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The Arts of the Ainu People of Japan: Tilting the World along the Dynamic Northern Silk Road

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Relevant periods/eras:

- Ainu: Ainu Culture (13th c. -1868); Modern (1869-1945); Postwar (1945-)
- Wajin: Edo (1615-1868); Meiji (1868-1912); Taishō (1912-1926); Shōwa (1926-1989)
- China: Ming (1368-1644); Qing (1616-1912)

Key terms:

Peoples

Ainu: lit. "people" (as opposed to divine spirits).
The word now used by the Ainu and Wajin to refer to ethnic Ainu.
Santan: Ainu and Wajin name for the nomadic people of the present-day southeast Russia.
Wajin: ethnic majority of Japan

Ainu vs. Wajin words

"Bark Robe" (Ainu textiles woven using tree bark fibers [e.g. Elm])
- [Ainu] *attus*
- [Wajin] *atsushi*

Northern most island now part of the Japanese archipelago
- [Ainu] *yaunmosir* (lit. "land made of ground")
- [Wajin] Ezo (lit. "barbarians") or Ezochi ("land of barbarians")
- [Wajin] Hokkaidō (post 1869; lit. "northern sea route")

Qing-dynasty courtly officials' robes imported through the Northern trade
- [Ainu] *santancimipu* (Santan clothing)
- [Wajin] *Ezo nishiki* (Ezo brocade)

Surcoat
- [Wajin] *jinbaori*
- [Ainu] *jinpaori* (surcoat imported through Wajin trade)

Other terms

Deren: The trading post between Qing officials and the "Santan" peoples
Matsumae clan: A Wajin warrior family sanctioned to monopolize the Ainu trade.
retar: "white" in Ainu language

Wajin and the "Ezo" (as we can know from the Wajin records)

712: Wajin establishes northern "districts"
8th C: Wajin forts in northern main island; Battles with the "Ezo" people
14th C: Wajin trade with "Ezo Island"; Ten Wajin trading posts in Ezo
1450s: Koshamain's War
1604: Matsumae clan gains permission to exclusively conduct the Wajin-Ainu trade
1630s: Edo shogunate restricts its people access to foreign import
1669: Shakushain's War
18th C: Wajin merchants take over the Wajin-Ainu trade
Wajin northern ship trade
Late 19th-20th century: Wajin militarism and expansionism

Acculturation and its Impact to the Sense of Identity

1869: Wajin renamed "Ezo" to "Hokkaidō"; Wajin migration to Hokkaidō
1871-: Assimilation of the Ainu people as the "people of the Japanese nation"
1899: Hokkaidō Former Aborigines Protection Act; Establishing of "Ainu schools"
1901: Imperial Japanese Army 7th Division stationed in Asahikawa
1920s: Production of wooden bear statues first in Asahikawa
1960s-70s: Hokkaidō tourism boom
1968: Centenary of Hokkaidō settlement; Ainu ethnic revival movement
1997: Policies on promoting Ainu culture (abolishment of the Former Aborigines Act)
2001: Ainu patterns designated as "Hokkaidō's Legacy"
2004: Ainu oral tradition designated as "Hokkaidō's Legacy"
2008: "Resolution to Recognize the Ainu as an Indigenous People"
2013: Kaizawa Tōru's great grandfather's works → designated as first "traditional craft" of Hokkaidō; Exhibition, "AINU ART" at the Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art
2019: Basic Policy for comprehensive and effective promotion of Ainu measures
2020: Establishment of Upopoy and National Ainu Museum

Further reading:

(Mainly featuring recent accessible English works with good bibliography.)

- Carr, Kevin, and Dana Reijerkerk. 2021. Decentering Japanese Art. November 15, 2021. https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/djah/.
- Coyle, MacKenzie. 2022. "Windows to the Ainu World." https://glam.uoregon.edu/s/uo-ainu-collections/page/welcome.
- Grunow, Tristan R., and Fuyubi Nakamura. 2019. "Hokkaidō 150: Settler Colonialism and Indigeneity in Modern Japan and Beyond." https://meijiat150.arts.ubc.ca/hokkaido150/
- Miyaji, Tsuzumi, and isayka Kitajima. 2025. *Research Report on Ainu Garments, vol. 1: Attus and Ruunpe in the Collection of the National Ainu Museum*. Shiraoi: National Ainu Museum. https://ainu-upopoy.go.jp/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/2021A04Report_Kitajima-Miyaji.pdf.
- The Foundation for Ainu Culture. "National Ainu Museum." National Ainu Museum and Park. https://ainu-upopoy.go.jp/en/museum/.
- The Foundation for Ainu Culture. "Ainu seikatsu bunka saigen manuaru" [Manuals for reconstructing Ainu lives and cultures]. https://www.ff-ainu.or.jp/web/learn/culture/manual/index.html. (Text information in Japanese, but with excellent photographs and videos.)
- Walley, Akiko. 2026. "Reassessing *we*: toward heterochronic histories of Japan." Japan Forum 38.3: 332-362. DOI: 10.1080/09555803.2026.2622450.

Transcription of the English translation of "sixty cradles" (*re hotne sinta*)
Based on the translation provided in: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSTXj7xs97Y.

Why are you crying
Do you want to hear the story?
Well let me try

It travelled through the clouds in the sky
travelled through the starts in the sky
all the way past the real sky
where pristine river flows through the scene
Going up the river
On one side
there is a silver Kashiwa oak grove a silver mugwort field and silver rocks
On the other side
there is a gold Nara oak grove a gold mugwort field and gold rocks
All around the woods was glittering

It traced up the river as far as it could
There stood a house a big big house
One side of the house was drawn a stormy sky
The other side of the house was drawn a sunny sky
In that house was a god who birthed life
hanging 60 cradles at the head
hanging 60 cradles at the foot
The god will face the head
and rock the cradles all at once
The god will face the foot
and rock the cradles all at once
Then the babies' cries will shower down
down to the world far below

That is how sleep is born
You cry so much so you could hear it
So I will sing you all about it

[That's how the song goes]