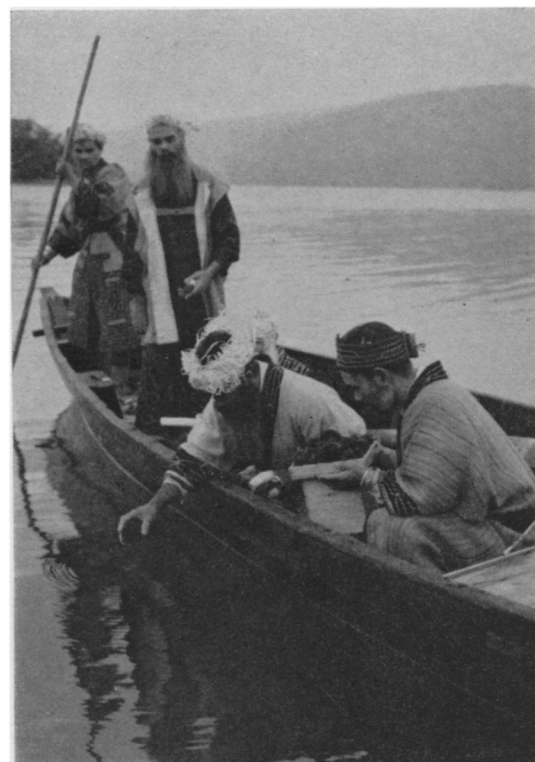


# Preserving the past

As Japan's Ainu merge with the rest of the population, an institute records the vestiges of their culture

by Stuart Griffin



*Marimo, round seaweed, means peace.*

Japan's Caucasian aborigines, the so-called Hairy Ainu, are dwindling in numbers, vanishing through intermarriage. Their doom is so regretted by the Oriental Japanese, however, that the University of Hokkaido has set up an Institute of Ainu Studies in an effort to preserve their culture.

Only a few thousand of the Ainu remain, on Japan's least populated main island of Hokkaido, where they are still ethnically distinct despite the fact that they speak orthodox Japanese. The American Indians are perhaps an equivalent in the U.S. of what Ainu are to Japan.

Ainu began to decline in numbers in the late 19th century. Anthropologists insist that since only a few hundred pure Ainu survive at present, they are an even rarer people than the New Zealand Maori or the pure-blooded Hawaiians. They agree the Ainu are a Caucasian, or at least a Caucasoid race physically—fair-skinned, blue-eyed, exceptionally hirsute. Simple hunters and fishermen, they were pushed aside by marauding latecomers, Japanese from China, Mongolia and Korea.

Aim of the Ainu institute, which has a budget of about \$175,000 a year, is research in the beginnings and characteristics of Ainu culture, preserving the details before the people are entirely absorbed into the modern Japanese culture. The spoken language of the Ainu is being studied, as are the Ainu folktales which, sung and transmitted from generation to generation, make up for

the lack of a written language. The music and religion are also being studied.

The basic drive of the institute is to understand where the Ainu came from and why, and fill in the gaps in Ainu history.

Chinese chroniclers called the Ainu Mao Min, the Hairy People. Their origin is not pinpointed, though belief is that they came from some part of Northern Asia.

That the Ainu once dominated Japan proper, even as far south as the Bonin and Ryukyu Islands, is indicated by the many names of distinctive Ainu flavor. Place names such as Noboribetsu, Hito-kappu, Kuttara, Shirohei and Biratori are found in the Kuriles, on Hokkaido and on Honshu proper. Even sacred Mt. Fuji derives from the ancient Ainu word for fire or fire goddess, kamui-fuchui.

The so-called Yamato Race, originators of today's main Japanese population, inched the Ainu back from Honshu's primeval forests and onto Hokkaido, slaughtering them with superior weapons and tactics. Scholars say the decline in Ainu numbers and the shrinkage of their living space dates to about the 4th century.

Other Ainu supposedly survive on the ex-Japanese southern half of what was called Karafuto. Now the island is Russian and termed Sakhalin: the fate of the island's Ainu is unknown.

Researchers speculate that the Ainu were once part of the famed Jomon

race, known for superb pottery making, and a culture dating back 9,000 to 10,000 years.

Some aspects of Ainu life linger on, little changed. Chieftains rule with aid from elders and shamans. Lips and faces, especially of women, are still tattooed blue. An exceedingly complex animal worship persists, with totems, taboos, rituals and with vivid communal ceremonies.

Ainu houses are one-story reed- or straw-thatched structures. Each house has two small, square windows, closed at night by wooden shutters with rope hinges. These are the kamu-ibuyara, or sacred god-windows, where toward sunrise the tribesmen worship.

At one end of the roof, itself neatly laid in distinctive receding layers, is a large triangular opening for the exit of smoke.

A small windowless hut called a shem is built near the vestibule of the main dwelling. It is a shelter for dogs, storehouse for firewood, place of work where millet, shelled peas and beans are pounded.

Bear sacrifices were common and bloody until missionary influences broke up the ritual killing of especially reared and pampered young bears. Bears are still deified as a major part of the Ainu nature-worship religion.

Ainu also hold strongly to life-after-death philosophy.

The original Ainu language shows scant resemblance to any other, further proof that the Caucasoids are indeed an



*Lips of women are tattooed blue.*



Photos: Japan National Tourist Organization

*Traditional fishing methods are preserved, partly as a tourist attraction.*

ancient folk. Perhaps, like the Australian aborigines, they are among the earliest types of *homo sapiens*. Linguists believe Ainu is one of earth's oldest tongues, with unexplained similarities to Celtic.

Living today in kotan or tribal villages, the Ainu exist by making souvenirs, especially a traditional cloth from the inner bark of the Japanese wychelm, called atsushi.

Today's Ainu are Japanized and commercialized. Their villages have tourist appeal, and Ainu squat and carve bears from cypress and scrub oak, perform the ritualistic bear-dances and weave their intricate, tough-fibered and colorful atsushi textiles for tourist yen.

Folksingers, too, will don their unique clothing, and paint blue their lips, their throats and the backs of hands and wrists, and intone their classic Yukor or Ainu epic, for yen.

**There is** little doubt that the out-moded Ainu culture will gradually be replaced by more modern ways. There has never been any attempt on the part of the Government to keep the Ainu separate and culturally intact, except in so far as the Ainu themselves wish to do so.

Still, it is possible that a good part of the Ainu culture could survive modernization, in the same way that many ancient Japanese customs have survived the effects of Westernization in the past decades. It is this type of accommodation that the Institute of Ainu Studies hopes to stimulate. ◇



*Elm bark, pounded in wooden vats, makes textiles for tourist sale.*