

# RECONSTRUCTION OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND TRADITIONAL AINU LIVING SPACES (*IWOR*)

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on recent efforts to reconstruct a traditional Ainu living space (*IWOR*) in Biratorichō, a village in the Hidaka Region of Hokkaido, with this initiative focused preserving and utilizing intangible cultural heritage. '*IWOR*' is an Ainu word that originally meant hunting ground or occupied place, area or space, but in recent years, it has been used as an administrative term to refer to 'traditional living space.' It is primarily used in this sense in this paper.

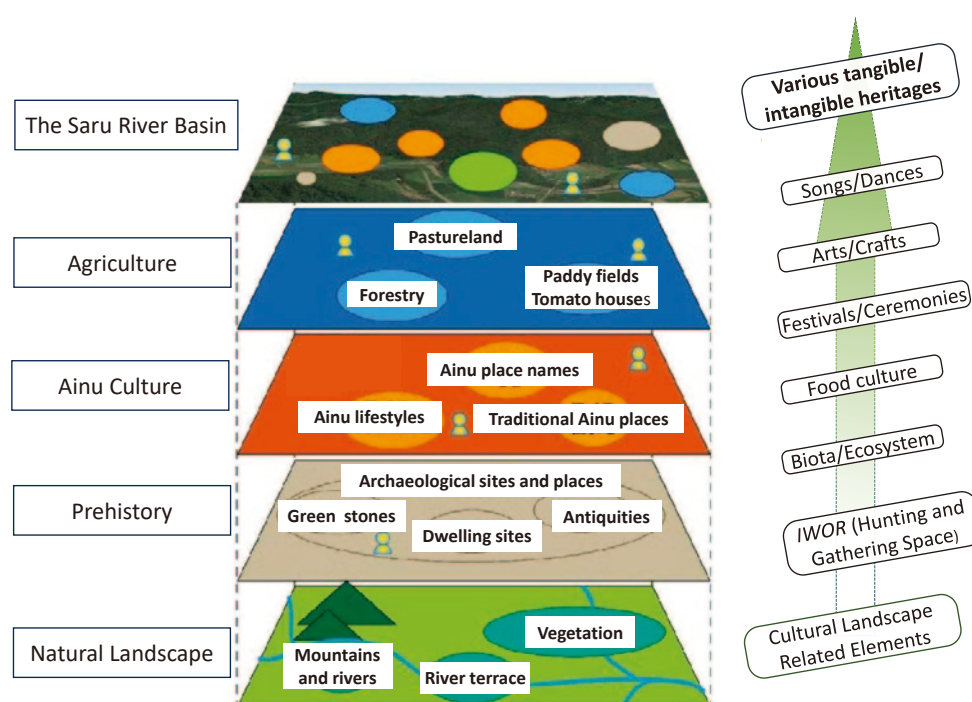
Ainu culture has a historically been neglected by the Japanese government and non-Ainu people. However, in recent years, the Ainu Culture Promotion Act (1997), Ainu Policy Promotion Act (2019) and United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2008) have led to a major reexamination of Ainu culture both at home and abroad. Thanks to the efforts of local governments and Ainu communities, this change is beginning to have a concrete impact on regional development.

The purpose of this paper is to examine and present, through a case study of Biratorichō, located in Hokkaido, the northernmost of the four major islands in the Japanese archipelago, the experiences of regional and ethnic communities affected by policies and development activities, who take these on with resilience, flexibility and creativity while increasing interest and pride in their own culture and linking this to community development. In particular, we focus on the fact that the contemporary revitalization and construction of traditional Ainu living spaces (*IWOR*) are tied to each generation of Ainu becoming aware of the value of such intangible cultural heritage as traditional dance, crafts and place names and to independent efforts to revitalize traditional Ainu culture (Figure 1). This is because we understand that intangible cultural heritage (ICH) can wipe

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**Figure 1** Traditional living space of the Ainu

away negative history, encourage local residents to become more active and contribute to regional development, and we believe that it can also serve as a reference to other important information.

## CREATION OF AN AINU CULTURAL FACILITY CENTRED AROUND NIBUTANI VILLAGE

Over the past 30 years, Biratorichō has been developing a group of cultural facilities that also function as museums to serve as infrastructure for continuing and developing Ainu culture. These cultural facilities serve not only to preserve and exhibit materials, and for research, education and information dissemination purposes, but also to promote environmental and conservation projects as a part of infrastructure development for reviving and promoting Ainu culture.

