that its utilization rate was only 15 percent (*ibid.*). In their statement, Kumamori Kyoukai urged Kushiro's mayor and city council members to "protect the Kushiro Mire from foreign companies and businesses from outside Hokkaido who are only interested in pursuing profits" and "quickly enact legislation to stop the destruction of nature caused by renewable energy projects" (*ibid.*).

Another environmental advocacy group, the Japan Wetlands Action Network (JAWAN), has also expressed concern about solar development in Kushiro on their website, where they write that "surprisingly, solar power generation is being developed even within the marshlands that are part of the national park," and cite one example of an array of 370,000 solar panels that stretching 1.5 kilometers and covering more than 2.3 million square meters, or the equivalent of 49 Tokyo Domes (JAWAN 2024). "Scenes like this can be seen all over Kushiro city," they write (*ibid.*). Approximately 10,000 square meters of northern salamander habitat overlap with areas planned for solar facilities in Kushiro (*ibid.*). A 2025 survey found salamander larvae at a 9.8-hectare site where an Osaka-based company was planning to build a 2 MW solar facility (Mainichi Shimbun 2025). A non-profit organization called NPO Trust Sarun Kushiro, (from the local Ainu word for swamp, *sarun*), which has been involved in conservation in the Kushiro Mire for since its founding in 1988, undertook a campaign in 2024 to buy up private lands surrounding the National Park to prevent the expansion of solar facilities, funded by donations to the Wetland Protection Fund (Kono 2024; Kumamori Kyoukai 2024). By November, it had purchased 607 hectares across 59 sites (Kumamori Kyoukai 2024). The village of Tsurui, which borders the wetlands, acquired

an area known for offering opportunities to photograph red-crowned crane activity, to prevent solar panels from being installed there (Kikuchi and Nakamura 2025).

Controversial projects such as these are not restricted to the area immediately surrounding the Kushiro Mire, but are also appearing in other wetlands in Kushiro, including those near Ainu communities. In May 2023, the *Mainichi Shimbun* newspaper ascertained via interviews that construction of a five-hectare, 1,999 kW solar facility was underway in another wetland area near Shiranuka called Pashikuru Swamp (J: *pashikuru-tou*; “Crow Swamp,” from the Ainu *paskur*, meaning crow) (Honma 2023). The Japan Wetlands Network then reported in November 2024 that a German company was planning to build 120,000 solar panels on 330 hectares of Pashikuru Swamp: “Foreign capital buys Ainu land,” the article’s sub-header read. Pashikuru Swamp has been designated as an important wetland by the Ministry of the Environment and is remembered and utilized “as an *iwor*” by local Ainu organizations, who voiced concerned about the project (Honma 2023). On November 28, 2023, the *Mainichi* ran an article with the headline “New Mega-Solar Project Planned for Ainu Traditional Site” (Mainichi Shimbun 2023). This article revealed that another Tokyo-based company was planning to build a 49.9 MW mega-solar facility on 330 hectares of land just west of Pashikuru Swamp. The name of the company involved is not disclosed, but according to the paper, it appears to be staffed by affiliates of foreign solar companies (Honma 2023). The company broke ground on a solar farm without government permission and ignored warnings from the city that it was in violation of the 2023 regulations (Asahi Shimbun 2025b). Soon after this incident, the city government began to consider passing stricter regulations. In May 2024, 20,000 residents submitted a petition to Kushiro’s mayor calling for the project to be canceled, citing the risk of disasters caused by the development.

One Kushiro resident complained that “the foreign companies developing the mega-solar plant are only considering it as a speculative investment and are not considering the various risks,” noting that “the planned mega-solar plant is located within a tsunami warning zone,” and “there is no access road for the fire department if a fire were to occur among the panels” (JAWAN 2024).

