

Contemporary Self-Craft and Gendered Practices

The Fabric of Indigeneity examines how Ainu women forge—or self-craft—identities as Ainu and as Indigenous through practices of clothwork. This study offers an important intervention in global Indigenous studies by examining how gendered and Indigenous subjectivities are made. Ainu women engage in a process that I describe as “becoming Ainu,” fashioning an Indigenous identity and embodying this as a lived connection to ancestral values and lifestyles. Spaces of cultural vitalization, such as embroidery workshops, serve as sites for negotiating a transition between “being Ainu” through one’s natal and affinal relationships and actively forging this identity through self-craft, or “becoming Ainu.” In Ainu terms, these two points on the continuum of Ainu subjectivity correlate with self-identity. Specifically, Ainu-identified persons distinguish an inevitable biological subjectivity, described as *Ainu no chi wo hiku* (J: to be descended from Ainu, or literally, to inherit Ainu blood), from an intentional choice of Ainu identity in the expressions *Ainu ni nanoru* (J: to call oneself Ainu) or the more emphatic *Ainu sengen* (J: a declaration of Ainu identity). Unlike the perceived inevitability of being born or adopted as Ainu, women report that an Ainu self-craft rooted in conscious choice is therapeutic.¹ More important, my emphasis on processes of “becoming Ainu” shifts the focus from a predetermined “innate Ainuness” to an Ainuness selectively forged by each individual, thereby displacing the centrality of blood in regulating ethnicity and recentering individual agency and the process of self-determination. As one Ainu-identified artist explained, “Of course, there are many, many people who have Ainu blood running in their veins, but few, if any, of them are aware of this. If they came to know about this ancestry and what it might mean, they would get it, what being Ainu is all about” (*Tokyo Ainu* 2011).

My use of “self-craft” is rooted in the transformative experiences of present-day Ainu in intertwining ancestral repertoires with contemporary lifestyles and consciously weaving an Ainu identity for the present, an identity that is neither constrained by ideas of tradition nor bound to ancestral place but is nevertheless steeped in the values espoused by each of these. This notion of Ainu self-craft describes a process of forging an Ainu identity firmly rooted in ancestral values, worldview, and lifeways, but one that is sufficiently flexible to adapt these values to meet the needs of the present, including asserting shared identity and solidarity with Indigenous peoples elsewhere. As I describe in the pages that follow, individual Ainu women’s choices to express a lived Ainu identity and define what that means in twenty-first-century Japan through self-craft are interpellated by the structures of settler colonialism and racialization, and also resist the discourses of “extinction” embedded in the rhetoric of assimilation. My framework contrasts with postcolonial-theory uses of the term, such as political scientist Achille Mbembe’s use of “self-craft” to denote an individual claiming an authenticity that confers belonging and constitutes a “particular self irreducible to that of any other group” (2002, 254).²

The protagonists of this study are the culture bearers and cloth artists, to whom I occasionally refer collectively as revivalists, whose clothworks constitute compelling if diverse approaches to an Ainu-styled Indigenous modernity. Revivalists privilege traditional *Ainupuri* (A: ideas of proper comportment based on ancestral protocols, or ancestral ways) as a core component of revival and attempt to engage with an ancestral space as a means of recuperating these values toward crafting themselves. Both the approaches embraced by cloth artists, including more innovative attempts to radically redefine Ainu expressive arts, and those espoused by culture-bearer artists oriented toward heritage revival, such as apparently conservative, tradition-focused efforts to preserve heritage techniques, draw heavily on the past in imagining the present and future. They also seek to forge expressions of a present-day and dynamic Ainuness as elements of an Indigenous modernity. In this they constitute attempts to articulate and link Ainu subjectivity with shifting notions of Indigenous modernity elsewhere.

The framework of self-craft (and “becoming Ainu”) I invoke here must be situated in the specific cultural and historic circumstances of ongoing settler colonialism in Japan, which represents a colonialist structure that exerts formidable and sometimes-violent influence on Ainu everyday experience. Aside from being a specific pattern of colonial domination and hegemony

that radically transforms the livelihood, landscapes, waterways, and political systems, and otherwise enacts violence on Indigenous communities and worldviews, discussions of settler colonialism as an analytic frame have critically informed theorization in Indigenous studies in recent decades (Simpson and Smith 2014). In her forthcoming book, *Specters of Colonialism*, Indigenous feminist Danika Medak-Saltzman has insightfully applied this framework to the occupation and settlement of Ainu lands and communities as a historical process (forthcoming b). In contrast, here I trace the settler-colonial formation as a structure of feeling that continues to influence how Ainu experience their Ainu identity and their emotional sensibility, and in many cases, how some individuals attempt to reject Ainu identities altogether. In this sense, Japan is not a postcolonial occupier, and thus I have situated this narrative within “settler-colonial Japan” as a provocation to urge readers to confront a new reality, the reality that settler colonialism inside Japan continues.

