

# A Study on Ainu Language Preservation

Report of Experience-Based Learning Program on Ainu Culture and Language

21 May 2024

## 1. Background

### 1.1. Background as BXAI scholars

In AFLSP, we value diversity and connectivity across all of Asia (Bai Xian Asia Institute, n.d.). As scholars in this program, it is important for us to study not only our own majors, but also learn about societal and regional problems of Asia and look into how we can contribute. The Ainu, an ethnic minority group in Japan primarily residing in Hokkaido, are of particular attention to us in this regard. Their native language, which is on the verge of extinction, resonates with us on the personal level for reasons explained below. Therefore we would like to explore how we, as BXAI scholars, can contribute to addressing such cultural and linguistic challenges, thereby enriching our educational journey and fostering a deeper understanding of Asia's diverse cultural landscape.

### 1.2. Importance of Preserving Languages

According to Ethnologue (2014), there are currently about 6,000 living languages spoken worldwide. However, at least half of them are expected to become extinct by the end of this century. Some linguists estimate that up to 90% of all presently spoken languages may face extinction within this century (Austin and Sallabank, 2011).

When we lose languages, we also lose a lot of old wisdom and knowledge. For example, the Seri language in Mexico, spoken by about 500 people, revealed that they use eelgrass as a grain source. This is a special kind of knowledge because eelgrass grows without needing fresh water or fertilizer, making it a sustainable food source (Evans, 2010). The Seri language is now considered 'vulnerable' to extinction, which means this valuable knowledge could be lost. Many endangered languages also hold precious medicinal knowledge. Cámara-Leret and Bascompte (2021) examine three regions with high biocultural diversity and demonstrate that over 75% of all of the medicinal plant services are unique to a single language. Protecting such languages helps keep the diversity of human thoughts and cultures alive.

Language is a core element of culture, serving as the primary means for expressing and transmitting cultural values, beliefs, and practices. Linguistic diversity enriches our global heritage by fostering a multitude of perspectives and ways of understanding the world. Each language embodies unique cultural expressions, stories, and wisdom that contribute to the richness of human civilization. The loss of linguistic diversity undermines cultural diversity, which is essential for fostering creativity, resilience, and adaptability within societies. Thus,

preserving linguistic diversity is crucial for passing down rich human knowledge and cultural heritage to future generations.

### 1.3. Why Ainu?

Our decision to focus on the Ainu language stems from its personal relevance to our team. Two of our members, coming from regions where the Sichuan dialect of Chinese and the Taiwanese language are undergoing varying degrees of language shift, have firsthand experience with this phenomenon. Given that the Ainu language represents an extreme case of language shift, it is relatable to us on a personal level.

Moreover, one of our team members is actively engaged in academic research on speech AI technologies for the Ainu language. His focus is on enhancing automatic speech recognition (ASR) capabilities, in collaboration with Ainu people and other experts in Ainu language. This work is particularly important given the strong interest among Ainu descendants in learning their ancestral language, challenged by a scarcity of resources, especially natural audio recordings from native speakers. A key objective of his research is to develop advanced voice conversion (VC) and text-to-speech (TTS) technologies for Ainu, aiming to provide learners with an efficient and immersive language learning experience.

Another important reason we focus on Ainu is its visibility. Residing and studying in Japan grants us direct access to Ainu resources. As Japan was the first Asian nation to undergo modernization, the Ainu language was among the earliest to face the challenges of this transformation. For us, as BXAI scholars committed to promoting diversity across Asia, it is both logical and important to explore how we can contribute to addressing the linguistic challenges faced by the Ainu language.

### 1.4. Minor languages & cultures in our own countries

#### 1.4.1. Indonesia

Indonesia is a country made up of many different ethnicities that speaks many different languages. To unite them into one country, the nation adopted a sole national language called Indonesian. This was a unique choice as Indonesian is a language based on Malay that was spoken by only around 5% of the population when independence was declared in 1945. Usually, the language belonging to the major ethnic group is chosen as the national language as was the case in neighboring Malaysia and the Philippines. At that time, Javanese was the language with the largest number of speakers at around 47%. However, Malay was chosen as the basis of the new language because it has been used as the lingua franca of the region even before the arrival of the Europeans. Malay was used as the language for trade throughout the archipelago which helped facilitate its spread. Furthermore, the Dutch that colonized modern-day Indonesia encouraged its use because they wanted to limit the use of Dutch among the natives, fearing that it would make the natives equal to that of the Dutch who lived in the colonies (Groeneboer, 1998; Zainu'ddin, 1970; Paauw, 2009).

However, the adoption of Indonesian as the national language came at the expense of local languages. To promote national unity, the Indonesian government enacted a massive campaign to spread the use of Indonesian through the education and media. Radio and television uses only Indonesian and in schools students are taught to speak only Indonesian. As a result, people started to use local languages less in order to adapt to the new condition.

The effect of this campaign was stunning, more people speaking Indonesian as their first language in the 1980s compared to in 1945 when independence was declared. Today, many Indonesians identify Indonesian as their first language and the language has been accepted by all elements of Indonesian society but many local languages have become threatened as a result.

### 1.4.2. China

China is a diverse country with 56 ethnic groups using over 130 types of languages and more than 30 types of writing systems. These languages are derived from five major language families, namely Sino-Tibetan, Altaic, Austronesian, Indo-Aryan, and Indo-European, making China one of the most linguistically rich nations in the world today (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). These languages, featuring distinct pronunciations, vocabularies, and grammatical systems, have their specific usage areas and populations, especially among minority groups.

