

JAPAN'S FORSAKEN PEOPLE

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Japan has a long and rich heritage; a heritage which is at least 1500 years old and possibly over 2000. Yet, we rarely discuss our heritage. In fact, the word *isan* or Japanese for heritage is rarely heard.

Fortunately, much of Japan's heritage is manifest in tangible historical and cultural assets such as Todaiji, Horyuji and the many other famous and not so famous temples and shrines throughout Japan, and the many treasures which they preserve. This is not true of our intangible heritage, however.

Shiretoko, Sapporo, Kushsharo, Wakkanai -- These are all names of beautiful places in Hokkaido. But, have you ever thought about the meanings of these names? Where did these names come from? The Ainu, no?

Let me ask you another question. What are the Ainu to you? An ethnic minority? A group of hirsute people who live in Hokkaido? People who make bear and salmon sculptures from wood? Or maybe you think that they are a group of people discriminated against by the majority of the Japanese.

To me they are none of these things; to me the Ainu, their language, and their culture are all very important parts of Japan's history and culture -- a part of our heritage.

Most Japanese, however, only think of the Ainu in terms of tourism or Hokkaido. Isn't it strange that we can place such value on and spend millions of yen on old temples such as Todaiji and Horyuji, yet we hardly give a thought to the debt which we owe the Ainu? Where lies the difference? Could it be that we cherish the old cities of Kyoto and Nara because we are told they are important cultural treasures?

The Ainu have influenced Japan and the Japanese in numerous ways. The many Ainu derived names in Hokkaido are only one example and there are similar examples in the Tohoku region. They have also left their mark on the Japanese language with words such as *tonakai*, *rakko*, *shishamo*, and *todo*, which are all standard Japanese for reindeer, sea otter, smelt and sea lion.

From the historical perspective, the Ainu did not only influence the culture in Hokkaido and northern Japan, but some scholars maintain that the origin of the Jomon culture and, therefore all Japanese, lie with the Ainu. In fact, the Ainu are thought to be the key to ancient Japanese and ancient Asian history by many Western scholars because of their unique status as the aborigines of the Japanese archipelago. What this means is that the Ainu are your ancestors and my ancestors, they are not some minority to be forgotten easily.

Linguistically, the Ainu language is also unique; there is no other related language. It is a difficult language with many inflections; it is a language rich in the nuances of nature; it is a language on the verge of dying -- for there is only one old woman left who can really speak it.

One of the problems is that there is no written Ainu language, that is there are no letters or characters. All Ainu history was passed on from generation to generation through their tales and ballads of which there are hundreds and maybe thousands. Ten years ago there were several storytellers, but now they are all gone. It is only a matter of time before all of their tales are gone with them.

What, then, is being done?

To date, there are only a few individuals and groups in Japan doing research on the Ainu. All of this research is privately funded. The government is doing virtually nothing.

There are many things to be done:

- Increasing the number of those studying the Ainu language.
- The transcription of the old Ainu tales and ballads.
- The compilation of an Ainu dictionary.
- The establishment of Ainu studies.

All of these things can and should be done by the Ministry of Education. There is one thing you can do. If you ever hear of a movement to change an old Ainu place to a new name protest. Suppose someone proposed changing the names Sapporo or Shiretoko to something more modern? You might think this is ridiculous but this has happened in the past. The preservation of Ainu

place names is important because they are a constant reminder of Japan's Ainu legacy.

The Ainu are an important part of the Japanese heritage. The loss of the Ainu language, history or culture is equivalent to what would have happened if the United States had bombed Kyoto during World War II, or if the Tale of Genji, the Manyoshu, the Pillow Book, and all other Heian and pre-Heian literature were lost to us forever.

Thucydides, the Greek historian, wrote, "An exact knowledge of the past is an aid to the interpretation of the future." The past is our map for the future. Without a past, we have no future and the Ainu heritage is an important part of our past which we have to protect.

The Ainu are undeniably a part of the Japanese people. They have helped to form and create the nation we call Japan. Their legacy is just as important as that of Shotoku Taishi who first called Japan, "the land of the rising sun," or Fukuzawa Yukichi who founded Keio University.

We must not forget that the heritage of the Ainu people -- their history, their language, their culture -- are an integral part of Japan.

The Ainu heritage is to Japan what the American Indian heritage is to the United States, the Aborigine heritage to Australia, and the Maori heritage to New Zealand. The only difference is that in the scale of time. Yet, compared to the United States, Australia and New Zealand, Japan has almost totally ignored this heritage.