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UGE 1 Ethnological Study

AINU - (Hokkaido Island, Japan)

Examination of the typical habitation of a living indigenous culture



Fig. 1: A couple of the Ainu tribe in front of the hut (2, p. 47)

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Introduction

„Up in the north of the Japanese island kingdom, on the island Hokkaido or Jesso, there still lives what is left of a unique people, the *Ainu*, i.e. ‘people’, as they have always called themselves.“ (2, p. 3) „In Hokkaido there remain only a few pure Ainu settlements, such as *Shiraoi* on the South coast and the adjacent *Shadai*. Further north lies *Piratori*, and a fourth settlement can be found close to *Asahigawa*.“ (2, p. 11)

The Ainu, „a doomed people“, is what one can find in almost every report on this people. According to recent estimations, there are only 3000 - 4000 single-race Ainu who struggle for their existence far away from civilisation as hunters and farmers. Sporadically, one can find them as well in South -Sachalin and on the Kuril islands , the majority lives, however, on the northernmost Japanese island Hokkaido, or Jesso. The following examination of the Ainu will merely focus on the people inhabiting Hokkaido.

The difficulty when conducting this research was the lack of elaborate reports on the Ainu in literature, which then often revealed discrepancies on fundamental topics. The reports were almost exclusively written by missionaries and depicted a rather one-sided attitude of the church. This research cannot reveal anything new about the Ainu, but it aims to capture every valuable detail concerning the background conditions and the description of the housing.

1. Features of the Surrounding Environment

1.1 Topographical Conditions

The image of Hokkaido is strongly influenced by uninterrupted volcanic mountain chains running from north to south which subsequently divide the island into many small valley landscapes. 72% of the island’s surface is covered by dense forest and swamps. In former times, only rivers and straits provided any kind of inter-connection. Today, however, an expansive railroad network covers the entire national area. Large cities, e.g. Sapparo, are located on the coastlines and on rivers that flow through forged valleys to the ocean.



Map: Japan (physical)

See the island Hokkaido at earth.google.de

1.2 Geological Conditions

Hokkaido, forming part of the east Asian island chain between 31° and 46° N, consists mostly of quarternary and young volcanic rock.

The volcanic eruptions that continue to occur even today, with the ash and sand deposits that they create, have lead to the creation of many table lands. The thick layers of volcanic ash have, however, caused the earth to become infertile, and make agricultural work and crop planting very difficult.

1.3 Climatic Conditions

The island of Hokkaido is the coldest region of Japan on account of its northern location. Cape Soya is the most northern end of the island, lying at 45° 20' 19''.

In the south, the 18 km wide Taugaru strait – that simultaneously acts as a vegetation boundary – separates Hokkaido from the island of Honshu. In the north between Hokkaido and Sachalin there is the 45 km Soya-strait.

Temperatures sway in the middle of the year between 3° and 9° C.

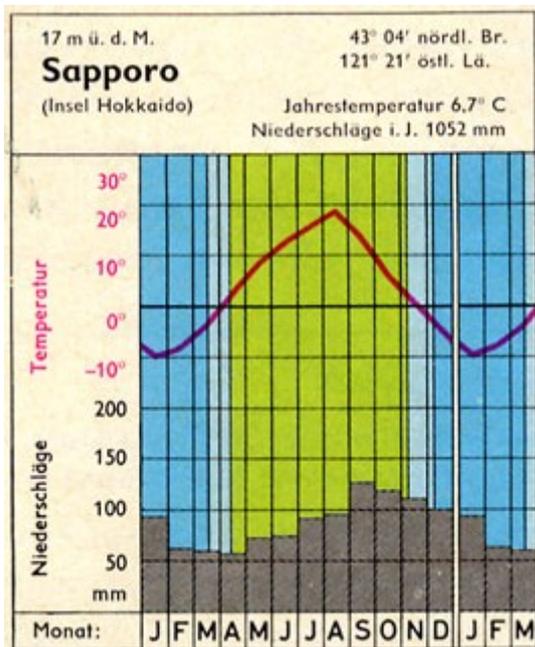


Diagram: Annual temperature and precipitation Sapporo (Island Hokkaido)

The first frost already begins in September. Due to this, the frost-free periods only consists of 120-200 days per year. Precipitation is 1052 mm per year on average. September has the highest rainfall and February the lowest.

During winter it snows predominantly. The wind blows strongly mostly from NW, only during the summer months does it occasionally come from the east. (3)

Due to the fact that the majority of the island is covered by woodland (72%) which mostly consists of pine trees – only the river banks remain for crop planting.

Rice, which is predominantly grown there, can only be harvested once a year due to the short summer.

