

Commentary

## The Ainu language and Indigenous psychological well-being in Hokkaido, northern Japan

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The Indigenous Ainu who once lived in northern Japan and the Russian Far East now live primarily in Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost prefecture. Over the years, many Ainu hid their Indigenous identity both from Japanese society and in some cases their own children (see e.g., NHK News, 2023). To this day, many with Ainu ancestry are unaware of their indigeneity. Despite the existence of linguistic resources such as language courses and radio stations, there are now only two native Ainu speakers in the world (Endangered Languages Project, n.d.). The Ainu language is a language isolate (that is, it has no known genealogical link with any other language) and can be divided into Hokkaido, Sakhalin and Kuril Ainu, the latter two of which are now extinct (Dal Corso, 2022: 3). Yet, language revitalisation is associated with a heightened sense of self-worth and community; 'it is no surprise that people who have access to their language have improved mental health, lower suicide rates, and lower rates of substance abuse than do comparison groups in similar communities who do not use their language' (Grenoble, 2021: 17-19).

The Ainu language traditionally has no alphabet and is often written using the Latin or Japanese alphabets (Hokkaido Government, n.d.). Primary school students in Japan learn the first two of the three Japanese alphabets – *hiragana* and *katakana* – prior to memorising a few thousand Chinese-based *kanji* by adulthood. In contrast to hiragana and katakana which are phonetic, a single kanji can house multiple context-dependent meanings. While close to eighty percent of place names in Hokkaido are said to be derived from Ainu, the language is a rare sight in the streets of Hokkaido; place names are usually written using kanji which often do not accurately represent their phonetics. *Ateji* is a 'phonological representation of Japanese words using kanji' (Sato 2018: 314) and the kanji for Wakkanai (the northernmost settlement in Japan) are 稚内 (technically *waka nai*) which come from the Ainu words *wakka* (drinking water) and *nai* (river). In Japanese, 稚 (*waka*, *itokena* or *chi*) means young and 内 (*nai*, *dai*, *nou*, *don*, *uchi* or *i*) interior, neither of which reflects the Ainu meanings.

Similarly, 倶知安 (technically *ku-chi-an*) near the prefectural capital Sapporo is pronounced *kutchan*. In these ways, many place names in Hokkaido are learned on a case-by-case basis and are notoriously difficult to read even for native Japanese-speakers.

### Language and psychological well-being

Founded in 1997 by Elder Shirō Kayano, The Ainu Times is the only newspaper in Japan that publishes entirely in the Ainu language. Kayano now works as a Director at the Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum in Hokkaido (in the town of Nibutani, approximately seven in ten residents have Ainu ancestry). He and his late father Shigeru made significant contributions in terms of Ainu language revitalisation and, in Shirō's mind, Ainu should be an official language in Japan (Kayano, 2023). Research shows that 'public recognition of an ancestral language can have a very positive effect on Indigenous well-being' (Walsh, 2018: 8) and, in addition to spoken Ainu (e.g., announcements on public transport), the potential of linguistic landscapes, or a 'displayed language in a particular space' (Carr, 2022) needs to be taken into account. A study on the use of languages in the Saami museum Siida in northern Finland highlighted museums' capacity to 'reinforce' or 'challenge' linguistic hierarchies already prevalent in society (Kelly-Homes & Pietikäinen, 2016: 37). A case in point is the size or placement of the Ainu language in relation to other displayed languages such as Japanese and English. Linguist Gorter and colleagues (2020: 179) found that, in addition to raising language awareness, 'the languages on display in public spaces can be an important resource for language learning and teaching'. This is particularly encouraging given that the few Ainu who are interested in the language 'are from relatively affluent backgrounds' (Tahara, 2009). Would such a democratisation of oral and written Ainu incentivise residents to learn the language? As Shirō comments, residents need to see the language as necessary or beneficial to their daily lives and feel motivated to learn it (Kayano, 2023).

According to a study on whether linguistic landscapes influence one's happiness, 'there is indeed a connection between individuals' sense of happiness and the presence of one's language in their environment' although it very much depends on 'individuals' own experiences, the perceived position of language groups within the society in question, and the way signs reference these experiences and social positions' (Malloy, 2022: 101). Such observations also call into question the psychological implications of seemingly commodified uses of the Ainu language in touristic areas (especially if its employment is limited to such locations). Importantly, introducing the Ainu language to Hokkaido's landscape may yield other benefits – for instance, research suggests that when non-Indigenous people learn an Indigenous language, there is 'a reduction in racism' (Walsh, 2018: 10).

### Looking forward

It was evident through my interview with Kayano that while exchange opportunities among Ainu and Māori communities in New Zealand exist, the Ainu and their Indigenous counterparts in other regions of the Arctic have little to no communication despite climatic and historical similarities. Additionally, there is a paucity of research on the connections among linguistic landscapes and psychological well-being among Ainu communities. It is therefore imperative that more studies are conducted to explore the potential psychological benefits – and disadvantages – of an Ainu linguistic landscape. In the same way that increased visibility of the language may encourage Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents alike to learn Ainu, such an exposure may even motivate Ainu currently unaware of their Indigenous roots to research their ancestry and lead to a

strengthened sense of community. While it may be challenging to effectuate immediate infrastructural changes, it is worth considering the potential role of linguistic landscapes in their more mobile or local forms ranging from shopping bags to bilingual café menus and pamphlets in the short term.

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