Ethnic Tourism and the Ainu: Questions of Cultural Authenticity

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The Ainu are the indigenous inhabitants of Hokkaidō, Sakhalin, and the Kurile Islands. Particularly during the Meiji period, the Ainu became an internal Other against which modernising Japan could define its Self. Before the Meiji Restoration, and in line with the imported Chinese *ka-i* world-view (which contrasted the civilised centre with the barbarian periphery), the Ainu were regarded as barbarous, uncivilised outsiders on the outskirts of Japan. However, as efforts were made to bring Yezo (now known as Hokkaidō) under Japanese governance, the Meiji policy towards the Ainu became one of simultaneous assimilation and exclusion. Ainu practices such as tattooing and salmon fishing were banned in an attempt to erode cultural differences, while ethnic tourist villages showcased their supposedly 'savage' yet 'childish' nature. Notions of Social Darwinism were imported from America and Europe to explain Ainu impoverishment – rather than attributing their destitution to the fact that their traditional way of living was being upended, it was believed that the Ainu were an inherently "inferior race[1]" (*rettō no jinshu*) destined for extinction.

Until recently, Ainu were only able to practice their traditional ceremonies and customs in tourist villages: as Hiwasaki states, the Japanese government "established and promoted Ainu tourism precisely at the time when the destruction of Ainu traditional life and Ainu impoverishment were at their worst[2]". These centres were invaluable for the preservation of many Ainu traditions, and are now places where those with Ainu heritage can learn about and engage with their culture. The development of Ainu tourist villages can be conceptualised through the transcultural lens of contact zones, highlighting Ainu agency despite seemingly asymmetrical power imbalances[3]. Indeed, as their political situation has evolved, so their autonomy within these zones has increased. As a result, these centres are not merely sites of preservation but also have a certain dynamism to them – in some areas, new traditions have developed as creative responses to contemporary and historical problems. However, criticism has been raised that such practices have been adapted solely to maximise touristic potential, thus commoditising and diluting 'true' Ainu culture.

This essay will argue that such a static concept of authenticity focuses solely on the preservation of culture, leaving no room for the dynamic process of cultural development. To criticise current Ainu culture and tourist villages as 'inauthentic' disregards inevitable individual and group negotiations of cultural identity in response to external and internal influences. It will look at Ainu tourist villages as contact zones between *Wajin* (ethnic Japanese) and Ainu, and address concerns from within and outside Ainu communities regarding the 'authenticity' of such locations, namely the marketing of ethnicity for profit, invented traditions, and the potentially intrusive tourist

gaze. It will then discuss the problematic nature of describing Ainu culture as 'inauthentic', and the ways in which this may continue to support the old trope of the Ainu as a 'dying race'.

1. Ethnic Tourism and Authenticity

Yamamura describes ethnic tourism as travel "motivated by the search for first-hand contact with people whose ethnic and/or cultural backgrounds are different from one's own … to gain direct experience of the[ir] culture[4]". He disavows cultural performances held for tourists as "secondary experiences", suggesting that the primary focus of ethnic tourism lies far more on experiencing the culture in an unadulterated way[5]. Yang's definition, on the other hand, suggests that the concept of ethnic tourism has evolved from what Yamamura describes as primary experiences to include "commercial entities" such as "ethnic theme parks or folk villages[6]". It is this definition that I will refer to over the course of this essay.

Ethnic tourism has strong roots in Self/Other discourses, particularly with regards to indigenous people. The appeal of touring Indigeneity, or 'Nativeness', stems from its inherent 'Otherness' – as Coombes et al note, indigenous forms of ethnic tourism rely on "essentialised differences and their projection to a global audience which yearns for 'authentic' culture[7]". Much has been written about the search for authentic Indigeneity. In the early 20th century, following the 'opening' of Hokkaidō, tourism to the island began to increase, with many visitors wishing to visit one of the new Ainu tourist villages. Official policies of assimilation were based largely on the understanding that Ainu should be subsumed into *Wajin* society for their own good and protection, as the doctrine of Social Darwinism dictated that they would otherwise eventually die out. Tourist villages therefore came to showcase the "wretched" nature of the Ainu, with one guidebook advising visitors that "Ainu have never shown any capacity, and are merely adult children[8]". Another advised *Wajin* tourists "to refrain from laughing … or assuming an attitude of mockery[9]" while watching traditional Ainu dances. Despite assimilation policies, Ainu were therefore still publically Othered.

