

A geographical area  
where one or more  
languages are  
endangered.

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



## Introduction

The geographic area that will be discussed in this case study is Japan and the language that is endangered is Ainu language.

The word Ainu means “human” in the Ainu language; Ezo, or Yezo, in old Japanese; or Utari, which is now called by many academics. The Ainu people, are ethnic group of native Hokkaido, from the northern part of Honshu which is in northern Japan, the Kurile Islands, much of Sakhalin, and the Southernmost third of the Kamchatka peninsula.

Although the accurate number of the Ainu population is not available, as it is common for the Ainu to deny being Ainu, due a long history of segregation by Japanese people. It is estimated that there are currently 23, 782[1], although figures could be doubled or even tripled[2]. Thus there is an endangering decline in the Ainu population.

The origin of the Ainu is very controversial as there is no existence of any written proof of Ainu language or where it originated. Moreover, the Japanese government does not distinguish the Ainu as separate people from the Japanese, which also makes it difficult to accurately state where it originated from and the current Ainu population. In addition, to the fact as stated above Ainu are reluctant to admit their identity to prevent discrimination, from the Japanese government.

The native are also known as Ezo, and it is suggested that their history goes back to about 1200 CE. As like other primitive cultures throughout the world,

the Ainu culture has encountered problems with the modern culture of Japan, it clashed to an extent that the Japanese government did not acknowledge and sought to eliminate it.

The Ainu are known for their trading contact with the Japanese during the Tokugawa Period (from 1600-1868). They were originally a hunting-and-gathering society, who also focused on fishing. The Ainu culture is noticeably different from the Japanese, there are several unique customs, for example the men never trim their beards or shave after certain age, and the women have tattoos just above the mouth are common. The traditional religion is a type of animism, which symbolises their hunting and gathering nature.

It is thought by many scholars that the Jomon are in fact the Ainu or at least descendents from the Jomon people. Studies conducted using Ainu DNA samples suggest there is a similarity between Jomon and Ainu.[3]

Furthermore, it is also believed that there is a connection between Ainu and the Polynesians that they have a common origin and belong neither to the Caucasian nor to the Mongolian race, although they possess some characteristics of both. The Ainu and the Polynesians had a common, ancient ancestry. There appear to be common cultural elements that have persisted despite the different influences the north has suffered. Studies have proven a strong resemblance between the Philippines, Indonesia, and Melanesia and Ainu which is evident by the general culture, their clothing, handcraft, household implements, weapons, ornaments, religious ceremonies and culture suggests there is a strong link.

Although there are indications that a large number of Ainu lived in the southern part of the Russian peninsula called Sakhalin, the northern part of Honshu on the main island of Japan called Tohoku, and the Kurile Islands, the main part however inhabited the Ainu is Hokkaido. The Ainu who lived in Russia were forced by the Russian government to move into Hokkaido, others who lived in Kurile Islands died as a consequence of poverty, bad conditions which eventually lead to diseases.

Peter Geiser, who is a professor of Sociology, suggests that Ainu may have migrated from the south and reached Honshu. Mongoloid also migrated to Honshu from Korea, thus the Ainu and Mongols have mixed in blood, and so the Ainu may have Mongoloid characteristics. Also it is believed that Ainu ancestors may have also been placed in Southeast Asia.

As a consequence of the discrimination and oppression suffered, the Ainu were not a group that were able to stick together, as result divided to three groups: 1) the Kurile Ainu, who lived on the Kurile Islands in present-day eastern Russia; 2) Sakhalin Ainu, who were habitants of northern Sakhalin Island now known as eastern Russia; and 3) Hokkaido Ainu, who lived on Hokkaido and southern Sakhalin Island. Therefore there are three main dialects of the Ainu language; Hokkaido-dialect, Sakhalin-dialect, and Kurile-dialect there is a big difference between the Hokkaido-dialect and the other two dialects. None of these Ainu tribes have letters or characters; as a result there is no written record of the Ainu language available today.

The Ainu language, culture customs and life is endangering of vanishing as, the population is rapidly diminishing as result of discrimination, which forced them to migrate. This resulted in the Ainu being forced to assimilate with the Japanese by the Former Aborigine Protection Law enacted in 1899, which prohibited expressions of Ainu culture, native language and forced to take Japanese names. However, a law enacted in 1997 that gave the Ainu official status as Japan's original inhabitants, recognized their language and culture and gave them the legal right to be different changed this. From then on the Ainu were recognised by the Japanese government the Ainu the language was acknowledge as the language of aboriginal Japanese people on Hokkaido Island, north of Japan. Separate from the Japanese language, however spoken before Japanese, which in some ways is a modern version of the Ainu language. Although, there is an acceptance of the language it is still significantly in decline as currently almost all of the Ainu speak Japanese. Ainu is an endangered language, as it is currently moribund, meaning that there are not many children who are native speaker as it is not taught in schools . It has been estimated that there are currently fewer than 100 speakers of Ainu. However, there is an internal movement for the revival of the Ainu language, which denied there is a decline in the number of native Ainu people, which led to the Ainu's increased marginalization. Only recently, on June 6, 2008, did the Japanese officially recognize the Ainu as an indigenous group and repeal the act of 1899.

