

タイトル	アイヌの人々から学ぶ 白老・阿寒湖・平取の三地域訪問を通して
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# Learning from Ainu Communities: Reflections on Three Field Visits to Shiraoi, Lake Akan and Biratori.

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## Background

This paper records my impressions and perspectives from three visits to Ainu cultural sites in Hokkaido. These visits took place in the autumn of 2025 as part of my growing interest in the Ainu people, their culture, and language. Before deepening my knowledge of the language, I wanted to gain a first-hand, current perspective on the communities' situation, their identities, and their place in Hokkaido today. The reasons for choosing each location are explained below.

I lived in Shiraoi in 1993-94, teaching English conversation to residents and elementary school children through the local Board of Education. While living there, I first heard about the Ainu people and witnessed an 'us-them' mentality—a certain awkwardness that occasionally entered the classroom. However, outside the classroom, I had no direct interaction with the Ainu community.

I had heard about Upopoy when it opened and had briefly visited once earlier in April 2025. On this second visit, I was joined by a member of my faculty, and we accompanied a visiting professor from the University of Lethbridge, who has worked with First Nations communities in Canada. My goal was to experience a deeper interaction with Ainu culture, which I believed would be possible at Upopoy.

The Akan Kotan community was a place I had heard about several times in conversation. It is well known across the island; so my curiosity and desire to visit had grown over the years. However, as it lies approximately 300 km from Sapporo—about a four-hour drive each way—I had long needed to set aside time for such a trip.

I learned about my third destination, the Nibutani community, only a few days before my visit, from the same professor whom I accompanied to Upopoy. In conversation, she mentioned a desire to meet Kanako Uzawa, whom she had contacted through her research. At the time I knew nothing about Uzawa, so I did some research and discovered she was originally from Nibutani and

active in sharing her culture. This aroused my curiosity and inspired the visit.

The next section describes my impressions and personal experiences at each location, followed by reflections on key differences and common threads that, together, weave the existence of these communities into contemporary Japan.

## Field Visit Reflections

### Upopoy (Shiraoi)

The visit took place on 25 October 2025, five years after the opening of the National Ainu Museum and Park—Japan’s first national museum ‘specializing in the research and display of Ainu culture.’ (National Ainu Museum, 2025). The area, fenced off from the public, lies on the edge of Lake Poroto and overlooks the water. The word *upopoy* means ‘singing together in a large group,’ (Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park, no date) symbolising harmony and community.

Entrance costs 1,200 yen per person, including access to the main museum and souvenir shop. Supplementary activities—stitching, woodcarving, and an Ainu-style lunch—cost 1,000 yen each. A ten-minute introduction to the Ainu language and the hands-on *mukkuri* (Jew’s harp) lessons were free. We participated in all of these, as well as seeing a traditional dance performed outdoors near the reconstructed *cise* (houses). We did not visit the theatre but instead spent time in the main museum. Arriving at 9:00 a.m., we left at 4:10 p.m.

Although a shuttle bus runs through the park, we chose to walk, which allowed us to stop, admire the view, and reflect as we moved around. Interactions with the staff were cordial. The workshops were well organised—the stitching and woodcarving sessions required booking upon arrival, while the language and *mukkuri* lessons were open to spontaneous participation.

Each presenter began by introducing themselves using their Ainu name. One woman told a humorous story about how she received hers: as a child, she would pester her grandmother while she worked in the fields, so she was tied to a tree—hence her name, “tied to a tree.” After the dance performance, several performers offered to take photos with visitors, leading to brief but warm conversations. Speaking with one older woman opened my heart and deepened my desire to connect more meaningfully with the people and their language.

Next, we entered the museum, where much to my delight, I particularly enjoyed engaging with the freely available digital Ainu language tool. The museum’s exhibits provide a balanced overview of Ainu history, spirituality, and daily life through modern curation and multimedia displays. The building is spacious and warm, with escalators leading to the second-floor exhibit, where large glass windows overlook the lake. Visitors—both Japanese and international—wandered leisurely through the displays. The museum’s educational mission is clear, with

bilingual signage and QR codes offering information in multiple languages, which helped satiate my inquisitive mind, yet also left me wanting more—motivating the two following excursions.

### Akan Kotan

This visit took place on 31 October 2025, with family and a friend visiting Japan from England for the first time. Following navigation on Google Maps, we were unsure where best to park, so we began at a small jeweller's shop (*Karip*) slightly away from the main area.

The cosy, family-run workshop displayed framed pieces on the walls, with smaller works arranged on tables underneath. A wooden table and chairs sat in the middle, and to one side was the jeweller's bench and tools. The craftsman was away at an exhibition in Kushiro that day, but his wife welcomed us warmly, offering coffee and conversation. We decided to return later, after exploring the main area.

Driving into the main shopping street, we parked as others had—casually, as one might in a small English village—in the centre street. The short street was lined with shops selling various Ainu and Hokkaido-related crafts. As it was off-season, there were few tourists, and we could stroll freely. At both ends of the street stood *torii*-like gates decorated with magnificent carvings of owls with outspread wings depicting *Cikap-kamuy* (or *Kotan-kor-kamuy*, the owl god that protects the village).

