

The Shift from Mass Tourism to Experience-Based Travel: Exploring the Life of the Ainu People in Hokkaido

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Abstract. In 2024, the number of tourists visiting Japan skyrocketed compared to the pre-COVID-19 era. A new travel trend has emerged in which visitors no longer content themselves with simply touring popular destinations such as Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka; rather, they seek authentic experiences in lesser-known locales. This shift has driven increased interest in experience-based tourism, exemplified by visits to the Ainu people in Hokkaido. The aim of this study is to analyze the post-pandemic tourism shift through the cultural-preservation complex and daily life of the Ainu in Hokkaido. The Ainu were not officially recognized by the Japanese government as Indigenous until 2019. Earlier research examined the transition from mass tourism to eco-tourism; the significance of the present study lies in exploring the move from predominantly passive site visits toward immersive, experience-based travel. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, this research draws on literature from websites, official government reports, and other references. Cultural-commodification theory is applied to examine how tourism can enhance the utilitarian value of a region. The findings are expected to contribute new insights into the understanding of the shift from mass tourism to experience-based tourism.

Keywords: Mass to experience-based tourism, Ainu, Cultural Commodification, community based tourism.

1 Introduction

The contemporary travel landscape is witnessing a shift from traditional mass tourism toward experience-based tourism, which emphasizes authentic engagement at destinations that receive fewer visitors. Modern travelers increasingly seek not only to see sights but to immerse themselves in local culture, evident in the rise of open trips, solo travel, experimental journeys, and cultural tours. This reflects a desire for new experiences, exploration of exotic locales, and direct engagement with host communities. Under the framework of cultural-commodification theory, such experiential tourism has both positive and negative implications: it can empower local communities by involving them directly in

cultural presentations, yet it also risks turning local culture into a commodified product without adequate community control. Greenwood (1989) warns that ethnic tourism may lead to “the commodification of local heritage, culture, and people for tourist consumption without community participation in value creation” [1]. This phenomenon is clearly visible in the Ainu community of Hokkaido, Japan. The Ainu as a distinct Indigenous group with their own language, religion, and traditions, endured centuries of suppression and forced assimilation by the Japanese government [2]. Only in 2019 were they formally recognized as Indigenous under Japanese law, granting them cultural rights [3]. Since then, various Ainu tourism initiatives have been launched, including the opening of the National Ainu Museum and Park (Upopoy) in 2020, and the creation of Ainu cultural centers designed to preserve and revitalize Ainu traditions through dance, crafts, and rituals.

This study examines experience-based tourism as an emerging paradigm by investigating cultural tourism developments within the Ainu community. To offer a comprehensive perspective, we analyze the shift toward experiential travel, the history and dynamics of the Ainu community, and the role of cultural-tourism programs (such as Upopoy, kotan villages, and festivals). Employing a descriptive qualitative methodology, we explore these practices in their tourism context. Finally, cultural-commodification theory is applied to understand how cultural elements can be transformed into economically beneficial commodities.

2 Methods

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to characterize the tourism shift and cultural-commodification practices. Data were collected via literature review and document observation. Secondary sources included academic articles, conference proceedings, and official reports from Japan’s Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT). Data analysis involved examining Ainu tourism narratives, literature studies, and media content on experiential tourism. Qualitative and descriptive methods enabled in-depth understanding of Ainu cultural contexts and tourism dynamics. Cultural-commodification theory served as the primary lens to interpret how cultural elements become tourism products. Thus, the study focuses on understanding cultural transformation among the Ainu and the resulting social implications.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1. History and Dynamics of the Ainu Community

The Ainu are an Indigenous people of Japan primarily living in Hokkaido. They possess a rich cultural heritage, such as traditional dances, music, weaving, and animistic beliefs. From the late 19th century colonization of Hokkaido, the Ainu faced social disintegration and forced assimilation under Japanese government policies. Their language and cultural practices were banned [2]. Long marginalized and officially “invisible” within Japanese society, they suffered systemic discrimination [2,5]. In recent decades, both the government and Ainu communities have sought to restore cultural pride. The 2019 Act on Promotion of Ainu Culture legally recognized the Ainu as Indigenous and mandated preservation of their heritage [3]. Ethnic tourism’s impact on the Ainu predates this law: Hiwasaki (2000) found that Ainu participation in ethnic tourism brought economic, social, cultural, and political changes in which many are beneficial [6]. Culturally, tourism has provided a platform for Ainu expression that was previously suppressed.

