

Architectural Assimilation
Zac Fairbrother

Architectural Assimilation: Dwellings as Sites of Colonialism in Hokkaido



The Seikatei.

Above is the Seikatei, a tourist attraction located in Sapporo, capital city of Japan's northernmost prefecture, Hokkaido. Built in the 1880s, the Seikatei was intended as a rest house for Japanese dignitaries passing through the city and is an important artefact of Hokkaido's colonisation. Its design incorporates both western and Japanese architectural motifs to represent the cosmopolitan outlook of the state; a German architect designed the surrounding gardens.¹

¹ Lambe, Michael, 'The Seikatei', Sapporo Station <https://www.sapporostation.com/the-seikatei/>.

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A reconstructed AINU chise.²

Compare the Seikatei to a traditional chise dwelling preserved in Asahikawa. Unlike the Seikatei, this house was built by AINU, people indigenous to Hokkaido. Where the Seikatei's roof is tiled, this is thatched; where the Seikatei features glass windows and wooden floors, this has neither. Looking at both together, we are tempted to make certain assumptions – that the Seikatei is 'modern' and comfortable where the chise is primitive and unpleasant. But to AINU, chise were carefully constructed to embody spiritual culture. To sightseers today, chise are curiosities, symbols of a bygone era – but to AINU, they were homes, imbued with meaning and memories.

This article is a short inquiry into the use of space, dwellings, and households in Japan's colonisation of Hokkaido. Indigenous architecture encapsulates a culture, religion, and way of understanding the world. Houses are where we sleep, eat, spend time with family, and so transforming both houses themselves and how their inhabitants view them is often crucial to colonial projects. This was no less the case for the AINU, a little-known group outside of Japan who I hope to highlight.

² 'Traditional AINU dwellings (chise)', Japan Heritage Council for the Promotion of Kamikawa AINU at Daisetsu Sanroku (2018) <https://daisetsu-kamikawa-ainu.jp/en/story/chise/>.

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Introducing Hokkaido

Hokkaido today is a prefecture equal to any other in Japan, but until the 1860s it was officially a separate entity, inhabited primarily not by Japanese but by the indigenous Ainu people. Despite claims of ethnic homogeneity, Japanese descend from various ethnic groups which coalesced on the islands thousands of years ago. The Ainu retained a distinct identity, inhabiting the islands of Sakhalin, the Kuriles, and Hokkaido, formerly called Ezo/Ezogashima. This term encapsulates the paradoxical relationship between Japanese and the Ainu. On one hand, it seems to derive from the Ainu word for 'people,' revealing linguistic intermingling. On the other, in Japanese Ezogashima means 'barbarian island,' showcasing Japanese xenophobia towards the Ainu.³

Throughout history Japanese have steadily migrated into Hokkaido, but in small numbers until the 17th century, when the Matsumae Clan secured dominance over trade with the Ainu. Ainu embraced trade with Japan – they could exchange woodwork, meats and pelts for abundant rice, and since Ainu goods were exempt from tariffs they were highly sought after. However, over time the Matsumae began to build mines, factories, and fisheries in Ainu territory, eroding and polluting the environment and cutting Ainu off from game and resources. Outposts built near Ainu fishing grounds forced them into dependence on an increasingly unequal trade with Japan, forcing them into wage labour, and limiting their access to traditional sources of food.⁴ Increasingly desperate, impoverished Ainu clans fought over territory and had to exploit the environment themselves in contravention of their religious values. Ainu fought to oust Japanese from Ezo under the chieftain Shakushain in 1669, but to little effect.⁵ Ainu culture was thus eroded alongside the environment, but their dwellings remained a powerful emblem of that culture well into the 1860s.

Traditional Ainu Houses as Culture

Ainu houses are microcosms of an indigenous view of the universe.⁶ Ainu believe in Kamuy, spirits which inhabit all things on earth – from rocks and trees, to disease, to animals. Where other religions emphasise a hierarchy of deity over human, Ainu see humans and kamuy as equal, entwined forces in an ever-changing universe, with kamuy entering and exiting the mortal plane fluidly.⁷ Animal kamuy are especially important to Ainu hunting practices – they believe that kamuy are trapped in the animal's body, so killing the animal will release the spirit. Hunting is therefore a reciprocal process; the hunter frees the kamuy, who grants sustenance in return.⁸

Kamuy that inhabit bears were thought to be most powerful. The bear-killing ceremony (iomante) is amongst the most important Ainu rituals; their houses and villages were built with it in mind and included cages to keep bear cubs. Cubs were raised by Ainu themselves (allegedly women even breastfed the youngest), until they were old enough for iomante. When ready to kill a bear, Ainu performed prayers and laid out treasures on special shelves, and brought the bear inside. Methods for killing differed, but Ainu houses invariably included a 'god-window' – this sacred opening allowed the bear kamuy to escape from its body and into the ethereal plane. Following the

3 Brett L. Walker, *The Conquest of Ainu Lands: Ecology and Culture in Japanese Expansion, 1590-1800* (University of California Press, 2001), 26.

