Contemporary Marginalization of the Indigenous Ainu People in View of the History of Colonization and Assimilation

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In view of these, this paper is concerned with the indigenous Ainu people of Japan. It aims 1) to give an overview of the history of colonization and assimilation effecting Ainu people, and 2) to illustrate the impact on their present day marginalization. To fulfill this goal, historical and demographic data is presented based mainly on official sources.

In accordance with the objectives, the results are divided into 1) the history of colonization and assimilation and 2) contemporary population and marginalization. The former organizes history into (1) expansion by the shogunate, (2) modern state policy and (3) post-war developments. The latter contains data on (1) the Ainu population and (2) their marginalization in and (3) outside Hokkaido.

These results show the process of colonization from the 15th century continuing to the modern era, as well as assimilation attempts since the 19th century. Such processes led to the downfall of the Ainu people into poverty. While several attempts were made to protection and welfare promotion, contemporary statistics show levels of marginalization and gaps when compared to the general population. When such results are viewed together, they reveal a possible relationship, namely the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Key Words: indigenous, Ainu, colonization, assimilation, marginalization
I Introduction

The Global Definition of the Social Work Profession was adopted in 2014 by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) at their joint world conference in Melbourne. This definition has a strong emphasis on indigenous issues, stating ‘indigenous knowledge’ as one of the epistemological foundations of social work. This point is elaborated in the commentary notes of the definition in the context of historic and scientific colonialism and hegemony. Similarly to IFSW’s previous Policy Statement on Indigenous People, the commentary notes draw on related United Nations (UN) frameworks and clarify how the profession defines indigenous people, namely as follows:

- They live within (or maintain attachments to) geographically distinct ancestral territories.
- They tend to maintain distinct social, economic and political institutions within their territories.
- They typically aspire to remain distinct culturally, geographically and institutionally, rather than assimilate fully into national society.
- They self-identify as indigenous or tribal.

The Global Definition also allows for regional and national amplifications stating that it ‘may be amplified at national and/or regional levels’. Accordingly, the Asian and Pacific Association for Social Work Education (APASWE) and the IFSW Asia Pacific Region (IFSW-AP) adopted the Amplification of the Global Definition for Asia Pacific Region in 2016 at the joint world conference in Seoul. This regional amplification takes the stance that ‘the region has been shaped by its migrations and indigenous and colonizing histories’ and makes an affirmation of ‘indigenous and local knowledges and practices’. Additionally, the Japanese Association of Schools of Social Work (JASSW) and the Japanese Coordinating Body for IFSW Membership (JCB-IFSW) worked together on the Japanese Amplification of the Global Definition of the Social Work Profession that was approved in 2017 and carried on by their successor organizations, the Japanese Association for Social Work Education (JASWE) and the Japanese Federation of Social Workers (JFSW). This national amplification states that Japanese social work recognizes ‘discriminatory and oppressive histories’ and that it ‘is in the spirit of the Global Definition and the Asia Pacific Amplification’.

II Objectives and methods

In view of the above, this paper focuses on the indigenous Ainu people in Japan originating in the northernmost parts of Japan (present day Hokkaido and its surroundings). The Ainu not only satisfy the above mentioned definition of indigenous people from the Global Definition but are also recognized as such by all three branches of the Japanese government, in specific the judiciary since 1997 and following
the UN’s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples also by the legislative and executive since 2008.8

In accordance with the Global Definition, its Asia Pacific Amplification and its Japanese Amplification, this study aims to provide a summary on the history of colonization and assimilation that had an impact on the present day marginalization of the Ainu people as described in the latter half of the paper. To fulfill this goal, historical and demographic data is presented based mainly on official sources, such as government reports and policy papers, as well as public statistics. With regard to historical processes, many conflicting views may exist on delicate subject matters. This is especially true in the case of colonial and oppressive histories emphasized in the Global Definition and its regional and national amplifications. Therefore, a cabinet report was used as the primary source with regard to such histories, since it can be considered to reflect the view of many experts gathered in a committee, hence representing a certain consensus on Ainu history.

