

**Hairy Ainu and Lost Aryans:**  
**Representing the Ainu People in the Osaka and Louisiana Expositions**

April 25, 2020

David Janson

## Abstract

The Ainu, an indigenous group from Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and the Kuril Islands, drew the attention of both Meiji reformers and Western anthropologists in the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1903, Japan hosted the Fifth National Industrial Exposition in Osaka, which featured a living Ainu exhibit. One year later, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition took place in the United States, designed to exhibit the progress of mankind from savagery to civilization. The ethnographic exhibition of Ainu people was a popular feature of the exposition. Examining these two expositions, along with the events surrounding them, reveals the different lenses through which Japan and the West viewed the indigenous people and culture. I argue that the Japanese viewed the Ainu through a cultural lens, believing that with time they could be integrated into the Japanese Empire if they abandoned their Ainu ways. The West meanwhile saw the Ainu through a racial lens, referring to them as “lost Aryans.” Due to their supposed racial brotherhood, Westerners viewed the Ainu more fondly than other indigenous groups. The comparison sheds light on the differences between Japanese and Western imperialism. While Western imperialism was combined with a grammar of racial difference, the early Japanese imperialism was framed in a language of cultural distinction.

As colonial empires expanded their influence across the globe at the beginning of the twentieth century, the anthropological exhibit became highly popular. Dating back to the tableaux of France in the 1500's, these exhibits featured living human subjects which went through their "daily routines" in a home that was built for the exhibit. These exhibits, which today are referred to as "human zoos" due to their use of living participants, were meant to show the differences between enlightened European civilization and the barbarity of other cultures. As W.J. McGee wrote, when discussing the purpose of his own exhibit, "... the aim of the Department... will be to present human progress from the dark prime to the highest enlightenment."<sup>1</sup> In 1903, Japan would also take part in the "human zoos," featuring a number of ethnicities from Asia in the Fifth Domestic Industrial Exposition at Osaka. Of particular note were the Ainu, an indigenous group of the Kuril Islands, Sakhalin, and Hokkaido. The Ainu were featured again at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904, put on by the Americans. These two exhibits at these two expositions allow for an analysis of the ways in which both Japan and the West interacted with the Ainu. This essay seeks to use the aforementioned expositions to examine the differing ways in which Japan and the West interacted with the Ainu, as well as how the Ainu interacted with these cultures. Japan interacted with the Ainu through a cultural lens, with the belief that over time they could become assimilated into the Japanese culture. The West, however, interacted with them through a racial lens, believing them to be "lost Aryans" which garnered them special sympathy in the eyes of intellectuals, but not among the common people.

The Japanese and the Ainu have long been in contact, arguably beginning with diplomacy between the Yamato Confederacy and those outside of Japanese culture, known as the Emishi.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> James W. Vanstone, "The Ainu Group at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, 1904," *Arctic Anthropology* 30, no. 2 (1993): 77.

<sup>2</sup> Brett Walker, *The Conquest of Ainu Lands: Ecology and Culture in Japanese Expansion 1590-1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 21.

It should be noted that even at this early stage, the precursors to the Japanese were making distinctions between themselves and the other. This term Emishi would eventually be transformed into Ezochi, which was the Japanese term for Hokkaido. Ezochi translates roughly to “land of the barbarians,” once again showing that the Japanese from an early period distanced themselves from the Ainu.<sup>3</sup>

Despite cultural differences, the Ainu and the Japanese traded with each other extensively throughout the Kamakura and Muromachi periods. During this time period, trade focused largely on animal products, such as salmon and animal skins.<sup>4</sup> Trade at this time was not limited to the nearest daimyo, and exports flooded into Ezochi. This period of unregulated trade came to an end with an edict from Tokugawa Ieyasu, which granted the Matsumae family exclusive trading rights in regards to Ezochi in 1604.<sup>5</sup> From their castle-town of Fukuyama, the Matsumae established a zone of direct Shogunate control in Southern Ezo, which became called Wajinchi, “Japanese land.”<sup>6</sup> Using Wajinchi as a base, the Matsumae employed a number of tactics to subtly subjugate the Ainu, such as *gireiteki shihai*, or management by ritual.<sup>7</sup> In one policy in this system, the Ainu chiefs would exchange gifts with the Matsumae lords in highly ritualized ceremonies, playing off the traditional Ainu gift-giving ceremonies. In these ceremonies, the Japanese cultivated a sense of superiority, as Brett Walker explains, “...by the early eighteenth century a ritual hierarchy was enforced... the Ainu... found themselves sitting in the courtyard... below their Japanese lords.”<sup>8</sup> This simple display of being seated higher than the Ainu was a

---

<sup>3</sup> Brett Walker, “Reappraising the Sakoku Paradigm: The Ezo Trade and the Extension of Tokugawa Political Space into Hokkaido,” *Journal of Asian History* 30, no.2(1996): 173.