However, under the impact of economic and social development, especially the spread of Mandarin and modern media, many languages are gradually fading away and face the danger of extinction. According to China's Ministry of Education, by 2015, of the over 130 languages in China, 68 had populations of fewer than 10,000 speakers, 48 had populations of fewer than 5,000 speakers, and 25 had populations of fewer than 1,000 speakers (China Reading Weekly, 2022). As of today, there is a significant likelihood that this situation has further deteriorated.

One example of extremely endangered languages in China is the Duoxu (多续) language, which is the traditional language used by the Tibetan ethnic group residing in the southwest part of Sichuan province. Since the end of Qing dynasty, and in alignment with the assimilation trend with the Han ethnic group, Duoxu people have gradually shifted to Mandarin Chinese. Worse, the prohibition on speaking the Duoxu language during the 1960s and 1970s caused Duoxu people to lose the habit of using it in their daily lives. Till now, it is reported that there are only six people who can speak fluent Duoxu language, and all of them are already over 70 years old (韩正康、袁晓文、齐卡佳, 2019).

### 1.4.3. Taiwan

Taiwan's official lingua franca is Mandarin, while the mother tongue is divided into Chinese, Aboriginal, and Creole Japanese (洪惟仁、許世融, 2009). It is important to note that this is a rough classification. Chinese can be further classified into three categories: Taiwanese, Hakka, and Min-Dong. Aboriginal languages are complex and can be divided into 14

categories based on their linguistic characteristics. These categories include Atayal, Seediq, Saisiyat, Bunun, Northern Tsou, Southern Tsou, Rukai, Paiwan, Amis, Puyuma, Tao, Thao, Kavalan, and Pazih.

As a speaker of the Quanzhou-oriented dialect in Taipei, the author is unable to fully understand the development of other languages in the community. Therefore, the focus will be on reviving Taiwanese, which is the most favored language of all the mother tongues.

Despite its popularity, Taiwanese is still experiencing a significant decline. The Ministry of Culture conducted a survey which found that only 45% of families use Taiwanese as their primary language, and as low as 20% use it with their children. This results in a high intergenerational language loss rate of 57%.

## 1.5. The current situation of Ainu

### 1.5.1. Overview of current situation

The Ainu language is classified as critically endangered in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (Moseley et al., 2010), and there are very few native speakers left, if any, among the approximately 17,000 people that identify themselves as Ainu (Kiryama & Osakada, 2017). Ethnologue has listed the Ainu language as nearly extinct in 2016 (Lewis et al., 2014). Despite the Ainu people's desire to revive their identity by reclaiming fluency in their language, they have already assimilated into Japanese society, speaking Japanese as their native language and adopting Japanese cultural practices. Moreover, due to prejudice and social discrimination within Japanese society, many are hesitant to speak the Ainu language or even disclose their Ainu heritage. It is suspected that there may be 'hidden' native Ainu speakers who have concealed their language proficiency their entire lives, but this remains unconfirmed.

Nevertheless, within the Ainu community, particularly in Hokkaido, there are ongoing efforts to revive the language. Schools and educational programs dedicated to the Ainu language have been established, including initiatives to train future Ainu language educators. Some universities now offer Ainu language courses, and there are even [Ainu radio broadcasts](#) and newspapers ([アイヌタイムズ](#)). However, despite these efforts spanning decades, the Ainu language is still far from being used in everyday contexts. One of our main research focuses will be to explore how the Ainu language is perceived and practiced among the local Ainu people.

### 1.5.2. A small interview

The interviews took place on 23 November 2023 at the Yoshida Dormitory Cafeteria. The interviewees were Usatsuyo and an Ainu individual who preferred to remain anonymous. The interviews lasted for 10 and 25 minutes, respectively. Due to methodological constraints and the intention of the interviewees, the interviews were not recorded, only notes were taken during and after the interviews. This is a methodological limitation and should not be

considered a professional academic interview. However, after discussion, we decided to include the interviews as an important foundation of knowledge about the Ainu people.

The challenges facing the Ainu language are complex and were gathered from an interview with Usa-san and Ainu parents. The interviews revealed that Ainu cultural oppression from the pre-war period to the present day can be divided into two major parts: the misplacement of financial resources and the revival of the language.

According to Usa-san's personal experience in applying for Ainu grants, she noted that the Ainu often have to rely on Yamato as intermediaries due to their limited access to government information when applying for grants related to Ainu cultural activities. The Ainu not only lack the means to communicate with the government but also cannot directly access grants. They need to act as de facto contractors to receive grants. This situation raises questions about the autonomy and genuine empowerment of the Ainu people in preserving and revitalizing their language.

Ainu language learning can be divided into two periods: the first period was marked by the Japanese central government's assimilation policy, which oppressed the Ainu language, and the later period, during which the Ainu felt cultural aggression and cooperated with the Yamato people in an attempt to revitalize their language. Individuals under the age of 40 have had some exposure to the Ainu language, indicating a recent shift towards its revival. However, those over 60 have faced significant repression due to past policies that prevented them from learning their ancestral language.

The Ainu have recently attempted to use the Yamato's anthropological findings to preserve their language and teach it to the next generation. However, this approach may affect the authenticity and cultural integrity of the language learning process. Despite these challenges, the Ainu strongly believe that their ancestral language has been preserved. At the same time, they believe that their language will once again become the primary language of their community, which signals a resilient hope for the future.

It is worth noting that Usa-san did not directly discuss the issue of language revitalisation, which may indicate underlying complexities or sensitivities surrounding the issue.

## 1.6. Assumptions for the reasons to the challenges

### 1.6.1. Economic

It is widely observed that economic development facilitates communications between different groups and cultures, bringing about a growing demand for learning languages. Similarly, economic development plays an important role in the decline of the Ainu language.