1.4 Sociological Conditions

The Ainu live mostly in tribes with common genealogical, cultural and possession-marking traditions. A tribe is often identical with a village community. Few bonds exist among the individual, scattered tribes. In former times, there were village leaders who possessed an inherited grandeur along male bloodlines.

In the Ainu, small families under patriarchal rule can be found where absolute power rests with the patriarch; this is, however, smaller when compared with that of the female family members. The bond that exists between a woman and the family of her own mother is stronger than the bond to the family of her partner. Patriarchal leadership is predominantly inherited by the oldest son.

Elder men possess an outstanding position in terms of cult, group leadership, judiciary etc. In the Ainu, free choice of partner exists, but only within the same tribe. The son-in-law is often adopted. The position of the woman is subordinated. She bears the responsibility of ensuring the well-being of her husband.

Women partake in Ainu cult. Deity cult however, which plays an important role in the Ainu, is something exclusively for men.

Every man carries the obligation as both head of the family and priest of the house, to pray to the Gods, celebrate religious ceremonies and, by offering food and drink, to please the Gods and receive their benevolence.

Also known is the right – dominant in former times – to hunt, fish and inherit, as well as a very strict criminal law system. Under the influence of the Japanese, however, there remains little of this today.

1.5 Cultural Conditions

There is hardly a people that has preserved its own spiritual culture so completely, without changing or mixing, as the Ainu have, even though there is no script or drawing in their possession to document their history. In the spiritual culture of the Ainu, all things taking on human form on earth are, in the world of the Gods, supernatural beings that appear and take on a form on earth that is to be used by the Ainu. This usage is the return of the divine, freed from its earthly form, to the world of the Gods. Many cult acts, e.g. the Festival of the Bear, whose description will not be given here, are based on this belief and serve that purpose of returning to the afterlife, as well as offering sacrifices and leading a good existence on earth to ensure a good afterlife, to enable their return to earth again in order that the Ainu can secure its way of life.

The remains of all those used are treated and stored with great care. Animal skulls are tied to poles and setup as an altar behind the house. The actual altar is situated in the house. There are no communal temples.

As there is a reigning fear of death, no death cult exists after burial. Low-rising mound graves are predominant. In addition to this, and depending on both the landscape and gender, various stakes are erected. (1) (2)

1.6 Economic Conditions

The economic form of the Ainu was hunting and gathering until recent decades. They lived on that which nature provided. Man procured meat nourishment through hunting and fishing while women collected herbs and roots. This economic form determined the social structure in part. Today, however, they plant essential food stuff – mostly sorghum and rice –

begrudgingly on badly maintained fields. They think very little of fertilising the land. If the harvest is bad, they simply take a new piece of land next year. It is their opinion that an abundant or marginal harvest depends on will of the Gods, and not fertiliser. In former times, this led to widespread famine. Even if they would prefer to withdraw to isolated regions, the advancing exploitation of Hokkaido means coming into ever greater contact with strangers and, during the summer months, earning a small income while working as a tour guide and showing some of their old practices. (1)

1.7 Historical Conditions

The first reports about the Ainu originate from the Chinese. Under the Han- Dynasty (189 B. C. – 30 A. D.) there was talk of a tribe under the name of „Mao-mim“ (Hair People). Neither their origin nor from which race they descended has been clarified to this day. Based on accumulated results, it must be assumed that the Ainu descended from the Caucasian race, and found themselves living to the east of the Ural, in west Siberia. It is probable that, during the Indian migration of the Germanic peoples, they (the Ainu) were forced to move eastwards, and pioneered their way through Siberia through to the Ochot Sea, which lasted for many centuries. They settled in Kamtschatka, on Sachalin, on the Kuril islands, on Hokkaido, and on the Japanese mainland island of Honshu. The advancing Yamato-race (the Japanese), coming from the south, drove the Ainu northwards until they found their final sanctuary on Hokkaido, Sachalin and the Kuril islands. (1)

1.8 Political Conditions

Hokkaido is one of the four main islands, to which the Japanese territory was limited after being defeated in the Second World War. The American occupying forces brought decisive democratic reform to Japan. The largest consolidated companies were dismantled, jurisdiction and constitution were revised. On 3rd May 1947 a new constitution came into force, according to which the highest authority did not lie with the emperor, but with the people; additionally, the House of Commons held far greater power than the House of Lords. The state of war with the Soviet Union was ended on 19th October 1956. Since December 1956, Japan has been a member of the United Nations. On 20th January 1958, there followed the conclusion of a peace treaty with Indonesia. The revised security agreement, set with the United States in 1951, was signed by Prime Minister Kishi. The last prime minister Sato Eisaku achieved the return of Okinawa from the USA. In recent years, Japan has succeeded in becoming one of the strongest economic powers in the world. (4)