According to the Akan Ainu website, 'The kotan began when Mitsuko Maeda, the third-generation owner of the Maeda Ippoen Foundation, provided free land to protect the lives of the Ainu people, who had been living through severe hardships. Ainu from all over Hokkaido moved here' (About the Akanko Ainu Kotan, no date.)

The street rises gently toward several traditional *cise* (houses) at the top. We entered one open to the public—unheated, quiet, and without guides—a striking contrast to the reconstructed, climate-controlled houses in Upopoy. Inside, I could feel the natural chill of the season.

Nearby, a deer grazed calmly, while tall carved poles (*chōkoku-bashira*) bearing Ainu motifs and animal figures marked the upper entrance. In one shop, an elderly man encouraged my friend to try the *mukkuri*, guiding her with patience and humour. From outdoor speakers, the gentle sound of the *mukkuri* echoed through the *kotan*.

Later, we visited a young woodcarver's studio filled with contemporary works in wood, antler, and bone. He greeted us cheerfully and spoke with enthusiasm about his art. As we could not decide what to buy, we resolved to return.

As evening fell, we went back to the jewellers. Coffee was poured, conversation flowed, and time seemed flexible. The jeweller's wife taught us how to say *thank you*—*iyayakere*—in Ainu,

demonstrating the gesture that accompanies it. She mentioned that her knowledge of the language was limited, which deepened my desire to learn more about both the Ainu language and culture.

### Nibutani (Biratori)

This visit took place on the afternoon of 3 November 2025, again with the same companions. Following Google Maps, we descended into Nibutani from Shimukappu, missing the designated parking at first, but we were soon redirected to a nearby free lot.

The area is open and dotted with *cise*, with visitors freely walking among them. A distinctive modern building caught our attention—the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum. We purchased the Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum and Biratori Onsen Yukara Combo Ticket (1,050 yen), granting entry to both museums and the hot spring.

The Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum is a single-floor building arranged around a central stage. Interactive exhibits encouraged appreciation of traditional craft patterns, and sliding drawers allowed close viewing of garments. Audio recordings of Shigeru Kayano speaking Ainu played at the touch of a button, with Japanese subtitles on screen. Although there were no English explanations, I found myself listening closely while reading the Japanese text.

A striking modern woodcarving stood near the exit, beside a raised area where visitors could complete questionnaires and children could colour Ainu patterns. Nearby, I learned that the carver had a workshop, Tsudomu Studio, near the road which we visited later.

Across the road stood The Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Museum, a two-storey building with global Indigenous artefacts upstairs and Ainu materials downstairs. The unheated interior felt authentic and personal. The history of the museum is displayed in Japanese at the entrance. The Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Museum hosts 'over 1,000 pieces, including Ainu folk artifacts collected over 40 years by Kayano Shigeru, the first Ainu Diet Member' (Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum, no date). Each clothing cabinet was labelled with the clothing's region of origin, revealing differences among Ainu communities. At the exit, a broken tape recorder had once played recordings of Kayano speaking Ainu. A note beside it mentioned the possibility of restoring access, which I made a mental note to follow up on.

Before leaving for the onsen, we met Shigehiro and Keiko Takano in their studio. Keiko kindly demonstrated how to weave a reversible pattern, letting my friend try the technique. We purchased souvenirs and said *iyayakere*—this time learning that the accompanying gesture differs from the gesture used in Akan.

Four hours passed quickly. As we relaxed in the onsen that evening, we realised how little we

had seen and how much there was still to learn. It was clear this was only the beginning of a longer journey.

## Final Reflections

These three visits left a deep impression on how I view both the Ainu people and their cultural continuity in Japan. In each community I encountered a different perspective and expression. Upopoy was more structured while both Nibutani and Akan gave the opportunity for more personal interactions. The Akan community appears largely to serve tourists, offering the chance to buy souvenirs and watch live performances, while the Nibutani Kotan has a strong sense of preserving craft-based traditions. Despite their differences, all three are bound by the same determination to preserve culture, artistry, and identity while integrating peacefully with the wider world.

What struck me most was the generosity with which people shared their stories and skills, whether through conversation, performance, or everyday acts of hospitality. Their openness encouraged me to reflect on how culture is not confined to museums or textbooks but lives through interaction and empathy.

These encounters deepened my desire to try to learn the Ainu language and to explore how education can contribute to cultural understanding. I left each place with gratitude and a sense of responsibility—to remember, to share, and to listen more carefully to the voices that have long shaped Hokkaido's landscape.

## References

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- Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park (no date). *Journey into the heart of Ainu culture*. Available at: <https://ainu-upopoy.jp/en/> (Accessed: 5 November 2025).
- Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum | 平取町へ。アイヌ文化へ。(no date). *Details*. Available at: <https://www.biratori-ainu-culture.com/en/trip/kayano-museum> (Accessed: 5 November 2025).

## Further Resources:

- <https://biratori-kanko.jp/enjoy/workshop-tsutomu/>  
<https://karip.life/>  
<https://nibutani-ainu-museum.com/>  
<https://www.nibutani-ainucraft.com/en/craftspeople/>

