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Indigenous tourism and new ethnographic filmmaking: The Ainu Stories: Contemporary Lives by the Saru River exhibition at Japan House London

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a growing international interest in the Ainu, the indigenous people of Japan. This article examines the films from the Ainu Stories: Contemporary Lives by the Saru River exhibition, held at Japan House London between 2023 and 2024, which promoted Ainu culture by focusing on the current lives of residents in Nibutani village, Hokkaido. It interrogates three aspects of the exhibition: First, the role of the manga and anime series *Golden Kamuy*, which has recently been a catalyst for the boom in Ainu culture worldwide. Second, the short films that comprise interviews with people from Nibutani who engage in activities closely related to tourism, cultural promotion, and community life. These films demonstrated that, for the selected participants, tourism is not merely the commodification of tradition but a legitimate way for cultural promotion and local development. Participants also shared a common motivation to demonstrate that Ainu culture remains alive without hiding assimilation into Japanese society. They also presented new narratives among younger generations that update indigenous identity by linking it to ecocriticism and contemporary concerns regarding the natural environment. Third, these interviews are contextualised within the history of ethnographic filmmaking in Nibutani: from Munro's early documentaries of the 1930s to Himeda Tadayoshi and Kayano Shigeru's documentaries in the 1970s. This article shows that the footage presented at Japan House London shifts away from earlier Ainu film representations and introduces a new strategy for promoting Ainu culture to foreign audiences by the Japanese government, highlighting Japan's multiculturalism.

Keywords: Ainu culture; Indigenous people; Ethnographic documentary; Japan House London; *Golden Kamuy*; Nibutani; Indigenous tourism; Kayano Shigeru

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1. Introduction

The manga *Golden Kamuy* has been adapted into a television and streaming anime series since 2018 (with the final season launched in January 2026) and into a live-action film released in 2024. The series follows Asirpa and a veteran of the Russo-Japanese

War in their quest to find a hidden Ainu treasure. One of its most characteristic traits is the accurate portrayal of Ainu traditional culture and the usage of the Ainu language, which was supervised by emeritus professor at Chiba University, Hiroshi Nakagawa.¹ The present study served as a catalyst for the recent “Ainu boom,” which has resulted in an extraordinary proliferation of websites and publications providing general information about the Ainu across the world. The exhibition, as well as the success of *Golden Kamuy*, has taken place in a context of growing recognition of Ainu culture by the Japanese government after the enactment of the Ainu Promotion Law in 2019. The law formally recognises the Ainu as the indigenous people of Japan,^{1 2} and establishes broad measures for cultural promotion, regional development, and tourism.^{2,3,4}

One year later, the Ainu National Museum and Park (Upopoy) was officially opened in Shiraoi, Hokkaido, as a government initiative intended to be completed before the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2021. This event may be seen as the first major national-level initiative to promote Ainu culture, and it allows a two-fold interpretation. On the one hand, it is an institution that helps increase visibility and awareness of Ainu culture, and supports Ainu people in actively promoting traditions, teaching about cultural heritage, and overcoming earlier stigmatisation and discrimination. On the other hand, the site might be seen as an appropriation that allows state control over Ainu narratives, presenting a selective view of folkloric aspects, sometimes criticised as a “museumification” of cultural heritage, while simultaneously downplaying the social and economic problems resulting from their difficult colonial history.

This article examines the role of visual culture developed by the Japanese government to promote Ainu culture and tourism abroad, focusing on the Ainu Stories: Contemporary Lives by the Saru River exhibition, held between November 2023 and April 2024 at Japan House London. This institution was inaugurated in June 2018 and was designed by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs to become an important institution for cultural diplomacy overseas. The fact that this public institution chose the Ainu people as the core of one of its exhibitions is not a

coincidence but must be contextualised within a recent revival of Ainu culture and global interest triggered by a variety of cultural institutions and transmedia agencies. This is evidenced by the exhibition that took place between May and August 2019 at the British Museum in London, entitled *Manga: The World of Japanese Comics*, a historical landmark for this institution and the first major exhibition devoted to this aspect of Japanese popular culture in the United Kingdom (UK) beyond the fan-base events. The initiative had international significance for the cultural recognition that it gave to the production of manga, its history and unique style, and, interestingly, the promotion image used for the event revolved around Ainu iconography—the exhibition welcomed visitors with a huge poster featuring Asirpa (Figure 1), an Ainu girl who is one of the protagonists of Noda Satoru’s *Golden Kamuy*, a popular manga series published between 2014 and 2022, and became a global hit with more than 29 million of copies in circulation by 2024.⁵



Figure 1. Main entrance of the *Manga: The World of Japanese Comics* exhibition, featuring the Ainu fictional character Asirpa at the British Museum, 2019. Source: Photo by Otaku News (2019). <https://www.otakunews.com/Article/6677/manga-exhibition-at-the-british-museum-a-review>.