III Results

Since the objectives of the paper is to show 1) the history of colonization and assimilation and 2) contemporary population and marginalization of the Ainu people, the results are divided into these two sections. The former organizes history into (1) expansion by the shogunate, (2) modern state policy and (3) post-war developments, while the latter contains data on (1) the Ainu population in and outside Hokkaido, (2) their poverty and related social indicators in Hokkaido and (3) outside Hokkaido.

1 History of colonization and assimilation

In response to the above mentioned UN declaration and parliamentary resolution, the Advisory Council for Future Ainu Policy was set up by the Comprehensive Ainu Policy Office of the Cabinet Secretariat in 2008. Members of the council included a range of experts on the subject and their final report stated their consensus on Ainu history, current conditions, and possible future policy. The historical part of this document can be considered to have been written with keeping in mind the Ainu perspective, while also representing an overview of the consensual view about Ainu history leading up to the present situation. Unless stated otherwise, this section cites this overview and provides a summary of events and developments that specifically illustrate colonial and assimilative tendencies that played a historical role and influenced the present day marginalized status of the Ainu people.

1 Expansion by the shogunate

The Kamakura period (1185-1333) saw a strengthening of contact between the Ainu and Wajin (a term referring to non-Ainu ethnic Japanese when contrasted with the Ainu) with trade in the focus of relations. By the 15th century, twelve Wajin trading forts were established in present day Hokkaido expanding
gradually and leading to troubles between the two peoples. In 1457, the Battle of Koshamain was fought over the killing of a young Ainu man by a Wajin blacksmith in a dispute about a purchase. This was the first large scale battle between and Ainu and the Wajin, but was lost after the death of Koshamain.

Smaller conflicts followed, until the 16th century brought a peace treaty with the Kakizaki clan leading to more active exchanges in trade. In 1593, the clan obtained control over trading areas such as taxation rights etc. from Hideyoshi Toyotomi. In 1604, they received a certification also from Ieyasu Tokugawa for exclusive trading rights and renamed to Matsumae clan after the name of the region reminiscent of the Ainu original. This gradually led to the socioeconomic incorporation of the Ainu into the Wajin feudal system.

Cold climate in the area rendered rice cultivation impossible with contemporary agricultural technology at the time. Hence, a non-rice-based feudal system (*akinaïba chigyo*) was introduced in the 17th century that granted trading rights to feudal vassals in certain trading outposts. This system made the Ainu dependent on trade with their Wajin counterparts. In 1669, Shakushain’s War was fought over certain trading practices such as unfair exchange rates, but Shakushain was poisoned at so-called ‘peace talks’ ending the war and giving the Matsumae more power.

The 18th century marked the beginning of a new system (*basho ukeoi*) in which feudal vassals let merchants manage trading posts for a commission. The system started the exploitation of Ainu labor through worsening trading rates and the intentional withholding of knowledge over the Japanese language to avoid direct complaints in the feudal system. Despite several uprisings, this led to gradual downfall into poverty. In 1789, the Kunashiri-Menashi Battle took place including the present day Northern Territories in dispute with Russia against forced labor, becoming the last organized uprising by the Ainu.

From fear from western (mainly Russian) expansion, attempts were made in 1799 and 1807 for direct control by the shogunate over trading posts, leading to improved working conditions for the Ainu. However, due to financial constraints, control was restored to the Matsumae clan in 1821. The clan reintroduced the outsourcing system and the Ainu faced worsened working conditions again. These practices contributed to a dramatic population drop.

Working age generations were forced to work away from the community (*kotan*), leaving only vulnerable populations (elderly, sick, disabled, children etc.) who were unable to care for themselves. Under harsh working conditions and abuses, young Ainu had limited opportunities for marriage and family building. Moreover, increased contact with Wajin seasonal laborers resulted in the introduction of new diseases such as smallpox, tuberculosis, cholera, and measles.