Although these policies, projects and activities have received support from local agencies of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism and the Agency for Cultural Affairs, they have been largely established and implemented under the initiative and leadership of Biratorichō and the Ainu community.

In 2022, two new cultural facilities opened in Biratorichō. In July of the same year, the Nokapiraiworo Visitor Center opened in the Memu area and began full-scale operations. This is the first cultural facility affiliated with a national institution to bear the *IWOR* name (Yoshihara, 2020). Moreover, in November, the Ioru

Cultural Exchange Center was launched in the Nibutani Kotan area. The successive opening of these facilities bearing the *IWOR* name is deeply connected to the ‘Saru River Basin IWOR Concept’ proposed by Biratorichō and others, which will be discussed later.

A traditional Ainu ceremony called *chise-no-mi* (literally, ‘housewarming ceremony’) was held when the two facilities began operation. The custom of performing this ritual has been revived in recent years in the Biratori region and has become firmly entrenched. This can be seen as the result of efforts to revive and promote Ainu culture. Newspaper reports tend to emphasise that the facility is for disseminating Ainu culture, but the author (Yoshihara) believes that, prior to disseminating information, the facility was intended as a place for learning.

Then, how did these cultural facilities aimed at reviving and promoting Ainu culture come to be? Let us look back on the trends and developments surrounding Ainu culture—mainly in Biratorichō—over the past 50 years, from the 1970s to the present.

The 1970s saw a *renewed appreciation of the history and culture of the Ainu people*. This was a time when Ainu traditional culture was being re-evaluated in a positive light, with the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum opened thanks to the efforts of Ainu cultural researcher and Diet member Shigeru Kayano (1926–2006) and others. Soon after the museum began its activities, a documentary film recreating the long-extinct Ainu traditional event *iomante* (sending off the spirit of the bear) was created.

In the 1980s, the Ainu slogan ‘preserve traditions and pass them on to the future’ was formed. This slogan was actually utilized by an organization dedicated to preserving Ainu folk dance and was used on various occasions as an expression symbolizing this period. In 1984, Ainu traditional dance was designated as a National Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property, and during this period, efforts to pass on Ainu culture to future generations became prominent.

In the 1990s, the theme of *contemporary handing down of traditional Ainu culture* emerged. This theme became a fixture of this time when it was established as the operational mission of the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum in Biratorichō, which had its grand opening in April 1992.

In the early 2000s, projects related to the *IWOR* concept, which calls for *active participation of local residents, including the Ainu, and collaboration with experts*, were launched and became established in the region.

In the 2010s, progress was made in efforts to *develop and deepen the handing*

*down of Ainu culture.* An example of this can be seen in the Ainu Policy Promotion Act, enacted and implemented in 2019, and the Ainu-themed *UPOPOY (Symbolic Space for Ethnic Coexistence)* national park, which was opened in Shiraoichō.

Over the past half century, a trend of nurturing the foundation for the revival and promotion of Ainu culture has become evident—a direct result of the prevailing mood in the mid-20th century that considered the Ainu people and their culture as having no future.

## **SARU RIVER BASIN IWOR INITIATIVE AND RELATED PROJECTS**

Launched in Biratorichō in the late 1990s, the Saru River Basin IWOR Initiative began on the heels of a report issued by the Expert Panel on Utari Measures, an advisory body to the Chief Cabinet Secretary, in 1996, with the *IWOR* concept for the Biratori region continually updated over the next few years thereafter. The plan's concept involved the idea of *creating a model region for coexistence between nature and humans, and for multicultural and multiethnic coexistence.* The framework for this idea involved using the general ideas of *learning, experimenting, blessing, spreading, and living* that encompass spiritual and cultural aspects, with its apparent intention to present the desired image from a comprehensive, long-term perspective. These points have been distinctive features of the *IWOR* concept from the outset, demonstrating the vast spatial scale of the project, which covers the entire Saru River system, a nationally managed river with a total length of 104 kilometres. The important materials that came out first, such as a proposal document providing an overall snapshot of the plan in 2001, as well as its digest version and presentation video, were all released, with the basic principles, goals and framework that are still in place today largely solidified.

