

Indigenous Survival Politics in the Promotion of a National Discourse

Society for East Asian Anthropology

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Editors' Note: *This piece is part of a SEAA column themed series on “Cultural Consumption and Performance in Asia.” The articles highlight different aspects of consumption and performance in a range of Asian regions. They examine issues such as cultural curation, the uses of the past, material culture, power and market, as well as the enactment of lived experience.*

In January 2018, 10 members from an Ainu traditional performance group, [Sapporo Upopo Hozonkai](#) (Sapporo Upopo Preservation Society, hereafter SUH), traveled from Sapporo, the capital city of Hokkaido prefecture, to Honolulu in Hawai'i for a one-day performance at the Ala Moana Centerstage. This performance promoted Upopoy, a state-funded National Ainu Museum and Park (also known as Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony) due to open on April 24, 2020 in Hokkaido to coincide with the Tokyo Olympics. This performance in Hawai'i is an instance of the global tendencies of settler states occupying indigenous lands to appropriate native bodies and culture for its national discourse. It is also one among many utilized by SUH as a means for survival through a sustained platform for cultural praxis and for creating trans-indigenous ties with indigenous peoples experiencing similar forms of [settler colonialism](#).

The Ainu lived in Hokkaido, the Kuril Islands, and Sakhalin before they were gradually colonized by the expanding Japanese empire from the nineteenth century onward. Post-1945 Japan had represented itself as a homogeneous nation with no ethnic minorities until 2008, when [grassroots organizing with trans-indigenous movements compelled Japan to recognize the Ainu as indigenous](#). This was followed by a [New Ainu Bill in 2019](#), which includes the planning and promotion of Upopoy. It seems that the Ainu are to play a large role in Japan's shift to a multiethnic and global nation speaking the language of harmonious national coexistence as represented in the construction of Upopoy for global tourists.



SUH members enjoying a quick visit to Waikiki Beach on the day of their arrival. Roslynn Ang

During their two performances at the Ala Moana Centerstage, I noticed several moments of dissonance. During one such moment, Hatsumi, a member of SUH, tried to ask the audience how they felt about a particular performance, but the emcee paid her no heed. I learned that while he understood Japanese, he stuck to the script because he was only paid to promote Upopoy and not to translate for the performers.

The first session ended with a *Poro Rimse* (a round dance). I was surprised to find familiar faces among the audience members who volunteered to join in the dance. They belong to a separate Ainu contingent who are employed at Upopoy and were on a four-day tour to learn about Polynesian cultural performances and history at the [Polynesian Cultural Center](#) and the [Bishop Museum](#). This participation with SUH was included as part of their itinerary. The second session's Poro Rimse finale ended with a different set of volunteers: a group of Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) men from a Hula dance company. After the finale, they started an informal round of gift exchange and photo taking on the stage with SUH members, amid the gaze of lingering spectators. Finally, the SUH members and the Kānaka Maoli company concluded the day with dinner together at a nearby restaurant.



SUH's Poro Rimse dance with the volunteers from Upopoy. Roslynn Ang

Settler state appropriation and consumption

Settler states appropriate the indigenous into their national framework in order to extend a lack of precolonial history on indigenous territories, thus justifying its occupation. This appropriation sustains a consumption of harmony into the present and future without addressing historical violence and contemporary inequalities. In an analysis of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, Janice Forsyth calls the settler nation's appropriation of indigenous culture for such global events an "illusion of inclusion"—a performative marketing move that does not redress unequal relations (2016).

Jennifer Adese (2016) connects this phenomenon to Jack D. Forbes's "*Wétiko psychosis*" (2008), a psychological infection with symptoms that include the settler compulsion to consume all things indigenous. This cannibalistic compulsion seeks to absorb indigenous natives into settler nations in multifarious ways. For this specific ethnographic snippet, it eliminates the AINU's cultural sovereignty to communicate their performance. Their performance, in turn, was mediated by and incorporated into a settler-national narrative devoid of historical violence. Recall that Hatsumi had no control over her communications with the audience as the performance was mediated by an emcee who was not on SUH payroll. State institutions funded the performance to represent Japan's multiethnic harmony for global consumption. This same performance of harmony and consumption of native culture is also discussed in [Claudia Huang's piece](#) from this series.