In 1855, the Shimoda Treaty with Russia established national borders without regard to the people of the land and brought back direct rule by the shogunate with attempts to assimilate now so-called ‘aborigines’ (*or dojin* in Japanese, currently a word with considerably discriminatory connotations) by forcefully changing customs (hairstyles etc.) and names. This historical period and the hardships of the Ainu people are described in detail in the contemporary works of Takeshiro Matsuura who travelled and
surveyed the region as an explorer and cartographer on a mission by the shogunate\textsuperscript{10}.

(2) Modern state policy

Following the Meiji Restoration, in the climate of building a nation state, the Ainu homeland (Ainu Mosir; literally meaning ‘the silent great plane where humans live’ [as opposed to the world of spirits]) was officially renamed Hokkaido in 1869 and massive immigration, as well as land development began.

The Ainu were entered to the family registry (koseki) as ‘commoners’ (heimin) in the pre-war class system, but were distinguished as ‘former aborigines’ (kyu-dojin) when deemed necessary. Typically for the era, under the auspices of cultural enlightenment, traditional cultural practices were strictly banned (burning the houses of the dead for use in their afterlife, female mouth tattoos as the sign of maturity, and male ear rings etc.). Assimilation policies were enacted, such as the establishment of the segregated and unequal (only 4 years as opposed to 6) ‘aboriginal schools’ (dojin gakko) that focused on Japanese language education and ultimately leading up to the situation today that the Ainu language is critically endangered as designated by UNESCO\textsuperscript{11}.

Upon the introduction of modern land ownership and land reform in 1872, Ainu were left behind and mostly without any valuable land due to no concept of individual land ownership, limited Japanese language skills (approximately less than 3% could read and write Japanese at the time) and too late introduction to the family registry (1876), a requirement for eligibility for grants. Under such circumstances, the Ainu faced severe livelihood problems at the end of the 19th century, not only due to the narrowing of collective lands traditionally used for hunting, fishing, logging and gathering, but also due to the prohibition of deer hunting and salmon fishing, both traditional staple foods for the Ainu. Table 1 and Figure 1 show the impact of these processes in numbers. It is clear that the Ainu became an extreme minority even in their original homeland of Hokkaido (only 0.6% by 1930).

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{ll}
\hline
 & 1872 & 1930 \\
\hline
Ainu population (people) & 15,275 & 15,703 \\
Total population (people) & 111,196 & 2,812,335 \\
Population ratio (%) & 13.7 & 0.6 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Population changes in Hokkaido}
\end{table}

The Meiji government also took measures to protect the Ainu from changing social conditions. Attempts were made in 1871 to promote agriculture among the Ainu since traditional livelihood through fishing or hunting became impossible. Similarly, to avoid being deceived and lose their land in a free real estate market, Ainu settlements were put under government control in 1877. The most significant of such protective measures was the *Former Aborigines Protection Act* of 1899 that was based on the Dawes Act in the United States. Unfortunately, these attempts did not lead to definitive success in effectively and explicitly improving living conditions.

Furthermore, the Meiji Era brought about unethical, deceitful, and racist scientific studies influenced by the rising nationalist ideology of the day. Namely, body measurements, photographing, grave digging and collection of remains were practiced without permission.

(3) Post-war developments

Virag (2015) provides an overview of post-war government policy related to Ainu welfare. According
to this, official council reports evaluate these measures in the following way\textsuperscript{14,15}. The Hokkaido Utari Welfare Measures were launched in 1961 on the prefectural level (\textit{utari} means companion or compatriot in Ainu). In 2002, the Hokkaido prefectural government shifted these measures into a new policy, the Measures on the Improvement of Living Standards of Ainu People. Presently, these measures encompass the following five areas: livelihood, education, employment, industry and group activities. However, council reports point out that while this prefectural policy led to improvement in livelihood, gaps between the Ainu and the general population still remain (as seen in the next section) and that the measures are limited only to those Ainu who continue to live in Hokkaido.