2. Methodology

The Ainu Stories: Contemporary Lives by the Saru River exhibition at Japan House London must be framed within wider discussions on the national promotion of indigenous tourism in Japan and the tensions between state-led cultural promotion and Ainu self-expression. In this regard, it may be noted that the new public initiatives that emerged from the Ainu Promotion Law of 2019 have proposed a radical shift away from previous controversial narratives related to the *tan'itsu minzoku* (the myth of the “only one race”) that had been promoted in the political sphere, particularly by the successive Jiminto (Liberal Democratic Party) administrations since the 1980s.⁶ However, current approaches to these initiatives may also consider contributions from critical voices that raised

¹ Although the Diet had passed a resolution recognising the Ainu as the “indigenous people of Japan” in 2008, one year after UN adopted the Draft Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous People on its 61th session (FRPAC 2011: 29).

² It has also been noted in Japan that Ainu culture had already experienced a revival since the 1990s and particularly since the beginning of 21st century (Nakamura 2012; Yamasaki 2011), which resulted in Ainu recognition as the “indigenous people of Japan” by the Japanese Diet.

concern about the “cosmetic multiculturalism”⁷ on media and public initiatives, which celebrate diversity through promotion of traditional culture while obscuring current structural inequalities.

How has Japan House London shifted from earlier public representations of the Ainu people? How have these visual representations of the Ainu people and culture evolved compared to earlier ethnographic documentaries? To what extent do the filmed interviews in the exhibition give new agency to the Ainu people? How do the participants negotiate tradition vis-à-vis contemporary life? How do the Ainu elements in the exhibition echo a broader ecology of Ainu-related objects and images? To shed light on these questions, this study applied a multidisciplinary approach to the Ainu Stories: Contemporary Lives by the Saru River exhibition, combining contributions from visual anthropology, museology, indigenous studies, and film studies with broader Ainu and Japanese studies.

This article examined the visual material found in the exhibition,³ focusing on two elements: first, the contemporary Ainu iconography on display taken from the aforementioned *Golden Kamuy* series; and second, the filmed interviews with Ainu people from Nibutani, a district of Biratori town in Hokkaido, almost an hour of footage divided into 12 interviews lasting between 4 min 20 s and 4 min 50 s, displayed along the walls of the exhibition. A comparative analysis was applied to this visual ethnography to explore new representations of the Ainu people and culture. In the former case, the iconography of *Golden Kamuy* was examined in relation to its interactions with artefacts found across British museums holding Ainu collections. This revealed a process that I have coined elsewhere as “inward circularity,”⁸ in which images, objects, and cultural practices mutually reproduce one another within a bounded ecology of selection and recognition. This is a recursive cultural dynamic in which traditional practices are performed using artefacts; artefacts, in turn, evoke certain images; and images refer back to the performance of traditional practices. This article examined how this constitutes a process that feeds on an inward circularity, with little to do with external reality. Instead, it generated a self-referential canon of “Ainu-ness,” which travels across museums, media, and other tourist practices, guiding subsequent cultural acquisition, display, and consumption. In the latter case, the analysis explored whether filmed interviews with contemporary Ainu residents from Nibutani can break this previous “inward circularity”

³ The short films containing the interviews to Nibutani people can be found at the virtual tour of the exhibition that is still available at the Japan House London website: <<https://www.japanhouselondon.uk/whats-on/ainu-stories-virtual-exhibition/>>

of Ainu iconography by giving agency to members of the indigenous community and moving away from earlier essentialist views and stereotypical images. To that end, the scenes featuring testimonies of contemporary Nibutani Ainu were compared with earlier ethnographic documentaries that also feature Ainu members of the local Nibutani community.