In December 2024, the Osaka-based company Japan Ecology announced plans to build a 27.3-hectare mega-solar facility within “a designated urban development zone” beside the Kushiro-Shitsugen National Park (Johnston 2025). Although Japan Ecology announced in February 2025 that its survey had found no white-tailed eagle nesting sites within the project zone, the *Mainichi Shimbun* newspaper reported multiple nest sites in the construction area in March 2025 (Johnston 2025). In response to this discovery, Kushiro City made entry to the area off-limits, and the company halted construction within 2.5 hectares of each nest site (Johnston 2025). In May 2025, a petition urging Mayor Tsuruma Hidenori to cancel the project received 67,000 signatures, including the support of twenty out of the twenty-four city council members (Johnston 2025). This proved to be the last straw for Kushiro’s city government, which finally enacted stricter regulations in September 2025 via a new city ordinance. Mayor Tsuruma explained that the government passed the new ordinance “out of a desire to protect what we are proud of, including the nature and the rare species” living in the Kushiro Mire (Kukuchi and Nakamura 2025). Under the 2025 ordinance, the city’s permission is required to build solar facilities with a generating capacity of 10 kW or more, which will not be granted if rare species will be impacted, and the names of noncompliant companies will be publicized (Kikuchi and Nakamura 2025).

E. Winds of Change: Wind Power Development in Hokkaido

As of 2022, 2,622 wind turbines had been built throughout Japan, with plans to build at least 307 more (Horigome 2025). However, between 1999 and 2022, there were 148 public disputes over wind power projects (Otake 2024), and since 2022, at least twenty-one wind power development projects have been canceled due to local opposition (Horigome 2025). Hokkaido, and Northern Hokkaido, in particular, is considered an ideal location for wind power generation due to the strength and frequency of its winds (Horigome 2025; Toyota Tsusho Corporation 2023). In 1999, Japan's first large-scale wind power facility was built in Tomamae, one of Hokkaido's windiest areas, by Eurus Energy, a subsidiary of the Toyota automotive group's main trading company, Toyota Tsusho Corporation (Toyota Tsusho Corporation 2023). Eurus opened a second wind facility in Mamatonbetsu in 2001, and a third in Soya in 2005. Eurus is the largest producer of wind power in Japan, with a total generating capacity of 3.42 GW from wind and solar combined. Eurus's parent company, Toyota Tsusho, has also acquired Japan's largest solar power producer, SB Energy, in 2023, which has a generating capacity of 0.823 GW. Toyota Tsusho is also planning hydropower and biomass power facilities, with a goal of increasing its generating capacity of renewable energy to more than 10 GW in 2030.

In 2013, the government designated northern Hokkaido as an area of focus for the development of wind power development and invited permit applicants to pitch ideas for a 10-year project to develop the transmission grid (*ibid.*). Ultimately, Eurus's plan to build a 78-kilometer transmission line from Wakkanai City to Hokkaido Electric Power's grid in Nakagawa Town via a substation in Toyotomi Town was accepted. Construction of the transmission line began in 2018 and it was completed in 2023. More than 600 people were

involved in the construction, which cost ¥105 billion, including government subsidies. In 2023, nine wind power facilities being built by Eurus Energy in Wakkanai City, Toyotomi Town, and Horonobe Town were planned to be connected to the new transmission line by 2025, with a total generating capacity of 540 MW, nearly doubling Hokkaido's wind power output at the time. Eurus Energy's promotional materials try to position it as a friend to the local community, and the company established the Community Development and Innovation Department in 2023 to "realize a wind power generation business that is rooted in the local community," and looks forward to "the day when the future children of northern Hokkaido will be proud of the scenery of their hometowns with wind turbines" (*ibid.*). The Toyota Tsusho Corporation intends to invest ¥700 billion into renewable energy, under the slogan, "A better global environment for the children of the future" (*ibid.*). Now, the solar developer JAPEX is also planning to build a 10MW onshore wind facility in Tomakomai (PVKnowhow 2025). To store Hokkaido's wind energy and help integrate it into the electric grid, Eurus Energy also built Japan's largest lithium-ion storage battery complex (Toyota Tsusho Corporation 2023). In addition, Sumitomo Electric has built two vanadium redox flow battery (VRFB) storage systems (Colthorpe 2022). Storage systems like these help to compensate for fluctuations in power output due to wind conditions (Toyota Tsusho Corporation 2023).