For one thing, since the 18th century, with the process of globalization and urbanization, Ainu people, who were previously autonomous and economically independent, have become more dependent on external markets through both imports and exports, fostering increased

interaction between the Ainu community and other regions, as well as a necessity for them to acquire proficiency in the Japanese language (Hellyer, 2013).

For another, today's uneven economic status between the Ainu community and more advanced cities has brought additional challenges. Variations in opportunities, such as employment and salaries, prompt many young Ainu people to pursue development outside their hometown. Under the influence of modern urban culture, these young people show diminishing interest in Ainu traditional culture, leading to a lack of continuity for the Ainu language.

### 1.6.2. Political

The political factor covers various distributional issues, such as budget allocation, cultural unifications, and healthcare resource distribution (Segal et al., 2002). For further discussion on cultural unity and economic incentives, please refer to the other sections.

Project-based grants are a common form of budget allocation, but they have several issues, including being allocated only after the total amount has been set. 1. Project budgets only provide for a limited range of grant programs for indigenous, rather than the full range. Additionally, Indigenous policy programs do not offer sustainable funding for the delivery of public services over the long term. (Coller, 2020) 2. The government provides a temporary program budget, and its implementation each year is uncertain when compared to the general budget (Sharkansky, 1968). Government agencies related to indigenous people are unable to provide long-term planning or services, such as software or medical services, due to financial constraints. This can lead to projects being abandoned halfway, exacerbating the situation. Sustainability in development for indigenous communities is thus becoming an issue to the area. Additionally, the instability of public services makes financial investment from the private sector less attractive, increasing the risk of investment projects. 3. Project budgets are typically competitive, which means that Aboriginal people in different locations may not receive uniform assistance. In a competitive budget, each local government must demonstrate the legitimacy and necessity of its projects each fiscal year. This can lead to bureaucratic inefficiencies and distractions, and limit the government's ability to conceive innovative projects. (Narbón-Perpiñám et al., 2020) 4. Competitive budgets can become the focus of political attacks. External factors may prevent those in need from receiving the necessary financial support, leaving them vulnerable to political manipulation. (Larcinese et al., 2005; de Haan et al., 2013)

### 1.6.3. Historical reasons (Suppressed history of Ainu)

In order to understand how the situation came to be, it is necessary to look into the historical background behind it. The relationship between the Ainu people and the Japanese did not start after the Meiji Restoration. Rather, it was a centuries old relationship with the Ainu depending on the Japanese for economic reasons and the Japanese reliant on the Ainu for political reasons. During the Edo period, the Tokugawa shogunate maintained central control over all of the daimyos in Japan after the end of the warring states period. During this time they gave the Matsumae domain responsibility for dealing with the Ainu people.

Jumping to the recent history that has profoundly affected the development of the Ainu language, specifically the Meiji Period. The Meiji government introduced “Endemic Protection Law” trying to promote the living standard and economic development in Hokkaido. However, such political support is, clearly through the legislative reasoning, strongly based on the idea of cultural superiority. ([T]he harsh reality of survival of the fittest. ...[T]hese people are equally the children of our emperor, and it is heartrending to witness them descend into such sorrowful states without extending aid. It is, therefore, an urgent national duty to devise a rescue plan, to eliminate their calamity, to address their poverty, and to enable them to sustain their lives and establish their homes through appropriate industries.<sup>1</sup>) (百瀬, 1994) By stating the ideology, the agencies are fostering Yamato cultures, while taking Ainu culture as “superannuated”, in Hokkaido. Not only the cultures itself but also the languages were, practically speaking, strictly outlawed. (小川, 1993) Such implications, continued even after WWII, remained until 1997, when the central government abandoned the outdated legislation and converted it into Ainu Culture Promotion Act, a law which finally supports the promotion of Ainu cultures.

## 1.7. Existing Preservation Efforts

### 1.7.1. What is being done in Japan

Ainu has seen a variety of preservation efforts aimed at reviving and maintaining its use, starting from the establishment of the Ainu Culture Promotion Act (1997). Shigeru Kayano, a famous Ainu political figure, played a key role in asserting the value of the Ainu language and culture and managed to establish the law. On a more local scale, the Ainu Association of Hokkaido started organizing Ainu language classes in Hokkaido, starting from the 1980s (Hasegawa, 2009). Creative methods, such as YouTube channels run by Ainu teachers and language camps, have made the language accessible to a broader audience. Additionally, academic contributions are crucial; efforts include the creation of Ainu language archives and research groups dedicated to studying and preserving the language. These combined efforts mark a committed approach to ensuring that the Ainu language continues to be a living, evolving form of communication.

### 1.7.2. What Indonesia is doing

In an effort to preserve local languages, The Indonesian government has also passed a legislation in 2009 placing the responsibility of preserving local languages on the central government. Through the support of UNESCO, Indonesia has enacted policies and programs to maintain the use of local language in order to preserve them. Furthermore, the Indonesian government has mandated the teaching of local language in schools. The languages taught differ based on each province which means that each province will teach only one local language. However, this effort does not help languages spoken by smaller groups. To preserve this language, local communities have taken a bigger role in introducing

---

<sup>1</sup> As in Japanese, it is: "優勝劣敗ノ理勢ニシテ...我皇ノ赤子ナリ而シテ今ヤ斯ノ如キノ悲境ニ沈淪セルヲ目撃シテ之ヲ顧サルハ亦忍フ可キニ非サルナリ則チ之カ救済ノ方法ヲ設ケ其災厄ヲ除キ其窮乏ヲ恤ミ以テ之ヲシテ適當ノ産業ニ依リ其生ヲ保チ。"

local language to the younger generations in their communities. Almost all of the younger generations speak Indonesian as a first language which has increased the risk of extinction for many languages with a small number of speakers. Efforts include the compiling of a dictionary for the language such as the one done by the Mentawai community who lives in the islands on the coast of Sumatra.