3. Results

3.1. *Golden Kamuy* and the “inward circularity” of iconography

Within the Ainu Stories: Contemporary Lives by the Saru River exhibition at Japan House London, there was a singular section on the manga series *Golden Kamuy* created by Noda Satoru, helping the audience link the exhibition with the Ainu iconography they may have seen in popular culture, particularly due to the global success of its anime adaptation. The main element of this section was a print image of the series protagonist, the Ainu girl Asirpa, holding her bow and arrows (*heper ay*), and wearing earrings (*ninkari*). Additionally, the visitor could easily identify the characteristic Ainu geometrical designs on her mittens (*tekunpe*), headband (*matanpushi*), and robe, all of which are similar to those found in the traditional *attus* (elm-bark cloth) or *ruunpe* (cotton cloth). All these items can be widely found in Ainu collections across British and European museums, which were assembled between the late 19th century and early 20th century, and which contain a significant portion of the Ainu material heritage preserved today.^{4,6,7}

In creating this fictional character, certain elements were inevitably selected, and others were necessarily omitted. For example, the manga does not feature Asirpa wearing salmon shoes (*cepker*) that can be found in several museums, an object that is also the topic of Eiko Soga's *Autumn Salmon* (2017), screened at Pitt Rivers Museum in November 2021⁴ next to the pair of *cepker* on display in the museum.⁵ However, the Ainu girl Asirpa is portrayed wearing a pair of fur shoes, similar to the Ainu deer-skin shoes that can be found, for example, at the British Museum (Figure 2). This evidence shows how museums consolidate certain iconographic templates through selective acquisition that subsequently inspire media representations. In other words, historical choices in cataloguing collections create normative taxonomies for the present.

⁴ According to Pitt Rivers Museum website: <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/eiko-sogas-autumn-salmon-2017>

⁵ The short film *Autumn Salmon* was screened at Pitt Rivers Museum in 2021, a description can be found online: <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/eiko-sogas-autumn-salmon-2017>, and can be watched as part of the virtual tour of the exhibition of the time at the museum available online: <https://virtualexhibition.v21artspace.com/pitt-rivers-museum-2022>.

Another example of the phenomenon of inward iconographic circulation can be found in the image displayed next to that of Asirpa, a larger poster of another character from the *Golden Kamuy* series, Kiroranke (Figure 3). The image showed Kiroranke holding a short Ainu knife (*makiri*), another artefact commonly found in European Ainu collections. The knife that Noda Satoru designed for the manga was modelled on a wooden *makiri* made by Kaizawa Tōru, an Ainu woodcarver from Nibutani. Additionally, an interview with Kaizawa was displayed on the exhibition walls. The works crafted by Kaizawa have played an important role in disseminating contemporary Ainu art internationally, and his creations have been exhibited widely at Ainu exhibitions in the UK (including the British Museum, the National Museum of Scotland, and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford). At Japan House London, the *makiri* made by Kaizawa was displayed beneath Kiroranke's image from the manga, which again evidences this inward circularity: the filmed interview (Kaizawa) was linked to the manga, the manga to the artefact (*makiri*), the artefact to other collections of Ainu culture in museums holding Kaizawa's works, Kaizawa's works to the manga, etc. In other words, the

exhibition responded to the visibility of the Ainu across popular culture, museums, and media. This also illustrates the process through which a museum reinserts media references that, in turn, evoke cultural practices, thus further reinforcing the loop museums–images–artefacts. The loop is “inward” insofar as the iconography is selected in a way that curators, media creators (manga and anime), audiences (anime viewers and manga readers), and visitors are already trained to see.

This “inward circularity” does not entail merely the duplication of elements but constitutes the fundamental component for understanding the contemporary development of cultural products and practices. I have described earlier how a similar process may be observed in artefacts inspiring images, and images whose iconography becomes standardised (for example, in photos and paintings) may shape the production of new images (for example, documentaries and fiction films).¹¹ The examples in this article show how artefacts can shape images (manga and anime) and how images can shape exhibitions.

The recycling of iconography, which underpinned the selection and formation of European collections,