One Hokkaido wind farm being planned by the Japan Renewable Energy Corporation, a Tokyo-based firm affiliated with the oil giant Eneos, has attracted opposition from environmental groups because of its possible impacts on Sakhalin taimen (*Parahucho perryi*; J: *itou*), an endangered freshwater salmonid (Horigome 2025). The project site covers 18,000 hectares in northern Hokkaido, straddling the towns of Wakkanai, Toyotomi, and

Sarufutsu. JRE plans to begin construction on 59 wind turbines with a maximum generating capacity of 354 MW in 2027, with completion scheduled for 2032 (Horigome 2025). Of the total 311 taimen spawning beds along the Sarufutsu River, 38 percent are located within the project site, with other spawning beds expected in other river systems within the site (Horigome 2025). In 2023, the Nature Conservation Society of Japan recommended that JRE cancel the project (Horigome 2025). They warned that deforestation to clear land for the project may increase water temperatures, reduce oxygen composition, and increase river sedimentation, harming young taimen and also negatively impacting other wildlife and tap water quality (Horigome 2025). They were joined by the Ecological Society of Japan's Hokkaido branch, who also urged JRE to cancel the project, which may lead to the extinction of taimen in the region (Horigome 2025). In November 2025, then-Environment Minister Itou Shintarou told JRE that “major revisions” to the project plan are needed if it “cannot significantly reduce the threat” to the Sakhalin taimen (Horigome 2025).

Although the vast majority of Hokkaido's wind power facilities are located onshore, offshore wind power is also being explored. As of May 2025, permits had been granted by the government to fifteen projects in five offshore locations, including island habitats inhabited by the white-tailed eagle (Coca 2025). Japan's first offshore wind power project, comprising two installations in Akita prefecture with a combined generating capacity of 130-MW, was built by a company called Marubeni and went online in 2022 (Proctor 2024). JERA, a consortium of power companies including Itochu, Tohoku Electric Power, and J-Power, began operation of the 112-MW Ishikari Bay New Port, Japan's largest offshore wind facility under a 20-year power purchasing agreement with Hokkaido Electric Power.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ In addition, three offshore wind projects outside of Hokkaido are set to begin operation in 2028-2029: in Akita Prefecture, JERA is building a 315-MW facility; in Niigata Prefecture, Mitsui, Osaka Gas, and the

Located just off the coast of Sapporo, the facility features state-of-the-art turbines designed to withstand typhoons and earthquakes. Shimizu Corporation, Nippon Steel Engineering, and Kajima Corporation were the primary contractors involved in the construction. Offshore wind is promoted as a means of reducing Japan's reliance on both fossil fuels and nuclear power (Coca 2025). The government intends to install 45 GW of offshore wind by 2040, making Japan's wind-power capacity the third largest in the world (Proctor 2024; Coca 2025). Yet offshore wind also raises concerns from conservationists about the dangers posed to birds and from those involved in the fishing industry who fear that development may harm fish populations or limit access to fishing sites (Coca 2025). The complexity of Japan's cooperative fishing rights system makes offshore wind development more challenging. In 2016, fishers opposed the construction of offshore wind in Yamaguchi prefecture, engaging in a five-year court battle before ultimately being dismissed by the Supreme Court in 2021. Construction on that project has since resumed, though it was significantly delayed by the court case.

F. Ainu Critiques of Renewable Energy Development

The Ainu people I got to know during my fourteen months of fieldwork often expressed concern about the environmental impacts of so-called "green" energy development, specifically naming wind turbines and solar panels. One Nibutani resident told me that:

I've honestly seen solar power projects where they just clear-cut a mountain and slap solar panels everywhere. I think that's absolutely terrible. It's dangerous. Sure, you might get a lot of power back in the short term, but the damage outweighs it. I really think they should stop. (Interview, May 17, 2024)

German firm RWE are collaborating on a 684-mW facility; and in Nagasaki Prefecture, Tokyo Electric Power and Sumitomo Corporation are building a 420-MW facility (Proctor 2024).

