

The Development of Sustainability for Tonkori Performance of the Ainu People in Northern Japan

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Abstract

The Ainu are the indigenous people of the northern region of Japan which is adjacent to the Russian border. An important Ainu musical instrument is the Tonkori, a wooden 5-string instrument played for entertainment purposes. The current Tonkori music is considered to be introduced by Sakhalin Ainu, one of the sub-ethnic groups of Ainu who migrated to Hokkaido prefecture after WWII. An effort to reduce inequality as well as to make their culture sustainable among the Ainu people is the followings: (1) Promoting the establishment of university research centers; (2) organizing workshops and musical performances in museums and recital halls; (3) offering short but intensive 3-year Tonkori courses for classes of four students each; (4) endorsing the establishment of a national registry of ancient musical instruments; (5) endorsing the establishment of Ainu culture study programs in secondary schools. The research findings reveal that the Ainu people based their sustainable cultural preservation efforts on the two principles of raising social awareness about Tonkori music and enhancing mutual cooperation for the related tasks.

Keywords: Sustainability, Tonkori, Ainu People, Japan

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Introduction

The Northern Peoples are the indigenous peoples who reside in the northern regions of China, Korea, Russia, Japan, and USA. These regions are home to different ethnic groups such as the Ainu, Nivkh, Uilta, etc. The Ainu People is an indigenous ethnic group who lives in three areas in the northern part of Japan: Hokkaido prefecture, the Sakhalin Island, and the Kuril Islands. At the end of WWII, the Sakhalin Island was annexed by the USSR (See Figure 1). The Ainu people live very close to nature as evident from their houses (See Figure 2) or clothing which are made from natural materials (See Figure 3). Their livelihood is closely associated with rivers, mountains, and lakes (Shimazu, 2017). The Ainu people have a speaking language of their own, but do not have any written language. Their primary occupation is fishing, such as salmon fishing which provides fish skin for their clothes and shoes. The Ainu people consider salmon as vital to their existence and have several traditions relating to salmon. They also believe that fire is a representation of deities, therefore, fire is almost always present in all rituals of the Ainu people. (Kitahara, interview, August 31, 2023)



Figure 1. The Ainu traditional territory by the author.

Tamura Masato¹ explained that around 1865 or approximately 80 years before the start of WWII, the Japanese government had conducted a population census in which there were separate figures for the Japanese and Ainu populations. The census revealed that there were approximately 18,000 Ainu people in Hokkaido and another 1,500 in Sakhalin. After WWII ended in 1945, Japan lost the war and the Sakhalin Island was annexed to the USSR, compelling almost all of the Ainu people on the Island to emigrate to Hokkaido. 1,400 Sakhalin Ainu moved to Hokkaido while the other 100 remained there for family reasons such as having Russian or Korean spouses. However, since then the Japanese government had never again conducted a consensus to differentiate Ainu and the Japanese populations, stating that all of them are considered the Japanese nationals. (Tamura, interview, Sept. 18, 2023)



Figure 2. Left, the traditional Ainu house exhibited at Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum photographed by the author. Right, the traditional clothing of the Ainu people. Source: A photograph exhibited at Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum.

Two Ainu Musical instruments were found during my field work in Hokkaido including Tonkori (Figure 3, right) and Mukkuri, left.



Figure 3. Left, Nishihira Ume (1901-1977), a Tonkori musician who emigrated from Sakhalin. Source: (Kitahara, 2005:26). Right, Mukkuri, Jew's harp of the Ainu photographed by the author.

From the research interviews, several Ainu experts agreed that during the immigration from Sakhalin after WWII not many people brought along their musical instruments, especially the Tonkori which was the larger of the two Ainu musical instruments. Most ancient Ainu musical instruments that are currently held in different museums were made in

Hokkaido. However, it is still possible to differentiate between the Hokkaido and Sakhalin Tonkori instruments by their distinctively unique characteristics.