4 *Ibid.*, 24-43.

5 Ibrahim Jalal, *Hokkaido: A History of Japan's Northern Isle and its People* (Earnshaw Books, 2021), 31-3.

6 Emiko Ohnuki-Tiemey, 'Spatial Concepts of the Ainu of the Northwest Coast of Southern Sakhalin', *American Anthropologist* 74/3 (1972), 434.

7 Walker, *The Conquest of Ainu Lands*, 52.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 77-8; Hiroshi Utagawa, 'The "Sending-Back" Rite in Ainu Culture', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 19 (1992), 255.

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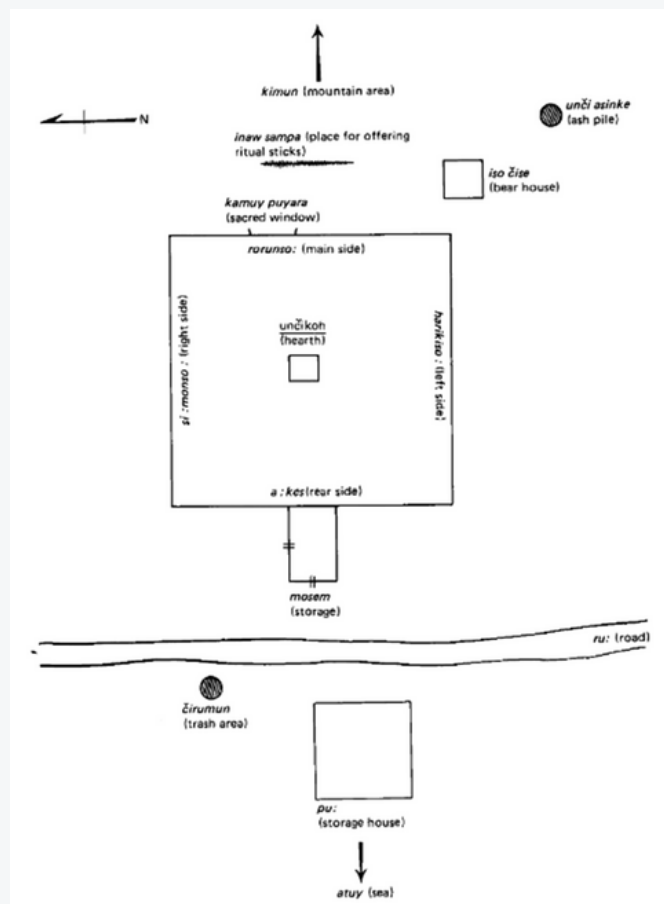
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killing, offerings were presented to the kamuy, wine prepared, and the contents of the bear's head scooped out. The head, finally, was filled with flowers as an expression of thanks to the kamuy whose carcass would feed the kotan (village).⁹ Ainu houses are largely designed with the *iomante* in mind, especially with the placement of god-windows and treasure shelves.



Floor plan of an Ainu house.¹⁰

9 Kyōsuke Kindaichi and Minori Yoshida, 'The Concepts behind the Ainu Bear Festival (Kumamatsuri)', *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 5/4 (1949), 345-350.

10 Ohnuki-Tierney, 'Spatial Concepts of the Ainu of the Northwest Coast of Southern Sakhalin', 436.

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Another important aspect of chise was the hearth; an indoor fire was crucial to keeping families warm in harsh Hokkaido winters. The hearth is the home of Fuchi, kamuy protector of the household and guardian of the portal between the mortal and spirit realms, represented by the hearth – as such, it must be kept alight perpetually. In effect, each Ainu house was a physical embodiment of the reciprocal relationship between human and kamuy which the universe relied on – it was through the hearth and god-window that Ainu could perform dialogue with the kamuy.¹¹

In some Ainu communities, seating was arranged so that husband and wife sat on the right-hand side of the house, oriented to face a coast or mountain and its resident kamuy. Other members of the household, often including adult children, would sit opposite, so that the hearth was between parents and children. The space between hearth and god-window was literally the seat of the bear kamuy during the iomante; visitors were often seated in this sacred space as a display of goodwill.¹² A person sat in this spot was straddling the connection between heaven and earth. Ainu reverence of kamuy is also reverence of ancestors, since when an Ainu dies, they become kamuy and wander the earth until they eventually come to rest in the afterlife.