Referencing the recent news about solar development happening in the Kushiro Mire, he told me that he predicts that “turning wetlands into solar panels will ultimately have some kind of negative impact on humans” (*ibid.*). My host brother Yupi expressed similar concerns about the environmental impacts of renewable energy development and questioned its sustainability for using non-renewable materials that ultimately end up as waste:

The biggest trend now is renewable energy—they think just putting it there will generate power. Windmills, you know. [Laughs]. Windmills or solar panels. But what do you do with them after you make them? How do you dispose of them? They break down eventually. But, you know, the disposal methods for that stuff haven’t been figured out at all yet. That’s the thing: they call it renewable energy, but they’re using non-renewable materials to make it, see? So, it’s just like, what are we going to do about that? (Interview, June 1, 2024)

Like the Nibutani resident above, Yupi also pointed to Kushiro as an example of renewable energy projects having negative environmental impacts:

Around Kushiro, it became a huge problem because we took away the natural habitats of creatures living in nature, you know? The wetlands disappeared too. They cleared the wetlands to catch the sunlight. That’s how it is. Didn’t we know it would turn out like this? (Interview, June 1, 2024)

But as a resident of a depopulating rural area like Biratori Town, Yupi also keenly understands the mindset and the incentive structures that are driving such projects As he explained to me,

Since money comes in for that renewable energy, everyone was happy about it, you see. Everyone thinks it’s just empty countryside, so they’re thrilled that empty fields in the empty countryside will just keep churning out money. They all jump at the chance and start building. And now? Nothing’s changed, really, except solar panels are everywhere you look. That’s the Hokkaido we’ve created. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

G. A Place with Nothing or a Place with Everything?

It is easy to understand why city-dwellers may not give much thought to the proliferation of energy infrastructure throughout Japan's depressed rural areas, and why some residents might welcome the short-term economic benefits promised by such projects. Yupi told me about a common perception in Japan of the countryside as a "place where there's nothing," using this phrase the way an American might refer to "the middle of nowhere." This turn of phrase is even self-effacingly expressed by rural denizens themselves:

There's this common phrase. Anywhere in Japan, if you go to the countryside, you'll hear it: "There's nothing here." They say things like "thank you for coming to our village where there's nothing," using these humble-sounding words. And everyone just says like it's normal, like it's modest or humble. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

My friend, Omappoho, who had moved to Nibutani from Sapporo, told me that he had also noticed this attitude. He pushed back against it, saying that Nibutani's rural charm was a major factor that motivated him to relocate there. "You know," he told me,

if everything were as developed as Sapporo, I don't think I'd want to live here. It wouldn't be fun anymore, and maybe the place would lose its charm. With Nibutani's low population, it might not be very convenient, but just because it's not convenient and doesn't have much doesn't mean it isn't fun. (Interview, May 13, 2024)

Yupi also told me that he strongly objects to minimizing the value of the countryside, calling it a place where nature continues to hold the potential to inspire great awe. As he explained:

I just think that's completely wrong. In my perspective, buildings are something that humans can construct in a year, but nature? Who could possibly create the amazing nature we have here? No matter how much humans try to turn it upside down, it eventually returns to its original state. There are so many things that humans can't do, so many things that humans can't create, remaining in places like this. Yet we've built a society that treats it like there's nothing here. That's probably the biggest problem with society today. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

Yupi's statement evokes a major theme we have seen through numerous examples presented in this dissertation; namely, that the Japanese government's relationship to the land

known as Hokkaido today has been nothing but a series of plays for short-term gain. From overfishing, overlogging, and the chaining of local economies to extractive industries only to have these industries collapse in a matter of decades, to the building of massive and expensive infrastructure projects that seek to control and simplify complex ecosystems and sever the threads that holds these webs of relationships together, only to become rubble that local people have to cope with; long-term consequences of short-term profiteering have never been much considered in the Japanese settler colony of Hokkaido. Japan is certainly not to be singled out in this regard, however, as such short-term profit-seeking also is the prevailing mindset of our global economy, which has created the polycrisis we *all* find ourselves in, today. In contrast, Ainu activists, including those I personally spoke with during my fieldwork, consistently emphasized the danger of focusing only on short-term gain and the need to keep sight on the long-term. “After all,” as Yupi put it to me:

human thoughts are fleeting compared to nature that’s been around for hundreds of years. We have a childish way of thinking. For some reason, humans—and Japan is no exception—think they can control nature. We even think we’re doing it for nature’s sake. But nature isn’t swayed by human cleverness. We’re dealing with something that spans centuries, decades of knowledge, and no matter how hard we try, we just don’t get it. But soon, maybe A.I. will be far smarter than humans and start telling us what to do. If that happens, things might be a bit different. (Interview, June 1, 2024)

