

A Brief History of Japanese Official Policies of Ainu Segregation and Assimilation, with a Focus on Language Policy

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Centuries of ethnocentric policies by successive Japanese central and local governments have caused the Ainu people much suffering, including deprivation of their language. This paper presents a brief historical overview of the educational and social assimilation policies leading to this situation.

1. A brief history of the assimilation process of the Ainu into the Japanese mainstream

The history between the Ainu and Japanese as the oppressed and the oppressors respectively, can be traced back all the way to a story in one of the oldest Japanese histories, *Nihon Shoki*, compiled in 720 A.D. (Sakamoto et al., 1967). This relationship seems to have remained basically unchanged to this day.

The original meaning of the word *Ainu* is rather similar to the English word *man*, in its senses of "a human being" or "a male adult" (Emori, 1987). The origin of this people is said to be uncertain and several different theories have been advanced (Peng & Geiser, 1977). Since this paper is not a detailed anthropological analysis of the Ainu, I would like to just relay one of those theories, the one seemingly more objectively and inclusively described, by Emori (1987).

In ancient times, the word *Emishi* was used to describe people in general who refused to submit to the control of Japan's central government. These people are said to have lived in the northern part of Honshu until the 11th century. Pushed by the expanding power and territorial control of the Japanese central government, by the middle of the 12th century these people had moved even farther north, to the northernmost part of Honshu and the smaller islands located to its north. The biggest of them, present-day Hokkaido, eventually became their main homeland.

The concept attached to the word *Emishi*, namely "rebellious people," was gradually equated to ethnic differences, the word itself changed to *Ezo*, and Hokkaido became known as *Ezogashima*, "the island of the Ezo" (Emori, 1987). By the Meiji era, 1868-1912, *Ainu*, into which the word *Ezo* had evolved, had become established as an ethnic name¹⁾ (Emori, 1987).

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1) Hereafter, the term "Ainu" will be used as an umbrella term to describe the groups

By the middle of the 14th century some Honshu Japanese also resided in Ezogashima and were engaged in trading with the Ainu people and with other Japanese in Honshu. One of the Japanese rulers who controlled the trading in Ezogashima gradually increased his power and eventually became the sole ruler there by the end of the 15th century. Shortly after the turn of the 17th century (1604), Kaki-zaki, the ruler at the time, obtained permission from the Japanese central government at Edo (present-day Tokyo) to establish a new clan, the Matsumae, with exclusive Ainu trading rights.

During the next three centuries, control over the Ainu alternated between the Matsumae clan and the central government at Edo, but the Ainu were similarly exploited under both.

The first Matsumae administration (1604-1799)

After obtaining exclusive trading rights with the Ainu, the Matsumae divided Ezogashima into two territories, one for resident Japanese and the other for the Ainu, and built official guardhouses to restrict the entry of both groups into each other's territories. The Matsumae then divided the Ainu territory into smaller sectors and assigned each of them to one of its higher retainers as a fief with Ainu trading rights. At the beginning, the ruler Matsumae and his retainers sent ships to their own fiefs every summer and bartered rice for salmon, which they then sold to merchants from Honshu. Before long, however, the merchants took over the business from the retainers, for

of people historically called "Emishi," "Ezo" and the modern "Ainu."

the convenience of both parties. They obtained the right to trade directly with the Ainu and in turn paid taxes to the ruler and his retainers. Each merchant built a trading center, where managers, interpreters, bookkeepers, and overseers were stationed.

The Matsumae forbade the Ainu from speaking Japanese (Shintani, 1977). This prohibition was issued partly in response to strong requests by the merchants²⁾. In spite of the prohibition, there seem to have been a quite number of the Ainu who could speak Japanese, and some of them could write it as well (Takakura, 1942). If we take a broad view of trade between different linguistic communities, the development of a pidginized Japanese is not surprising. Although not much is known of the interpreters' proficiencies in the Ainu language at the trading centers, it was said that they spoke a kind of "Japanized Ainu," which was almost certainly not the same as the language that the Ainu people spoke among themselves (Murao, 1892).