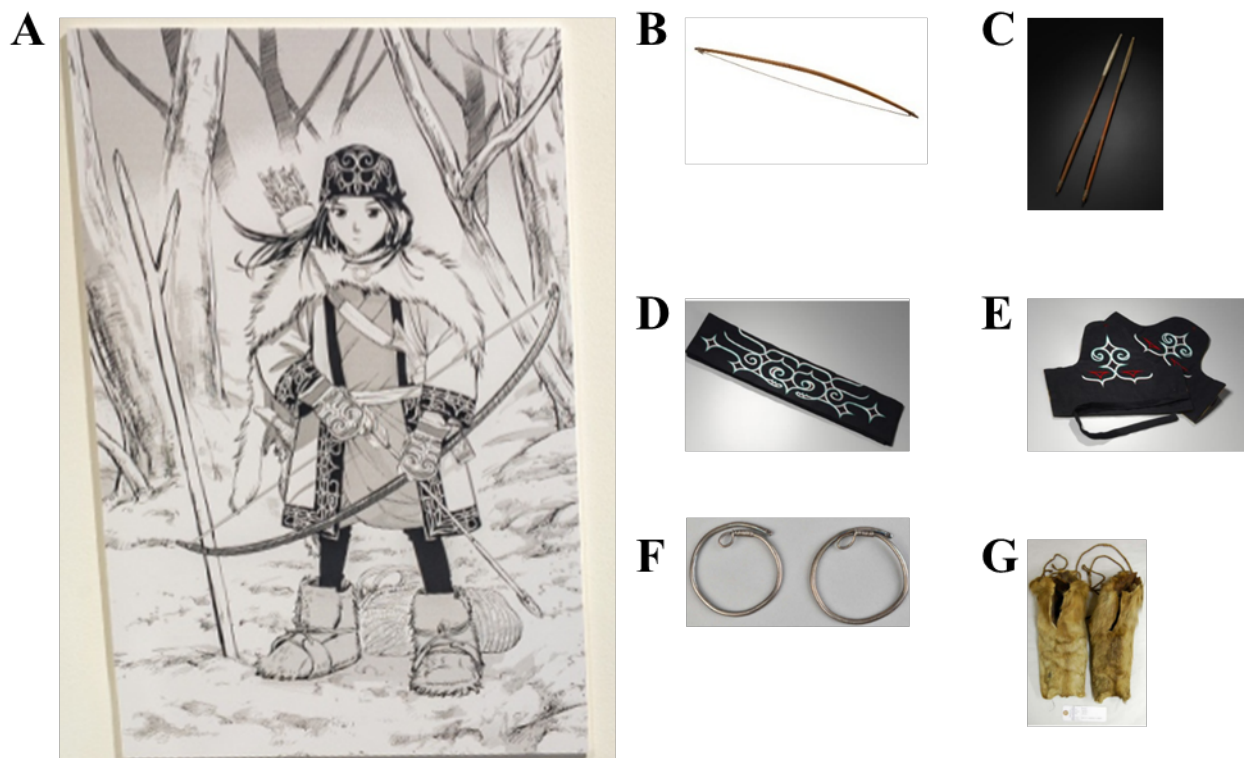


Figure 2. *Golden Kamuy* section at the Japan House London exhibition. (A) Image featuring the protagonist Asirpa in the manga series *Golden Kamuy*. (B–C) Bow and arrows (*heper ay*). (D) Mittens (*tekunpe*). (E) Headband (*matanpushi*). (F) Earrings (*ninkari*). (G) Deer skin shoes. Sources: (A) Photo from the Japan House London. (B–E) Photos from the National Museum of Scotland. (F–G) Photos from the British Museum.



Figure 3. *Golden Kamuy* section at the Japan House London exhibition. (A) Image from the manga series *Golden Kamuy* featuring the character Kiroranke holding a short Ainu knife (*makiri*). Below the picture is the *makiri* by the Nibutani woodcarver Kaizawa Tōru, which was used as a model for the manga series. (B) Ainu knife at Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. (C) A filmed interview with Kaizawa Tōru at Japan House London. Source: Japan House London virtual tour.

plays a key role in shaping current perceptions regarding Ainu traditional culture. It is also instrumental for understanding the process of the objectification (*misemonoka*) of Ainu culture, as noted by a number of scholars.^{12–17} The patterns of representation of Ainu culture found across museums, tourist destinations, film, and media result from a selective process that continues to shape our understanding of traditional Ainu culture. It has been noted that the elements usually regarded as “traditional” actually belong to a “neo-Ainu culture”¹⁸ that emerged from a set of conventions on what Ainu culture was assumed to be from the second half of the 19th century, disregarding the rapid changes and deep adaptation to modern life that the community underwent during those years. For example, many portrayals of the Ainu people on paintings, photos, and ethnographic documentaries depict them with bows and arrows, barefoot, showing women’s tattoos (*sinuye*) between the late 19th and early 20th century, when the Ainu were being heavily assimilated into Japanese society, tattoos and traditional hunting were forbidden, and Ainu sandals (*situker*) were widely spread as a result of Japanese influence.¹⁹ In this sense, Howell²⁰ raised the question of how far back a pattern needs to have been established to be considered “traditional”? Therefore, we may say that “tradition” was created in modernity by privileging elements that were different from the Japanese and appeared more “indigenous,” and by encouraging difference and ideas related to isolation and primitivism. The perspective on those elements, however, changed from the 1960s and 1970s,²¹ when the Ainu community increasingly gained agency in their representation and

appropriated them as an act of resistance and an effort to enhance the visibility of their difference.