*An Ainu family.*¹³

Ainu dwellings, then, were more than homes. They encapsulated an entire religion and culture, as axes on which harmony between mortals and spirits hinged. Notice, however, my use of the past tense; physically, Ainu houses can still be found around Hokkaido, but they are no longer inhabited. When you visit one on display, its hearth is long extinguished, and its god-window may have been covered by glass to keep out the elements – the connection between the house and the land of kamuy has been severed.¹⁴ The treasure shelves are no longer adorned with ritual tools or intricate wooden trinkets.¹⁵

11 Utagawa, 'The "Sending-Back" Rite in Ainu Culture', 262-3;

12 Ohnuki-Tierney, 'Spatial Concepts of the Ainu of the Northwest Coast of Southern Sakhalin', 434-7.

13 J. K. Goodrich, 'Ainu Houses and their Furnishing', *Popular Science Monthly* 33 (1888), 503.

14 'Architecture of the Ainu', TOTA <https://www.tota.world/article/60/>.

15 Pieter Baas et al., 'Mogami Tokunai's wood collection from Hokkaido, Japan: an early record of Ainu wood culture', *IAWA Journal* 42/4 (2021), 349-64.

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Where once Ainu women, lips tattooed black, may have honed woodcarving or tapestry; children may have delighted in preparing for seasonal dances; village elders may have indulged in the storytelling for which Ainu were famous; neighbours may have gathered to argue over village politics or celebrate reaching a consensus – there is today only empty silence.¹⁶ What was once a dwelling is now a display piece.

Meiji Settler Colonialism

In 1868, after centuries of isolation from western affairs, the Shogunal government was overthrown by disaffected samurai and the Meiji Emperor restored to power. The Shogun had failed to adequately fend off western encroachment; the new Meiji government immediately embarked on a programme of selective emulation of the west to protect itself from colonisation.¹⁷ Japan's state structure, military, and economy were all rapidly reformed along western lines.

If Japan was to be a modern nation state, it needed secure borders. Its peripheral territories had long been crucial targets of western imperialists. For example, American Commodore Matthew Perry, who forced Japan to sign its first unequal treaty with a western power in 1854, had first arrived in the Ryukyu Kingdom, southwest of Japan, before sailing into Tokyo Bay. The small island kingdom had been a vassal state of China and Japan but left largely independent. Now that American forces had used it as a base, however, the Meiji government realised it needed to secure its power over the Ryukyu Islands, and in 1879 the kingdom was abolished, and formally annexed as Okinawa Prefecture.¹⁸ Japan had extended and clarified its southwestern border.

Ezo, too, had been the subject of foreign imperial encroachment. Various controversies had erupted over Russian trade with the Ainu, and tellingly, the Japanese settlement of Hakodate in Ezo was one of the first two ports forced open to American trade in 1854, turning Ezo into a theatre of western imperialist rivalry.¹⁹ During a brief civil war over the Meiji Restoration, the Shogunal navy's remnants retreated to Ezo and declared it a republic based on liberal ideals. Despite the short-lived republic's claim to uphold democracy, it paid little thought to the Ainu.²⁰

The Meiji state immediately set its sights on Ezo, and in 1869 the island was formally annexed as a prefecture of Japan and renamed Hokkaido, 'northern sea route.' Explorer Matsuura Takeshirō had suggested using Ainu characters in the name, but the state ignored his ideas, spelling Hokkaido similarly to other Japanese regions. Thus, the word Hokkaido is wholly Japanese, with no reference to Ainu inhabitants.²¹

This foreshadowed the systematic erasure of Ainu presence in Japanese cultural imagination. Japanese discourse throughout the Meiji period (1868-1912) described Hokkaido as a 'virgin land', entirely absent of human habitation, a blank slate on which Japanese settlers could imprint. Doppo Kunikida's novels depicted Hokkaido as a wilderness which had 'never permitted a human footprint.' Of course, many Japanese were well aware of the Ainu, but their careful relationship with the land had, according to imperialist legalese, left no adequate evidence of

16 E. Taylor Atkins, *A History of Popular Culture in Japan From the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (Bloomsbury, 2nd ed., 2023), 37.

17 Mark Ravina, *To Stand with the Nations of the World: Japan's Meiji Restoration in World History* (Oxford, 2017), 17-83.

18 Steve Rabson, 'Perry's Black Ships in Japan and Ryukyu: The Whitewash of History', *Asia-Pacific Journal* 14/9 (2016), 1-11.

19 Walker, *The Conquest of Ainu Lands*, 128-77.

20 Ravina, *To Stand with the Nations of the World*, 125-8.

21 Michele M. Mason, *Dominant Narratives of Colonial Hokkaido and Imperial Japan: Envisioning the Periphery and the Modern Nation-State* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 25-6.

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ownership, unlike the Japanese who had permanently altered the natural environment with factories and mines.²² This representation of Hokkaido and the Ainu was directly inspired by US treatment of Native Americans, and would in the 1930s inspire discourse which presented Manchuria as free for the taking.²³ As in these cases, Hokkaido, rich in natural resources, was an excellent source of revenue for Japanese capitalists and the state; its depiction as uninhabited would be crucial to their ruthless settlement and exploitation of the island.

