



## The fabric of indigeneity: Ainu identity, gender, and settler colonialism in Japan

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**The fabric of indigeneity: Ainu identity, gender, and settler colonialism in Japan**, by Ann-Elise Lewallen, Santa Fe, School for Advanced Research, 2016, xvii+289 pp., \$49.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-8263-5736-6

The Ainu, the indigenous inhabitants of what is now (and has been since the late nineteenth century) the northernmost main island of Japan – Hokkaido – today face a major problem of identity. Effectively colonized by the majority Japanese, their population diluted through extensive inter-marriage with that majority community, and frequently denigrated as backward (along with Japan's other significant minorities of Okinawans, Koreans and some would argue the Buraku people), the claiming or re-claiming of membership in the Ainu community is fraught with difficulties. This book addresses these difficulties. It can be read at a number of levels – of social mobilization through art and other forms of cultural production, as a study of cloth in relation to the assertion of indigeneity, as the study of a little known (in the scholarship of colonialism and post-colonialism) example of settler colonialism in the Far East, and as a study of gender as it pertains to the re-assertion of membership in an indigenous community that has seen itself as, if not under direct attack, at least subject to erosion through the corrosive forces of displacement, marginalization, denigration, migration and inter-marriage. While focused primarily on the strategies of Ainu women, the book does not confine itself exclusively to the gender aspect, but also addresses the problems of young Ainu now being forced or encouraged to choose between their ancestral identity and that of assimilating to the mainstream Japanese one, and also the dilemmas of would-be Ainu (those with some claim, even if a diluted one, to membership in the now visible and perhaps even fashionable Ainu community) and what might be called “ex-Ainu” – those who had effectively left the community through inter-marriage with Japanese, migration or other factors, and who now wish to in some form join or re-join.

A problem with the book is that these levels or themes are not always fully or convincingly linked to one another. The focus of the book shifts between an excellent study of cloth in the re-assertion of Ainu identity on the part of women who have discovered or re-discovered ancestral arts of clothwork as a powerful way of expressing Ainu identity, and indeed the success of many cloth-workers in achieving considerable recognition as artists in their own right, settler colonialism which the author (who has adopted the rather silly affectation of insisting that her name for some reason be spelled in lower case letters) asserts has not only happened in the past when Hokkaido was indeed incorporated into Japan and occupied by substantial numbers of non-Ainu, but still continues unabated, Japanese mainstream racism and sexual violence. The problem is the under-theorized links between these (despite the book being written in currently fashionable academic prose), which gives it the air of theoretical sophistication. As a study of the re-assertion of an indigenous identity on the part of women through the revitalization of Ainu textiles, it is a good and well-researched work. Where it falters is when it quite deliberately crosses into controversial areas, without fully relating those to that central theme of the book. Certainly, the claim that contemporary Japan

continues to be a settler-colonial society in relation to its indigenous minorities is one that can be made, but it also needs more thorough argumentation. Likewise, while assimilation through inter-marriage with Japanese has indeed occurred on a large scale, the book suggests and in some cases bluntly claims that these were forced and little short of institutionalized rape, something sometimes true during the century from 1740 onwards, little distinction is made in the book between historical conditions, the total extent of which is unclear, and contemporary conditions. Likewise we are told in a very preachy fashion (and by a non-Ainu outsider) what conditions must be met for any genuine multi-culturalism involving the Ainu to work in contemporary Japan (90).

The result is a book that in many ways is difficult to read. At the level of ethnography it is a thorough, detailed and sympathetic study of the “politics of cloth” and the strategies now employed, largely by women who wish to signal or re-assert their Ainu identity (men do also feature, principally as wood carvers) through the production of textiles using traditional techniques and/or embodying traditional motifs, and as such can stand as a major contribution to the emerging literature on crafts, gender and identity. Whether some of the resulting claims are supportable is certainly open to debate, such as Lewallen’s claim that with the dilution of the “pure” Ainu gene pool, it is now textiles that are the carriers of identity rather than “blood, genes or bone marrow” (104). While Ainu women are identified as the true culture-bearers, the uneasy alliance of this position with claims of historic sexual violence, and continuing settler colonialism at the same time as Ainu craftspeople benefit from the large numbers of Japanese tourists from the “mainland” is not fully worked out. Where Lewallen is on stronger ground is with her discussions of contemporary Japanese policy, arguments in Japan about assimilation or ethnic revitalization of minorities, and the role of such exogenous factors as the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a document that has given an impetus and a quasi-legal standing to claims of indigeneity to the Ainu. What is certainly clear from the book is that, cloth or no cloth, the position of the Ainu is one that will continue to be negotiated in a country that until recently saw itself as mono-ethnic and mono-cultural. While as the author rightly points out, the Japanese government now officially recognize the Ainu as an indigenous minority, it is not clear where such a recognition might lead – to some form of autonomy (unlikely in highly centralized Japan), recognition of the rights to language use and cultural expression, to the compartmentalizing of the Ainu as an exotic minority, but hence implicitly inferior, or of continuing if subtle attempts to assimilate the Ainu into mainstream Japanese society.

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