In reexamining this, *restoring traditional living spaces (ioru)* was one of the important measures proposed in the report of the aforementioned Expert Panel, which was compiled prior to the enactment of the *Ainu Culture Promotion Act* of 1997. Seven regions in Hokkaido (Sapporo, Asahikawa, Kushiro, Tokachi, Shizunai, Biratori and Shiraoi) announced their participation in the Ioru Revitalization Project and have continued to participate as observers in the Hokkaido Conference for Policies Promoting Ainu Culture, which was established by the Hokkaido Prefectural Government in 2000.

With the Hokkaido Utari Association headquarters at its centre, during this period, these seven regions formed the Ioru Network Promotion Council with the participation of respective Utari Association branches and local government officials. This Promotion Council held lively discussions, continued to lobby Hokkaido

and the national government, developed local concepts and plans, and advanced activities through competition and cooperation. A major turning point in the activities of the Promotion Council was when, at the Hokkaido Conference mentioned above in March 2002, Shiraoi was designated as the *pioneer loru*, which laid the groundwork for later realizing a *symbolic space for ethnic coexistence* in the same region.

With Shiraoichō selected as the first candidate site to begin work on a traditional living space (*loru*), Biratorichō's strategy needed to be reconsidered. Furthermore, even in Shiraoichō, which had taken the lead, the project did not make any progress because the national and prefectural governments were unable to decide on policies and plans for realizing *loru* for several years. In Shiraoichō, the *loru* Revitalization Project was officially launched in 2006 with national and prefectural budgets secured.

Biratorichō's strategic shift involved gradually implementing those measures, projects and activities within the Saru River Basin IWOR Initiative that were feasible to undertake, while making use of existing administrative frameworks at the national and prefectural levels. In particular, policies involving national and prefectural subsidies in the fields of culture and cultural assets have proven feasible if municipalities are keen to implement them and can provide some funding. In addition to the enactment of the Ainu Culture Promotion Act, the Sapporo District Court ruling in the Nibutani Dam case, which positioned the Ainu as an *indigenous people* and found the developer (defendant) guilty on the grounds of the *right of the Ainu to enjoy their own culture*, was finalized without

**Table 1** Major policies, projects and activities that Biratorichō has implemented since the 2000s

Year	Policies/projects/activities
2003	Ainu Cultural Environment Conservation Project launched
2006	Collection of traditional utensils used in daily life designated an important tangible folk-cultural property
2007	'Cultural Landscape along the Sarugawa River resulting from Ainu Tradition and Modern Settlement' designated as an Important Cultural Landscape
2008	The national government's 'Traditional Living Spaces ( <i>loru</i> ) Revitalization Project' launched in the Biratori region
2012	Launch of the 21st Century Ainu Cultural Heritage Forest Project
2013	Ainu handicrafts (Nibutani <i>Ita</i> /Nibutani <i>Attus</i> ) designated as a traditional handicraft industry
2014	Pirikanoka designated as a scenic spot (Poroshiri 2013 / Chashi of Okikurumi and Muy Noka)
2019	General expansion of Ainu policies, projects and activities in Biratorichō following the enactment of the 'Act on Promoting Measures to Achieve a Society where the Pride of the Ainu People is Respected'

any appeal from either the plaintiff or defendant. This was behind the national government's acceptance of local proposals regarding preparatory surveys and conservation measures prior to the start of river improvement work such as the Ainu Cultural Environment Conservation Project (Table 1).

## **EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION THROUGH ICH**

This section introduces three examples of community revitalization through ICH.

### **Example 1: The Handing Down and Propagation of Ainu Folk Dance**

Even into the 1970s, the fact that Ainu culture was to be spoken of as a 'lost culture' and the Ainu people themselves a 'diminished people' was taken for granted. An important turning point that brought about a change in this situation was the designation of *Ainu traditional dance* as an Important National Intangible Folk Cultural Asset in 1984. Presently, 17 groups in Hokkaido are registered as Important National Intangible Folk Cultural Asset Preservation Organizations for this dance.