The first Edo government administration (1799-1821)

One of the Edo government's concerns at that time was of a possible Russian invasion of Hokkaido. Japan had been closed to almost all foreign countries since 1639, allowing only limited contact with a few countries. In 1792, a Russian envoy arrived in Hokkaido and requested a trading relationship with Japan. Four years later, in 1796, a British ship came to the shore of Hokkaido and started to sound

2) Takakura (1942) disagrees, however, denying that the Matsumae imposed such a language policy.

around it. These incidents caused the Edo government some concern and it decided to reinforce the defenses of Hokkaido. The Edo government put the eastern part of Hokkaido under its direct control in 1799 and then the western part in 1807. As a result of this central government intervention, the Matsumae clan was relegated to a fief on Honshu instead.

The aim of this Edo government strategy was to utilize the Ainu as a defense force against a Russian attack. In order to achieve their purpose, the central government adopted an assimilation policy in the belief that the Ainu would identify themselves as Japanese and fight against the Russians (Shintani, 1977). This assimilation policy included lifting the ban on speaking Japanese. The Edo government encouraged the Ainu to learn Japanese language and customs (Hanazaki, 1988). However, there is no evidence that the Edo government took the initiative to establish any organized educational institutions to educate the Ainu (Hokkaido-cho Gakumu-bu Shakai-ka, 1926). Only some government officers of good will or Buddhist priests were reported to have tried to teach them the Japanese language on a voluntary basis (Takakura, 1942).

This direct jurisdiction by the Edo government lasted only about two decades, until its vast expense became an unbearable burden. When the threat of a Russian invasion seemed to have diminished, the Edo government decided to withdraw its jurisdiction and reappoint the Matsumae to administer Hokkaido.

The second Matsumae administration (1821-1855)

In order to monopolize the abundant

natural resources in their territory, the Matsumae clan kept the domestic conditions in strict secrecy from the Edo government and other neighboring clans (Shintani, 1977). For this reason, Matsumae records on language and educational policies are extremely scarce. However, the available records do tell us that the Matsumae discontinued the Edo government's assimilation policy and reverted to a segregationist policy.

In their second administration, the Matsumae clan also abolished their fief system. Instead, they had Japanese merchants undertake all trade with the Ainu and perform all the administrative work in Ezochi, the area reserved for the Ainu. The Matsumae in turn collected various taxes from the merchants. As a consequence of this new system, the merchants gained exclusive power over the Ainu and abused them even more than before. As they had done during their previous administration, the Matsumae again forbade the Ainu from using the Japanese language, for the convenience of the merchants (Takakura, 1942).

The second Edo government administration (1855-1868)

Russia's interest in the Hokkaido area, abating temporarily but never ceasing, again raised the Edo government's concerns about defense in the area. Consequently, the Edo government undertook direct control of Hokkaido once more. Just as it had done during its earlier administration, the Edo government again employed an assimilation policy toward the Ainu, in order to utilize them as a "spearhead," a forward line of defense against Russia (Shintani, 1977).

This second assimilation policy seems to have been more actively implemented than the first one had been. Although no official records have been found in any government documents, the Edo government reportedly not only lifted the ban on Japanese language use, but also established some educational facilities to teach Ainu children the Japanese language, including the writing skill (Takakura, 1942).

As with the Matsumae clan, though, inadequate Edo-era records prevent us from determining the sociolinguistic situation of the Ainu at the time.

The Meiji government administration and thereafter (1868-)

Although still not much, the Meiji era offers us more data about the sociolinguistic and educational conditions of the Ainu, especially the pedagogical philosophy of the time and its implementation.

The Meiji government was born as a result of revolution, the Meiji Restoration. This was the dawn of modernization in Japan after the collapse of the nearly 300-year-old Edo government.

One of the major goals of this new government was the development of Hokkaido. Since the defense of Hokkaido also remained an urgent and important issue, the Meiji government put these two issues together to solve both at the same time. First, the government collected people such as former feudal lords and their soldiers, who had lost their sources of income after the emancipation, and sent them to Hokkaido, first as a work force and later, with the establishment of a colonial militia system, a defense force. The Ainu were also included in this de-

fense force. The Meiji government employed an assimilation policy toward the Ainu, just as the Edo government had done. This time, however, the assimilation policy was much more systematic and more strictly enforced.

In order to assure the success of its assimilation policy, the government took two actions of far-reaching consequence: granting the Ainu citizenship and making provisions for Ainu children in the education system.