While Ainu interpellation as subjects of the settler-colonial state has indelibly shaped their position in Japanese society, the way they are received by Wajin (J: ethnic Japanese), and the legacy of government attempts to administer Ainu as a distinct ethnic population, Ainu themselves have continuously exercised agency and self-determination in sculpting their identities as Ainu.³ The silence of 90 percent of those with Ainu ancestry reflects ongoing experiences of colonial violence, a palpable anxiety over racism, fears that foreclose the possibility of living openly as Ainu, and purposeful choices to remain silent. As such, I address a minority of those with Ainu ancestry, in part because most of those with Ainu ancestry would prefer to remain silent, are unaware of this ancestry, have elected to identify as Wajin, and/or would prefer to align themselves with the Wajin elements of their ancestry. My use of the term “becoming Ainu” must therefore be situated in twenty-first-century Japan and describes the agency of persons who have chosen to identify with their Ainu heritage (as either adopted Ainu or Ainu descendants) despite the overwhelming pressure to the contrary. In settler-colonial contexts like Japan, colonial control continues to manifest as mental, emotional, and, increasingly, verbal and physical forms of violence (Winchester and Okawada 2015). While I am sympathetic to the perspective that choosing to remain silent about ancestry and passing as Wajin may be seen as acts of resistance (Medak-Saltzman 2010), this perspective is not sufficient to address the complex range of motivations for living one’s life as Wajin in Japan (Morris-Suzuki 2014), including widespread

ignorance about ethnic heritage. This narrative addresses specifically those who have long negotiated with settler racisms and other forms of epistemic violence and those who have chosen to embrace an Ainu identity and to forge a contemporary Ainu subjectivity through clothwork and material culture. Because of my position as a cultural outsider and non-Japanese national, I was unable to cultivate relationships with individuals who have rejected their Ainu ancestry, who experience paralyzing ambivalence about their Ainu heritage, or those who have elected to pass as Wajin or to remain silent. In the few conversations I shared with individuals who have chosen to conceal their Ainu ancestry or who have recently embraced it publicly, I came to understand two key factors that prompted their silence. First, the dominance of a culture-based Ainu identity, experienced as pressure to achieve cultural fluency through language, material arts, music, or dance forms, appeared to foreclose alternative paths of embracing Ainuness, as the heritage economy has similarly emphasized. Second, others confided that the threat of debilitating racism, as recent hate-speech incidents have demonstrated, stymied them because of fear of how their public Ainu identities might adversely impact their extended families and especially young children in public schools.

Below I focus on the gendered nature of the cultural-revival movement and specifically attend to Ainu women's clothwork and cultural labor from the postwar era through 2008. I employ the term "Ainu identified" to index individuals who publicly embrace their Ainu ancestry as the primary component of their identity. Among those with parents from both Wajin and Ainu backgrounds, many have elected Ainu as their primary identity while others identify with both parents' ancestry. Below, I use the language of "identification" not to regulate legitimacy or define "authentic Ainuness" but instead to distinguish those who publicly assert an Ainu identity from the silent majority of persons of Ainu heritage who do not claim an Ainu identity, although these individuals may be hailed as Ainu subjects by fellow Ainu activists or by the Japanese government. That these "Ainu-identified" persons constitute a minority among those with Ainu ancestry does not diminish the significance of their efforts. On the contrary, their active negotiation with ethnicity and now with an Indigenous framework, in spite of the indifference toward or explicit rejection of an Ainu identity by immediate family members, further heightens the gravity of these endeavors in self-craft and these expressions of self-determination. Indeed, in spite of personal convictions to openly identify as Ainu, this choice is fraught with anxiety over how such

a public *kamingu auto* (J: “coming out”) will impact one’s extended family, triggering divorce or other painful responses among one’s relatives, as several Ainu friends confided to me