Tonkori is a plucked string instrument with five strings (or only three strings) and six strings. Professor Kitahara Jirota explained that 1876 (the 9th year of the Meiji Era) was the year that the first group of the Sakhalin Ainu emigrated to Hokkaido. They first settled in Ebetsu which was the residential area for international groups of people from Europe and the United States. Some of the foreigners in these groups who were interested in the Ainu culture were probably the ones who took some 6-string Tonkori back to their countries and documented their existence. (Kitahara, interview, August 31, 2023)

Tonkori is a type of chordophone instrument² whose music is produced by plucking its strings. It was previously referred to by the locals of Hokkaido as 'Ka' and by the Ainu of Sakhalin as 'Tonkori.' However, both groups now call them by the same name of 'Tonkori.' Some researchers tried to classify Tonkori by their physical characteristics. In an interview with Oya Kyosuke, a researcher who is the current curator of the Hakodate City Museum of Northern Peoples, he classified the plucked string instruments of the Northern Peoples into two main categories: Lute and Zither. Musical instruments in the first category, Lutes, are further divided by their physical characteristics into three groups. They are musical instruments with three components: the Head, Neck, and Resonance body. Musical instruments in the second category, Zithers, are divided into seven groups of instruments which have only two components: the Head and Resonance body. Tonkori is classified as a musical instrument in the zither category. (Oya, interview, Sept. 1, 2023, See also Oya 2011)

At present, Tonkori music can be found in three regions: (1) Hokkaido; (2) the west coast of Sakhalin Island and; (3) the east coast of Sakhalin Island. In the first region, Hokkaido, Tonkori music tradition had completely disappeared for lack of transmission with no clear evidence to indicate when this had happened. In the second and third regions, the two coasts of the Sakhalin Island, the music tradition that came with Ainu immigrants still remains to this day. Ainu musicians from the Sakhalin Island can be divided into two groups: those who came from the East and West coasts of the Island. Nishihira Ume (1901-1977), an Ainu musician who was the pioneer in the transmission of Tonkori music, came from the East Coast. Fujiyama Haru (1900-1974), another leading Ainu musician from the West Coast passed on the musical knowledge and activities to her own family members. However, after the death of her daughter in 1986 and of her husband, who was both a Tonkori musician and craftsman, in 2001, the West Coast Tonkori music tradition has almost become extinct. (Kitahara, interview, August 31, 2023)

In relation to Tonkori to the Ainu's ways of life, William W. Fitzhugh and Chisato O. Dureuil described this musical instrument as follows: "Ainu used the tonkori frequently to accompany yukar presentation. It was such an important part of Ainu culture that it was considered a god in itself." (Fitzhugh, W. W. and Dubreuil, C. O., 1991). The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, East Asia: China, Japan, and Korea give the following descriptions for both types of the Ainu musical instruments:

Typical Ainu instruments are the Mukkuri (Jew's harp) and the Tonkori or ka (zeither).

The Mukkuri and the Tonkori were both used not for solo performance but also to accompany

song and dance. Most pieces for these instruments are imitations of the sounds of nature, such as raindrops, waterfalls, and the cries of birds and animals. (Tanimoto, 2002)

Due to the changes of their physical environment after emigrating to Hokkaido, the Ainu people had to adjust themselves to their new social environment and ways of life. The literature review of this study reveals that the Ainu people had made several adjustments to be able to cope with the changes and to preserve their traditional culture. For example, Tonkori music has been recently modified to incorporate modern styles of music into the traditional one. Carlo Forlivesi stated that musicians had to adopt “*new Ainu music*” by *mixing together Ainu tunes and pop styles such as jazz, reggae, new age and so forth (in some case this music is played with “Ainu instrument”).* (Forlivesi, 2004)

Furthermore, in being under the Japanese administration and increasingly experiencing the pressure of the changing global contexts, the Ainu people must find a means to preserve various aspects of their cultural heritage and wisdom to prevent the loss of their rituals, languages, performing arts, carving, textile weaving, sewing as well as agricultural traditions and knowledge relating to plants, flowers and their relevant contexts. Some of the Ainu people now work in different institutes in Hokkaido, especially in museums which were the key sources of data for this research. The findings of the present research will provide guidelines for ethnic groups across the world in dealing with similar problems and allowing them to recognize the power of cooperation and unity of the Ainu people of Hokkaido in developing sustainable preservation of their culture and traditions, reducing inequality, and creating livelihood stability.

