

A new year has begun, and with this issue of *The Japan Society Review* in February 2021 we start the 16th year of our publication. We hope so far our readers have enjoyed discovering new books, films and events and learning about Japan. None of this would have been possible without our fantastic reviewers so we want to open this issue with a big thank you to all of them for their help.

We are delighted to include in this issue two academic publications examining people and historical events which played a key role in Anglo-Japanese relations during the late Tokugawa and early Meiji eras. Antony Best's *British Engagement with Japan, 1854–1922* is an insightful account of the relationship of Britain and Japan from its earliest days until the demise of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in the early 1920s. In his well-illustrated biography of Sir Harry Parkes (1828-1885), Robert Morton records his life and achievements as well as giving a sense of the personality of this important figure in the history of the British relations with Japan and East Asia. Japan Society hosted two online lectures in November 2020 and January 2021 in which Morton and Best presented their

research and answered questions from the audience. Video recordings of these lectures are available on the Japan Society YouTube channel and in the News section (videos) on our website.

This issue also presents the review of *The Day the Sun Fell*, the important memoirs of hibakusha survivor Hashizume Bun. As pointed out in the review, this falls into the category of "genbaku bungaku", atomic bomb literature and is an accessible emotional thriller through which we follow Hashizume and her family and friends as they try to recover from the bomb.

Finally, we close our first issue of 2021 with the film review of *Ainu Mosir* written and directed by Fukunaga Takeshi. Depicting the life of an Ainu community and tourist village in Hokkaido from the point of view of a teenager, the film offers a realistic yet sensitive portrayal of the challenges of being an Ainu in contemporary Japan and the issues regarding Ainu culture and identity for the new generations.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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## Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

## Reviewers

Elizabeth Chappell, Susan Meehan, Robert Morton and Sir David Warren.

Image: © *Ainu Mosir*

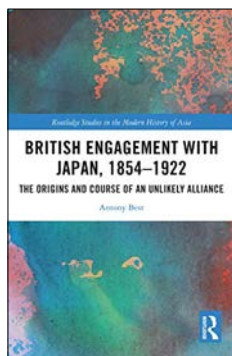
## British Engagement with Japan, 1854–1922: The Origins and Course of an Unlikely Alliance

by Antony Best

Routledge (2020)

ISBN-13: 978-1138477308

Review by Robert Morton



This is an extremely well-researched book which charts the relationship of Britain and Japan from its earliest days until the demise of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in the early 1920s. Best tells us in the introduction that the book 'is concerned with solving the puzzle of both how the alliance came into existence and how it endured for twenty years' (p. 2) and that is very much what it does.

Inevitably, scholars who have themselves trawled in the same waters will find things to object to. Let's get the biggest issue out of the way first: the lack of Japanese opinions in the book – the relationship is almost exclusively viewed from the British side. From A to G in the index, there are just two Japanese names (Princes Arisugawa Takehito and Fushimi Sadanaru) listed, but around eighty British ones.

I felt that there were moments when matters could have been looked at from a longer perspective. Best makes much of the 'civilizational tests' that Japan had to pass before the 1858 treaty between the two countries could be revised (it took until 1894). But I think that this is how we still evaluate developing countries, although instead of using the word 'civilisation', we say things like 'transparency', 'democracy', 'human rights' and 'rule of law'. In this context, Best mentions Queen Victoria's balancing praise of Japan's progress with pressing for religious toleration when she met Iwakura Tomomi in 1872 (p. 36). To me it seems reasonable for the British to see the persecution of Christians in Japan as a violation of civilised values.

Some of the attitudes Best holds up as unfair have elements of truth in them: 'Asian countries', he tells us, 'were deemed to be arbitrary and cruel' (p. 13). This really was not a completely unreasonable thing to say about Japan and China: the Japanese justice system was very murky (in 1866, an official told Sir Harry Parkes 'We think by concealing the laws they will inspire more terror') and there was cruelty in China on an unimaginable scale: 20 to 30 million people died as a result of the Taiping Rebellion.[1]

There are moments when one wants a wider perspective as well. About Queen Victoria's refusal to receive Prince Higashi-Fushimi Yorihito at Balmoral in 1893, Best says that the 'episode reiterates Japan's problem – it was considered to be but one of a number of Asian potentates and thus not deserving of any special treatment' (p. 40). Actually the prince was getting the same sort of treatment as everybody else. In 1867, the Queen, writing about a visit by the Tsar of Russia – hardly a minor potentate – said that she was 'UTTERLY incapable (overwhelmed with work, and the responsibility of her arduous position...) of entertaining any Royal personage'.[2] But in the Japanese case, her private secretary told the Foreign Secretary that she might receive the prince at Windsor – unfortunately Best doesn't say if she did or not.