### 1.7.3. What China is doing

The Chinese government has taken active efforts to preserve endangered languages. In 2015, “Chinese Language Resources Protection Project” was launched by China’s Ministry of Education and the National Language Committee, aiming at protecting endangered languages as well as Chinese dialects nationwide. This project has gathered experts in this field to investigate endangered languages in a great deal of locations and record them in multiple media such as text and audio (Center for the Protection and Research of Language Resources of China, n.d.).

Till now, this project has obtained several achievements. During its first 5-year phrase (2015-2019), a total of 1,131 survey sites for Chinese dialects, 307 for minority languages, 189 for endangered language dialects (123 for minority languages, 66 for Chinese dialects), and 102 for language and dialect cultural survey sites (25 for minority languages, 77 for Chinese dialects) were successfully completed. Its second phrase (2021-) is currently underway. Detailed information of these spots are open to the public and made visible on their website (<https://zhongguoyuyan.cn/index/>) (Center for the Protection and Research of Language Resources of China, n.d.).

To better protect endangered languages and dialects, a book series called “China Endangered Language Chronicles” has also been published, and its first publication involves 20 volumes on minority languages and 10 volumes on Chinese dialects (Center for the Protection and Research of Language Resources of China, n.d.).

### 1.7.4. What Taiwan is doing

To address the issue of mother-tongue transmission, the government has taken steps such as granting official status to the language, launching mother-tongue TV channels, and introducing mother-tongue teaching programmes. The Development of National Languages Act mandates the state to promote language revitalisation measures and ensure non-discriminatory and unrestricted use of the national language. The Taiwan Public Television Service has created a Taiwanese-language television station that broadcasts dubbed animations (such as Spy Family), Taiwanese dramas, and news broadcasts. Mother tongue teaching programmes are implemented at least once a week in high school, junior high school, and elementary school. (中華民國(台灣)文化部, 2023)



## 2. What we did

### 2-1. Time schedule

Below was the schedule of the trip.

Date	Location	Activities	Remarks	Estimated Budget (per person)
Feb 16th	Sapporo	KIX - CTS Estimated Landing: 13:00	Lunch will be finished before the flight.	Flight: 37,000 Train: 2,000 Hotel: 6,000
		14:30 - X [Plan changed due to heavy snow]		
Feb 17th	Biratori	Sapporo - Biratori (trains & buses) Travel time: 07:29 - 11:30	1. Taking multiple buses, which takes a long time.	Bus: 4,000 Museum: 400 Yanto: 3,850
		13:20 - 15:10 Visit <a href="#">Ainu Cultural Museum</a>	2. Considering people working in Ainu-related facilities are those highly interested in Ainu culture, interviews with local people, who might hold different perspectives, may also be essential.	
		15:20 - 17:00 Interview local people		
		17:30 Guest House check-in & Dinner time		
		19:30 - 20:30 Talking to people in Ainu guest house (Yanto)		
Feb 18th	Shiraoi	Biratori - Shiraoi (buses & trains) Travel time: 08:16 - 12:11	The National Ainu Museum (Upopoy) is the biggest and the most representative Ainu museum in Japan.	Train: 3,000 Museum: 1,200 Hotel: 6,000
		12:15 - 13:00 Lunch time		
		13:15 - 17:00 Visit <a href="#">the National Ainu Museum (Upopoy)</a> [With multiple cultural experiential activities, including Ainu fairy tales telling, traditional crafting, music playing etc. We participated in both exhibitions and activities. ]		
Feb	Sapporo	Meeting with Ainu experts,		Train: 2,000

19th		including professor Osami Okuda (expert in Ainu language and literature).		Hotel: 6,000
Feb 20th	Leaving Hokkaido	CTS - KIX Estimated Departure: 14:35		Train: 2,000

## 2-2. Biratori Museum & Yanto

As one of the most critical Ainu culture museums, after Upopoy National Ainu Museum, Biratori Municipal Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum focuses on exhibiting the original tools and crafts employed by Ainu ancestors. The Museum is divided into two main sections, outdoors and indoors. The outdoors section features traditional Ainu real estates, including traditional-style warehouses and residences. The architecture, constructed by the Ainu youngsters, not only serves a display function but also preserves traditional Ainu crafting techniques and passes on Ainu wisdom to future generations. The exhibition method is both cohesive and consistent with the interior design, promoting a contemplative observation of Ainu culture and fostering understanding without offering superfluous explanations.

The indoor section is separated with two themes, lifestyle-related craftworks and religion-related instruments. Lifestyle-related craftworks collections are, seemingly, previously utilized. Those comprise hunting and fishing supplies, canoes, pottery, tableware, traditional clothing, looms, and other items. The display-centered exhibition approach, as previously mentioned, transports visitors away from the hustle and bustle of modern society, thereby broadening their opportunities to further explore and develop an interest in Ainu culture. The knowledge another BXAI scholar acquired during the Ainu culture camp deepened our understanding of the traditional Ainu lifestyle, enabling a reproduction of Ainu life through myths, traditions, and instruments. To be clear, at the end of the main collection room, on a bookshelf, there is a massive, detailed academic dictionary of Ainu handicrafts. The museum's decision not to categorize the bookmarks on display allows visitors to explore the rich culture and history of the Ainu in an engaging and immersive manner. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of Ainu culture, particularly its myths.