Research Results

This research (since 1 May, 2023 to 1 February, 2024) employed the qualitative research methods of documentary research, interviews of key informants, and collection of field data at the following 11 museums/ institutes in Hokkaido:

- Center for Ainu & Indigenous Studies, Hokkaido University
- Hakodate City Museum of Northern Peoples
- Hakodate City Museum
- National Ainu Museum (UPOPOY)
- Hokkaido Museum
- Biratori Ainu Crafts and Heritage Center (Urespa)
- Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum
- Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum
- Historical Museum of the Saru River
- Asahikawa City Museum
- Kawamura Kaneto Aynu Memorial Museum

In this section, the author will present data on the physical characteristics of the Ainu people’s musical instruments, their performing culture, and recommended guidelines for sustainable preservation of the musical culture of the Ainu people.

Tonkori Physical Characteristics and Performing Arts



Figure 4. The Tonkori made by Shigehiro Takano photographed by the author.

Since the Ainu people live close to nature and primarily make their living from fishing and hunting, Tonkori components are made from materials that are available in their everyday life. The body of Tonkori is made from the wood of Ezomatsu pines (See Figure 5) which has a distinctive circular rings pattern. Tonkori strings are made from soft but durable silk threads, whale tendons and deer Achilles tendons (See Figure 5, right). However, today's Tonkori strings are mostly made from nylon. Strings made from whale tendons are produced by letting the tendons dry out before pounding them into thin threads and braiding them into individual strings (See Figure 5, right Figure 6, left & center). The unique characteristic of tendon strings lies in their toughness and do not break. However, the law prohibiting whale hunting in Japan has resulted in the use of Shamisen strings for Tonkori. The bridges of Tonkori are made from seal skins (See Figure 6 right) or sheep skin. Tonkori of the old days usually come in different sizes, ranging from 80-105 cm long and 9 cm wide. Present-day Tonkori are approximately 120 cm long and 9-10 cm wide. The currently celebrated Tonkori maker is Takano Shigehiro from Nibutani Village in Biratori-Cho area.



Figure 5. Left, *Picea jezoensis* trees (Ezomatsu). Center, Ezomatsu lumber. Right, deer Achilles tendon. Photos by the author.



Figure 6. Left, Takano Shigehiro demonstrated pounding & crushing deer Achilles tendon. Center, the process of braiding deer Achilles tendon for musical instrument strings. Right, Seal skin is used as neo [cloth end piece anchoring the strings. Photos by the author.

At present, Tonkori is a relatively expensive musical instrument with a price of approximately 100,000 yen and more (prices vary depending on the amount of engraved decoration). This presents quite an obstacle to its sustainable preservation. Takano Shigehiro stated that after the introduction of factory-made Tonkori, its price has been reduced by half to only about 50,000 yen a piece.

Pitches of the 5-string Tonkori

Tonkori pitches are flexible. Some musicians prefer high pitch tuning while others go for low pitch tuning. There is no definite requirement for Tonkori tuning but each string should be four pitches apart while the fourth and fifth strings may be 4 or 5 pitches apart. Nowadays, some musicians may set Tonkori pitches to the pitches of Western music in order to achieve complementary tunes during a performance. For example, Takano Shigehiro sets the first string of his Tonkori at C scale, the second string at G scale, the third string at D scale, the fourth string at A scale, and the fifth string at E or D scales (See Figure 6 right). The five strings of Tonkori are, therefore, not tuned in order of pitch or from high to low like other plucked string instruments in other parts of the world. This makes it difficult for professional plucked string musicians to play Tonkori as they have to modify their performing skills to suit the unique pitch tuning style of Tonkori. Kitahara Jirota also made an effort to meticulously notate Tonkori music, providing clarity on both the position of the strings to be plucked and the rhythm. This was done to facilitate better understanding for students (See Figure 7).



Figure 7. Examples of Tonkori's tone levels. Source: (Tomita, 2017:4).