These discourses informed and were informed by the western-inspired legal framework imposed on Hokkaido and the Ainu through the state's primary tool of control, the Hokkaido Development Agency, at one point headed by future Prime Minister Kuroda Kiyotaka, who named the Seikatei. In 1872 the Agency declared Hokkaido terra nullius, legally defining all land on the island as unowned (so open to Japanese purchase) despite Ainu presence. Ainu were banned from hunting with poison arrows or fishing nocturnally, which were deemed to be 'barbarian practices', preventing them from securing sustenance through traditional means. The Agency announced a 10-Year Plan to develop industry, mining, and for-profit farming on Hokkaido, and foreign 'experts' were brought in to restructure the island's agriculture; farmland was used to grow cash crops, leaving little space for Ainu to cultivate food for themselves. Deer was massively overhunted by Japanese settlers, and bears – the heart of Ainu religion – were systematically exterminated. Land on which Ainu had lived and hunted was accumulated in the hands of wealthy Japanese, and Hokkaido suffered rampant deforestation. Forced into starvation and poverty and vulnerable to diseases transported from Japan, over 70% of the Ainu population died between 1870 and 1920.²⁴

Architecture and Space in the Colonisation of Hokkaido

Whenever I have the opportunity to speak to the Hokkaido legislature, I propose the following: The Ainu have no recollection of either selling or lending Ainu Mosir [land of the Ainu], or what the 'Japanese' have arbitrarily renamed Hokkaido, to the 'nation' of Japan [...] I wish for the Ainu and the 'Japanese' in Ainu Mosir to work together to protect our natural surroundings. I want you to put into effect policies that would effectively improve the living conditions of the original settlers, the Ainu, who have constantly suffered discrimination. Build homes for people who have none. [...] In order to revive the Ainu language and share the benefits of Ainu culture, establish, in regions that want them, nursery schools and elementary, junior high, and high schools that teach the Ainu language."²⁵

Ainu activist Kayano Shigeru's words render a moral judgement about the replacement of Ainu houses elusive. Urging Japanese legislators to build homes for the unhoused, he certainly means 'modern,' stylistically Japanese houses. Likewise, his proposed nurseries and schools would be Japanese-style. Ainu chise, despite important religious meanings, are preindustrial, wooden/thatch constructions offering precious little warmth, space or privacy. Kayano himself dedicated his life to preserving Ainu culture and language, but measured his success and comfort by his style of house. He associated the chise of his youth with poverty, and when building his own house in the 1940s, he revelled in having a foundation and Japanese tatami mats.²⁶ The fact that the house had a thatched

²² Ibid, 57-83.

²³ Mark Driscoll, *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque: The Living, Dead, and Undead in Japan's Imperialism, 1895-1945* (Duke, 2010), 29.

²⁴ Katsuya Hirano, 'Settler Colonialism in the Making of Japan's Hokkaido', in Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism* (Taylor & Francis, 2016), 357-8.

²⁵ Shigeru Kayano and Mark Selden (trans.), *Our Land was a Forest: An Ainu Memoir* (Taylor & Francis, 1994), 152-3.

²⁶ Ibid, 2; 89-91.

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rather than tiled roof he described as a downside. For Kayano, a Japanese house represented both colonialism and better living standards.



Kayano Shigeru (right) alongside linguist Kindaichi Kyōsuke.²⁷

Kayano's embrace of a physically comfortable Japanese house does not diminish his emotional positivity to Ainu houses. Alongside describing his childhood house as chilly and cramped, he recalls joyous days spent sledding in the snow outside – despite its inadequacies, traditional dwellings still offered some contentment.²⁸ When given the opportunity to preserve Ainu culture by reconstructing a traditional house in Nibutani (a town with an 80% Ainu population, the only place today where Ainu constitute a majority), he jumped at the chance, seeing the value of using dwellings to embody culture.²⁹ What Kayano's writings demonstrate is that indigenous housing might be materially inferior to 'modern' housing, but more important to Ainu society are the cultural ideas represented through those houses. Japanese colonisation of Ainu dwellings was less problematic, then, because of the replacement of built structures, than because of the complete dismissal of important cultural and emotional remnants represented within them.

Scholars agree that built structures were a crucial factor in Japanese colonisation. For example, Hokkaido became home to various imposing prisons; still seen as a marginal space separate from 'the mainland,' sending dangerous prisoners to Hokkaido was embraced to remove them physically and symbolically from the polity. Most famous was Abashiri prison, where hardened criminals assisted in Japan's 'modernising' project through forced labour, such as irrigating farmland. Popular perception of Hokkaido as a wasteland assisted in creating an image of its prisons as isolated from civilisation, perfect settings for exciting escape stories.³⁰ Even today the manga/anime *Golden Kamuy*, a rare media representation of Ainu culture, heavily features escapees.