Even so the Ainu is an almost extinct language of Japan. It is thought to have been the language of the ancient Jomon culture. It is further believed that the Jomon

Continued to be practiced by people who fled from the invading pressures to have become the Ainu language eventually. In the process, the old Japanese would have adopted some of the Jomon traditions, such as place names, person names, stories and expressions.

Biological studies also suggest that the Ainu people are closer to the people who form European nations. Linguistically, the Ainu language has similar syntax structure to Japanese, but differs in the use of pronouns used as verbal prefixes. It is considered by some linguists that the Ainu language is a distant family of the Finno-Ugric subgroup of Ural- Altaic language group. There are studies suggest that the Ainu people are probably a branch of a group of people who originally came from the North Ural mountains, and spread from Finland to Northeast Siberia between 700 BC to 700 AD[4]. This is from the cultural & religious similarity found in old ruins, but culture can be transferred by contact of people, so the origin of Ainu people is still not known for sure.

However, until the twentieth century, Ainu language was also spoken during the Southern half of the Island of Sakhalin also minor people in the Kuril Islands. It became used as a lingua franca in the Kuril Islands. However, by the first decade of the twentieth century the language ceased to be spoken on Kuril Island, it was only spoken on the Sakhalin island as a lingua franca

between the local language and also between the local administrative and Japanese fishing industries. However, the language gradually started to disappear, in 1949 there was only 100 reported speaker in Sakhalin island which by the late twentieth century the last remaining speaker of the Sakhalin island had died.

Furthermore, Ainu language in global context was not usually accepted in part with any other family language. However, Ainu is an isolated language as history suggests it is language from a group that has never been accepted in society, which is one of the reasons why it is difficult to state their origins, as it was almost a taboo to speak the language. Thus the reason why it is considered an isolated language. According to John C. Street (1962), Ainu, Korean, and Japanese are the same descendants and Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic other group, the difference between the two families is like in a common “North Asiatic family”. However, Ainu is a declining language, and has been endangered for at least the past few decades.

The Ainu language is known as a moribund language, which has been endangered for at least a few decades. The remaining 25,000 ethnic Ainu only speak Japanese as a consequence of the assimilation. In the town of Nibutani (part of Biratori, Hokkaido) where there are remaining native speakers live, there are 100 speakers, out of which only 15 used the language every day in the late 1980s. However, use of the language is on the rise. There is currently an active movement to reinstate the language mainly in Hokkaido and to increase the number of speakers as second-language learners, especially in Hokkaido.

There is no doubt the Ainu language has over time suffered enormous decline, what sociolinguists refer as a language shift[5]. As a consequence of the discrimination the Ainu's people suffered especially at the hands of the Japanese, although to a certain extent there has been attempts to ratify through the activism of the Ainu people in 1986, which was a result of the statement made by the Japanese prime minister that the Japanese people are mono-ethnic. This provided members of the Ainu association with the will power to fight to have their rights legalise and to have their own language. However, it is doubtful as to the exact number of Ainu speaker today, as stated above much still fear discrimination and still is reluctant to say they are Ainu.

The Law stated above was aimed at preservation and maintain of Ainu language and culture was published in 1997. In theory it is still a declining language, customs, even though they have been legally recognized the Japanese government is still reluctant to recognize Ainu's right to be Ainu and prohibit the existence of Ainu language and culture from being discriminated.

Presently in Japan there are many centres, foundations and societies devoted to reinstating and promoting of Ainu language and Ainu culture, but all they are just half measures, as all they do is provide awareness of the language. They do not deal with the fact that the language is significantly declining this something that only autonomy resolve this problem. It is time for the Japanese and the Russians to accept their links to the Ainu and to no longer see them as an "inconvenient" for Japanese colonization as well as



for Russian. Although, there is a significant decline to the point that the language is considered endangered it should not be forgotten that the Ainu still exist and they have much more rights to be the owner of so-called “northern territories” and should no longer be oppressed and ashamed to be a Ainu. The answer to this may lay in the ‘ Northern territories being handed back to the Ainu as only then will they have a sense of belonging, which in term will prevent them from being oppressed and ashamed.

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