Now such sites have become places in which minority cultures are able to practice, discover, and showcase their culture largely on their own terms. In the case of the Ainu, the chance to do so was previously almost entirely restricted to such tourist villages[10]. We can look at the phenomenon of ethnic tourism with the help of Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone'. Pratt describes the contact zone as a "space of colonial encounters … usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict[11]". She notes that the term 'contact' "aim[s] to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters[12]". Despite the stark difference in power between Ainu and *Wajin*, tourist villages were not just places for Ainu culture to be judged and found lacking, but also sites in which they could continue to live (at least to an extent) in their traditional ways, thus resisting complete assimilation into the dominant *Wajin* culture. The existence

of such villages was vital for the preservation of some aspects of Ainu culture that may otherwise have been lost under the pressures of assimilation. In an interview with Tilley, Chief Stephan, leader of the Small Nambas dance troupe in Vanuatu, expressed that "it was important to perform culture if it was to be preserved … To keep culture alive, it must be lived[13]".

However, the lure of the supposedly authentic 'Otherness' or 'Nativeness' of Ainu tourist villages and their subsequent economic success inevitably drags the Ainu in to discussions of cultural commoditisation, dilution, and inauthenticity. Cohen describes commoditisation as the "process by which things … come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value … thereby becoming goods (and services)[14]". Wall and Yang note the pressures this can have upon the host culture, identifying "authenticity versus cultural commodification" as one of four main tensions underlying ethnic tourism[15].

Yet the suggestion that "authenticity" and "commodification" are two binary concepts is problematic in several ways. Firstly, the protection of what is seen as 'authentic' culture is often enabled by tourism, or the commodification of said culture. Hinch and Butler suggest that once ethnic tourism and minority cultures align, they tend to enter into something of a symbiotic relationship: money brought in by tourism allows members of the group to continue to preserve and practice their culture, which in turn brings further financial support[16]. Although some aspects of the culture may evolve to appeal to a wider range of tourists, the proceeds help other aspects of the culture to survive. Indeed, funds brought in by ethnic tourism have allowed the Ainu to both promote and protect aspects of their culture that may otherwise have been lost.

Secondly, authenticity is in itself a slippery, complicated concept. The on-going search for what MacCannell describes as a "postmodern fantasy of 'authentic alterity'[17]" essentialises indigenous cultures and does not at all account for their evolution and/or modernisation, nor the ways in which indigenous people adapt(ed) to colonial pressures or the remnants of colonialism which are still embossed on their lived experiences. The search for this kind of 'authenticity' is usually a search for 'pure', traditional cultures unchanged by time and pressure. Authenticity should rather be understood as a shape-shifting, dynamic process which simultaneously encourages self-reflexivity and yet is also inherent in the way a certain individual or group navigates the world and their realities. Cultural adaptations are therefore inherently 'authentic' in that they are creative reactions based on histories of oppression and negotiation in the contact zone. Indeed, as Theodossopoulos reminds us, there are "no single, bounded, and self-contained cultures, and [so] neither is there a unitary … definition of authenticity[18]".

2. Negotiating Identity in the Market

Hiwasaki notes that around 13 per cent of Ainu are engaged in ethnic tourism as their primary occupation[19]. The most popular Ainu tourist destinations are *Porotokotan* (meaning "large lakeside village"), a tourist village in Shiraoi with an open-air museum; an Ainu settlement at Lake Akan; and Nibutani, a town with a majority Ainu population but which did not initially develop with tourists in mind.

As mentioned, such sites are places in which Ainu are able to practice their culture. Carving is a traditionally valued Ainu skill, and across these settlements, many Ainu engage in carving wooden souvenirs. The carved bear is a particularly famous product, and very popular among tourists. The bear is a particularly important god for inland Ainu, though Dubreuil notes that, as tends to be the case across Ainu communities, there are strong regional differences[20].