The aim of colonising Hokkaido was largely to develop for-profit agriculture, so Japanese settlement and farming went hand in hand – by 1935, around 3 million Japanese settlers had cultivated 4 million hectares.³¹ Some of the first Meiji settlers were *Tondenhei*, male military pioneers whose exploits have become somewhat legendary despite their small numbers. *Tondenhei* were compulsorily married and required to bring at least two family members with them to

²⁷ Kyoko Selden, 'The Goddess of the Wind and Okikurmi', *Asia-Pacific Journal* 14/15 (2016).

²⁸ Kayano, *Our Land was a Forest*, 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

³⁰ Mason, *Dominant Narratives of Colonial Hokkaido and Imperial Japan*, 83-113.

³¹ Shiina Shigeaki, 'Outline History of the Colonisation of Hokkaido, 1870-1930', in J. A. Mollett (ed.), *Migrants in Agricultural Development: A Study of Intrarural Migration* (Macmillan, 1991), 105.

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Hokkaido to farm. Thus, entire households were transplanted from the 'mainland,' demonstrating the household's ideological importance in the development of Hokkaido.³² Upon arrival, each Tondenhei family was granted land to crop, cementing the image of private, family farms, within settler villages, as the ideal organisation for Japanese in Hokkaido. While numerically miniscule, Tondenhei set the standard for how life in Hokkaido should look.³³

A dominant imperial argument saw Japan as a leader of Asia which would throw off the chains of western colonialism. In this paradoxical view, Japanese were racially united with all Asians, but further along a teleological process of 'civilisation and enlightenment' and, therefore, better. Chinese, Koreans, and other 'feudal' peoples were currently backwards, but by adopting Japanese ways could be civilised and assimilated into a modern, prosperous pan-Asian community. The same Asian groups could be demonised and brutalised, or complemented, depending on their degree of assimilation.³⁴ In Taiwan, Taiwanese living amongst Japanese on the coast were considered fully assimilated, those further inland were 'cooked barbarians,' while mountain dwellers with minimal Japanese contact were 'raw barbarians' to be eliminated.³⁵

Hokkaido's colonisation thus occurred in a discursive background with two main pillars – first, that Japanese settlers should run a family farm and cultivate land, and second, that 'barbarians' could be assimilated by emulating Japanese ways. These ideas were exemplified by the 1899 Hokkaido Former Aborigine Protection Act, outwardly aimed at 'protecting' Ainu who had been suffering for decades. The name alone suggests that Ainu were no longer barbarians, but as 'former aborigines' they were not fully Japanese either. Under this law, Ainu households were to be provided with several acres of land exempt from tax for 30 years. If the household did not cultivate the land within 15 years, it would revert to state ownership. Ainu had been living contentedly as lumberjacks or fishermen – the very jobs they'd been forced into by Japanese in the first place – but now were coerced out of their ancestral communities and into becoming farmers, an undesirable, non-traditional lifestyle. Ainu farmers were typically left worse-off; farming was more economically precarious than wage labour, the government rarely allotted the intended amount of land, and that land was commonly wasteland entirely unsuitable for farming.³⁶

This coerced movement of Ainu was key to the disappearance of their traditional lifestyles, for removal from one's village meant moving into a new house built by Japanese authorities. Japanese scientists considered Ainu housing to be veritable breeding grounds for disease, so new houses were built along supposedly more hygienic lines – as with the Former Aborigines Act, management of Ainu life was conceived as being for their own good. New houses were built using uniform Japanese plans, with no consideration for treasure shelves, hearths, or god-windows.³⁷ We've seen in Kayano's writings that switching to a Japanese house could majorly improve Ainu living standards. Indeed, early Ainu activists often embraced new housing to better Ainu lives. Yoshida Kikutarō dedicated himself to the replacement of Ainu dwellings with Japanese ones and was especially proud that by 1930 all 35 houses in his village had been replaced. Moreover, in a 1935 roundtable discussion between Ainu activists, several argued that, since Ainu religion was declining,

32 Mason, *Dominant Narratives of Colonial Hokkaido and Imperial Japan*, 35.

33 *Ibid.*, 36-7.

34 Kal Hong, 'Modelling the West, returning to Asia: shifting politics of representation in Japanese colonial expositions in Korea', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47/3 (2005), 507-531; Jin-Kyung Park, 'Interrogating the 'Population Problem' of the Non-Western Empire: Japanese Colonialism, the Korean Peninsula, and the Global Geopolitics of Race', *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 19/8 (2017), 1-20.

35 Paul Barclay, 'Cultural brokerage and internethnic marriage in colonial Taiwan: Japanese subalterns and their aborigine wives, 1895-1930', *Journal of Asian Studies* 64/2 (2005), 330-1.

36 David L. Howell, 'Making "Useful Citizens" of Ainu Subjects in Early Twentieth-Century Japan', *Journal of Asian Studies* 63/1 (2004), 7.

37 *Ibid.*, 11.