After renaming "Ezo-chi" as "Hokkaido" in 1869, the government announced in 1871 that all the Ainu people were to be given Japanese citizenship. As a consequence, on census registers the term and the category "Ezo" was abolished and the Ainu were categorized as Japanese. However, this treatment was somewhat deceptive because in case the necessity ever arose in the future to separate them from other Japanese citizens again, they were put under another category called "Kju-dojin," that is, "former aborigines"³⁾ (Ainu Bunka Hogo Taisaku Kyogikai, 1970).

Even though it gave them official standing as citizens in Japanese society, as did the duty of military service and payment of taxes, this new categorical term implied that the Ainu would continue to be treated as second-class citizens.

The second action, the education of Ainu children, will be discussed at length in the following section.

3) Probably this English translation does not properly convey the insulting tone of the original Japanese. It might be more evocatively rendered as "the former uncivilized barbarians."

2. The educational milieu of Ainu children

2.1. Schools for Ainu children⁴⁾

The basic Japanese notion of the time, obviously founded in ethnocentrism, seems to have been that the Ainu were inferior to the Japanese. This notion was reflected in the attitudes of the Japanese mainstream and thus in various governmental policies toward the Ainu as well, and was especially evident in the policies concerning the education of Ainu children.

After the chaos caused by the shift of political power was partially settled, the new government embarked on the forced assimilation of the Ainu into Japanese society. The education of Ainu children was an important item on the agenda to promote their assimilation policy.

The government initiated this project in 1872 by building an experimental school for the Ainu in the newly renamed capital, Tokyo. It is reported that 35 Ainu people⁵⁾, aged between 13 to 38, were brought to Tokyo all the way from Hokkaido to be acculturated into the mainstream Japanese society. Eighteen of the young adults were sent to the school to study reading and writing in Japanese (Takakura, 1942).

4) As described in the previous section, the Ainu people have had Japanese citizenship since 1871, so Ainu children also should rightfully be described as Japanese children. They are distinguished from each other here only for the purpose of describing a history of the Ainu people.

5) According to Takegahara (1976), the number of the Ainu people who were sent to Tokyo was only 27, but Takegahara did not include in his count another group of eight Ainu people who were sent later.

Two years later, only five Ainu people remained in the school, the rest having died of sickness, returned home, or gone missing (Shintani, 1977). This experimental school was a total failure.

The first school for Ainu children in Hokkaido was built in 1878, and two years later three more schools were added. Ainu children who were unable to study in any of these segregated schools were encouraged to attend either public or private schools built for Japanese children near their homes. It seems that they were merely put in among Japanese children without any special care taken for their language, in a submersion situation. There is no evidence that any form (or even any concept) of bilingual education existed in Japan in those days.

Since, to the best of my knowledge, there exist no detailed research reports referring to the education of Ainu children of the time, it is not possible, at least for the moment, to investigate how the children acquired the Japanese language, if they ever did, nor to measure how much bilingual proficiency they attained. It can be deduced, however, from the extremely scarce records available, that Ainu children could not adjust well enough to benefit much from school education. This is understandable, since they were to be educated in a completely different environment with an utterly different value system, especially in a discriminatory atmosphere. In 1899 the government reached the conclusion that Ainu children would benefit more from a segregated educational system. The justification for this conclusion was an ethnocentric one. The government officials as well as the educational circles of the time believed that the Ainu

were intellectually inferior to Japanese and could not be educated together with Japanese children (Iwaya, 1893). In fact, it is reported that a governmental official actually stated, at a Diet session held in 1899, that the efforts to educate Ainu children had not produced much progress and that this unsatisfactory result was due to the fact that the Ainu were an inferior race (Tanigawa, 1972).

Under a new law, "The Protection Act for Former Aborigines," established in the same year, the government planned a project to build 21 more schools for Ainu children within the period of seven years. This project was undertaken in 1901. Unexpected budget cuts caused by extraordinary expenditures for the Russo-Japanese War delayed the project and aggravated the working conditions of the teachers in these schools, but the project was finally completed in 1911, three years behind schedule (Hokkaido-cho Gakumu-bu Shakai-ka, 1926).

At the beginning Ainu children were reluctant to attend school and actually very few children were registered at school, presumably partly because of the unfamiliarity with formal education and partly because of their economic situation. It is reported that during the busy fishing season the attendance of the Ainu children decreased drastically, because the children were needed to help their parents. In 1901, for instance, there were reportedly 2,060 Ainu school age children, but only 919 of them (44.6%) were registered in school. As time passed, however, more Ainu children gradually started to register in school and in 1924 the registration rate reached 99.1% (Hokkaido-cho Gakumu-bu Shakai-ka, 1926).

