

# Chapter 9

## Significance of Grassroots Museums and Ainu Culture in Japan

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter explores the history of Japanese grassroots museums by focusing on the establishment of museums dedicated to the challenges and distinct culture of the Ainu who are indigenous to northern Japan, including the Hokkaido Island. Recently, the Japanese government has intensified its focus on Ainu-related policies. This includes initiatives, such as the opening of new national museums in Hokkaido. However, the government has faced criticism owing to its failure to fully recognize and protect the rights of the Ainu. The arrest of Ainu individuals practicing traditional fishing methods, political rhetoric from the government, and denial of the existence of the Ainu people by ruling party officials indicate that the approach and policies concerning the Ainu have remained largely unchanged from historically discriminatory practices. There is growing criticism that current Ainu policies primarily view the Ainu as mere “tourist attractions” rather than a community with distinct rights and cultural heritage.*

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE AINU**

The Ainu people are indigenous to the northern territories of Japan - Hokkaido, the upper part of Tohoku, and including areas such as Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands that are now under Russian administration. Acknowledged by the Japanese govern-

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ment as the indigenous inhabitants, particularly of Hokkaido and its surrounding Japanese islands, they have nurtured a unique culture and language.

In the Ainu language, the term “Ainu” signifies “human.” Traditionally, the Ainu have coexisted with nature, primarily as hunters, gatherers, and devoted fishermen. A noteworthy aspect of their society is the formation of settlements, commonly referred to as “kotan.”

Despite the rich and diverse nature of Ainu culture, and the fact that the government has formally acknowledged them as an indigenous group, the government's actions have often been fraught with controversy. A prominent example of this is the establishment of Upopoy, the National Ainu Museum and Park.

## **Upopoy: The National Ainu Museum and Park**

A comprehensive facility related to the Ainu people named Upopoy, the Ainu term for “singing in a group,” was established in 2020 in Shiraoi Town, Hokkaido in Japan. This complex encompasses the National Ainu Museum, National Ethnic Coexistence Park, and a memorial facility. Collectively designated as the Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony by the government, these facilities aim to serve as a national center for cultural exchange. According to the Japanese government, their primary purpose is to foster the revival, creation, and development of Ainu culture.

The author's visit to Upopoy shortly after its opening revealed a notable contrast in the representation of the Japanese government's assimilation policies and the history of discrimination against the Ainu, especially compared with existing grassroots museums. Grassroots museums, often initiated and managed by local communities or small organizations, focus on representing history from the perspective of those directly impacted, offering a more personal and sometimes counter-narrative to official state versions. This approach starkly contrasts with the more institutionalized representations seen at places like Upopoy, which are often influenced by governmental perspectives.

A significant incident in this context was the statement made by Koichi Hagiuda, the then Minister of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), during a post-cabinet meeting press conference on July 10, 2020, about Upopoy's construction. His remarks were markedly insensitive. Hagiuda stated that:

There must have been various differences in values between the indigenous Ainu and the new settlers. To uniformly label these differences as “discrimination” in the context of passing down Ainu culture to future generations is a matter of concern. With such a valuable facility, our effort should be focused on positively promoting the virtues of Ainu culture (Maruyama, 2020).

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