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there was no need for new housing to include spiritual features. The rapid decline of Ainu religion, however, was surely hastened by the dearth of sacred objects in the homes which a new generation of Ainu grew up in. The disappearance of these features actively contributed to religious decline alongside the state-backed phasing out of traditional hunting practices, clothing, names, hairstyles, language, and tattoos.³⁸

Ainu tradition was liquidated to turn Ainu into proper subjects, indistinguishable from Japanese settlers. By stripping Ainu of all physical markers of their own culture, the state prevented them from retaining a distinct identity which might threaten ideal Japanese homogeneity.³⁹ Housing was crucial in deciding who was, or was not, Ainu; since Japanese imperialists emphasised the fundamental togetherness of Asians (under Japanese rule), they relied less on blood to define ethnicity than culture. Thus, the Hokkaido Development Agency defined Ainu as those who 'anyone would recognise as an aborigine.' Ainu who had relocated from their childhood kotan for work in big cities, or set up family farms, were considered by the state to have assimilated and become Japanese because they lived in Japanese housing. But the Ainu, mostly old or very young, who still lived in traditional housing in kotan were more 'recognisably aborigine' and were recorded as Ainu, so could not access the legal benefits of 'Japanese-ness.' Where and in what kind of house an Ainu lived became a core method through which the state decided their ethnicity.⁴⁰

Ainu practices did not entirely disappear. Where they remained, however, they were often employed as spectacles by impoverished Ainu desperate for tourist money. Children were pulled out of school to perform iomante for important visitors, Ainu woodwork has long been produced for giftshops, and Kayano remembers the embarrassment of dancing in traditional dress for Japanese spectators.⁴¹ Tellingly, at a 1904 St Louis imperial exhibition it was decided that the best way to showcase Ainu culture was through a replica kotan, recruiting Ainu families to live there for several months as a tourist attraction. 'Ethnic tourism' had the positive effect of introducing Ainu culture to new audiences; Ainu Fushine Kōzō, displayed at an Osaka 'Human Pavilion,' used his platform to teach visitors about Ainu culture in fluent Japanese. But many Ainu, faced with the humiliation of becoming objects of Japanese tourists' desire for the exotic, consciously abandoned their customs to 'pass' as Japanese.⁴²

'Ainu-ness' has been simultaneously erased from the cultural landscape, and commodified as a gimmick. In this context, museums in Hokkaido have reconstructed traditional housing as seen above; regardless of the well-meaning intentions of cultivators, it remains true that these structures are largely present to be gawked at by curious tourists.

Critical Interpretations

While this essay is light on historical theory, it is important to consider some of the ways that the colonisation of the built environment can be understood. For this I rely on Mark Driscoll, who reinterpreted Japanese imperialism as a series of teleological phases – biopolitics, neuropolitics, and necropolitics – played out in colonial Taiwan, Korea and China. Where Driscoll's analysis falters is his failure to seriously consider Okinawa or Hokkaido, the original spaces in which bio/neuro/necropolitics were performed.

38 Howell, 'Making "Useful Citizens" of Ainu Subjects in Early Twentieth-Century Japan', 11-2.

39 Ibid, 13.

40 Howell, 'Making "Useful Citizens" of Ainu Subjects in Early Twentieth-Century Japan', 12-3.

41 Lisa Hiwasaki, 'Ethnic Tourism in Hokkaido and the Shaping of Ainu Identity', *Pacific Affairs* 73/3 (2000), 401-4.

42 Atkins, *A History of Popular Culture in Japan*, 174.

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Biopolitics is, fundamentally, the seizure of bodily autonomy.⁴³ In imperial contexts, this can mean medical population management, imprisonment, or coerced movement of people across colonised space.⁴⁴ Driscoll employs biopolitics to describe the movement of Chinese labour into colonial Manchuria, but the colonisation of Hokkaido can also be defined as centrally biopolitical.⁴⁵ Japanese and Ainu bodies became sites of colonialism; while Japanese were coerced (through false promises of prosperity, or incarceration) into settling, Ainu were relocated, either in a systematic process by which they were 'gifted' land and houses, or informally through forced migration due to environmental destruction.⁴⁶ Houses were the start- and end-point, and justification, for coerced movement, so were central to biopolitics in Hokkaido.

Next, neuropolitics is, per Driscoll, a process by which capitalist logic infects the very neuro-system of human brains. Through constant exposure to stimuli, brains are rewired to see everything, including human life and death, as objects of profit.⁴⁷ In Hokkaido's case, Ainu used to view the natural world through egalitarian/utilitarian lenses, but the development of a Japan-centred market economy caused them to view game, woodwork, and crops as commodities.⁴⁸ Ainu culture itself became commodified to be displayed and consumed as a tourist attraction. Dwellings were crucial to this process – transition from an Ainu chise built around hunting for sustenance, to a Japanese house built around for-profit farming, symbolised appropriation of life into marketized existence. Land on which houses stood became purchasable, and chise are still 'sold' to tourists as attractions. Finally, Driscoll argues that after 1931 the Japanese empire transitioned to necropolitics. If biopolitics is a politics of life, then necropolitics is a politics of death, wherein a state decides who can and cannot die.⁴⁹ Driscoll describes it as *laissez-faire*: not killing a subject so much as letting the subject die.⁵⁰ Evidently Ainu experienced this process; Japanese may not have systematically exterminated them, but did leave Ainu without sustenance, land and culture. Ainu became 'living dead,' suspended in a liminal state where death was inevitable.⁵¹ Their homes were discursively weaponised to construct this subjectivity – Japanese epidemiologists portrayed chise as hotbeds of disease, in which Ainu were less living beings than future dead bodies.⁵² Driscoll might argue that necropolitics emerged as a final stage in Japanese imperialism, but I argue, following Katsuya Hirano, that necropolitics was exercised in Hokkaido long before.⁵³