3.2. Filmed interviews with Ainu participants

How did the exhibition at Japan House London engage in recent trends that break the historical loop of iconographies, resulting in the “neo-Ainu” culture? The exhibition, in general, fitted well with Japan House London’s goal of presenting a more accurate depiction of present-day Japan and its diversity beyond stereotypes to an international audience, focusing on the contemporary life of the Ainu people living in Nibutani. The walls of the exhibition displayed 12 short films comprised of interviews with individuals from the community (Figure 4), and these films were divided into: (i) those engaged in activities closely related to tourism; (ii) those engaged in cultural promotion; and (iii) those engaged in activities oriented towards the community rather than visitors, including ecocritical approaches to the environment.



Figure 4. Short films featuring interviews with members of the Ainu community in Nibutani are on display at Japan House London and available on the virtual tour. Source Japan House London.

3.2.1. Participants engaged in tourism-related activities

Some of the films in the exhibition feature Ainu individuals involved in tourism-related activities. For them, tourism is not a form of commodification of tradition but a legitimate way for cultural promotion, preservation, and local development. The clearest example is “Ainu Culture Matters,” featuring Kayano Kimihiro, the grandson of the famous activist and politician Kayano Shigeru, who was the first Ainu to serve in the Japanese Diet from 1994 to 1998 as a member of the Social Democratic Party. His efforts contributed to the passage of the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act in 1997, a landmark in the recognition of the rights and heritage of the Ainu people. Kayano Kimihiro does not appear to be directly involved in political activism. He states that the goal of his guesthouse is to promote backpacking in the region while also supporting minority cultures, a goal he says is influenced by his grandfather. In this sense, he argues that one of the reasons to start the guesthouse was to foster cultural interaction, which, on the one hand, could bring visitors to Nibutani to raise awareness about the importance of preserving Ainu culture; and on the other hand, might make residents rediscover the value of their own culture.

Then, another video on display, “Tourism and New Identity,” features an interview to the aforementioned woodcarver Kaizawa, explaining that he runs a souvenir store since the 1970s and his usual job is making traditional Nibutani crafts called *ita*, a profession that has been handed down to him from his father and other ancestors who were also craftsmen in Nibutani, who made those crafts for everyday use before it became commercial items for tourism. However, he acknowledges that time and environment have changed, as have sensibilities towards craftmaking. He is also an artisan, sometimes making artistic pieces, such as those exhibited at the British Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. This film was shown alongside another film titled “Wood Carving,” featuring Hiramura Daiki, who repairs and maintains tourist facilities such as traditional Ainu houses (*cise*). In his free time, he also engages in woodcarving, developing his own Ainu traditional designs, and has posts to spread Ainu culture. An additional film, “Teaching the Next Generation Building Techniques,” presents Ozaki Tsuyoshi, the eldest participant, who was also a woodcarver and shifted to landscaping. Ozaki learned about the Ainu culture from Kayano Shigeru, who explained the details of house construction and how they teach younger generations.⁶

⁶ This suggests that Hiramura might have been one of the participants of the documentary *Chise a Kara. We Build Our Home* (*Chise a kara. Warera ie o tsukuru*; 1974), shot by Himeda Tadayoshi on the activities led by Kayano Shigeru.

3.2.2. Participants engaged in cultural promotion

Other participants in the films are more engaged in cultural promotion. Among them, one can find a common motivation to show that Ainu culture is still alive, while at the same time acknowledging that they are assimilated into Japanese society and culture. Another film, “Ainu Language,” features a participant named Sekine Kenji, who promotes the Ainu language and teaches Ainu classes for children twice a week. He explains that the language is not dead; for example, visitors can see Ainu-language bus announcements and place names. Moreover, Sekine notes that although no residents speak Ainu as their first language, one can hear Ainu lexicon mixed into the conversations of the Nibutani people in Japanese; visitors can hear a lot of Ainu words in their conversations. Nevertheless, to improve the language skills of the community, he has tried to set aside time to practice Ainu exclusively and claims that an increasing number of young people can now speak the language, constituting the “new speakers” of Ainu. Despite these efforts, most of the Ainu community does not speak the language. As Sekine notes, it is possible to identify as Ainu even if one cannot speak the language. Nonetheless, language is part of cultural heritage that must be preserved, and acknowledging its use may strengthen the sense of community. He also links his work to a political claim that Ainu should be recognised as an official language, at least in Hokkaido. From his position as a language teacher, he does not see tourism as a negative activity, stating, “My dream is to see the Ainu language bringing tourists to Hokkaido.” This is consistent with all participants, who view tourism as beneficial to the area’s economic development and cultural promotion.