I also wonder about Best's view that *The Mikado* 'was intended as a satire on the superficial portrayals of Japan prevalent in British society' (p. 43). There may have been a small element of this, but *The Mikado* was basically a satire on all of British society. As G.K. Chesterton put it, 'Gilbert pursued and persecuted the evils of modern England ... I doubt if there is a single joke in the whole play that fits the Japanese.'[3]

I'm doing what all authors hate and that is singling out tiny little bits of a book for criticism while ignoring swathes of excellence. So, let's move to what I liked. Firstly, that so much of it is genuinely new. The background to the relationship (inevitably) treads upon familiar ground, but once we get to the build-up to the Anglo-Japanese alliance, it is simply superb, supported by voluminous research that has never before seen the light of day. Best largely eschews the traditional sources – there is surprisingly little quoting, for example, of the British Ministers to Japan, who have reliably supplied much of the main meat for most other writers on this topic (myself included). Rather we hear less familiar voices: businessmen, bankers, missionaries and so on. He is not afraid to quote eccentric, yet telling, opinions, such as that of Bishop George Smith, who maintained that the 'prevalence of fogs and mists' in Japan had helped impart the 'solid, stable and energetic qualities' of the British (rather – presumably – than their love of complaining) (p. 21).

A major positive thing about the book is that it is an exceptionally easy read. I don't think I'm alone in opening academic books with a slight feeling of dread, but this one is the opposite of hard work, managing to be entertaining and scholarly at the same time, with every page brimming with interest for the general reader as much as the specialist.

Another thing we don't expect from such books is memorable lines but there are a few. My favourite begins chapter 6: 'Nothing erodes an alliance quicker than engaging in a successful struggle against a common opponent' (p. 172). It is a striking idea that had never occurred to me, perfectly expressed. While on the subject of clarity, I think the conclusion is a model of scholarly writing, describing the move towards the Anglo-Japanese alliance in a way that would be perfectly understandable to an undergraduate while satisfying to an expert. If only all academics could express themselves like this!

It is above all a balanced book. Best is right that accounts of British relations with Japan have tended to either focus on the high politics or cultural aspects. He does both. I particularly like the way he separates racial and cultural hostility to Japan. Any criticism of the Japanese can be seen in racial terms, but I think that British reservations about the country were mostly

based on the fact that it was seen as being just too 'out there' – it would only be treated as an equal when it fell into line with Western ways.

I could go on and on but I will instead end by saying that while of course there are caveats, this is a very good book and I strongly recommend it to anybody interested in Britain's relationship with Japan. I actually think, for all my earlier quibbles, that it's so well done that you don't need to be all that interested in the topic to still find it an enjoyable read.

#### Notes

[1] Minutes of an interview held in Edo, 10 January 1866, at the residence of Matsudaira Suwo no Kami, FO 46/65.

[2] Queen Victoria to Lord Derby, 5 June 1867, George Earle Buckle (ed.), *The Letters of Queen Victoria*, series 2, vol. 1, 1862-1869. London: John Murray, 1926, 430.