Located in the back of the main exhibition room, occupying a quarter of the gallery, the canoe is a perfect example of philosophy of the exhibition. Spatially speaking, no tourist will be able to ignore the presence of the canoes once they have entered, even if they are placed at the back of the exhibition space. Thus the canoes, by positioning at the center, prompt visitors to reflect on the interrelationship between life in Hokkaido and the sea. Additionally, the museum provides an opportunity to engage with Ainu maritime history on board the canoe, thereby facilitating an understanding of the distinctions between Ainu and Yamato (Wa) cultures. The Ainu handicraft dictionary behind you offers a gateway to explore the unique water culture and its connections with other items in the museum.

Iomante, a ceremony centered in the Ainu traditional belief, replicated its spatial arrangement in a glass box before us. The space is not complicatedly designed, only very

few rules for the relatively small square. A number of pots are stored, with a bear placed in the center, and the windows must be oriented in a specific direction. The participation of pious souls is the most important aspect. Probably due to the central position of Ainu culture, Iomante is the single chapter with an annotation. The respected souls praying for Kamuy (the god) are all conveyed through the footage, including the history of the rites, their taboos, and their execution.

In the absence of active descriptions, we agree with consensus that Biratori Municipal Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum reserves innumerable treasures inherited from Ainu ancestors, creating enough spaces for the tourists slowing down their steps to search for the distinctions. A distinctive feature of this museum is its minimalist approach, which profoundly impacts visitors by using gaps to remind the current situation of the Ainu and to reserve the opportunities for future generations. Furthermore, the Museum deserves credit for offering a bird's eye view of Ainu daily life and culture, a foundation for the later part of the journey.

## 2-3. Upopoy Museum

### 2-3-1. General impression

In general, Upopoy Museum showcases Ainu culture in more detail with explanations regarding each of the items exhibited. The museum also provides a more detailed explanation of Ainu religion and history compared to the museum in Biratori. The best example of this is the video that explains the concept of “Kamui” or gods in Ainu culture. The video helps explain the beliefs of the Ainu people and how that influences their life. Furthermore, the museum has a lot of interesting exhibitions and activities that would help broaden the appeal of the museum especially to children.

### 2-3-2. Performance

Different from Biratori Museum, Upopoy Museum offers a broader range of formats to display and promote Ainu culture. For example, besides conventional exhibitions and videos in the main museum building, Upopoy Museum also offers various facilities for visitors to experience Ainu history and culture, which include the Cultural Exchange Hall, where visitors can watch real-time performance of Ainu traditional songs and dances; the workshop and craft studios, where visitors can have a trial of Ainu food, music instruments, and crafts firsthand by themselves; the Kotan (Traditional Ainu Village), where visitors can not only have a direct impression of Ainu people's living place but also experience Ainu language and daily activities. From window exhibition, stage performance, to experience-based activities which cover various aspects of Ainu culture and history, Upopoy museum provides an impressive and embedded experience for visitors.

Besides visiting the main museum building, we also watched two stage performances and visited the traditional Ainu village. It was a pity that we didn't experience all these activities due to the time limit.

The Cultural Exchange Hall offered stage performances by Ainu performers. One stage performance lasted for about 30 minutes, composed by a variety of formats like traditional Ainu songs, dances, oral literature in Ainu language, and music instruments. Performers all wore Ainu traditional clothes. Some scenes mimic the ritual ceremonies and daily life in reality, for example the “熊送り(sending bears’ soul to the sky)”, vividly expressing Ainu people’s cultural and religious practices to us.

The traditional Ainu village includes a group of reconstructed Ainu houses, which were usually single-storey houses made of wood and thatch, all in brown. A display of food consumed the most by Ainu people, like potatoes, was also available. Besides houses for people, we also saw the small houses built for growing bears, which resonated with what we learned from their culture and religion in the exhibition. We also got the opportunities to experience archery, which was the traditional game of Ainu people.

## 2-4. Informal interviews

We conducted informal interviews several relevant personnels that are either Ainu themselves or are studying Ainu language and culture, including two important experts in this field - one famous Ainu language instructor in Biratori, and a professor who is an expert in Ainu folklore and language at Sapporo Gakuin University. Other interviewees include staff members of 平取町アイヌ文化振興公社 (*Biratori Town Ainu Culture Promotion Center*), researchers at Upopoy National Ainu Museum that are working on transcription and translation of Ainu folklore and the Ainu language archive, and trainees of アイヌ文化の伝承者育成事業 (*Ainu Culture Successor Development Project*). We focused on the use and perception of Ainu language, and also that of Ainu culture, and explored future prospects related to one of the authors’ research field, AI. As these interviews were kept informal and unofficial, we do not disclose here who stated what, as requested by the interviewees.

In terms of the use of the language, our interviews revealed that while there are many people, especially those with Ainu heritage, that are highly motivated to learn and speak the language, the use of language is **quite limited** due to the lack of proficiency and the prevalence of Japanese as the lingua franca within the community. There were only a few fluent Ainu speakers in the Biratori community for example, who were non-native and learned the language as adults, however they were reluctant to use the language much because they knew they would not be understood by others. Furthermore, since even the fluent Ainu speakers were non-native, they often had to rely on the online Ainu database and dictionary, though in the past they relied on still-living native speakers of Ainu. The use of the language was limited to common everyday phrases such as *irankarapte* (meaning Hello) and special occasions they set up, such as Ainu speaking practice sessions.

The Ainu language was perceived as an important part of Ainu identity by many people in the community. Many people of Ainu descendants were actively trying to learn the language, at least dozens in the Biratori community, still with the hope that it will be the common language of everyday Ainu people once again. However, it was also mentioned that many Ainu parents residing in Biratori are not highly motivated to educate their children in Ainu

language; it seems that there exists mixed perception towards the use of Ainu even among Ainu people, necessitating further research.