H. Envisioning and Enacting Indigenous Futures

One spring afternoon, I sat with my friend Omapoho around a coffee table on the tatami-matted floor of my log cabin at Sikina Farm. We had been chatting for quite some time, and the sun was beginning to sink behind the mountains that flanked the quaint, little valley that I called home. At that point, the conversation lulled, and we sat in thoughtful

silence for a few moments, looking out the window and chewing over what had been said.

Then, Omapoho turned to me and said:

You know, I sometimes fantasize that if Ainu culture hadn't been disrupted, that if colonization had never happened, that the Ainu might have built a more wonderful world. A more wonderful society. From an ecosystem perspective, I think they might have created a peaceful society. But, well... it's just a fantasy, after all. (Interview, May 13, 2024)

This dissertation has shown that, despite dealing with repeated hardship, frustration, and discouragement over the course of centuries, the Ainu people have never given up on creating a more wonderful world, not only for themselves, but for all. Ainu communities today are actively involved in envisioning and enacting a future as a 21st-century Indigenous people. They are engaging in infrastructural work, including river and forest conservation, either with or without the support of local or national governments. Unlike developers and politicians focused on short-term profits, Hokkaido's Ainu communities are in it for the long haul. Young people living in Ainu communities are being raised with values that teach them to participate in their ecosystems in a knowledgeable and far-seeing way, never losing sight of their reciprocal obligations to their more-than-human neighbors. Although activists possess a far-seeing temporal orientation, they emphasize the need to maintain a connection to the past. My friend Rimsemat, for example, taught me that “to disregard what has happened in the past, and make it look like there is no connection to the past, with only the future existing” is “a part of assimilation” and “a continuation of colonization” (Interview, February 17, 2024).

This is not to say that Ainu communities are merely pining for bygone days—although this certainly does happen: for instance, when I once asked my host mother, Hapo, about her dreams for the future, she told me:

Honestly, I prefer the era a little while back. Going back would be great, but that's impossible, so what can I do? Since I can't go back to the old days, I try to make the most of the present but... I can't really see it. It's not very bright. What should we do? I always think about it. (Field Notes, April 30, 2024)

But the people I got to know during my fieldwork—Hapo included—all expressed a strong desire to see Ainu culture flourish and develop into vibrant new forms, rather than merely seeking a repetition of past forms. For example, one young Ainu man I spoke with told me that:

I want the culture that we care about to be revived—well, I wouldn't say completely back to how it was before, but in a form close to that. How should I put it? Not going back to the past, but rebuilding it, so Ainu culture can continue to develop. (Interview, May 17, 2024)

This temporal orientation is strongly rooted in Ainu traditional ecological knowledge. My host father, Mici, taught me many things throughout my fieldwork, one of which was that the ancestors of today's Ainu “were a people who derived everything from the natural environment around them” (Field notes, February 5, 2024). From this perspective, the strong ethic of environmental protection and stewardship displayed by Ainu communities throughout Hokkaido makes sense, because “if you destroy nature, you can't survive” (*ibid.*). His son, Yupi, added additional nuance to this lesson, saying that:

The Ainu way of thinking—living with nature—is often described in such simplistic, inadequate terms. My view, which might be considered problematic, is that the Ainu simply live by valuing those who bring us benefits. And since nature provides us with benefits, with some kind of advantage, we stand on the principle that nature must be cherished. This is probably a bit hard for modern Japanese people to understand. I'm talking about the non-farmers among them; the farmers probably understand this. They know that what they do to nature will be returned by nature. So, I think a farmer's mindset is probably closer to the Ainu way of thinking. It's just about giving thanks to those who deserve it and valuing them. For the Ainu people, who had to live with nature day in and day out, it wasn't something strange or incomprehensible. It was just normal. When my grandmother used to talk, I would hear that way of thinking here and there, you know? I was taught by my grandmother and other grandmothers that, if you do something

disrespectful to nature, you will absolutely be punished, so you definitely have to be careful about that. That way of thinking was so deeply ingrained in my grandmother's heart, that doing so didn't feel like a struggle or anything unnatural for her. It was just obvious. (Field notes, June 1, 2024)