1	2	3	4	5	口唱歌	手
		●			keh	● 右手
		●			keh	○ 左手
		●			he	
○					ta	
		●			ni	
			●		paye	
			●		an	
			●		ti	
○					ti	
		●			ti	
○					to	
		●			ta	
		●			ti	
○					to	
			●		ta	
○					to	
○					to	

1	2	3	4	5	口唱歌
				●	he
○					ta
		●			ni
			●		paye
				●	an
			●		ti
		●			ti
○					ti
	○				to
			●		ta
		●			ti
○					to
				●	ta
○					to
○					to

Figure 8. Examples of Tonkori musical notation by Kitahara Jirota.

Performing Methods, Performing Occasions, and Meanings of Tonkori Melodies

Tonkori is generally played to accompany dances or songs or as sleeping music for children and even for the dead. It can be performed while standing, sitting, or lying down. The last performing posture is used when trying to put a child to sleep so that the performer can also rest while playing. If a deceased person is particularly fond of Tonkori music, the musician will play Tonkori for him or her while lying down. However, Tonkori is not usually played to accompany a ritual but can be played before its commencement (Kitahara, interview, August 31, 2023)

There are approximately 50 melodies for Tonkori songs; 17-20 of these belong to Tonkori music tradition of the West Coast of Sakhalin Island while 13-15 melodies of the East Coast music tradition were recorded in various documents. The meanings of most Tonkori melodies revolve around themes from their ways of life and about nature. Examples of such Tonkori melodies are as follows (see Chiba 2005):

- *Keh Keh He Tani Paye An* is a melody used for a request of friendship / or romantic love when a person is too shy to directly confess his or her love.
- *Ikeresotte* is a melody for practice sessions.
- *Tokito Ran Ran* is a melody that describes a scene of birds swooping down to feed on vegetable plots.
- *Kitsune* (Sumari Puu Kosan) is a melody relating a story of a family of Kitsune, a type of animal, that sneaked into an Ainu house to steal their seal oil.
- *Tsuru no Nakigoe* is a melody imitating the voice of a crane.
- *Karasu no Suiyoku* (*Cikah Maa Irehte/ Etuhka Maa Irehte*) is a melody describing a scene of bathing crows.
- *Uta no Banso* (*Suma Kaa Peka Tuhse Irehte*) is a song about a couple who fell in love with one another against the wish of their parents. The lovers made a date to meet at a sea-side location and, after the receding of the tide, ran together towards the sea rocks.
- *Odori no Banso* is a melody performed to accompany a dance.
- *Ikeresotte Horipi Ikeresotte* is a melody used to accompany a singing lyric.
- *Cakuton/ Hosuyasuya Ikos* is a melody imitating the sound of the word "Cakuton."

Methods of Transmission

Tonkori music is transmitted through oral tradition and face-to-face training. Since the number of Tonkori musicians has significantly decreased and this problem has long been recognized by both scholars and Tonkori musicians, they have strived to find easier methods of transmission, either through the creating of Tonkori musical notation or determination of melodies with more precise rhythms. Another problem has arisen from the fact that Tonkori strings are not tuned in order of pitch, which makes it very difficult to play Tonkori music. On this issue, Kochi Rie, an ethnomusicologist and a researcher on the Ainu people and culture at Hokkaido Museum, stated in an interview that a suitable method of transmission was to initially have students practice with a paper model of a Tonkori (See Figure 8) before advancing to playing a real Tonkori. The practice session is carried out in four steps: memorizing the melodies, making finger movements on a paper model Tonkori, touching a real Tonkori, and practicing a musical notation on a real Tonkori (Kochi, interview, Sept.13, 2023).



Figure 9. Kochi Rie with musical instrument paper models at Hokkaido Museum photographed by the author.

Guidelines for the Development of Sustainability for Tonkori Music

Based on the documentary research data and interviews with scholars, researchers, and museum curators the author found that both the public and private sectors have tried to preserve and promote sustainability for Ainu culture. Following the Ainu immigration from the Sakhalin Island after WWII, it is now almost impossible to differentiate the Ainu Hokkaido from the Ainu people from the Sakhalin Island. Both groups have joined forces in promoting sustainable preservation of Tonkori music by adopting the music tradition mainly from a source of Tonkori music transmitted by Nishihira Ume, a Tonkori performer from the East Coast of the Sakhalin Island. This research found that the following five measures have been implemented for the purpose of developing sustainability for the Ainu's music and its related cultural aspects:

Establishment of the Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies by Hokkaido University



Figure 10. Professor Kitahara Jirota photographed by the author.