On the national level, as the previously described discriminatory \textit{Former Aborigines Protection Act} of 1899 was abolished in 1997 the new Ainu Culture Promotion Act came to effect\textsuperscript{16}. Measures under the act consist of the promotion of Ainu research, language, culture, traditions and living space. Advisory council reports recognize the positive effects of this legislation, yet it is stated that it does not function properly in communicating and developing Ainu culture on the intergenerational level, and that since it is limited to culture, it does not necessary lead to employment opportunities, hence to better livelihood for younger generations. Also, in comparison with Hokkaido, Ainu culture and social understanding did not spread on the national level as expected.

As mentioned above, Japan vote for the related UN declaration in 2007 and both houses of parliament adopted the resolution on the Ainu in 2008. Due to this, the first national level Ainu policies came to effect including the following areas: university enrollment, livelihood consultation, employment, passing on of traditions outside Hokkaido and social exchange space in the metropolitan area. These measures show promising effects, however their long term impact is yet to be evaluated. The same can be said about a new legislation adopted in 2019\textsuperscript{17}.

Also, Japan is yet to ratify the International Labor Organization (ILO) convention (1989) on indigenous people\textsuperscript{18}.

\section*{2 Contemporary population and marginalization}

To provide data on the population and marginalization of contemporary Ainu, this section evaluates Ainu population estimates in and outside Hokkaido and available statistics showing the levels of poverty and related social indicators in and outside Hokkaido.

\textbf{(1) Ainu population in and outside Hokkaido}

The newest data by the Hokkaido government shows that the Ainu population surveyed in 2017 was 13,118 people\textsuperscript{19}. This shows a decrease in people self-reporting as Ainu in comparison with the previous data (16,786 people in 2013). However, UN estimates put the Ainu population in Hokkaido at between 30,000 and 50,000\textsuperscript{20}. As for the Ainu population outside Hokkaido, a metropolitan government survey in Tokyo reported 2,700 people in 1988\textsuperscript{21}. Meanwhile, the Science Council of Japan estimates that some
10,000 Ainu live in the metropolitan area\textsuperscript{22}.

Since there is no ethnicity related question in the Japanese census, no exact data on Japanese nationals with non-Japanese heritage such as the Ainu exists. Also, there remains the possibility that data collected through self-reporting is under-representative due to fear of discrimination and other factors.

(2) Marginalization in Hokkaido

According to the above mentioned prefectural government survey in 2017, public assistance rate for Ainu people is at 3.6\%, still 0.4\% higher than the local average. Additionally 52.9\% of households have used public loans for livelihood, a 9.2\% increase since the previous survey in 2013 (43.7\%). As for income, 5.2\% of households have an annual income less than 1 million yens, 19.6\% less than 2 million and 31.9\% than 3.5 million. 27.1\% report that livelihood is ‘very difficult’, while 45.3\% report income and livelihood as a source of worries. Although increasing, high school enrollment rate at 95.1\% is lower than the local average (98.8\%). While college enrollment has also increased, it is still only 33.3\%, below the local average (45.8\%). 23.2\% have experienced discrimination and an additional 13.1\% know someone else who has.

In 2008, the Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies at Hokkaido University conducted a more comprehensive survey\textsuperscript{23}. This data shows that the average annual household income is less than 3.6 million yens, lower than the average on both national (5.7 million) and local (4.4 million) levels. Annual individual income averages less than 2 million, 53.2\% actually below this line are considered low-income. In this survey, public assistance rate is 5.2\%, more than 1.3 times higher than the total percentage for Hokkaido (3.9\%) and 2.4 times higher than the total national average (2.2\%) with actually 33.5\% feeling livelihood to be ‘very difficult’.

With regard to education, a considerable factor in determining future income, average high school experience throughout the lifetime is 58.5\% (highest finished education being high school for 44.4\%). Lifetime university experience is 4.7\% (highest finished education being university for 4.5\%) on the average. The reason to give up higher studies is given as ‘economic’ in 77.6\%. Dropout rates for high school and university are respectively 12.9\% and 20.3\% in comparison to only 2.1\% and 2.7\% national averages.