Other people I spoke with during my fieldwork, both Ainu and Wajin, told me that they even saw value in this Ainu environmental ethic beyond local Ainu communities, but throughout Hokkaido and Japan. One Wajin resident of Biratori Town told me of his belief that:

environmental protection is something we have to keep advocating for. Sure, to make it easy to understand, it's easier to frame it as the Ainu people having their land taken away arbitrarily and being destroyed like this, right? But, well, I think it's an issue for everyone in this country, not just the Ainu people. (Interview, May 20, 2024a)

An Ainu resident, meanwhile, told me that he thinks that Ainu culture, including this environmental ethic, should be "taken for granted." As he passionately explained:

First and foremost, I want Ainu culture to be taken for granted. Really, yeah, Ainu culture should be taken for granted! It should be visible and it should be normal, throughout all of Hokkaido. Ainu culture should be taken for granted! And it's not about being Ainu or non-Ainu—I want to see it become a culture that's just natural for everyone. Then, well, I think we Ainu would feel more pride, too. (Interview, May 21, 2024)

The Indigenous futures that contemporary Ainu communities are envisioning and enacting are varied and multi-faceted, drawing from the community-members' different individual skills, interests, and passions. My friend, Aepakasnumat, told me that she thinks that this diversity ought to be embraced, rather than minimized in favor of a unified vision. As she observed:

There are people with passionate convictions who are active, and around them, there are all kinds of young people interested in politics who are really calling for these things. And then, of course, there are also people who want to protect this environment, who are working on land issues and things like that. Then there are people who want to nurture the creators of Ainu culture, the makers, and who want to create things themselves. Each person—their genre,

their area of expertise—is different. Even within Ainu culture, there are so many different things, so I hope everyone finds their own area of interest and acts with conviction. (Interview, May 14, 2024)

For some, it is the spiritual foundation of Ainu culture—illustrated by the vignettes that appear throughout this dissertation—that guides their actions and animates their dreams for the future. My friend, Ekimnekur, told me that, for him:

It's all about living with confidence, you know? We need to create an environment where we can live with confidence, and to do that, we need to be able to properly face the *kamuy*. We need to keep our special protocols for dealing with them in our hearts. That's why, you know, just being able to carve wood isn't enough. We need to hold onto our living spiritual culture—the soul of the Ainu people—even more strongly, because that spiritual foundation is something that's easily forgotten. We need to work hard to keep it alive in the environment we create. (Interview, May 21, 2024)

Other people I spoke with expressed more personal dreams for the future, although these were also rooted in traditional Ainu values. For example, my friend, Omappoho told me that his personal hope for the future was to become a respectable person, citing the figure of an Ainu *ekasi* (A: male elder) as his major role model. “I want to be a cool adult,” he told me,

the kind kids look up to. Like, if I had a child, I'd want them to think, “I want to be like my dad.” Even if it's just a little bit, I've always thought it'd be nice to be someone who makes people think, “Wow, that person is cool.” To put it simply, I want to become an *ekasi*. The image I have of an *ekasi* is someone who can do anything. If the village has some kind of problem, he acts as a leader and settles it. He is respected. He is persuasive. He is someone who makes you think, “well, if *he* says it, it *must* be right;” someone who makes you think, “I should listen to what this person has to say.” I just want to become a more admirable person, a more admirable Ainu. (Interview, May 13, 2024)

In many ways, the future vision being pursued by the Ainu activists that I got to know during my fieldwork is rooted in an image of an ideal world that is remembered in Ainu oral literature. One story that provides a glimpse into such a world was recited by Hiraga Etenoa in 1932 and recorded as *Kamuy Yukar* 86 by Kubodera (1977), and then translated English by