Hokkaido University has established this center to specifically study the Ainu people. Professor Kitahara Jirota (See Figure 10) of the Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies is a descendant of the Ainu people on his maternal side. His grandmother was born in the Southern part of Sakhalin and emigrated to Hokkaido in 1945. His father was a Japanese, and his mother studied Tonkori music under with Tomoko Tomita who was a student of Nishihira Ume. While actively contributing to sound recordings and research as a Tonkori player, Nishihira Ume had transmitted the art of Tonkori performance not only Ainu descendants but also Japanese. Among her students, Tomita Tomoko devoted herself to its transmission, for example contributing to teach Tonkori music in Kanto Utarikai [one of Ainu's associations which locates in Tokyo and its neighborhoods]. Due to her career as a Japanese Koto player, Tomita had established a unique teaching system through applying Iemoto system [Iemoto system: a teaching/licensing system of Japanese traditional arts with Iemoto, a grand master, at a top] (Kitahara, interview, August 31, 2023). An analysis of these recordings reveals that they have contributed to the sustainability of Tonkori transmission among the Tonkori musicians from the East Coast of Sakhalin Island to this day.

Museum Operations

There are three principal museums that dedicated to their operations to the preservation of the Ainu culture.

National Ainu Museum (UPOPOY)

Prior to 1965, an Ainu village in Shiraoi had organized cultural events to showcase Ainu culture. With an increase in popularity and the number of visitors, the village decided to move the venue for their cultural exhibition from downtown of Shiraoi to the shore of Lake Poroto, where the current museum "UPOPOY" locates. In 1984, the museum was administered by a private organization but was later transferred to be under the government's administration in 2020 (Ishida, interview, Sept. 12, 2023).

Nibutani Kotan in Biratori

Nibutani Village in Biratori area is another site for the preservation of Ainu culture where the Biratori Ainu Crafts and Heritage Center (Urespa) where four more museums are located, namely:

- Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum
- Historical Museum of the Saru River
- Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum (a private museum)

Akanko Ainu Kotan (Ainu Village in Lake Akan)

Akanko Ainu Kotan is one of the largest Ainu kotan (settlements) in Hokkaido, inhabited by about 120 people. The facilities including museum and theatre engaged in various activities to ensure sustainability of Ainu music and other aspects of the Ainu culture.

Moreover, there are around 45 museums in Hokkaido prefecture that have been holding Ainu culture exhibitions for the purpose of disseminating Ainu culture. For additional information, see public relations brochures about these activities on a related website (<http://www.ff.ainu.or.jp>). The three principal museums in this area organized similar activities, namely, indoor/outdoor exhibitions, workshops on various aspects of the Ainu culture, such as Tonkori playing, short 10-15 minutes of Tonkori and Mukkuri performances, full 30-minute indoor musical performances, model Ainu houses to showcase their ways of life. On display in these houses are traditional Ainu implements and utensils, and demonstrations

of Ainu clothing and dressing methods. These museums also hire Ainu staff. This research reveals that some of Ainu gain the permanent jobs in those museums. For this reason, museums are a significant mechanism for the development of sustainability for the Ainu culture.

Intensive Courses for Transmitters of Ainu Culture

This is the most crucial form of sustainability measure. The Biratori Ainu and Heritage Center (Urespa) has continued to organize intensive training courses on Ainu culture with financial support from the District Administrative Organization and the Ainu Culture Foundation. These intensive training courses were first offered in 2003 and until now five classes have been held. The number of trainees is limited to four students per class. This 3-year program offers four training courses in language, rituals, literature, and different types of crafts ranging from Ainu musical instruments, wood carving, weaving, sewing as well as the study of plants, flowers, trees, barks. The training courses have been held in Urespa but relocated a new center named "the Ainu Culture Center" in 2023 with Takano Shigehiro as the program director. Expert guest speakers are invited to share their knowledge and expertise with trainees. Okamoto Tomoya (See Figure 11), a graduate of this program, states that:

I graduated from Sapporo University. My grandparents are of Ainu descent. I study wood carving here because I love this craft. After completing the program, I start working here and receive my salary from Biratori local government. I am afraid that if all Ainu people passes away everything will disappear. That is why I want to transmit this knowledge. (Okamoto, interview, Sept. 15, 2023)



Figure 11. Tomoya Okamoto, course completion graduate photographed by the author.

