Chapter 2

Hokkaido Island: Ainu

Of all the indigenous peoples of Northeast Asia, the Ainu are by far the best represented in ethnographic literature, especially in the Russian, Japanese and English languages. The early interest devoted to the Ainu has undoubtedly stemmed from their unique and isolated position in terms of physical appearance that vaguely displayed similarities, from various points of view, with the Caucasian, aboriginal Australian, Micronesian-Polynesian and American Indian types, in addition to their conspicuous hirsuteness. These unique physical characteristics, seen together with the apparent genetic isolation of the Ainu language, led, along with some prominently highlighted cultural features such as the bear ceremony, to the popular image of the Ainu as an ethnological riddle. Of the thousands of pages of ethnographic data on the Ainu, almost all concern the Hokkaido and Sakhalin Ainu; very little is known about the Ainu of the northern Kuril islands and northern Honshu, both of whom were already acculturated or assimilated at a time when there was little interest in ethnographic research.

a Ethnographic Synopsis

Background

The autonym Ainu (‘human beings’) is universally used as an ethnonym of the aboriginal people of Hokkaido and surrounding islands. Aino, Ezo, Yezo, and other appellations were used until the late 19th and early 20th century. Early Chinese sources referred to the Ainu as Kui, derived from Kugi, Kughi, and similar names used by various northern Ainu neighbors. It is possible that the name Kuril that refers to the chain of islands formerly inhabited by the Ainu is a Europeanized version of this name; the Nivkh, their northern neighbors and probable carriers of Okhotsk culture to the islands, also use forms of this term to refer to the Ainu. The traditional Ainu territories included the island of Hokkaido, the southern one-third of Sakhalin island, and all the islands of the Kuril chain (Kunashir, Shikotan, Iturup, Urup, Simushir, Ketoy, Rasshua, Matua, Raykoke, Shiashkotan, Onekotan, Paramushir, Shumshu). Until various points of a more distant past, the Ainu also inhabited portions lands dominated by other peoples, namely northern Honshu, parts of the Amur region of the main-
land, and the southern tip of Kamchatka peninsula where they lived among the Itelmen.

Their settlements in Sakhalin and Hokkaido were located near sea coasts and in river valleys surrounded by dense coniferous, deciduous, and mixed forests of a transitional Subarctic-temperate zone. The climate was characterized by four distinct seasons with short, mild summers and cold, snowy winters. The total Ainu population was 17,810 in 1854 and in 1913, the number was 18,543. (Sakhalin under the Japanese administration during the first half of the 20th century had roughly 1,700 to 2,400 Ainu.) The highest population density was in the broad valleys of large rivers in southeastern Hokkaido where they still concentrate today (between modern Tomakomai and Cape Erimo).

According to a 1994 count, there were 23,830 Ainu in Hokkaido in addition to several thousand more living in Tokyo or other cities in Japan; however, according to various unofficial censuses, there are anywhere between 27,000 and 40,000 individuals in Hokkaido who identify themselves as Ainu.

**Subsistence**

The principal subsistence activities are fishing (mainly salmon) and hunting forest animals such as deer. Sea mammal hunting was important in coastal settlements and especially on the Kuril Islands before the areas were overrun by Japanese settlers. Bird (e.g. cormorant) hunting was also a major activity especially on Kuril Islands where it was utilized not only for food but also for clothing. The emphasis on particular subsistence activities varies according to the seasons. Summers are mainly spent by fishing to ensure adequate year-round diet of fish for the people, the dogs and the bear raised in a cage in preparation of the bear ceremony. Fish is the staple food as it is perpetually available, unlike meat. Salmon is often eaten raw in summer, but the Ainu usually cook other fish in contrast to all their southern and northern neighbors who eat most kinds of fish raw. The summer fishing season begins in May, immediately after their relocation from winter to summer settlements, with the herring run near the coast, followed by the trout also caught in the sea. As the trout begin migrating up rivers, the people also shift their activities to rivers and lakes some distance inland. The final and most important part of the fishing season coincides with the time of salmon spawning. In the spawning shallows, the fish are generally caught from the shore with spears; in other parts of the river, nets, hooks and lines, and basket traps are used. A team of twenty to thirty dogs is sometimes used to assist fishermen in catching fish near the seashore by driving the fish toward the men who are waiting with spears. The Ainu use dugout boats for both river and seashore fishing. The end of summer is