In the early 1980s, Biratorichō faced a dwindling population of older adults able to pass down Ainu dance traditions. Given these circumstances, a performance commemorating the designation of Ainu dance as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Asset in Hokkaido served as an opportunity to strengthen preservation activities by children. As these children's activities gained a foothold, mothers and other relatives became interested, and the activities grew in popularity. Looking at remaining footage of old documentaries, children assumed the role of dancers, performing in front of adults, reviving and even expanding the repertoire of dances that had long since ceased to be performed. Ainu culture was thought to be a thing of the past, something that had gradually faded away, but locals began to sense that it had a future.

Ainu folk dance was registered on the UNESCO *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* in 2009. In the Nibutani area alone, traditional dance has become a compulsory subject in almost all elementary schools, with many children becoming familiar with traditional dance and learning several sets. In this way, young people have contributed to spreading Ainu folk dance among different generations and regions.

### **Example 2: Techniques and Materials in the Handicrafts Field**

Handicraft objects themselves are often tangible personal property. However, even for the smallest workpiece, intangible knowledge, wisdom, techniques, ideas and the like are involved in every process, from securing materials to

completing the design, and the process of these elements becoming condensed into the workpiece can be described as ICH. Those involved in the production and sale of handicrafts in the region have reflected on the question of ‘what is tradition?’, actively exchanging ideas on this front. One result of continued trial and error regarding the future prospects of the industry is that Nibutani *ita* (wooden trays) and *attus* (woven fabrics) have been designated as traditional crafts by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. In 2013, this was the first such designation in Hokkaido.

Whether it be sculpture or weaving, the vexing dilemma of fewer people carrying on Ainu traditional culture, local industries disappearing, and handicrafts only having historical value as museum materials or cultural assets is seemingly now a thing of the past. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry’s system for promoting traditional handicraft industries has existed since before the 1970s, but we need to consider a sociocultural background in which sufficient efforts had not been made to include Ainu-related products.

### **Example 3: Increasing Interest in Environmental and Landscape Conservation and Ainu Place Names**

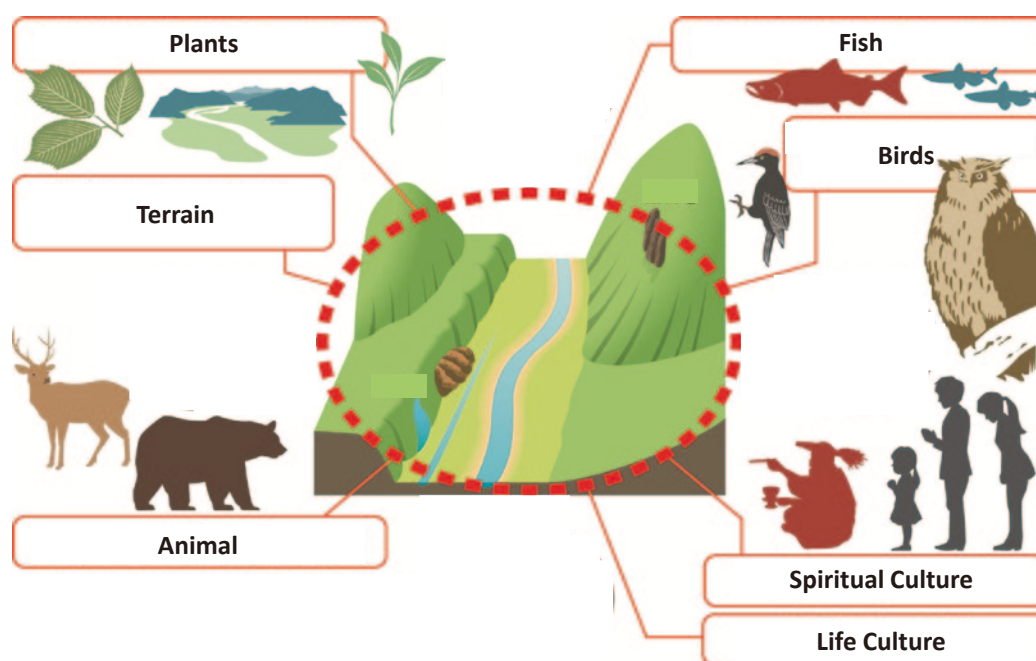
In 2003, Biratorichō launched the Ainu Cultural Environment Conservation Project with the cooperation of the Hokkaido Regional Development Bureau and the Biratori Ainu Association, with one of the most important research topics being Ainu place names. This cultural environment conservation project was the catalyst for a series of ongoing efforts to select and utilize nationally important cultural landscapes in Biratorichō. In the process, place names came to be regarded as intangible landscape-related elements.