Scholars have viewed Japanese imperialism and state-building as reciprocal processes. In other cases, fully 'modernised' nations embarked on colonial projects, whereas in Japan, imperialism and modernisation occurred concurrently, each process informing the other.⁵⁴ Hokkaido was right in the middle. 'Modernity' was transplanted onto it through new farming techniques and housing, then exported from Hokkaido to other colonies as, for instance, discourse which erased built dwellings by describing Manchuria as empty land.⁵⁵ Chise were used to produce Japanese nationhood – by

43 Thomas Lemke et. al. (eds.), *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (New York, 2011), 35-6.

44 Ibid, 66-76.

45 Driscoll, *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque*, 25-57.

46 Michael Roellinghoff, 'Osteo-hermeneutics: Ainu racialization, de-indigenization, and bone theft in Japanese Hokkaido', *Settler Colonial Studies* 10/3 (2020), 295-310.

47 Driscoll, *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque*, 131; 200.

48 Walker, *The Conquest of Ainu Lands*.

49 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke, 2019), 66.

50 Driscoll, *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque*, 13-5.

51 Ibid, 203.

52 Howell, 'Making "Useful Citizens" of Ainu Subjects in Early Twentieth-Century Japan', 11; Takakura

Shinichirō, 'The Ainu of Northern Japan: A Study in Conquest and Acculturation', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 50/4 (1960), 71.

53 Katsuya Hirano, 'Thanatopolitics in the making of Japan's Hokkaido: Settler colonialism and primitive accumulation', *Critical Historical Studies* 2/2 (2015), 191-218.

54 Mason, *Dominant Narratives of Colonial Hokkaido and Imperial Japan*, 1-31.

55 Driscoll, *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque*, 29.

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perceiving a 'primitive' house, Japanese could feel united in their comparative civilisation.⁵⁶ What I've attempted to demonstrate here is not just that Hokkaido and the Ainu were central to Japanese imperialism and nation building, but that, specifically, Ainu and Japanese dwellings were key sites and technologies of both processes

Finally, I implore readers to recognise Japan's historical treatment of the Ainu as no less than a cultural genocide, and to consider its similarities to current British discourse which weaponizes dwellings, and who does or does not deserve them, to demonise migrants.⁵⁷

Ainu Today



*Ainu women perform a ritual in 2020.*⁵⁸

In 1995, Kayano Shigeru and Kaizawa Tadashi objected to the construction of an industrial dam in Nibutani and sued the Hokkaido Development Bureau. Sapporo district court ruled that the government's confiscation of land was unlawful; the Saru River is important to Ainu religious practice and damming it would negatively impact their lifestyles. The Nibutani Dam Case was a watershed moment in the fight for recognition as an indigenous people.⁵⁹

As of 1997, decades after the post-WW2 'democratisation' of Japan, the legal backbone of Hokkaido policy was still the Former Aborigine Act. Japan, according to Prime Minister Nakasone in 1986, was a 'homogenous nation-state;' implicitly, Ainu were simply less-developed Japanese. The

⁵⁶ Atkins, *A History of Popular Culture in Japan*, 174.

⁵⁷ Katarina Sjöberg, 'Redefining the Past, Taking Charge of the Present, Appropriating the Future; The Hokkaido Ainu Case', in Barry Sautman (ed.), *Cultural Genocide and Asian State Peripheries* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 39-62.

⁵⁸ 'Efforts underway to save Ainu language and culture', *Japan Times* (21/02/2022)

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/2022/02/21/special-supplements/efforts-underway-save-ainu-language-culture/>

⁵⁹ Mark Levin, 'Kayano et al. v. Hokkaido Expropriation Committee: 'The Nibutani Dam Decision'', *International Legal Materials* 38 (1999), 394-435; Richard Siddle, 'An epoch-making event? The 1997 Ainu Cultural Promotion Act and its impact', *Japan Forum* 14/3 (2002), 412.