2. Description of the House

2.1 Construction Brief

2.1.1 Physical Checks

One can hardly speak of regulating guidelines when referring to the physical constructions in the Ainu. The internal climatic conditions vary only marginally from those outside as the thin external walls (made of reeds) can barely withstand the cold from the long, harsh winters. Additionally, the only available window - termed the ‘holy window’ – is merely a hole in the wall through which the cold of winter passes without any restriction. A reed mat is only then placed in front during night, storm, rain and snow. Equally, the entrance is permanently covered with a reed mat. The only source of warmth in winter is a continually burning fire in a set fireplace where the smoke collects above in the roofing before escaping through a small opening in the roof ridge. The Ainu sleep fully-clothed and rolled together like dogs on account of the low room temperatures. The sleeping areas are laid out with bear skins.

Inside a Ainu hut it is mostly dim, due to the fact that not much light passes through the only available window. A small lamp running on fish oil, and the light of the fire lighten the room a little. (1) (2)

2.1.2 Functional Framework

The construction tasks that have come to be are:

1. Living space for the family and
2. Storage rooms for food stuff.

Cult buildings and places of public assembly are completely absent in the Ainu, because everything – especially cult activities – all take place in the home, and because every family has its own altar. When a larger festival takes place, e.g. the Festival of the Bear, even this event occurs at home in one family, and every family sends one member. Festivals where all tribe members take part, e.g. the slaughter of a young bear, all take place out in the open. (1) (2)

2.1.3 Social Milieu

The social milieu and cultural symbolism are connected closely to the housing system.

The residential hut is something holy to the Ainu, that which they view and treat as a living being. According to ancient tradition, the Goddess of fire Abe-Fuchi brought the first hut from heaven when she came down to earth in order to live there. The never-ending hearth fire, seen as the place where the Goddess lives, is the heart of the hut, a religious place of worship, as it were. In reverence of the Goddess of fire, the area surrounding the fireplace is scrupulously ordered. The ‘holy window’, as already mentioned, has an equivalent cult significance, and must be pointing up-river, towards where the Gods reside. This window may never be used for ordinary purposes. When an Ainu member goes hunting, his weapons are passed to him through this window.

If he were to carry these through the door, he would not be blessed and would be unsuccessful in his hunt. After the hunt, the catch is then also passed through the window and placed onto a stand representing an altar. It remains there for a while to honour the Gods as any catch is considered to be a gift from them. The Ainu do not tolerate others looking through the ‘holy window’ from outside.

A new house is always built when a young couple marry. After building work on the house is completed, those who helped build come to take part in the great house-warming festival that is, after the Festival of the Bear, one of the biggest festivals in the Ainu.

It proceeds according to very specific rites and ends with a large feast. In former times it was a custom that the house had to be burnt after the death of the housewife, as women are unable to build a house and, in the land of the ancestors, would otherwise be without a house. This customs has since been banned by the Japanese government on account of the fact that the houses are registered as permanent residences. (1) (2)

2.2 Form

The Ainu live in small settlements, mostly in close proximity to a river, that seldom consist of more than ten huts. These are situated without any systematical order around each other, and are not too close together. The houses which, as a rule only have one door and one window, consist of only one large room inside. The entrance to every house faces upstream, without exception, the window is located on the opposite side and facing upstream as well. This has its reasoning in the strict tradition and beliefs of the Ainu. The Gods reside upstream and it

would be disrespectful to them if the entrance were not placed in their direction. Punishment from the Gods would follow and would bring tremendous misfortune to the house.

The houses are usually approximately 7m long and 4m wide. Above the 2.00-2.50m high external walls, a hipped roof of up to 5m rises upwards. Chopped wood from surrounding forests serves as building material. Not only the walls but also the roof are made of reed and bamboo grass. (1) (2).

