

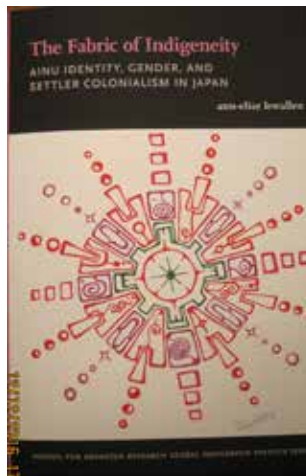
# The Fabric of Indigeneity: Ainu Identity, Gender, and Settler Colonialism in Japan

By Ann-Elise Lewallen, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, ©2016 School of Advanced Research ISBN 9780826357373 (Hard bound book); LCCN 2016029454 (ebook)

Review by Bertha Miller

Ann-Elise Lewallen's volume is a fascinating and much needed work revealing the tenacious bond between ancestral Ainu women and the contemporary Ainu society in the face of Japanese colonization. *The Fabric of Indigeneity* is at once loving and sensitive while offering a bold and forceful narrative of Ainu women reclaiming their ancient culture. At the same time they are registering protest against the continued colonization of their home land *Yaun Mosir* (Ainu language term for their territory meaning "country land" labeled by the Japanese [*Wanjin* is the Ainu term used for the settlers] Hokkaido – the farthest north Island complex of Japan.

The Ainu women resist what they consider to be a political, cultural and physical invasion into *Yaun Mosir* by the *Wanjin* by observing and practicing ancient "protocols with *kamuy* and ancestor." Through cultural protocols, applied to language, food gathering and preparation, ritual, cloth work and oral literature Ainu women systematically act to restore Ainu culture. By applying handwork to the design and making of cloth the women see themselves as giving tangible life to ancient traditions, knowledge and ways of life to inform modern Ainu. The women adorn themselves in personally embroidered ancestral clothing



in patterns, "weaving (from tree bark, hand woven sashes and mats), twining (baskets, cords, thread, and ropes), and needlework (embroidery and sewing). By so doing they engage in an intimate connection to their ancestors. Not only does this cloth work provide personal earnings, they provide clothing and other adornments for weddings, ceremonies, rituals and other social gatherings. Cooking in the traditional fashion further enhances the importance of these Ainu women to the restoration.

As author Lewallen firmly writes: "Today it is ancestral Ainu women whose voices resonate within contemporary cultural revival."

The Japanese government claims authority to define what is "Ainu tradition" in a manner that is both unintelligible and nebulous. This pattern of government policy renders the Ainu cultural reality like cardboard—colorless, opaque and bendable to the Japanese whim. It is this pattern of policy that the Ainu women seek to overcome. That the Japanese state insists on distorting Ainu culture gives rise to the demand for ancestral Ainu women to train younger Ainu to become cultural carriers who will take the knowledge into the future.

The peoples of Japan (Ainu, Japanese, and Okinawans) can all be accurately described as "indigenous to Japan" since the 1,800 to 40,000 years of compiled evidence seems to

support the theory that the Jomon culture (term originated to the period by American zoologist **Edward S. Morse** in 1877) arose first between 40,000 and 12,000 years before the present, followed by the Yayoi culture between 3,000 and 1,700 years before the present. Geneticist **Kinishi Shinoda** theorizes with some justification that genetic measures confirm the Ainu and Okinawans as earlier arrivals followed by the Japanese—all from mainland south China and the Korean peninsula. Researchers confirm distinct genetic differences (along with some similarities) that render each population as distinctive. While all of these peoples are essentially indigenous, the Japanese have set about dominating and expanding into Ainu and Okinawa.

The Japanese government maintained until recently “there are no indigenous peoples in Japan.” Fearing that Ainu and Okinawans would claim special rights if the government recognized them, Japan’s legislative body (Diet) consistently remained disinterested in official recognition. The Japanese government’s Diet voted to recognize the Ainu as an indigenous people on June 6, 2008 following adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in September 2007. This acceptance came about 139 years after imperial Japan’s initial colonization of *Yaun Mosir* (Ainu language term for their territory meaning “country land.”)

Ainu artifacts and archaeological objects have long been held in Japanese museums, and instead of demanding to reclaim the objects; Ainu have simply used the museums as the source of cultural restoration. The Ainu women spend time in the museums translating the ancient textiles and then render the history as contemporary design in cloth. It is by this means that the women “wear their heritage.”

Ann-Elise Lewallen has authored a wonderful narrative that tells the story of struggle

and restoration, shame and pride. Her book includes sixteen full color photos of the Ainu women conducting a protest demonstration in front of Japan’s Parliament in 2008 wearing the clothes they made with designs and colors from Ainu heritage. Other photos illustrate the beautiful designs taken from ancient fabrics to modern cloth. The story of Ainu revived provided by the women of *Yaun Mosir* is thrilling to read and restorative even to non-Ainu. Whether you are from an indigenous nation or not, you must read this book—a saga of great importance. ■

#### About the reviewer:

Bertha Miller is an American Indian and anthropologist.

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