<sup>4</sup> *The Conquest of Ainu Lands*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>7</sup> “Reappraising the Sakoku Paradigm,” 181.

<sup>8</sup> “Reappraising the Sakoku Paradigm,” 182.

direct display of authority, similar to the way in which Japanese Emperors would be seated above their subjects. The Matsumae would continue to indirectly rule over Hokkaido until 1799, when the Shogun's government took over Fukuyama directly.

Japan's policy towards the Ainu changed drastically during the Meiji Restoration of 1868. That same year, the Japanese extended their claims beyond Wajinchi to encompass all of Hokkaido. From this policy change, the Meiji government began to intensify its colonial ambitions in the region. The hope was to integrate the Ainu into the Japanese polity through their assimilation to Japanese culture.<sup>9</sup> This could be done by tearing away at the things that made them barbarians: such as the banning of tattoos in the 1870's and the replacement of hunting and gathering with agriculture.<sup>10</sup> Many of the government's policies towards the Ainu in Hokkaido (and eventually the Kuril Islands and Sakhalin) were centered around cultural conversion. Especially in the Northern portions of Ainu territory, there was a concrete fear that the Ainu would fall into the Russian sphere of influence, and as such the orthodox church and Russian style names were banned. In the meantime, Buddhist missionaries were sent to convert the populace.<sup>11</sup> Despite these policies, Ainu were given equal citizenship under Japanese law, as the government was unwilling to place the Ainu into a specific category.<sup>12</sup> While they remained supposedly equal under the law, the Ainu often faced cultural discrimination, which forced many to make the transition towards Japanese culture.<sup>13</sup> Even the government often treated the Ainu poorly despite their legal status. Often under the guise of policies meant to protect and nurture the Ainu, the government in Hokkaido would relocate Ainu communities, often to locations with

---

<sup>9</sup> David Howell, "Ainu Identity and the Meiji State," *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 173.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 176

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 195.

lower crop yields.<sup>14</sup> These policies indicate that the Meiji Japanese opinions of the Ainu, even before the 1903 Osaka Exposition, were negative in regards to their cultural practices.

While Japan had interacted with the Ainu for many centuries, Western interaction with the Ainu has only occurred since the late 1500's, not long after they had made first contact with the Japanese.<sup>15</sup> While early European sources depicted the Ainu as uncivilized "wild men," perceptions of them eventually shifted towards the idea of the "noble savage" which was becoming increasingly popular among European intellectuals at the time.<sup>16</sup> The term "noble savage" was especially popular to describe indigenous populations during the colonial era, as it cast native groups as innocent and peace-loving, lacking the knowledge or capability to understand war. The term also carries with it a positive connotation, as long as the aforementioned indigenous group did not become hostile towards the colonizers.<sup>17</sup> As the centuries would continue, the Ainu would become increasingly favorable in the eyes of Westerners.

Even as late as 1856, the West prided the Ainu above other indigenous cultures, referring to them as, "... a far nobler creature than the Red Indian..."<sup>18</sup> However, there was a shift away from the special treatment of the Ainu during the later half of the 19th century. European intellectuals at this time saw the rise of Japan, and naturally feared that over time, the Ainu culture would be wiped out due to Japanese colonization.<sup>19</sup> Simultaneously, new Social Darwinian theories amplified these fears, as Western intellectuals believed that "weak" cultures

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ainu Identity and the Meiji State*, 178.

<sup>15</sup> Hans Dieter Olschleger, "Ainu Ethnography: Historical Representations in the West," *Beyond Ainu Studies: Changing Academic and Public Perspectives*, ed. Mark J. Hudson (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014) 26.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 29

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>19</sup> "Ainu Ethnography: Historical Representations in the West", 35.

like the Ainu could not survive.<sup>20</sup> It became increasingly clear to many that the Ainu could not survive, yet the Ainu remained within the consciousness of many Western ethnographers, especially in regards to their origins.