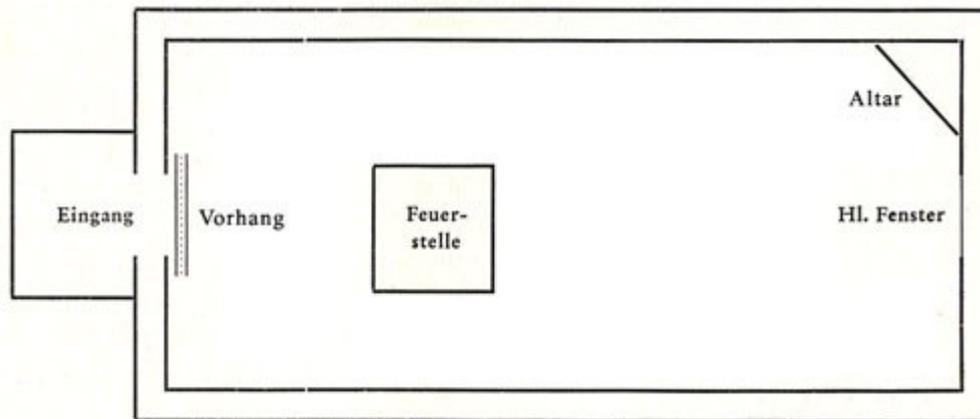


Fig. 2: Hut Floorplan

The order and arrangement of the single room is, in accordance with ancient AINU tradition, everywhere the same. Depending on the size of the family the room can be smaller or larger, the dividing up of the floor space remains the same. There is no suspended ceiling, meaning that there is only open space up to the tip of the roof. In front of the entrance to the living area there is a small porch, termed “small house”, where the largest household devices are stored. The entrance to the living area is covered with a reed mat, which hangs from above. When one enters the living area, one finds oneself on a small plot of trampled earth, where shoes are removed and placed. Almost in the centre of the room, slighter nearer to the entrance, there is a hearth measuring 1m x 1.5m whose special significance has already been dealt with. This consists of the hollow section in the ground filled with sand and ash, and fixed with four polished wooden beams. There are strict rules concerning the four sides of the hearth. The right side is always reserved for the man of the house, the left side for other members of the house and close friends. The side facing the entrance is for children and possible servants. The opposite space looking over the fire towards the entrance is the honorary place. Only high-ranking, special honorary guests are invited to sit there. Arrangements for things to the left and right of the house are decided from this position.

The floor area is covered by a thick layer of dried grass upon which finely platted reed- and bast mats are placed. In the left corner of the room, viewed from the entrance, the house altar is located, known as the “room centre”. Here, the Guardian God of the house is honored. Next to this sanctuary one can find the family treasures on the wall. Valuable hand-crafted objects from the woman, swords, bows, lances and rifles. The sleeping area of the man of the house is directly next to this, straight after this the sleeping area of the woman. All other members of the house have their sleeping quarters on the other side of the room.

Apart from the actual living area in the house, there is also a small pantry. This is located over some distance and is arranged on six poles in order to protect the provisions from animals.

Provisions houses of this building type can be found in almost all Palau – Asian tribes right up to Siberia.

The lavatory is situated 10-15m from the entrance to the home and is separated for men and women. It normally consists of two roof-shaped reed walls leaning against one another, and is closed both front and back with matting. Also part of every home is the ‘holy fence’ that is made of stakes with impaled animal skulls. This was already covered in another section. It stands behind the house in a place that can be seen from the ‘holy window’. (1) (2)

2.3 Technique

The sheer amount of wood on Hokkaido would make it possible for the Ainu to build solid, permanent wooden houses; however, on both religious and traditional grounds, they stick to less permanent reed-based constructions. The technical construction principle should be explained using the following depiction of house building in progress.

After chopping the wood in the forest and bringing all the building materials to the construction site, the first task is to set three poles upright where the hearth is to be situated, tie them together at the top and hang a small lamp with fish oil. This is the so-called ‘ground consecration’, which is allowed to pass for approximately one week before actual building work commences.

In complete contrast to the building order normally known to us, the Ainu begin by constructing the roof section. Round wood is tied together with reeds to form a hipped roof. When the roof frame is finished, it is placed on top of supporting stilts placed deep into the ground, and then tied again to the stilts with reeds. With the skeleton construction now in place, the roof is then covered with reeds and bamboo grass in a cascaded fashion. After completing the roof, the walls are also finished off with reeds. The construction of the house, in which all men in the village take part, normally only takes a few days. (1) (2)



Fig. 3: House construction (2, p. 50)



Fig. 4: Typical Ainu House. The roof- and wall sections consist mostly of grass (2, p. 50)

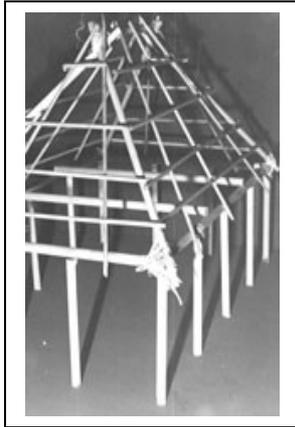


Fig. 5: Model Photos

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of the life, habitation and building activity of the Ainu shows a housing system that is less geared towards the surrounding environment and which, to a limited extent, only suffices in the face of the demands placed on it by environmental factors. It primarily clings to the old, passed down traditions and religious influences.

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