2.2. Ainu education policies adopted by the government

The basic concept toward the Ainu as being intellectually inferior was reflected in the length of schooling and the curriculum for Ainu children, but, not knowing how best to deal with Ainu children, the Meiji government reversed its policies several times. "The Education Act for Former Aborigine Children," issued in 1901, allotted only four years of education to Ainu children, while six years were provided to Japanese children. The subjects offered to Ainu children were ethics, Japanese language, arithmetic, physical education, sewing (for girls) and agriculture (for boys). While Japanese history, geography and natural science were offered to Japanese children, these were not taught to Ainu children, nor were subjects related to Ainu language and culture taught.

The 1901 Education Act was superseded in 1908 by "The Special Education Act." Although segregated education was maintained, under this new act the same curriculum and length of schooling were adopted for Japanese children and Ainu children alike. Ainu children were permitted to study history, geography and natural science, just as Japanese children were. They were even given a chance to study Ainu-related topics at school. This offer was hypocritical, however, because according to a special instruction in the act, teachers were advised not to deal with any topic which might be "unpleasant" to Ainu children. "Unpleasant" facts, actually meaning facts embarrassing to the Japanese, were swept under the carpet.

In 1916 the 1901 Act was re-adopted, in

an amended form, again to the detriment of the Ainu children's education. The government had reevaluated the elongated period of schooling and had concluded that it was too long for most Ainu children. Therefore, the length of schooling was shortened from six years back to four years again, with possible extension up to six years in some special cases. History, geography and natural science were again excluded from the curriculum, as a result of the reduction in years of schooling.

Another discriminatory feature of the reinstated policy was the entry age of schooling. On the grounds that the mental development of Ainu children was considered to be slower than that of Japanese children, they were not allowed to attend school until they had become seven years old, one year older than Japanese children.

The amendment evoked much criticism from the educators involved in education of the Ainu and from the Ainu people themselves. There were also requests by the Ainu people that their children be educated together with Japanese children and the government began to reconsider their segregationist educational policy as well. As a result, the government reversed itself yet again and came to the decision that it would be educationally more beneficial for Ainu children to be educated together with Japanese children. Nine out of the 21 schools that had been established in the first decade of the century specifically for Ainu children were closed down between 1917 and 1922, and the government repealed the 1916 Act in 1922.

2.3. Ainu academic achievement and the retention of Japanese language skills

Under these vacillating educational policies, what was the academic achievement of Ainu children like?

Ainu children were generally reported to have achieved less than contemporary Japanese children. Among Ainu children, those who were studying at schools built for Japanese children were judged to be academically more advanced than those at Ainu schools (Akamatsu, 1917). This is rather ironic, because the segregationist education policy had been based on the belief that segregation would be more effective than integration. Those who were attending schools for Japanese children were also said to be functionally bilinguals, though with less competence in Japanese than in the Ainu language (Kono, 1911).

According to one report from 1917 (Hokkaido-cho, 1922), referring to the academic achievement of 221 Ainu children studying at schools for Japanese children, in the so-called "intellectual subjects," such as Japanese language and arithmetic, 10% of the children were evaluated as "excellent," 32% as "medium," 34% as "poor," and 24% as "extremely poor." The report also evaluated their achievement in "skills subjects," such as manual training or singing: 14% were rated as "excellent," 52% as "medium," 25% as "poor" and 9% as "extremely poor." In the achievement of the "intellectual subjects," 42% of the Ainu children were considered to be average or better, while 66% were similarly rated in the "skills subjects." Since comparable data on the achievement of their Japanese counterparts is not available, it

is rather difficult to evaluate the significance of these numbers. Although the report says that the academic achievement of the Ainu children in general was inferior to that of the Japanese children, this result may well be derived from the difference in the amount of time they spent in school. As mentioned above, compared with the six-year schooling allotted to the Japanese children, only four years were allocated to Ainu children during the two periods 1901-1907 and 1916-1922.

Another report by Hokkaido-cho Gakumu-bu Shakai-ka (1926) sheds some light on the maintenance conditions of Ainu academic and linguistic achievement. The report says that the majority of the Ainu, both those who completed elementary school education and those who dropped out in the middle, were experiencing deterioration in their Japanese reading and writing skills because of the lack of opportunities to use them in their everyday life.