Philippi (1979). In the story, the Divine Culture Hero Okikurmi and his sister-wife Tures-mat have left *Yaun Mosir* (A: Hokkaido) and are living in *Samor Mosir* (A: Honshu). Tures-mat is stricken by a terrible homesickness, refusing to eat or leave her bed. Seeing Tures-mat in such anguish and wishing to cheer her up, Okikurmi decides to make for her a picture of their homeland. In the picture that Okikurmi made, we can see what an ideal world might look like, and, as should come as no surprise by this point, it centers on a river. A condensed retelling of the story reads as follows:

These are the words of Tures-mat:

In my longing for my native homeland, I turned aside from even the tastiest of foods. I remained lying in bed without eating all the time. Black mold grew on the food served to me earlier, and white mold appeared on the food served to me more recently.

Meanwhile, my elder brother Okikurmi did nothing but carve wooden scabbards with his eyes focused on a single spot, and this is the way we continued to live, on and on. By this time, I felt on the verge of death, as if I could die at any moment, and only remained conscious in the deepest part of my heart.

Then one day, my brother set aside his carving and stepped outside. After a long while, he came back inside and sat down at the right-hand side of the hearth. He turned and spoke these words to me:

“Look here, sister! Since you have been behaving like this because you wanted to see our homeland, I have made a picture of it. Come outside and see!”

I raised myself up with the utmost effort and crawled on all fours toward the door, feeling as if I could fall over at any moment. I sat down by the doorway and looked outside, and this is what I saw:

Exactly as it used to be, the *Sisirmuka* could be seen clearly as it flowed along. There were many small meadows and big meadows by the river, spreading out one after another. There were many small woods and big woods by the river, spreading out one after another. Thickets of *sarki* (A: reeds) grew densely in the background, and thickets of *sikina* (A: bulrush) grew densely in the foreground. Groves of *susu* (A: willows) grew densely in the foreground and groves of *kene* (A: alders) grew densely in the background. It was a delightful sight, and my heart leaped with pleasure.

In the river fishing grounds, the fish were so abundant that the scales of the fish at the bottom would rub against the rocks and the scales of the fish at the top would be scorched by the sun. Groups of young men, going out to catch fish, darted their harpoons this way and that way and jumped around in every direction.

In the mountain hunting grounds, the stags were running in their own herds, the does were running in their own herds, and the fawns were running in their own herds, skipping and leaping about over the mountains. Groups of young men, going out to hunt the deer, tipped their quivers back and, laughing and singing in loud voices, jumped around in every direction.

In the woods by the river, small *turep* (A: lily-bulb) beds and large *turep* beds spread out one after another. Groups of young women, going out to dig up the *turep*, threw down their small baskets and raced to fill their big baskets, laughing and singing in loud voices and rising up all at once.

When I saw this, it was a delightful sight, and my heart leaped with pleasure. Then, after a while, the vision vanished from before my eyes as if a light had been put out.

I went and sat down by the hearth next to my brother, Okikurmi. Then he spoke these words to me:

“Listen, sister, to what I have to say! I was so exceedingly angry at the humans that I departed in anger and came here to the eastern tip of *Samor Mosir* and I plan to continue living here, never to return to the land of the *Yaunkur*. But since your longing distressed my heart so sorely, I fashioned with my hands this picture of our native homeland, our native river, the *Sisirmuka*. Now that you have seen it, please stop behaving as you have been.” Thus spoke my brother.

Only then did I begin to do nothing but needlework, with my eyes focused on a single spot, and this is the way we live on and on, uneventfully. My brother continues to do nothing but carve wooden scabbards, with his eyes focused on a single spot, and we live on. (Adapted from Philippi 1979, 230-235).