During the late 19th century, Western intellectuals engaged in an intensive debate, known as “the Ainu question,” regarding which “race” the Ainu belonged to.<sup>21</sup> Despite being native to Hokkaido, many believed that the Ainu belonged to the Aryan race, due to their facial characteristics, such as “... horizontal eyelids, wide open eyes, protruding nose, overall hairyness.”<sup>22</sup> The belief that the Ainu were a member of the Aryan race was not held by all members of the anthropological field, and thus many within the study would posit their own theories about the origins of the Ainu. It is in the context of these intellectual debates that the Fifth Domestic Industrial Exposition, which will be referred to as the Osaka Exposition, took place.

It should be noted that the Osaka Exposition hosted a large number of different ethnicities, as opposed to just the Ainu. There were exhibits that represented peoples from across the world, particularly from Africa, the Ottoman Empire, and South Asia.<sup>23</sup> The exhibits also included members of the colonies of Japan, such as Taiwanese aborigines, Okinawans, and the Ainu.<sup>24</sup> Debates about the reasoning for this exhibit have raged since its opening, however a common belief is that these exhibits were designed to show the different civilizational levels of

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>23</sup> Kirsten L. Ziomek, “The 1903 Human Pavilion: Colonial Realities and Subaltern Subjectivities in Twentieth-century Japan,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 2 (2014), 493.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 494.

the world, and through the contrast, show how civilized the Japanese Empire had become.<sup>25</sup> It is in this display of civilization that Kozo and his family were able to make names for themselves.

When the Osaka Exposition began, the Ainu exhibit featured only one Ainu member, named Fushine Kozo. Kozo had come, along with his family, to help raise funds for learning centers in Hokkaido.<sup>26</sup> Kozo became very popular during the exposition, mainly because he was fluent in Japanese and would give speeches in favor of his cause.<sup>27</sup> He caused further shock at the exposition by donning Western-style clothing while not in the exhibit, but still retaining his traditional outfit while on display.<sup>28</sup> The way that Kozo presented himself helped him in his auxiliary political message: the belief that the Ainu could be culturally Ainu while also being loyal subjects of the Emperor. In his speech given on April 5th, Kozo says, “The Ainu people... are a pitiful race; ladies and gentlemen, if you embrace the concept that we are all subjects of the empire, raise your hand if you would like to exert your efforts in helping Ainu education.”<sup>29</sup> In the eyes of Kozo, he does not need to become purely Japanese to earn the respect of the government. In an ideal world, the Emperor unifies all of his subjects, and thereby destroys cultural distinctions.

However, while Kozo sought to show that one could be Ainu and a loyal subject, two groups accidentally worked against him. The first was a group of Ainu merchants who were visiting Osaka, who were there to sell meat. While these merchants did not do anything out of the ordinary, many Japanese citizens gathered around them, which led Kozo to presume that the merchants were being gawked at.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, another group of Ainu were on display in a

---

<sup>25</sup> “The 1903 Human Pavillion”, 494.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 498.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 495.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 498.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 500.

<sup>30</sup> “The 1903 Human Pavilion”, 511.



play-house, performing various rituals for Japanese audiences. Despite knowing Japanese, these performers were forced to speak Ainu, and their manager refused to pay them.<sup>31</sup> These two groups of Ainu, by appearing less cultivated than Kozo, revealed a harsh realization: The Ainu were still considered different culturally from the Japanese, and that maintaining Ainu identity while simultaneously gaining the recognition of the government or the people was not a simple task.

While these Ainu groups outside of the exposition displayed the Japanese disdain for traditional Ainu culture and practices, the responses to Kozo and his exhibit also show that many Japanese had begun to view the “civilized” Ainu as their countrymen. Following the announcement of the groups that would be on display, there were mass protests towards the display of Han Chinese, as they were seen as civilizational equals to the Japanese, resulting in their removal from the exposition.<sup>32</sup> Kozo and his family would remain on display, however there was a similar outpouring of anger towards their exhibition. As one newspaper recalled during the exposition, “Even when the two races of the Ryukuans and Ainu who are our compatriots are treated with contempt, can we still go calmly along and put up with the insults heaped on our countrymen?”<sup>33</sup> This direct questioning of the display of the Ainu shows that some within Japan had already begun to see them as fellow members of the Empire, referring to them as “compatriots”. During this time, the Ainu had begun to fall under the term *shin Nihonjin*, or New Japanese, which clearly denotes the special classification the Ainu had received.<sup>34</sup> However, this new classification only extended to figures like Kozo, who had shown an ability to dress in the Western style and who could speak fluent Japanese.