These wooden carvings became ubiquitous due to a mixture of external pressures and internal negotiations. As the Japanese government systematically banned aspects of Ainu hunting practices such as salmon fishing, the Ainu were faced with further poverty and the looming threat of starvation. Dubreuil notes that many Ainu men "were forced to abandon that part of their religion that forbade depicting life forms of the gods in secular art[21]" and begin to carve images of bears to sell to the increasing crowds of tourists. Although the exact origin of these carvings does not seem to be known, a popular theory suggests that the idea to carve wooden bears and other animals originated with *Wajin* Yoshichika Tokugawa, who visited Switzerland in 1922 and came across such locally carved artefacts. He then introduced the idea in Hokkaidō as a way for Ainu farmers to occupy themselves during the winter months when the tourist flow ebbed, so that they could make a profit when visitors returned in summer[22].

Regardless of whether this is true or not, carving bears for profit did clash with traditional Ainu beliefs: carving images of gods was traditionally only permissible for religious implements such as the prayer stick. Dubreuil notes the difficulty Ainu faced in beginning to carve souvenirs:

"We petitioned the gods through private prayer[23] that we be allowed to change the dogma against making images in the forms of gods. We desperately needed to enter the market, and gradually the "Ainu bear" and other animal gods, especially the salmon, kamuy-chep … were carved and offered for sale.[24]"

Dubreuil's succinct description of the adaptation process highlights key themes that are important to this issue: economic desperation, petitioning the gods, and the gradual development of the souvenir carving trade. The emergence of bear carvings was a direct response not only to the ethnic tourist industry as established by *Wajin*, but also to market forces, i.e. the economic impoverishment of the Ainu as caused by years of structural and social discrimination. In engaging in dialogue with the gods, the Ainu showed a level of agency that arguments of 'commoditisation'

may overlook, namely their ability to authorise the practice of carving souvenir bears. Pratt notes that processes of transculturation are common to the contact zone, where "subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant … culture[25]". In this case, the Ainu involved were able to acknowledge the suggestion transmitted to them, and decide under what kind of circumstances they would permit it. The practice allows traditional Ainu skills to become marketable, and reconciles traditional culture with the demands of modernity. Sissons notes that contemporary indigenous cultures are "cultures of survival … they represent a particular form of modernity that is characterised by an affirmation and conscious re-appropriation of tradition[26]".

3. Invented Traditions?

Another particularly interesting case is the Marimo Festival held at Lake Akan. Marimo is a spherical type of seaweed that grows in the lake, which is near an Ainu settlement. The plant was awarded national heritage status by the Japanese government in the early 1920s, but became endangered in the 1940s. In 1950, local Ainu people organised an annual Marimo Festival "to symbolise a ritual of return as well as the harmony of human and nature[27]", and to raise awareness of the importance of marimo conservation. Traditional Ainu beliefs distinguish between the human world (*Aynu Moshir*) and the world of the gods (*Kamuy Moshir*). Ainu saw animals and plants as deities crossing over into the human world, and this ideology was applied to the Marimo Festival, emphasising "the marimo's return to nature[28]". However, this festival received much criticism, particularly from other Ainu, and was labelled as a commoditised event designed purely to attract tourists. Marimo are not a traditional Ainu deity, and although the festival did not recognise them as such, the connection was viewed as tenuous. One local newspaper published an article with the headline "Experts find the Ainu-aegagropila link irrelevant and disagreeable[29]". Local Ainu argued that it was an authentic expression of Ainu spiritual beliefs, while outsiders claimed it was an 'invented tradition', and not representative of all Ainu but just the Akan area.

Lake Akan was already a tourist destination before the Marimo Festival was established. Many Ainu initially lived around the area as fishers or labour workers for the *Wajin* forestry nearby. When Akan became a National Park in 1934, the area "shift[ed] its economic base to one based on tourism[30]". Local Ainu would engage with the tourists by dressing in traditional garments and telling tales, or explaining aspects of Ainu culture[31]. Here, the tourist industry seemed to grow alongside the Ainu; as tourism increased, more and more Ainu moved to the area. The locals also had the idea to build a large house (*onnecise*) and small house (*poncise*) to further attract and entertain the tourists in 1970[32].