A young Ainu interviewee described his struggles with identity. Born and raised in modern Japan, he found it challenging to connect with traditional Ainu culture, feeling more like an outsider than a participant. For example, it is difficult for someone living in the modern era to grasp the concept of *kamuy*, which in Ainu culture refers to supernatural beings that can inhabit various forms, including animals and even modern vehicles like cars and airplanes. The disconnection from his heritage made it hard for him to understand such cultural beliefs.

## 3. What we think

### 3.1. Linguistic aspect

The Ainu language's decline is a typical example of language shift, where urbanization, modernization, and strong external pressures push indigenous languages to the brink of extinction. The transition to the national language, Japanese, in daily life has practically erased Ainu as a primary mode of communication, after over 100 years of colonization and assimilation policy (Hasegawa, 2009). Currently, remnants of Ainu persist within the Japanese language in the form of place names and some loanwords. Although the situation appears grim with virtually no native speakers remaining, there's a silver lining: national support for Ainu culture and language has been robust. This is evidenced by the establishment of Ainu language archives and an extensive online dictionary that provide rich resources for anyone interested in learning the language. Moreover, the presence of ethnic Ainu people who identify with their heritage and are keen to learn the language underscores a vital, ongoing connection to their cultural roots.

Considering the possibility of revitalizing the Ainu language, several strategies could be employed. Creating an immersive environment where the language can be actively used is crucial. This could involve introducing Ainu language programs in schools and encouraging its use at home, where parents can speak Ainu with their children. A strong sense of identity and pride might inspire more individuals to teach and use the language. Additionally, increasing the language's presence on the internet and other public spaces can enhance its visibility and usage. A symbolic but impactful step could be recognizing Ainu as an official language in Hokkaido alongside Japanese. Although this might not have immediate practical benefits, it would significantly elevate the language's prestige and potentially encourage broader adoption.

### 3.2. Cultural aspect

Both museums we visited showcase Ainu culture through everyday objects used by the Ainu people. In Biratori, the museum focused more on the objects used such as the boats, tools, weapons, and clothes that the Ainu people use. Unfortunately, there was not a lot of explanation regarding the items even in Japanese which reduces the appeal of the museum.

The way the exhibition is presented makes it seem like the Ainu culture is a culture long gone even though there are more to show within Ainu culture beyond the objects such as traditional music, dance, and religious ceremonies.

On the other hand, the Upopoy Museum tries to negate this by showcasing the ainu culture through videos, performances, and activities. A good example of this was the performance that we attended showcasing ainu music and dances as well as the videos in the exhibition explaining ainu beliefs. This was the appeal of the museum that allows the visitor to see Ainu culture directly.

Although museums play an important role in explaining Ainu cultures, it seems that the current method used does not do justice to Ainu culture. The museum makes it feel like ainu culture is more of a show that can be used to attract visitors. It makes the culture feel like something from the past, something that is distant. However, understanding a culture requires interaction with the people who are living with said culture. Cultures came to be as the result of human interactions.

That being said, a possible method to further introduce Ainu culture into society can be seen from the Masai tribe of Tanzania. As a method to introduce their culture, they invite people to come into their residence and experience Masai culture. This has boomed into a business that appeals to foreign tourists. As a result, they have an additional income on top of the one that they have already received. This method can serve as a reference for promoting Ainu culture in Japan and help stimulate the preservation of Ainu culture beyond promotional purposes and to recreate Ainu society that once existed in Hokkaido.

### 3.3. Management (Current preservation efforts)

Museums play a significant role in the preservation and promotion of Ainu traditional culture. We visited both Biratori Ainu Culture Museum and Upopoy Museum, the two largest museums about Ainu in Hokkaido.

According to our experiences, these two museums share some common features in functions. Firstly, they both have exhibitions of objects related to Ainu people's basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing, housing, and transportation, as well as their culture, such as religious rituals and language; secondly, they both offer cultural experience activities, like craft workshops where visitors can make Ainu traditional crafts in person; thirdly, they all have an outdoor area displaying Ainu houses to mimic the traditional Ainu village.

But they also have many differences. For example, they have a very different exhibition atmosphere. In the Biratori Museum, the display of objects is more intense and compact, with less textual explanation; while in the Upopoy Museum, the objects are better organized and displayed in wider space with richer description and vivid video illustration. Also, in the Biratori Museum, with dim yellow light and a unified brown color tone, the spatial style is in accord with exhibits, which could help visitors immerse in Ainu culture deeply; while in the

Upopoy Museum, the decoration of exhibition hall is more modern and artist with colorful light shining, leading to a sense of gap between exhibits and the space.

Generally speaking, Upopoy Museum is more well-facilitated and operated. It is obvious that Upopoy Museum has more visitors than Biratori, according to our observation. It is possibly due to a wider land space, a better location, and more richful services. Besides the common cultural activities, Upopoy also provides stage performances by Ainu people as well as a bunch of restaurants where Ainu food is available, and the number of activity types and supporting staff is also larger. Upopoy also makes efforts to attract international visitors with multilingual marketing and services.

Therefore, we think Upopoy has received a higher amount of government funding. According to the museum, its operational fund mainly comes from the national government and the Hokkaido government. Besides, Upopoy can make some profits through tenant management (e.g. restaurants and souvenir shops), parking space, and other businesses like coin lockers. However, this profit is apparently insufficient, and Upopoy seems still facing financial burden, for it is still calling for financial support from external individuals and organizations as membership. Financial information of Biratori is not available but we assume they have similar situations.