Although the retention of academic and linguistic skills did not seem to be as good as had been hoped for, the general linguistic shift among the Ainu population was slowly but surely proceeding through their formal education at school and also through their inevitable contact with members of the Japanese majority. In 1916 the Hokkaido regional government conducted a large-scale survey of the Ainu population in Hokkaido. According to this survey, most of the Ainu people, except for a very small portion of the aged population, were reported to be able to speak and comprehend Japanese.

The survey report also revealed that some of the Ainu people were literate in Japanese. While their literacy level in

Japanese is not known, the report states that approximately 27% of them could read some written Japanese.

To the best of my knowledge, no scientific investigation on the linguistic proficiency of the Ainu people has ever been done. The following is only a speculation, but it seems that the Ainu people studied in the 1916 survey were more or less functional bilinguals: with Japanese proficiencies varying from individual to individual, they communicated in the Ainu language among themselves and in Japanese with Japanese people.

The Ainu language did not have a writing system, however, and had always relied on oral transmission to the succeeding generations. Thus, maintenance of the Ainu language was difficult when the number of Ainu people who learned to read and write as well as speak and understand Japanese increased through formal education.

Since the assimilation of the Ainu into the Japanese society was the government's prime purpose, the maintenance of the Ainu language was never a consideration. As of today this situation remains the same. The government and the mainstream society have left it to its fate. The result of this policy may be viewed as another case of "linguistic genocide," as Day (1985) has called the similar results of American policy toward native Hawaiians.

3. The prospects for the future of the Ainu community

Minority groups in the United States stood up to maintain their ethnic identities in the late sixties, causing a number of

conceptual and also actual social changes throughout the nation, including the implementation of language policies such as government-funded transitional bilingual education programs, which utilize the native languages to facilitate the acquisition of English. More progressive alternatives have also been proposed. One of them, for instance, is an enrichment program, which encourages children from both minority and majority groups to acquire an additional language other than their own mother tongues (Ruiz, 1988).

Some members of the Ainu community have been trying to gain recognition of their independent ethnic status from the mainstream Japanese society and also to reinvigorate their language. They have been trying to transmit their language, which has ceased to be used in daily communication, to their younger generations, not as a corpus to be studied about but as a living language to be used in actual communication (Yoneda, 1989).

For several reasons, however, it is hard to predict the future direction of the movement or the probability of its successful realization in the form of maintenance bilingual education projects in the Ainu community. First of all, this movement has not necessarily been supported by the whole Ainu community, as a portion of the Ainu population hide their ethnic background in order to avoid being discriminated against by the mainstream society. Secondly, the size of the Ainu population is now very small. In 1804 it was reported that there were 21,697 Ainu people living in Hokkaido (Hayakawa, 1974). Intermarriages between the Ainu and Japanese and also the diffusion of Ainu people into other areas make it

difficult to determine the exact size of the present population of Ainu background, but it is estimated that they number only approximately 24,000 throughout Japan, many of them still in Hokkaido (Nakagawa, 1991). This small community thus does not have much political influence, at least not yet. Thirdly, and in consequence of the two reasons above, their movement has not drawn much attention from the majority of the mainstream society.

However, there are some reasons for optimism: some Ainu language schools have been founded by Ainu people in several locations in Hokkaido (DeChicchis, 1995), and, along with more teaching materials such as audio and video recordings being available (Maher, 1994; DeChicchis, 1995), the number of learners of Ainu as a second/foreign language has been increasing, both within the Ainu community itself and in the mainstream Japanese society as well.

The prospects of the Ainu community's future in terms of ethno-linguistic identity could be seen as promising only if the mainstream Japanese society acknowledges the Ainu as an independent ethnic group and cooperates with them in maintaining their identity.

4. Conclusion

Under different rulers, the Ainu people have been alternately segregated from and forcibly assimilated into the mainstream Japanese society. Especially after the regime of the Meiji government, the assimilation process was reinforced through education of Ainu children. As a consequence, the Ainu people have found it extremely difficult to maintain their ethnic identity

and their own language.

Although it is very difficult to predict the future of the Ainu community, especially in terms of the status of their language, the Ainu language, some grounds for optimism can be found in the Ainu people's own efforts to reinvigorate their language and also in increased interest in the Ainu language among mainstream Japanese.

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