The Ainu at Lake Akan come from diverse backgrounds, making them a particularly interesting group to look at when critiquing a static notion of authenticity. Many migrated there to

work in the tourist trade; as Cheung notes, most Ainu at Lake Akan "belong neither to one single distinctive group with common origin or ancestors, nor to a regional ethnic group sharing common local traditions, specific ways of life, and socio-historical relations with the landscape[33]". The Marimo Festival can therefore perhaps be seen as a culturally unifying event – a new tradition to be shared by the local Ainu, providing them with a spiritual and tangible connection to the lake and their surroundings. It was also a creative response to a local environmental problem, grounded in traditional Ainu spiritual beliefs and therefore culturally 'authentic' and representative of Akan Ainu. Theodossopoulos suggests that such inventiveness should not be thrown under the umbrella of "invented traditions" in the Hobsbawmian sense, as Hobsbawm used this term more to draw attention to the fabrication of Western traditions with the intent to ground nation-states in history and lend them a level of legitimacy[34]. When applied to indigenous groups, terms such as "revitalisation", "transformation", or, as Sahlins suggests, "inventive*ness*[35]" (my emphasis) are more appropriate, as they are "more sensitive to agency and appreciative of indigenous creative accomplishments[36]". Furthermore, such terminology permits indigenous groups to retain 'authenticity' in their responses to external changes and pressures, acknowledging that such inventiveness stems from local creativity. Rather than describing the Marimo Festival as an "invented tradition", the term "invent*ive* tradition" therefore seems more appropriate.

Cohen argues that "a cultural product … which is at one point generally judged as contrived or inauthentic may also, in the course of time, become generally recognised as authentic[37]". Traditions are seen as authentic because they have passed the test of time, but were also at some point new and 'inauthentic'. Ainu responses to modern challenges and negotiation of identity within ethnic tourist villages are inherently 'authentic' as they are *Ainu* reactions, although perhaps some will first be recognised as such in a few decades or centuries.

4. The Tourist Gaze

Urry defines the tourist gaze as a "socially constructed" contrast between the everyday and the tourist destination[38]. Here, I will be using the term to refer to the lens of preconceived colonial expectations through which ethnic tourists gaze upon the Ainu. In particular, I refer to common and entrenched *Wajin* expectations that the Ainu are still a primitive people. I will analyse the ways in which the Ainu respond to or perhaps cater to this gaze.

Hiwasaki found that most mainstream museums still focus only on the concept of the 'primitive' Ainu[39]. In an interview with an Ainu shop owner in Akan, she discovered that this is a commonly held belief: many *Wajin* tourists ask questions such as "Do you go to the mountains to chase bears?", "Do you pay taxes?", or "My, your Japanese is very good. Where did you learn to speak that?[40]" Nakamura notes that staff at the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum are also often asked

ignorant questions, such as whether the Ainu still live as they once did[41]. Some tourists even dismiss the Ainu who work at the museum as 'inauthentic' and try to get staff to disclose the locations of real, "authentic" Ainu[42]. Indeed, Nakamura notes that "the present day Ainu who wear Western style clothing, watch TV, and use the internet and iPod like the Japanese tends to be considered "impure" or … "inauthentic"[43]": it seems that visitors to Ainu ethnic centres therefore expect to experience "exotic, primitive people[44]", and assume also that these performances are representative of how the Ainu still live. Indeed, the curator of the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, Yoshihara Hideki, notes that

> "most visitors expect to see traditional Ainu culture here. The stereotype that Ainu culture should be traditional strongly exists in the contemporary Japanese society.[45]"

Despite years of assimilation projects, this Self/Other discourse is therefore still very much alive, and it seems that ethnic tourist villages and mainstream museums do little to negate this. It is therefore unsurprising that many Ainu are so sceptical of the tourist industry.