Government funding is the most common way for museum operation. However, it has both pros and cons. On the one hand, government funding is indeed essential to preserve ethnic culture like Ainu; on the other hand, the dependence on government funding may reduce museum's self-driven motivation to pursue better operation but instead be content with their current status, which may lead to problems like formalism or failure to keep pace with the times. This concern also resonates with another BXAI scholar's feeling about their experience in a 5-day Ainu Cultural Programme, where college students around Japan are recruited to experience and discuss the preservation of Ainu culture. We think it is not enough for preservation organizations like museums to only rely on external fundings. To pursue long-term development, they should also make efforts to explore more dynamic ways with innovation to enhance their self-sufficiency ability.

### 3.4. What could be done in the future

A culture is never and should never be regarded as stopping at its appearance, such as language, ritual, craftsmanship, etc.; rather, it is about how they perceive the world, such as vocabulary definitions, relationships between heaven and earth or man and God, and the narrative behind the arts. The demise of cultures is not and should not be seen simply as the loss of intangible and uncompetitive broken behaviors, but more the erosion of the ability to connect with the creations. As the Ainu Culture Promotion Act states: "[T]o realize... the Ainu people can live with pride... a society... which... all citizens respect each other's personality and individuality." Efforts to revitalize Ainu culture should be preserved at any cost to anyone who desires diversity and welcomes different ideas.

The majority culture of Japan, Wa culture (和の文化), is not only dominant but also expanding, swallowing up domestic minority cultures - Ainu and Ryukyu. While suppressing

the prevailing culture is unrealistic, the only option left is to promote the minorities through providing adequate incentives and facilities. However, given both the critical realities and our limited knowledge toward the Ainu culture, only specific aspects will be proposed. We advise that two approaches should be particularly focused on. **The first is to facilitate the adoption and revitalization of their language, and the second is to enhance the fundamental economic capacity of the Ainu community.**

Though there are plenty of Ainu language classes all around Japan, most of the Ainu people are still developing the ability to communicate with each other purely in Ainu language. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the Ainu language is not being preserved by Ainu scholars or studied in Hokkaido. The Japanese ethnicity, Wajin(和人) called by Ainu as ethnics, have invested significant resources in studying the Ainu language in Tokyo as well. Nevertheless, it is irrefutable that a considerable amount of resources are allocated to language revitalization in Tokyo, which is currently in the process of relocating to its ancestral homeland, Hokkaido, driven by the strong determination of the Ainu people. Local authorities can play a pivotal role in facilitating the relocation of the Ainu.

Given the imminent extinction of the Ainu language, it is clear that governmental support, namely in the governmental paperwork and educational sphere, is essential to its revival. The Ainu language has been confirmed by the Upopoy as one of the official languages within the facility. However, this is not sufficient. In addition to Upopoy, the Hokkaido government should confirm the Ainu language as an official language throughout the prefecture. The inclusion of Ainu languages in governmental documents will result in a significant increase in the demand for reading and writing in the language, which will in turn contribute to the revival of the Ainu language. Conversely, primary language education represents an indispensable approach to integrating the Ainu language into everyday life. Providing Ainu language classes outside the school setting in kindergarten or elementary school is undoubtedly inadequate. It is only through fostering basic communication skills in a living environment and integrating the use of the Ainu language into daily life that the Ainu language can be gradually revitalized.

To overcome the language development dilemma and provide a robust rationale for its use, enhancing the economic strength of the Ainu people is a viable strategy for improving their long-term standard of living. The achievement of cultural self-reliance and self-sufficiency is contingent upon the existence of a stable economic life. Hence, it is challenging to achieve a cultural renaissance through the promotion of cultural activities alone. The Ainu Culture Enhancement Plan proposed by the Hokkaido government, conversely, neglected the importance of economic growth but concentrated on the culture itself. The plan outlines a strategy for the allocation of various tourism resources, with the objective of promoting Ainu culture and simultaneously enhancing the standard of living. It is noteworthy that the plan does not explicitly address the development of the other industries besides tourism.

It is evident that with such limited time, it is not feasible to present a comprehensive and viable economic development plan, nor to identify specific strategies. Nevertheless, it is equally important to recognise that the Hokkaido government should not solely prioritize the tourism industry, given that the Ainu people are not limited to working in the tourism sector.



This paragraph, in conjunction with the preceding one, serves no more than a cautionary note for the governor.

## 4. Conclusion

The Ainu language and culture serves as an example of the dynamic struggle between decline and revitalization. As an important representative of ethnic and linguistic minorities, Ainu challenges the commonly held perception of Japan as a homogeneous nation and illuminates the broader lessons about cultural preservation. Despite facing significant challenges, Ainu people are actively integrating their heritage into modern lifestyles. With individuals embracing their Ainu identity—whether they are chefs at Ainu-themed restaurants or furniture designers inspired by traditional Ainu patterns—the community is trying to find new ways to keep their culture vibrant and relevant. As the world becomes more interconnected, the Ainu community tells us the value of maintaining cultural diversity, enriching the global human experience.

## References

Act on the Promotion of Ainu Culture, and Dissemination and Enlightenment of Knowledge about Ainu Tradition, etc (Act No. 52 of May 14, 1997). (1997). Retrieved from [https://elaws.e-gov.go.jp/document?lawid=409AC0000000052\\_20190524\\_431AC0000000016](https://elaws.e-gov.go.jp/document?lawid=409AC0000000052_20190524_431AC0000000016) (Accessed: 2024-04-23)

Austin, P. K., & Sallabank, J. (2011). Introduction. In P. K. Austin & J. Sallabank (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of endangered languages*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511975981>

Bai Xian Asia Institute. (n.d.). About BXAI. Retrieved from <https://www.bxai.org/who-we-are/about-us/about-bxai/> (Accessed: 2024-05-19)

Cámara-Leret, R., & Bascompte, J. (2021). Language extinction triggers the loss of unique medicinal knowledge. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 118(24), e2103683118. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2103683118>

Center for the Protection and Research of Language Resources of China. (n.d.). Yubao Center. <http://www.chinalanguages.cn/institute/research-production> (Accessed: 2024-01-20)

China Reading Weekly. (2022). How to Protect Endangered Language. <https://bj.bjd.com.cn/a/202201/27/AP61f1fac6e4b01840994d843b.html> (Accessed: 2024-04-21)

Chinese Language Protection Project. (2023). The Data Collection, Recording, and Display Platform. <https://zhongguoyuyan.cn/index/> (Accessed: 2024-01-20)

Collier, B. (2020). Services for Indigenous people living in urban areas (Publication No. 2020-66-E). Library of Parliament.