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 512.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 505.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 508.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 496.

The 1903 exposition shows the extent to which the Meiji government had attempted to assimilate the Ainu, as well as showing the products of that assimilation. Unlike racial categorization, Ainu citizens could eventually earn the respect of the Japanese government and people, and become *shin Nihonjin*. However, in order to reach this respect, fundamental aspects of Ainu culture needed to be abandoned, as shown by the presence of the Ainu merchants and actors. Following the Osaka Exposition, Kozo succeeded in raising funds for additional schools in Hokkaido.<sup>35</sup> However, Kozo and his family had only played further into the cultural assimilation of their people. When Frederick Starr came to Japan in search of “authentic” Ainu for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, he was warned, “... a group of them were shown at the Osaka Exposition,... and were so sadly spoiled and corrupted, that we were... warned against having anything to do with any of the group.”<sup>36</sup>

Comparatively, the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in Saint Louis (hereafter called the Saint Louis Exposition) was deeply entrenched in the racial theories that had enveloped Western anthropology. The exposition featured nine Ainu, gathered from a number of different villages in Hokkaido. Frederick Starr’s *The Ainu Group at the Saint Louis Exposition* details the recruitment of these Ainu, while also showcasing his racial and cultural theories regarding their origin.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Starr’s work deals with the racial composition of the Ainu. In the second half of the book, he devotes many pages to the subject of the origins of the Ainu, concluding that they must be of Aryan descent. He cites numerous sources for this belief, beginning with concepts of appearance. He writes, “The white skin, abundant body hair

---

<sup>35</sup> “The 1903 Human Pavilion,” 501.

<sup>36</sup> Frederick Starr, *The Ainu Group at the Saint Louis Exposition* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1904) 3.

and beard,... the horizontal eye full of expression and fire... he resembles us, the whites of European race.”<sup>37</sup> Starr is not alone in his assessment of the “white” appearance of the Ainu. At the Osaka Exposition, many observers remarked that Kozo, “...bore a striking resemblance to Tolstoy...”<sup>38</sup> Starr further reinforces his belief that the Ainu are of Aryan descent through linguistic evidence, declaring the Ainu language to be “... an Aryan language...” due to its use of pronouns, passive voice, and reflective verbs.<sup>39</sup>

As an Aryan culture, Starr gives the Ainu special treatment in comparison to the Japanese in his work. While referring to the Ainu’s position within history, he writes, “... that old white race was broken and submerged by a great flood of active yellow Asiatics...”<sup>40</sup> This theory is clearly not a compliment towards the Japanese, a point further elaborated on when Starr encountered an Ainu man with a Japanese wife. He writes, “... his wife is Japanese and the little mongrel children were not much to my taste.”<sup>41</sup> These passages indicate that while the Japanese had by this point in history advanced to the same technological level as the Europeans, European and American intellectuals still viewed the Japanese as “lesser” while their perceived brethren were regarded more highly.

Another key point of contention that Starr remarks upon during his travels is the Ainu relation to the Japanese. As stated previously, Starr believes that the Japanese ultimately subsumed the Aryan ancestors of the Ainu. However, his theories also delve into the relationship between the modern Japanese and the Ainu. While Starr makes clear that the Japanese and the Ainu are not related racially, he does proclaim that the Ainu are the indigenous population of all

---

<sup>37</sup> *The Ainu Group at the Saint Louis Exposition*, 108.

<sup>38</sup> “The 1903 Human Pavilion”, 498.