Similarly to other indigenous people around the world, addictive habits such as smoking, drinking and gambling (pachinko etc.) show higher rates than both national and local Hokkaido surveys. Regarding current worries, 45.6\% report ‘low income’, 13.2\% ‘too much debt’, 56.9\% ‘health problems in the family’, 6.7\% ‘no job’, 7.8\% ‘bad working conditions’, 0.8\% ‘high school or college enrollment’, 10.2\% ‘children’s education’, 2.6\% ‘human relationships at the workplace or at school’, 2.4\% ‘neighborhood relations’, 8.7\% ‘housing’, and 2.4\% report ‘discrimination’.

(3) Marginalization outside Hokkaido

A national government survey on Ainu living conditions outside Hokkaido was conducted in 2010\textsuperscript{24}. 

\textsuperscript{22} Data from MINEMI, cited in 2017

\textsuperscript{23} Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies, Hokkaido University

\textsuperscript{24} Japanese government census data

\textsuperscript{25} Hokkaido University study, 2010
According to these statistics, the incidence of an annual income below 3 million yen is 44.8% in households and 79.5% on an individual basis, the national average being 33.2% and 53.0% respectively. Public assistance rate for households is 7.6%, 3.3 times higher than the national data (2.3%). High school experience even for younger generations under 30 is 87.9%, lower than the national average (97.3%) and college experience is 31.1% (compared to 44.1%). In 73.9% of the cases, ‘economic reasons’ are stated as the main reason for giving up higher studies. Dropout rate from high schools stands at 11.2% (6.6 times higher than for the total population at only 1.7%) and at 16.0% from college. ‘Economic reasons’ are reported in 40.7% of the cases as opposed to the 2.9% national average (14 times difference).

11.4% say that the reason for leaving Hokkaido was ‘to escape from discrimination’, yet 20.5% have experienced discrimination outside Hokkaido. In fact, 19.1% have not told about their Ainu roots to their married partners, 34.8% to their children and 37.6% do not have anyone around who would know that they are ethnically Ainu. As for recent worries, 45.2% answer ‘low income’, 12.4% ‘too much debt’, 29.0% ‘health problems in the family’, 13.3% ‘no job’, 11.4% ‘bad working conditions’, 2.9% ‘high school or college enrollment’, 6.2% ‘children’s education’, 3.3% ‘human relationships at the workplace or at school’, 5.2% ‘neighborhood relations’, 7.1% ‘housing’, and 5.2% state ‘discrimination’.

IV Conclusion

In view of the focus on indigenous issues and colonizing histories in the Global definition and its Asia Pacific and Japanese Amplifications, the purpose of this paper was twofold: 1) to give an overview of the history of colonization and assimilation effecting Ainu people in Japan, and 2) to illustrate the impact on their present day marginalization. For the first objective, the results provided a brief historical narrative based on the historical consensus on the matter summarized in public reports. The second objective was achieved by the organization of existing statistics on poverty related issues.

These results show the gradual process of invasion from the 15th century expanding to full scale colonization in the modern era. Since the 19th century, several policies can be seen to be aimed at assimilation. Such processes led to the hardship of the Ainu people, and also to their downfall into poverty and extreme minority status (0.6% in 1930) even in their original homeland. While several attempts were made to protection and welfare promotion, contemporary statistics show levels of marginalization and gaps when compared to the general population. According to data in the second half of the results, there is a tendency for lower than average income and higher than average rates of public assistance etc. that indicate poverty and marginalization. These are also combined with lower than average rates of school enrollment, higher than average dropout rates and altogether less privileged educational background. When such results are viewed together, they reveal a possible relationship, namely the intergenerational cycle of poverty, hence the reproduction of marginalized status.

Based on these findings, this study proposes the proper introduction of cultural sensitivity to the Japanese social work profession, as well as more consideration for the historical context and a stronger
strive for a deeper understanding of and learning from indigenous Ainu knowledge in social work education.

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