Catering to the tourist gaze can also result in feelings of exploitation. The late Kayano Shigeru, perhaps the most famous Ainu activist and the only Ainu politician, described his time dancing for tourists as "a phenomenon of ethnic oppression in a world of tourism[46]". Although the relationship between tourists and indigenous performers is far more complex than a simple act of exploitation on the behalf of one or the other, Pratt notes that interactions and negotiations in the contact zone tend to be heavily slanted in favour of the dominant group or culture, giving the minority group far less room for leverage. To view Ainu ethnic tourism as something of an extension of colonialism is on the one hand very valid, in that it began as part of a colonial project, and continues to idealise the 'Otherness' and 'Nativeness' of Ainu culture, reducing it and its members to a set of exoticised, essentialised stereotypes. On the other hand, many Ainu have made use of the small amount of leverage they had and turned tourist centres into sites of learning, preservation, and dynamism. Trapped in capitalist market forces and poverty as they may be, many Ainu are not helplessly dragged along by the tide but rather still fighting to maintain and increase their level of autonomy.

Concerns about *Wajin* influence and maximising touristic potential also raise questions of authenticity, namely that Ainu culture may be diluted or tainted in catering to the tourist gaze. As Greenwood notes, "rituals may be shortened, embellished, or otherwise adapted to the tastes of tourists[47]". The forms of cultural representation presented at such centres tend to be heavily influenced by *Wajin* dominance over the tourist industry, as well as *kanko* ("tourist") Ainu's dependence on tourism as a vital source of income. An example of this is the *Iyomante* ceremony, which is one of the major Ainu festivals. The Ainu were banned from practicing this ritual until

1970, when the ceremony was reintroduced in order to bring in more tourists, having first been "groomed specifically for the visitors[48]". The festival is no longer held in February as is traditional, but rather in the tourist season, and Sjöberg describes the new ceremony as having undergone an "almost total transformation[49]". Under the ban, many Ainu continued to carry out this practice in secret, but the most visible form is now the edited tourist version. Ainu author Hatozawa Samio voiced this criticism clearly, stating that through ethnic tourism "all Ainu will just end up in the image created for them by *Wajin[50]*".

However, Ainu ethnic villages are not just passive receptacles of *Wajin* influence. Many tourist villages are also important sites of learning. Alongside providing entertainment and information to tourists, such centres also strive to preserve Ainu culture and to act as sites where other Ainu can learn about their own ethnic heritage. Nibutani is a tourist destination-cum-site of learning, with a number of informational films and books available to the public. Kayano Shigeru established an Ainu museum in Nibutani, and in a visit to the centre's exhibition hall (*Shiryoka*), Sjöberg discovered many films he had created, including "How to build a chise" (*Chise Akara*), and "How to build an Ainu canoe" (*Fune Sukari*), as well as information about the Ainu language and customs[51]. An Ainu woman there told her that Nibutani children

> "have an advantage. In Nibutani, they learn about their culture from elderly people
> whom they admire. They teach them to be proud of their origins.[52]"

In Shiraoi, *Porotokotan* is a similar site of learning. Due to its accessibility and nearby Ainu village, or *kotan*, Shiraoi became a popular tourist destination in the early 20th century. This led some Ainu to arrange tours for visitors, and the Ainu village was reconstructed as a tourist village on Lake Poroto in 1965. In 1976, the Shiraoi Foundation for the Preservation of Ainu Culture was established at Lake Poroto as a research centre. It turned its focus to tourists in 1984 and opened to the public as *Porotokotan* Ainu Museum. Nomoto ascribes Ainu agency to this project, asserting that Ainu chose to profit from the village's popularity amongst tourists[53]. The Ainu Museum had many Ainu staff, and also focused heavily on promoting Ainu culture among Ainu themselves. Nakamura notes that for every 16 dances performed, only 3 of these were intended for visitors[54]. This practice turns the idea of commoditisation somewhat on its head; rather than being mere "*objects* of ethnic tourism[55]" (my emphasis), some Ainu are able to exploit their role as tourist attractions to continue practicing, preserving, and sharing their culture among one another. Indeed, Hiwasaki notes that without such sites, many aspects of Ainu culture would have been lost under *Wajin* oppression[56]. This highlights the blurred lines between a dominating tourism industry and indigenous agency. At the time of writing, *Porotokotan* is closed for renovations, and will reopen in April 2020, ahead of

the Tokyo Olympics, as a national museum – it will be interesting to see what kind of changes will be made to accommodate the predicted influx of tourists.

