

Indigenous Inspirations: The Role of Alcohol and Western Notions of Indigeneity in Japanese Colonialism and Ainu Life in Hokkaido, 1869-1899

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Abstract

In 1869, the Japanese government established the Hokkaido Development Commission (or the Kaitakushi) as the department responsible for developing the territory of Hokkaido, the northernmost island of the Japanese archipelago. Its main objective in directing the incorporation of Hokkaido into the Japanese nation was promoting industrial and agricultural development, populating the territory with Japanese settlers, and assimilating the native Ainu people into the Japanese population. American foreign advisors like Horace Capron, who worked for the Kaitakushi in the 1870s, left their mark on Hokkaido in their recommendations for its agricultural, industrial, and social advancement. The implementation of the Hokkaido Former Aborigines Act of 1899, which was influenced by the American Dawes Act of 1887, resulted in the removal of the native status of the Ainu, effectively labeling them as ordinary Japanese citizens, and cemented their cultural destruction by the Japanese in legal terms.

This thesis analyzes the ways in which nineteenth-century American notions of indigeneity contributed to the construction of the Ainu image in the eyes of American members of the Kaitakushi and other Western visitors to Hokkaido. It uses comparisons between white Americans' experiences with Native American tribes and the Ainu to examine the role of alcohol in the Ainu-Japanese relationship in colonial Hokkaido from 1868 to 1899, by linking Western perceptions of that role to American stereotypes, such as the "whiskey Indian." Personal writings by American Kaitakushi employees and other Western figures reveal that they developed images of the Ainu that were informed by pre-existing Native American stereotypes, their personal religious and moral beliefs, and the histories of relationships between indigenous peoples and their colonizers. Unlike in the United States, where alcoholism was seen as one of the worst aspects of civilized life and signified an acceptance of white vice, American advisors associated Ainu dependency on alcohol with established colonial control by the Japanese and thus, as a gateway to smoother assimilation.