Above all, Ainu place names have been created and passed down by traditional Ainu society, which has a strong connection with the natural environment. Place names can be said to be a treasure trove of information that encompasses a region’s history and culture as well as the knowledge and wisdom of its ancestors. Place names can also be considered a part of ICH in that they can be linked to the formation of people’s ethnic and regional identity and may also influence cultural tourism.

## **CONCLUSION: ENVIRONMENT, LANDSCAPE AND SPACE AS CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

With the Ainu Cultural Environment Conservation Project of 2003, an assessment survey of living things and their environments, spiritual and living culture and cultural landscapes (Figure 2) was initiated along with conservation measures. The expectations were that NIVC would function as a base facility for future projects.





**Figure 2** Cultural landscape of the Ainu

Efforts that emphasize the environment and landscape, and comprehensive research and measures for tangible and intangible cultural heritage, are important features common to all *IWOR*-related projects, with research and measures in various fields conducted both independently and in parallel. Testimonies from older individuals about *chinomishiri* (places of prayer) and requests and proposals for their protection and preservation were unique and provided a foundation and depth to the project.

Twenty years of sustained efforts to survey and preserve the landscape from a cultural asset perspective are bringing about changes in the way local residents think and view the landscape as well as its history and traditions. Additionally, continued work on cultural landscapes deepens the understanding of traditional culture.

Riding around in a car on business related to research and preservation organizations with Shigeru Kayano, who founded the Nibutani Ainu Museum, and the local Ainu historical researcher Yuji Kawakami (1930–2004), the author (Yoshihara) said that when they passed by ruins or historical sites, the two would always talk about their origins and explain how important these places were to the local community. The knowledge and wisdom of times with no written language or when the transmission of information was not solely dependent on written language may have also been passed down from generation to generation through such conscious storytelling. The basis for passing on ICH lies in



people continuing to tell these stories.

At the same time, progress in linguistic and literary research is leading to a deeper understanding of traditional Ainu thinking, spiritual culture and outlook on nature. For example, Hiroshi Nakagawa, a leading expert on Ainu language studies and editor of the recent hit manga *Golden Kamuy*, has expressed the following view about the Ainu word *kamuy* as quoted below. Even basic vocabulary such as *kamuy* seems to have room for further consideration and investigation.

...If we say that *kamuy* refer to animals, plants, fire, and water, it might be tempting to translate it as 'nature,' but as I said earlier, man-made objects such as houses, boats, mortars, pestles, pots, and knives are also referred to as *kamuy*. This word refers to everything surrounding humankind and somehow related to human survival, so 'nature' doesn't really fit. It would probably be better to just refer to it as 'environment' (Nakagawa, 2019).

Shishirimuka-loru Cultural College (renamed Shishirimuka Cultural College in 2010), which Biratorichō began operating in conjunction with the launch of the Ainu Cultural Environment Conservation Project in 2003, held a symposium in 2018 to mark the 15th anniversary of the start of the project. The author (Yoshihara) summarized the features and significance of the project in the following six points:

1. Local Ainu residents, who have strong ties to cultural and environmental issues, are actively engaged in these issues.
2. New, highly unique data are constantly accumulated and verified through ongoing research and trials.
3. Multifaceted trials and demonstrations based on expert knowledge, including consideration and utilization of previous research, are conducted.
4. In addition to being researchers, individuals conducting the project also function as transmitters (successors) and practitioners (creators).
5. These individuals emphasize their own (local) skills and techniques and their ability to receive and transmit information, and strive to pass on, accumulate and develop it.
6. They emphasize problem-solving through teamwork (*ukouk power*) and collaboration based on respect and promotion of individuality.

As mentioned above, with regards to the important principles of project establishment, not only has the active participation of local residents and collaboration with experts been realized, but a new type of expert with practical knowledge of Ainu culture is being nurtured.

Preserving and utilizing tangible and intangible cultural heritage is steadily

bringing about changes in regions, communities and the lives of the people who call these places home.

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