5. A 'Dying Race'?

The concept of the Ainu as a 'dying race' was propagated throughout Japan and embedded in media and educational depictions of the indigenous people. It was assumed that the Ainu were an inferior race, unable to adapt to the demands of modernity. Bans on Ainu customs and the Ainu language severely endangered Ainu heritage, and many Ainu preferred to assimilate and discard their ethnic identity for fear of discrimination.

Against this backdrop, it seems problematic to argue that *kanko* Ainu are not 'authentic' or 'pure' Ainu. The implication is now no longer that the Ainu have been unable to adapt to a modern world, but rather that they have adapted *too* well. As we have seen, many *Wajin* believe that the Ainu still live in their traditional ways, "chase bears[57]" in the mountains, and speak Ainu from birth. Those Ainu who do not fit this stereotypical mould are seen as 'inauthentic'. However, due to decades of Japanese oppression and assimilation, next to no Ainu are able to live in such a way. Most contemporary Ainu would therefore be seen through this lens as 'inauthentic', and therefore as harbingers of a 'dying culture'. Such an argument wholly disregards Ainu agency in establishing tourist villages and actively preserving their culture, as well as exploiting their positions as attractions in order to do so. Japanese oppression has left behind a scaffolding of structural racism and oppression, and Ainu attempts to navigate this are in themselves 'authentic'.

However, although Ainu have been able to adapt to and exploit their position as tourist attractions, the tourism industry in Hokkaidō is still "dominated by outsiders[58]". Stakeholders and decision-makers in tourism tend to be *Wajin* rather than Ainu, limiting Ainu agency on a higher level. For example, during the deliberations about nominating Shiretoko National Park as Japan's third World Heritage Site in 2004, eco-tour manager Fujisaki tried to convince the committee to include Ainu as stakeholders. He reports that

> "they brushed me off: "You know, Fujisaki, you keep bringing up Ainu, but they no longer exist, period." … They weren't simply talking about Shiretoko Ainu, they meant no Ainu in Japan.[59]"

It is hard to involve indigenous people if their presence is not even recognised. Indigenous involvement at all levels of ethnic tourism is not only key to reducing poverty and dependency amongst such communities[60], it would also offer Ainu the chance to present and cultivate their culture entirely on their own terms.

6. Conclusion

Ultimately, this essay has argued that the concept of authenticity should be far more flexible in order to encompass the dynamic nature of cultural change and unavoidable processes of transculturality. Authenticity is a concept particularly desired by ethnic tourists, and is often more stringently applied to indigenous groups such as the Ainu. Its inverse, inauthenticity, is found in the supposed 'dilution' or 'tainting' of a culture through the influence of another. However, such expectations of purity are doomed to disappointment. No culture exists in a vacuum, and many "have been altered irrevocably in the contact zone of colonial relations[61]".

Ethnic tourism can be problematic on a structural level, with indigenous people often left out of decision-making processes or utilised by the majority culture as mere attractions without issues such as widespread poverty or the aftermath of oppression being addressed. However, on a cultural level ethnic tourism has been and continues to be important to the Ainu. On the one hand, the preservation of Ainu heritage would have been severely impeded in the absence of sites such as *Porotokotan* and Nibatuni. The popularity of these places amongst tourists provides the Ainu with the means to finance the further preservation of their traditions. Such sites are also places where Ainu were able to practice their culture long before they were recognised as an indigenous people, and where they continue to do so today. In the process, younger Ainu are also able to learn about and practice their heritage.

On the other hand, ethnic tourism has provided the Ainu with a platform for cultural adaptation and negotiation of identity. Grounded in Ainu traditions, customs, and beliefs, as well as contemporary obstacles facing the group, such adaptations are unique to the Ainu and therefore inherently authentic. Due to cultural diversity across regional Ainu groups, new practices in some areas may not be recognised as authentic by other Ainu. However, the experiences of certain groups shape their individual responses, and authenticity arises from their inventiveness in crossing contemporary hurdles whilst retaining aspects of their culture that they recognise as important.

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