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government has relied on ideal nationalism predicated on homogeneity, which any sense of multiculturalism would threaten – as such it has been reluctant to grant specific rights to the Ainu.⁶⁰ Ainu activists have increasingly fought for their recognition as a distinct indigenous group. Kayano did so as the first Ainu parliamentarian, while other Ainu have joined the Ainu Association of Hokkaido, a powerful advocacy group. Often, they have kept tradition alive through activism, relying on consensus just as in village politics. Ainu in Tokyo have become more comfortable with asserting a distinct identity rather than ‘passing,’ through cultural events, ethnic restaurants, and common spaces.⁶¹

Some Ainu continue to emphasise their ‘Japanese-ness’ to become assimilated into the nation and gain the same treatment as Japanese. For them, legal recognition as indigenous was unimportant so long as they could keep tradition alive within the household. Indeed, some Ainu resented Kayano and Kaizawa’s efforts to prevent dam construction – happy to take government compensation for their land, they viewed both as elites out of touch with common Ainu experience.⁶² Yet these Ainu’s focus on monetary compensation over tradition reveals their dire economic straits. Ainu are more likely to work in low-paying jobs; more likely to require state welfare; and less likely to receive advanced education.⁶³ One octogenarian Ainu, writing in 2018 on the need for Ainu to collectively own a river for fishing rituals, confessed that ‘I even think that [the situation] is worse than when I was born.’ Despite various material improvements to Ainu life, this writer argues that the outcome is a net negative due to cultural erosion.⁶⁴

Legislatively, there have been successes. The Nibutani Dam Case made way for the 1997 Ainu Cultural Promotion Act, finally replacing the Former Aborigine Act. Rather than eradicated, Ainu culture was to be actively promoted and incorporated into school curricula.⁶⁵ Yet Ainu are still woefully underrepresented and mistreated. Despite paying lip-service to Ainu indigenous recognition since 2008, the Japanese government still insists that the country is homogenous. Ainu are represented in some museums and exhibitions, but their traditional culture is presented as lost – in fact Japan’s 24,000 Ainu are rarely recognised in museums as a group that still exists in Japanese society.⁶⁶ Ainu presence in Hokkaido is, as ever, ignored and whitewashed.

The emblematic Hokkaido Historical Village is an open-air museum in Sapporo which claims to showcase life in Hokkaido circa 1860-1920. Visitors explore various structures including houses, huts, shops, and the HQ of the Hokkaido Development Agency.⁶⁷ Yet crucially, ‘life in Hokkaido’ is really the life of Japanese pioneers. The nearby Hokkaido Museum may have made some effort to showcase Ainu tradition, but the village, supposedly displaying ‘typical buildings from all over Hokkaido,’ includes no chise or Ainu presence at all.⁶⁸ Tellingly, the Sapporo Tourism Association writes that the village’s construction marked the 100 th anniversary of the ‘foundation of Hokkaido,’

60 Ibid, 405-6.

61 Kanako Uzawa, ‘Everyday Acts of Resurgence and Diasporic Indigeneity among the Ainu of Tokyo’, in Gerald Roche et al. (eds.), *Indigenous Efflorescence: Beyond Revitalisation in Sapmi and Ainu Mosir* (ANU, 2018), 179-205.

62 Siddle, ‘An epoch-making event?’, 405-6.

63 ‘Actual Living Conditions of the Hokkaido Ainu’, Ainu Association of Hokkaido <https://www.ainu-assn.or.jp/english/life.html>.

64 Shizue Ukaji, ‘The Racing of Ainu Hearts: Our Wish for One Salmon River’, in Roche et al. (eds.), *Indigenous Efflorescence*, 79-85.

65 Siddle, ‘An epoch-making event?’, 405-23.

66 Marianne Ubalde, ‘A Survey on the Representation of Ainu People in Exhibitions in Contemporary Japan’, *International Journal of the Inclusive Museum* 14/1 (2021), 29-48.

67 ‘Historical Village of Hokkaido: About “Kaitaku on mura”’, Hokkaido Historical Village <https://www.kaitaku.or.jp/en/>.

68 ‘Historic Village of Hokkaido’, *Japan Guide* (2023) <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e5303.html>.

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as if Hokkaido's history began when it was annexed by the Meiji state as Japanese. It describes the period as the 'frontier era,' evoking images not dissimilar to daring cowboys in the American west. Ainu have been erased from the built environment of Hokkaido, whereas the architectural achievements of the 'pioneers' who devastated their lands have been valorised.⁶⁹

Housing, households, and dwellings are underappreciated themes in post-colonial studies. At every historical juncture in Hokkaido's colonisation, dwellings have been crucial. Ainu housing has been discursively ravaged to justify its replacement. Household religious features have been lost. Style of house was a key legal signifier of who was and was not an Ainu until 1997. Meanwhile, the presence of Japanese housing has become evidence of positive influence on Hokkaido, despite the thousands of Ainu deaths caused by Japanese colonisation. This history is as important as it is discomfoting.

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⁶⁹ 'Historical Village of Hokkaido', *Welcome To Sapporo* (2023) https://www.sapporo.travel/en/spot/facility/historical_village_of_hokkaido/.

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