Interviews across the films shown at Japan House London did not necessarily focus on traditional culture, but rather on the current lives, professional jobs, and hobbies of the residents and how, through them, they engage with Ainu tangible and intangible culture, spirituality, and ways of understanding the environment. For example, the film “Ainu Spirituality” introduces Monbetsu Atsushi, who works at the Ainu Culture Public Corporation, and shows that his job in the forest involves teaching traditional Ainu hunting methods. However, for Monbetsu, the most important aspect is not material culture but the spiritual side behind it. For example, he explains that he teaches not only the practical aspects of traditional hunting but also the relationship with the *kamuy* (spirits of the living and the surrounding environment), and he prays for thanks before using the ritual *pasuy* (prayer stick). It seems that, for some individuals today, hunting is interpreted as a way to reconnect with the ancient Ainu lifestyle and spirituality, as documented in Eiko Soga’s ethnographic video, *Ainu*

Hunter, Mon-chan (2016). Along these lines, this work shows how the ecocritical approach of the protagonist Mon-chan (Atsushi) to the changing nature in Japan is combined with the spiritual approach to the forest and non-human beings as part of the worldview and values that were transferred to him by his grandmother.²²

Some of the participants in the films work for cultural promotion agencies. However, while they are engaged in teaching or disseminating traditional aspects, there is also a clear stance to break with any orientalist view of the Ainu as savages who live in the forest by showing that they have regular jobs and that tradition is either a part of their professional activities, or is reinterpreted as a way of understanding the world with modern eyes. For example, the interview with Harada Rino in “Singing as a Part of Everyday Life” shows her job at the Biratori Ainu Culture Promotion Corporation, where she trains people to become “ambassadors” of Ainu culture. This project involves living in Nibutani for 3 years (230 days a year), where they learn the language and culture. However, Harada also notes that it is important to clarify a common misunderstanding among foreign visitors regarding the life of current Ainu people: she states that traditional culture, singing and dancing, is not her entire life; she has a regular job in an office, sits in front of a computer, uses automated teller machines, etc. She explains that when she performs a dance for a school trip, she wears a traditional robe, but after she finishes, she takes it off, and students get surprised when they see her wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Harada notes that this is also an important point to explain to visitors. This testimony evidences the current determination among the community members to move away from former romanticised and exotic views of the Ainu, which had also been the reason for stigmatisation, discrimination, and stereotypes in the past, and their will to provide a more accurate interaction with visitors, making them understand that they do not live isolated from the modern world. Having clarified that, Harada claims it is fine to have tourism in Nibutani, indicating that, for many community members, it is not negative. On the contrary, it may not only be a way to promote economic development but also an opportunity to demonstrate that Ainu culture is alive and to make it visible. She is also able to explain the singularities of Ainu dances, which were declared United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009, such as singing in a round, in which people join one by one rather than starting all at once, which makes them special.

3.2.3. Participants engaged in community- and ecocriticism-oriented activities

Finally, other films in the exhibition present participants engaged in community activities rather than those designed

for visitors. For example, elders such as Kaizawa Yukiko, in “Attus Weaving,” show how she weaves Ainu robes (*attus*), with elm bark in the traditional way, including how she prepares the threads, making her one of the few remaining artisans capable of this work; another film, “Nibutani Ainu Food Culture,” features Oikawa Naomi who studied Ainu food culture and is writing a recipe book to pass on to other generations.

In films that interview the younger generation, one can note new narratives that update how members embrace indigenous identity by linking it to ecocriticism and contemporary concerns related to the natural environment. For example, “The Importance of Local Knowledge” features Nagano Tamaki, who conducts environmental surveys to assess the impact of the nearby Biratori Dam on the Saru River for a preservation association. She explains that she engages in oral interviews with residents, asking them what they used to do in the area in the old days. Nagano claims that the people she interviewed were fluent in Ainu, which was hard for her to understand, so she began learning the language herself. While acknowledging that the dam has a negative impact on the local community—building the dam in Nibutani was controversial since the beginning of construction in the early 1970s—she nevertheless considers measures that may be taken to reduce its effects and sends petitions. Nagano’s testimony relates the environment to Ainu spiritual culture. She was involved in opening a new visitor centre about the natural environment of Biratori in 2022, with the goal of making it a hub connecting older and younger generations.