Scholars' and AINU activists' critique of the state-funded Upopoy echoes Forsyth's critique—this is a settler nation's marketing move that evades the issue of inequality (see [Morris-Suzuki 2018](#)). This was evident even in the project planning stage. Concentrated in the

hands of state actors and a few powerful Ainu, there was limited feedback from the broader Ainu community.

Survival politics in/against the settler-national narrative

The histories of the Japanese settler state and the Ainu are complex. The Ainu survived more than a century of forced assimilation and discrimination. Foreign contagions, frontier violence, forced labor, and forced relocation decreased the indigenous population ([Walker 2001](#)). Consequently, a discourse of the Ainu as “dying natives” arose to align with the legitimacy of settler occupation on native lands and resonated with the manifest destiny so often used to validate the mantra of **“Kill the Indian (or Ainu in this case) and save the man”** across settler states. SUH’s performance, among others, is a statement of their refusal to disappear in spite of this history of settler colonial elimination.

In general, urban Ainu are occupied with primary professions such as office workers, laborers, homemakers, and school-goers. SUH members live in urban Sapporo and most of them do not perform full time as professionals. They are mostly middle-aged women freed from work and childcare, retired men, and school-aged children. Their performances are largely supported by state-funded institutions (for example, the [Foundation for Ainu Culture](#)), that create a space for them to practice their culture and sustain community relations.

The Japanese state had tried and is still trying to depoliticize the Ainu community’s movements with a perfunctory recognition of a valorized Ainu culture to pacify them (see [Povinelli 2002](#) for parallels in Australia’s case). While SUH depends on state funding for performances, they simultaneously utilize the trans-indigenous spaces provided by the settler state for their own ends. I am not discounting the fact that Ainu performance groups remain severely hampered by the problematic concepts of authenticity, settler nationalism, and everyday racism. However, their continued survival, encapsulated in SUH’s performance at the Ala Moana Centerstage and in the recognition of their indigenous status in Japan, marks an ongoing process in undermining the boundaries of settler race and nationhood. Their survival politics depends on settler state benevolence, even as they create trans-indigenous ties beyond the narrative of the settler state. As such, with the Ainu gaining more global visibility, there is an increasing need to rethink the meaning of “Japan.”



SUH performers on the Ala Moana Centerstage, with the banner for Upopoy. Roslynn Ang

Trans-indigenous ties beyond the limits of national discourse

Settler colonialism may infect settlers with Forbes's Wétiko psychosis to consume all things native, but it also connects indigenous peoples in a common experience of loss, including the loss of territorial sovereignty, cultural sovereignty, history, family, and life. The Ainu were involved in numerous trans-indigenous exchanges well before their visit to Hawai'i. During the 2008 G8 summit in Hokkaido, Ainu activists and their allies invited indigenous peoples from the G8 settler nations to draft a declaration pressuring Japan to recognize the Ainu as indigenous (Lewallen 2008). Kapi'olani Community College in Honolulu hosted the 2014 World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education (WIPCE), which was attended by Ainu from Hokkaido and Tokyo. This was followed by a WIPCE report in 2015, delivered by several Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians) guests in Sapporo. Despite a settler nation discourse of harmonious multiethnicity and SUH's dependence on state funding, SUH's performance in Ala Moana Centerstage sustains a non-settler, trans-indigenous space for exchange with the Kānaka Maoli. This trans-indigenous network is also a potential space for future activism and critical discourse on settler states.

The co-option of an indigenous minority for a national project may be problematic. However, the process sometimes aligns with the aims of the Ainu performance groups to reinforce their existence in contemporary Japan while strengthening trans-indigenous ties with other indigenous peoples, including the Kānaka Maoli in this case. The objectives of the Japanese settler state and the Ainu may not be entirely antagonistic, with the former desiring a performance of national harmony and the latter emphasizing cultural survival, communal relations, and trans-indigenous ties. As part of the larger process of cultural survival and communal continuity, SUH's performances nevertheless exhibit the potential to

reconfigure settler legitimacy as the Ainu gain more global traction in trans-indigenous networks.

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