Procurement of Remaining Old Musical Instruments and Registration as National Important Tangible Folk Cultural Properties

Ainu museums have made efforts to purchase or ask for donation of ancient Tonkori with illustrious history to add to their collection or put on display. Such Tonkori instruments are the source of great pride for the Ainu people. Field data obtained during the course of this research revealed a number of Tonkori instruments that have been registered as national important tangible folk cultural properties as follows:

- Baba Collection (Hakodate City Museum). The oldest Tonkori in this collection was obtained in 1930's.
- Hokkaido Development Commissioners' Collection (Hakodate City Museum). The oldest Tonkori in this collection was obtained in 1800's.

- Sarashina Genzo Collection (Hokkaido Museum)
- Kondo Kyojiro Collection (Hokkaido Museum)

Endorsement of an Ainu Culture Program for Upper Secondary Students

The effort to develop sustainability for the Ainu culture are multi-dimensional. In 2024, Hokkaido Biratori High School calls for admission of students who want to major in its Ainu culture program. This represents an innovative attempt to promote sustainable transmission of Ainu culture in Hokkaido prefecture of Japan.

Conclusion

With recognition of the significance of their culture, the Ainu people of Hokkaido are determined to ensure sustainable preservation of their musical culture. Although it is not possible to rediscover the traditional Tonkori music of Hokkaido and almost impossible to rediscover the Tonkori music of the Ainu on the West Coast of Sakhalin, there still remain traces of the Tonkori music of the Ainu immigrants from the East Coast of Sakhalin which can be retrieved from the sound recordings of a prominent East Coast Tonkori musician. This effort has become successful through a collaboration with a group of Japanese Koto musicians who formed a musical association for the transmission of Tonkori music in the Japanese musical transmission style. Through these measures the Ainu Tonkori music still exist to the present day. The Ainu people of all regions are determined to be unified in their preservation efforts of the remaining musical culture. A testimony to this success can be seen in the number of visitors to the Ainu National Museum (UPOPOY) in the Museum's records. The researcher was able to obtain these figures through the kind assistance of Yachita Mio, an Associate fellow at the National Ainu Museum (see the statistical data available on the website of Comprehensive Ainu Policy Office, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of Japan). These records revealed extremely high numbers of Museum visitors, even during the COVID-19 pandemic period, to the extent that limited number of visitors have to be imposed at specific periods and sometimes a one-month advanced booking is required to visit the museum. Between July 2020 and January 2023, there were as high as 754,910 visitors. The Museum's popularity is a positive indicator for the sustainable existence of Tonkori music and other aspects of the Ainu culture in the future. However, an obstacle to the preservation of Tonkori music lies in the relatively high price of Tonkori instruments. Another problem involves the care and maintenance of ancient Tonkori instruments in the collections of different museums. Takano Shigehiro, a Tonkori craftsman, is very concerned about the lack of knowledge about the musical instrument craftsmanship among museum personnel. He saw this as a serious problem for the future preservation of Tonkori musical instruments.

The benefits gained from this research project reflect the multi-dimensional aspects of Tonkori preservation efforts regarding people's awareness and cooperation in developing and implementing suitable preservation methods. They also open up new perspectives on how to repair or maintain the old and priceless Tonkori instruments that are scattered across different museums. Tonkori performance contests may be another approach that should be taken into consideration to ensure ongoing preservation efforts of the Ainu culture.

Acknowledgements

This Paper was supported by Bridge Fellowship Program, Japan Society for the Promotion of Sciences (JSPS), Hokkaido University of Education, and Center of Excellence for Thai Music and Culture Research, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

Endnotes

- 1 Head of Division of Collection Management, National Ainu Museum.
- 2 The basic classification of instruments derived from the system published in 1914 by Erich von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs.

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