I. Infrastructures of Sovereignty, Infrastructures of Abundance

River and floodplains play a major role in the global carbon cycle, storing significantly more carbon than other types of land-cover, accounting for up to eight percent of soil-bound carbon despite covering less than one percent of all land on Earth (Sear, *et al.* 2023, 3). Moreover, rivers are responsible for moving land-bound carbon in the form of soil and organic material to the ocean, where it is “eventually buried and disconnected from the atmosphere for millions of years” (Thames21 2025). But rivers are already degrading at an alarming rate relative to other ecosystems, and climate change is making rivers more unpredictable, with increasing precipitation in some regions causing worse and more frequent

floods along with worsening water pollution, while drought in other regions is causing rivers and reservoirs to begin to run dry out (Kingsford 2011, 217; Skidmore and Wheaton 2022, 3-4). Human attempts to control rivers through dam construction and other infrastructure projects have only made many of these problems worse. River modification projects and the draining of wetlands have severed the connections between rivers, floodplains, forests, and wetlands, compromising their carbon storage capacity (Sear, *et al.* 2023, 4). Skidmore and Wheaton argue, “the limitations of aging gray infrastructure to address growing challenges or the extent to which it has accelerated the decline of river ecosystem health and biodiversity” have become impossible to ignore. (Skidmore and Wheaton 2022, 3). As we continue to destroy our lifegiving rivers for the sake of economic gain, we are faced with an increasingly urgent need re-evaluate our values and our priorities.

In Hokkaido, the Indigenous Ainu people have never stopped caring for their rivers. Rivers are the infrastructures of Ainu sovereignty, the rallying points around which Ainu have come together to form communities and assert their right to envision and enact a better future for themselves and for all of us. Paying attention to the words and actions of Ainu activists can help us to see that a life of true abundance begins by honoring and protecting the rivers that give us life. They recognize, as their ancestors always have, that our destinies are inextricably linked to the health of our rivers. And just as the River Goddess, *Wakka-us-kamuy*, continues to live on and on with her eyes focused on a single spot, the Ainu people will continue to fight for the right to define what it means to be Ainu in the 21st century. Whatever that ends up looking like, I feel quite certain that rivers will be at the center of things.

J. Epilogue

As *Kotan-kor-kamuy* continues his flight far above the Saru River, something else catches his eye. A group of humans has gathered at the *Sisirmuka*'s confluence with the *Sikerpe* River, armed with buckets. Intrigued, *Kotan-kor-kamuy* finds a nearby tree limb (or power line) from which to perch and observe with his golden eyes. Now that he is closer, *Kotan-kor-kamuy* can see the group more clearly. Young children, guided by elders, stoop over the buckets clutching plastic cups. Each child plunges their cup into the bucket and withdraws it full of water in which a tiny, juvenile salmon is suspended. Salivating, *Kotan-kor-kamuy* shifts his weight from one foot to another, barely able to contain his excitement. Carrying their cups to the edge of the gentle *Sikerpe*, the children carefully release the young salmon into the current. "*Suy unukar anrooo!* See you again soon!" they say as they send the tiny fish off on their three-year journey from the river to the ocean and—hopefully—back again. *Kotan-kor-kamuy* knows that their journey will be difficult and full of danger. He has seen the changes that humans have wrought to the rivers, which made it nearly impossible for the salmon to reach their ancestral spawning grounds. But he has also seen telling indications that some humans, those living in the Ainu communities that he has long protected, have never stopped caring for their rivers. This new generation of *Sarunkur*, together with the *Petunkur* of the island's other river basins, has not forgotten their obligation to cherish him and all the gods that inhabit *Yaun Mosir*'s lands and waters. And just as the great Okikurmi once did, they will never stop fighting to protect their rivers from the evils that threaten them.

Seeing and contemplating this gives the great *Kotan-kor-kamuy* pause. Perhaps giving up on this land would be premature, after all. If I can just wait it out somewhere cooler, he thinks, perhaps a day will come when I can return and feast on *Sisirmuka* salmon as I did in

the old days. Turning eastward, his magnificent eyes zoom in on Mount Poroshiri's lofty peak, shrouded in cloud, where the *Sisirmuka*'s headwaters originate. Yes, he thinks, I will go there, to the home of the River Goddess, *Wakka-us-kamuy*, and seek her wisdom on this matter. Together, we live on and on, keeping our eyes on a single spot, until the day when the Ainu people finally succeed in reclaiming their rivers, the infrastructures of their sovereignty.



Image: Guided by adults, schoolchildren release young salmon into the Saru River.

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