<sup>39</sup> *The Ainu Group at the Saint Louis Exposition*, 109.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

of the Japanese islands. He declares that a race of “pit-dwellers,” whom the Japanese have taken to be a pre-Ainu race, are in fact signs of Ainu presence, all throughout the Japanese islands.<sup>42</sup> He further writes, “The Ainu were the old population of Japan and probably occupied all the islands, even down to Kiushiu[sic]...”<sup>43</sup> While placing the Ainu as the indigenous population of Japan may seem like a semantic argument, this narrative allowed for many in the West to rationalize the racial position of the Japanese. At the Saint Louis Exposition, McGee, who was director of the anthropological exhibits, said that the Ainu, “... magnified the racial characteristics that underlay Japanese progress...”<sup>44</sup> By making the Ainu the indigenous population of Japan (although not the ancestors of the Japanese) Western intellectuals are able to frame Japanese success as an extension of Aryan supremacy, thereby fitting them into their world-view.

Despite this racial companionship, the Ainu suffered harassment upon arriving in the Americas. Starr notes that while Vancouver was pleasant, however, “In Seattle it was less tolerant, but only once was anything absolutely unpleasant said.”<sup>45</sup> Further, Starr writes, “In Saint Louis there was more rudeness, but nowhere was there so much as we had dreaded.”<sup>46</sup> At the Exposition itself, the Ainu were well received, although there is little evidence that they were prized above any other groups present.<sup>47</sup> These events show that while intellectuals found a racial bond with the Ainu, this notion did not extend to the common people. To people simply viewing the exhibit, the Ainu likely looked similar to any other indigenous group. This also displays the view that the Ainu were primitive, considered by many to be at the bottom of the

---

<sup>42</sup> *The Ainu Group at the Saint Louis Exposition*, 87.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>44</sup> “The Ainu Group at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition”, 90.

<sup>45</sup> *The Ainu Group at the Saint Louis Exposition*, 103.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-104.

<sup>47</sup> “The Ainu Group at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition”, 86.

civilizational hierarchy, regardless of their racial categorization.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, the treatment of the Ainu in the Saint Louis Exposition shows the complex views that the West held towards the Ainu, and by extension other indigenous peoples.

These two expositions have shown that while both Japan and the Western powers were driven by imperialism to conquer indigenous peoples, the lens through which these two cultures interacted with their indigenous counterparts were vastly different. Both saw the indigenous populations that they subsumed as inferior, but this inferiority was based on separate standards. The Japanese Empire saw the Ainu as inferior, and instituted a number of policies with the objective of eliminating traditional Ainu culture. However, the Ainu were only seen as culturally inferior, and by shedding their “barbaric” customs they could become *shin Nihonjin*, or New Japanese. Comparatively, Western intellectuals examined the Ainu through a racial lens. By identifying them as members of the Aryan race, intellectuals were able to find a sense of companionship with the Ainu. By placing these supposed Aryans as the indigenous population of Japan, they were also able to explain Japanese successes in the early 20th century. However, even with this supposed racial brotherhood, other intellectuals and common people still looked down on the Ainu as a “lesser” people who had not evolved enough to be civilized. While the subject of this essay has been from the perspective of the imperialists, it should be noted that colonialism does not simply feature an active force against a passive force. As shown by the Ainu who participated in these expositions (particularly Kozo), the Ainu were active in the construction of these perceptions. Thus, these two frameworks; the Japanese cultural lens and the Western racial lens, alongside the actions of indigenous peoples who acted within these lenses, shaped the history of the Pacific during the 20th century.

---

<sup>48</sup> “Ainu Ethnography: Historical Representations in the West,” 33-34.

# Work Cited

Dieter Olschleger, Hans. "Ainu Ethnography: Historical Representations in the West." *In Beyond Ainu Studies: Changing Academic and Public Perspectives*. Edited by Mark J. Hudson. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014

Howell, David. "Ainu Identity and the Meiji State." *In Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005

Starr, Frederick. *The Ainu Group at the Saint Louis Exposition*. Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1904

Vanstone, James W. "The Ainu Group at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, 1904." *Arctic Anthropology* 30, no. 2 (1993): 77-91.

Walker, Brett. "Reappraising the Sakoku Paradigm: The Ezo Trade and the Extension of Tokugawa Political Space into Hokkaido." *Journal of Asian History* 30, no.2 (1996): 169-192.

Walker, Brett. *The Conquest of Ainu Lands: Ecology and Culture in Japanese Expansion 1590-1800*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001

Ziomek, Kristen L. "The 1903 Human Pavilion: Colonial Realities and Subaltern Subjectivities in Twentieth-century Japan." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 2 (2014): 493-516.