3.2. Shift to Experience-Based Tourism

Current tourism trends show a marked shift from mass tourism to experience-based tourism, which emphasizes active participation, cultural interaction, and educational enrichment. Driven by moral and emotional engagement desires, travelers now prefer immersive cultural encounters over conventional vacations. Consequently, community-based experiential tours and unique travel concepts such as educational open trips have emerged. This demand has indirectly spurred the commodification of local cultures, transforming them into sought-after tourism products.

3.2.1. Ainu Cultural-Tourism Programs

Ainu cultural-tourism programs are designed to provide visitors with immersive opportunities to learn about and appreciate the heritage of the Ainu, the Indigenous people of Hokkaido, Japan. Major Ainu cultural-tourism initiatives include:

- **Upopoy (National Ainu Museum and Park).**

Established in 2020 in Shiraoi, Upopoy is Japan’s first national Ainu museum with a public education mandate. Designed as a “Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony,” it features permanent exhibits showcasing Ainu language, cosmology, history, and

daily life through artifacts and interactive performances [7]. Its mission is to educate the public and foster ethnic harmony.

- **Kotan Villages and Cultural Center.**

Hokkaido hosts several kotan (コタン) or a traditional Ainu villages managed by local communities or regional governments as cultural centers. Sapporo Pirka Kotan is a hands-on facility where visitors learn about Ainu history and culture and view over 300 traditional artifacts, including garments, tools, and crafts, some of which may be handled under supervision [8]. Workshops in traditional dyeing and the mukuri jaw-harp allow visitors to experience Ainu daily life and craftsmanship. Other kotan, such as those in Shiraoi and Lake Akan, offer daily dance and craft demonstrations for tourists.

- **Ainu Cultural Festivals.**

Annual events celebrate authentic Ainu rituals and arts. The Marimo Festival features the “*marimo wo mukaeru gishiki*,” a boat procession carrying sacred marimo algae balls to an Ainu village, accompanied by torchlight parades and ancient Ainu dances [1]. Similarly, Sapporo’s Hachinohe Soran Festa (usually in summer) showcases traditional Ainu dance, tonkori zithers, and the iyomante bear-sending ceremony. Such festivals attract tourists and facilitate cultural exchange between Ainu and Wajin Japanese.

3.2.2. Cultural Commodification in Practice

From a cultural-commodification perspective, Hokkaido’s cultural centers and the Ainu National Museum package Ainu heritage into attractive tourism offerings. Hohmann (2008) defines commodification as transforming cultural elements into marketable tourism goods [1]. In the Ainu context, traditional dances and crafts may become mere tourist spectacles. Greenwood (1989) warns that without local participation, commodification can alienate culture from its community [1]. For example, while performances at Upopoy or kotan bring economic benefits, they risk stripping spiritual meaning from cultural expressions. Nakamura & Osakada (2023) reveal that Upopoy visitors often enjoy the displays but lament the omission of Ainu colonial-era suffering, reflecting a “silent history” in exhibitions tailored for palatable tourist experiences. Conversely, some research highlights tourism’s empowering potential: Hiwasaki (2000) notes that tourism has enhanced economic opportunities for Ainu and strengthened cultural pride among younger generations [1]. Thus, commodification is not inherently negative, it can serve as a cultural revitalization tool when managed participatively. Crucially, Ainu community involvement at all planning and implementation stages is necessary to ensure that commodification

becomes community empowerment rather than mere display. Moreover, the cooperative framework between Hokkaido Prefecture and Ainu communities, curating cultural rituals at Upopoy, managing homestays in *kotan*, and funding traditional festivals, demonstrates how cultural commodification can be leveraged for local empowerment. By mandating Ainu participation standards throughout the tourism value chain, Hokkaido has successfully packaged experience-based tourism that both appeals to visitors and reinforces Ainu cultural identity and local economic benefit.

4 Conclusion

The shift to experience-based tourism has elevated Ainu culture onto the global stage as a unique tourism draw. Programs such as Upopoy, interactive *kotan* villages, and Ainu festivals offer travelers immersive cultural experiences. This descriptive qualitative study shows that the evolving traveler orientation toward emotional and meaningful engagement can empower the Ainu through tourism. However, cultural commodification remains a critical challenge: if not carefully managed, Ainu cultural tourism can devolve into commoditized displays that obscure historical and spiritual contexts. Therefore, the development of Ainu cultural tourism must prioritize Ainu empowerment, inclusive historical narratives, and the preservation of cultural meaning in tourism consumption. By fully involving Ainu communities in planning and presentation, experience-based tourism can become a means of preserving and enriching Indigenous heritage rather than exploiting it.

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