There are other films in the exhibition that link Ainu identity with ecocriticism and environmental issues. First, the film “Living off the Land” interviewed Kaizawa Taichi, who, after studying at university and working away, returned to Nibutani to become a farmer and grow rice and vegetables organically, without chemicals. He also explains his concerns about protecting the river and the surrounding forest. Second, “A Sustainable Forest for the Future” shows Kimura Misaki engaged in forest management and planning, planting trees, and enhancing biodiversity. She understands this job as something that has always existed in the relationship that the Ainu had with the environment. She brings the environment closer to culture and states that, “without forests we can’t pass on our culture,” since they are necessary for material culture (making tools and utensils or even for the materials needed to build a *cise*) and intangible culture (noting that *kamuy* or deities like *kotan-kor-kamuy*, the village protector, is a fish owl who needs big trees to live). She also brings her job into the 21st century, explaining that forest planning today also involves managing the space occupied by

humans for hunting, gathering, and making tools. Her aim is to regenerate a natural environment that can coexist in harmony with people in a sustainable way for the future.

4. Discussion

Shooting Ainu people in Nibutani is not a new practice in ethnographic filmmaking. The community has played an important role in making elements of traditional culture available to the cameras. This was possible due to the singular demography of the area: Nibutani has roughly 400 residents today, of whom an estimated 80% are Ainu, making it the town with the highest percentage of Ainu in the country.¹⁵ This has allowed filmmakers, explorers, and anthropologists to capture Ainu cultural heritage with their cameras since the beginning of the 20th century. Additionally, despite its small size, Nibutani has long been a central location for documenting Ainu culture, holding several important collections available for visitors: the oldest one is Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum, which opened in 1972 as a private collection, gathered for decades by Kayano Shigero; the Biratori Information Centre for Ainu Culture (Biratori cho Ainu bunka joho Center) and Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, which is the town's main Ainu museum, opened in 1992 within the Nibutani Kotan, an area where *Cisegun*, an open air museum of traditional *cise*, can be found; and the more recent Historical Museum of the Saru River, opened in 1998, which covers the human history of the Saru River providing archaeological crucial context for Ainu life in the area and Biratori Ainu Crafts and Heritage Center Urespa opened in 2019.

However, long before the proliferation of visitor centres and museums, Nibutani was the location for some of the earliest ethnographic documentaries on the Ainu. They were shot by the Scottish physician Neil Gordon Munro, who added a scientific rigour to the film representation of Ainu culture unseen until that date. His interest in Ainu culture led him to open a clinic in Nibutani from 1930 until his death in 1942, leaving manuscripts that were partially published in the posthumous book *Ainu: Creed and Cult*²³. Over the years living among the Ainu, Munro became one of the most authoritative voices on Ainu traditional culture. Parallel to his writings, Munro also shot documentaries of a variety of Ainu rituals. For example, he shot the most famous Ainu ceremony, the *iyomante* (bear festival, sometimes known as *Kuma Okuri*) in *Divine Dispatch Commonly Called the Ainu Bear Festival* (1931)²⁴—re-edited as *Iyomante: The Ainu Bear Festival* in 1935 and *The Ainu Bear Ceremony* in 1961—and other lesser-known rituals, such as in *House Warming Ceremony: Chiseinomi* (1934) and *Exorcism Rites "Uepotara"* (1933–1934).²⁵

Years later, Nibutani became the core of the revitalisation of Ainu culture thanks to the activities of Kayano Shigeru. His activities expanded beyond the aforementioned foundation in 1972, with the establishment of the Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum. During the second half of the 1970s, he prompted a turn in ethnographic filmmaking through his collaboration with the ethnographic documentary maker Himeda Tadayoshi, who became a renowned director for his work on minority cultures. During the 1970s, Himeda followed Kayano's initiatives in *Ainu no kekkonshiki* (*Ainu Wedding*; 1971), *Chise a kara. Warera ie o tsukuru* (*We Build Our Home*; 1974), and *Iyomante: The Bear Ceremony* (1977), all of which became valuable documents for restoring practices that had faded from memory.¹¹ In the 1990s, Kayano's son, Kayano Shiro, continued this task of restoring ancient cultural heritage through more intimate documentary films, such as *Tontokamui. Sake no kamisama* (*Tonoto Kamuy, The Spirit of Sake*, 1992), in which Kayano Shiro follows his parents at home making *tonoto*, a fermented alcoholic drink made from millet used for some ceremonies such as the *chisenomi*. He also documents his father's activities in the forest in *Kotova wa minzoku no shirushi* (*Language is the Proof of a People - A story about Canoe Making*; 1993), capturing the process of recalling forgotten techniques for making a *cip* (Ainu canoe). The film originated as an initiative led by Daishima Haruhiko and Mark Nornes at the Yamagata International Film Festival to stimulate video activism among the Ainu community and counteract the historically uneven relationship between the Ainu and filmmakers.