[https://lop.parl.ca/sites/PublicWebsite/default/en\\_CA/ResearchPublications/202066E](https://lop.parl.ca/sites/PublicWebsite/default/en_CA/ResearchPublications/202066E)

(Accessed: 2024-04-23)

de Haan, J., Klomp, J. Conditional political budget cycles: a review of recent evidence. *Public Choice* 157, 387–410 (2013).

Evans, N. (2010). *Dying words: Endangered languages and what they have to tell us*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Groeneboer, K. (1998). *Gateway to the west: The Dutch language in colonial Indonesia, 1600-1950 : a history of language policy*. Leiden University Press.

Hasegawa, Y. (2009). The rights movement and cultural revitalization: The case of the Ainu in Japan. In M. Langfield, W. Logan, & M. Nic Craith (Eds.), *Cultural diversity, heritage and human rights: Intersections in theory and practice* (pp. 208-225). Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203863015>

Hellyer, R. (2013). The West, the East, and the insular middle: Trading systems, demand, and labour in the integration of the Pacific, 1750–1875. *Journal of Global History*, 8(3), 391-413. doi: 10.1017/S174002281300034X

Kiriyama, T., & Osakada, Y. (2017). The Ainu in Japan: The Ainu and international law. *Hogaku Zasshi: Journal of Law and Politics of Osaka City University*, 63(4), 1059-1070.

<https://doi.org/10.24544/ocu.20190109-004>

Larcinese, V., Rizzo, L., & Testa, C. (2005). Allocating the U.S. Federal Budget to the States: The Impact of the President. *The Journal of Politics*, 68, 447 - 456.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2006.00419.x>.

Lewis, M. P., Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (2014). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world* (17th ed.).

Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2021). Overview of Chinese language and characters.

[http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_sjzl/wenzi/202108/t20210827\\_554992.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/wenzi/202108/t20210827_554992.html) (Accessed:

2024-01-20)

Moseley, C. (Ed.). (2010). *Atlas of the world's languages in danger* (3rd ed.). UNESCO Publishing.

Narbón-Perpiñá, I., Arribas, I., Balaguer-Coll, M., & Tortosa-Ausina, E. (2020). Explaining local governments' cost efficiency: Controllable and uncontrollable factors. *Cities*, 100, 102665. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2020.102665>.

Paauw, S. (2009). One land, one nation, one language: An analysis of Indonesia's national language policy. In H. Lehnert-LeHouillier and A.B. Fine (Eds.), University of Rochester Working Papers in the Language Sciences, 5(1), 2-16.

Segal, L., Donato, R., Richardson, J., & Peacock, S. (2002). Strengths and limitations of competitive versus non-competitive models of integrated capitated fundholding. *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, 7, 56 - 64.  
<https://doi.org/10.1258/135581902320176485>.

Sharkansky, I. (1968). Agency Requests, Gubernatorial Support and Budget Success in State Legislatures. *American Political Science Review*, 62(4), 1220-1231.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1953914>.

Zainu'ddin, A. (1970). Education in the Netherlands East Indies and the republic of Indonesia. *Melbourne Studies in Education*, 12(1), 17-82.

小川正人「北海道旧土人保護法」「旧土人児童教育規程」下のアイヌ教員—江賀寅三と武隈徳三郎を中心に」北海道大學教育學部紀要第58卷(1992年)197-266。

百瀬響「北海道旧土人保護法の成立と変遷の概要」史苑第55号第1期(1994年)64-86。

中華民國(台灣)文化部 (2022), 國家語言整體發展方案(111年-115年), 文化部。  
<https://file.moc.gov.tw/Download.ashx?u=LzAwMS9VcGxvYWQvT2xkRmlsZXMvQWRtaW5VcGxvYWZlL2ZpbGVzLzlwMjIwOS82ZGY4NjY4Mi1jMzQyLTQzZTA0GEzOS0wNDk2ODNjZTdmOGYucGRm&n=5ZyL5a626Kqe6KiA5pW06auU55m85bGV5pa55qGILnBkZg%3d%3d> (Accessed: 2024-04-23)

中華民國(台灣)文化部 (2023), 國家語言發展報告, 文化部。  
<https://file.moc.gov.tw/Download.ashx?u=LzAwMS9VcGxvYWQvNDcwL3JlbGZpbGUvMTA1NjgvOTU3NDQvMjY1NWZlMTA0OWQ4YjQyYjZkMGU0LnBkZg%3d&n=6Kqe55m85aCx5ZGKKOS+nTHmnlxMOaXpeacg+bitsOS+fruatoykwMzA2LnBkZg%3d> (Accessed: 2024-05-19)

洪惟仁(2013), 台灣的語種分布與區劃, 人文與社會科學簡訊, 第14卷第2期, 123-139頁。

洪惟仁、許世融(2009), 宜蘭地區的語言分佈[會議論文], 台灣的語言方言分佈與族群遷徙工作坊, 東華大學原住民族學院。

韩正康、袁晓文、齐卡佳(2019)。四川冕宁多续话。北京:商务印书馆。