By comparing the filmed interviews at the Ainu Stories: Contemporary Lives by the Saru River exhibition with the earlier documentaries described above, it becomes evident that the Nibutani Ainu shown on screen and the audience are radically different. The participants featured in Munro's films are shown as masters of their traditions, deeply engaged in their rituals and knowledgeable about their processes and meaning. However, the documentaries shot in the 1970s by Himeda in collaboration with Kayano Shigeru documented the process of revitalising a culture that had become alien to the Ainu community. The approach changes again in the interviews screened at Japan House London, in which traditional culture is no longer the main preoccupation in the construction of indigenous identity. While some participants engage in cultural revitalisation, which today appears more institutionalised, others find new meanings in their "Ainu-ness" and embrace their identity through various aspects of their modern lives.

Interestingly, the reception and target of these representations of the Nibutani Ainu have also changed

throughout history. Munro's audience in the first half of the 20th century was the international academic community. For example, much of his research on Ainu culture was sent as letters to his mentor, Professor Charles Seligman, including photos of those rituals (*uepotara*, *chisenomi*, and *iyomante*). He also sent a copy of his film on the bear festival to the *Royal Anthropological Institute in London*. However, the films by Kayano and Himeda from the 1970s were made for domestic consumption, aimed at the local audience, particularly the Ainu community, to promote language and cultural revival. Finally, the interviews screened at Japan House London were aimed at an international audience, and their main goal was not to preserve or educate about traditional culture. Instead, the exhibition offers a more honest view of the contemporary lives of Ainu people, serving as a tool for cultural diplomacy and sparking cultural interest and tourism by promoting a positive image of Japan that embraces diversity—a strategy that clearly seeks to overcome previous international criticism on this issue.

5. Conclusion

The comparative and diachronic analysis of the exhibition at Japan House London showed that the purpose, meaning, and attitudes towards the representation of the Nibutani Ainu have changed significantly throughout history. Early ethnographic filmmaking in Nibutani, driven by anthropological concerns, anticipated the construction of tourism-oriented visitor reception centres in the 1990s. However, the exhibition at Japan House London between 2023 and 2024 marked a milestone in which the Japanese government is actively promoting Ainu culture abroad. This may be seen as a positive turn in Japanese cultural diplomacy, signaling institutional support for diversity. However, it is also a strategy that entails state appropriation and control over the indigenous narratives disseminated overseas.

From the perspective of ethnographic practice, the analysis also demonstrated how visual anthropology has radically changed in its representation of the Nibutani Ainu. First of all, the filmed interviews were not the initiative of an individual ethnographer, visitor, or filmmaker (such as Munro's works in the first half of the 20th century) or of members of the Ainu community (such as the ethnographic documentaries of the 1970s). Instead, the films at Japan House London are produced by the Japanese state. This is a significant historical shift regarding the context in which Ainu culture is being presented today. It clearly responds to the long-standing international criticism against Japan for promoting an apparent homogeneity that ignores minorities such as the Ainu. Now, the films shown at

the Ainu Stories: Contemporary Lives by the Saru River exhibition are no longer an act of resistance but the result of an official policy promoting Japan's international image as a diverse and multiethnic nation.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed the materialisation of contemporary strategies in visual anthropology that lean towards participatory practices, resulting in multivocal documentaries that tend to reduce the authority of the filmmaker, whose voice has disappeared in the Japan House London films. Instead, these films privilege the agency of indigenous people in their representation by explaining and interpreting who they are by themselves. This has resulted in more honest and comprehensive representations of the Ainu community, who are not always engaged in traditional culture and folklore but use them as part of their professional activities, hobbies, approaches to nature, or spirituality. These films also place the representation of contemporary lives, with all their contradictions, as a valuable ethnographic practice and present participants engaged in regular jobs as legitimate indigenous testimonies.

At the same time, while the goals of the earlier documentaries were research and preservation of what was regarded as a “vanishing culture” aimed at scholars (Munro) or the Ainu community (Kayano and Himeda), the films from the exhibition at Japan House London were aimed at foreign audience, showing the revitalisation of a culture that is still alive, appropriated in modern life and reinterpreted in a variety of ways. In this sense, these films can still operate as screen-induced cultural affinity, affections towards a culture displayed on screen that may promote travel or a desire to travel, which aligns with the goals of Japan House London, which hosted the event.²⁶ The films at Japan House London fit within the recent growing interest in Ainu culture worldwide, fostered by the global success of the *Golden Kamuy* series, and complement the romantic, orientalist, and stereotypical image of the Ainu presented in the manga and anime series with an updated and more nuanced depiction of contemporary Ainu. This will help foreign audiences rethink what indigenous people are like today and be more prepared before traveling to Hokkaido to encounter Ainu people at new tourist destinations and cultural promotion centres.

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