[3] Dark, Sidney and Rowland Grey, *W. S. Gilbert: His Life and Letters*. London: Methuen, 1923, 101. §

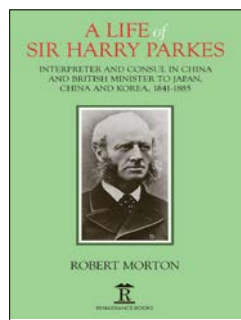
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## A Life of Sir Harry Parkes: British Minister to Japan, China and Korea, 1865- 1885

by Robert Morton

Renaissance Books (2020)  
ISBN-13: 978-1912961160

Review by Sir David Warren



Sir Harry Parkes, British Minister to Japan at the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, has had a generally poor press. He is seen as bad-tempered, aggressive, the essence of the belligerent imperialist. Much of the evidence for this comes from more culturally sympathetic observers of Japan like Ernest Satow and William Willis, who disliked working for a man they saw as a hyperactive, overbearing martinet. Lauded by his peers for his devotion to Empire (*The Times* described his death in 1885 in Peking at the age of 57 as 'a national calamity'), Parkes's reputation is inevitably lower in a more sceptical and revisionist age.

But he deserves re-evaluation, and Robert Morton has taken this task on in this very readable biography. To start with, it is a rattling good tale. Parkes had an extraordinary life. The son of a West Midlands ironmaster, he was orphaned at the age of five. His uncle appears to have run through what money there was before he too died, and by the age of thirteen Parkes was on his way to join his sisters in Macau,

where their cousin Mary had married a missionary. He worked for Sir Henry Pottinger, the Superintendent of Trade (and later first Governor of Hong Kong); he witnessed the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, which ended the First Opium War; having qualified in the language at the age of fifteen, he joined the Chinese Consular Service, and served as interpreter, clerk and consul in China for the next twenty years. Parkes as a young man – ambitious, driven, obsessively self-improving – is well drawn.

There was hostility to foreigners as the Western powers attempted to open China to trade. Parkes's attitude towards the Chinese hardened. By 1856 he was acting Consul in Guangzhou. When Chinese officials there boarded the *Arrow*, a Hong Kong-registered ship, Parkes got into a heated argument with them, demanded public redress, and persuaded the Governor of Hong Kong to escalate matters. The Second Opium War was the result. Criticism of British aggression (and of Parkes's actions) brought down Lord Palmerston's Government, although he won the subsequent election.

Parkes remained in the eye of the storm as the war continued. In 1860, he was captured by the Chinese. At one point, hands tied and forced to his knees, he faced imminent execution. Although reprieved, he was held in chains and interrogated under duress. He never bargained for his safety. Eventually he was released. In retaliation for the deaths of other prisoners in captivity, British troops burned down the Emperor's



Summer Palace. In 1862, Parkes returned to Britain a hero and was knighted at the age of 34.

He was undeniably a man of great courage, but also an aggressive servant of Empire. This tension became more difficult in Japan, where he was to spend eighteen years from 1865 to 1883. As in China, there was violence against foreigners and resistance to the 'unequal treaties' being forced upon the country. But Japan was a more complex political environment. The weakened Shogunate was caught between different opposition factions – the forces of incipient modernisation on the one hand, the traditionalists gathered around the Emperor, wanting to expel the foreign barbarians, on the other. Parkes seems to have been a man who tended to start difficult conversations with a (metaphorical) punch on the nose: not the perfect temperament for subtle diplomacy.

Robert Morton sifts the evidence from Parkes's time in Japan carefully. Satow despaired of his aggressiveness with Japanese officials and restless, undirected energy. But Parkes's forcing the pace with the Shogunate, demanding that the Treaties be honoured and threatening to back all this up with gunboats, did eventually make a difference. And there is evidence that Parkes, helped by Satow and A B Mitford, read the political scene accurately. He was initially inclined to support the Shogun. But unlike other European powers, especially the French, he saw how power had shifted by early 1868, recognised the factions around the Emperor as having the upper hand, and skilfully managed the double act of giving them moral support while ensuring the Powers remained neutral in the developing civil war. He brushed to one side a near-fatal attack in Kyoto as he rode to his first audience with Emperor Meiji: his assailant was disarmed and decapitated by a Japanese official. 'Sensation diplomacy, this', he remarked to Mitford, riding next to him.

Parkes dominated his diplomatic colleagues, whom he generally corralled behind the line he wanted to take. Japanese reactions to him were more nuanced. He was seen, in Robert Morton's words, as the new Japan's 'best friend among quite a hostile diplomatic corps'. He supported Japan's modernisation, and helped to get British engineers and businessmen involved. But Japanese respect for him was tempered. As Iwakura, the leader of the 1870-1872 fact-finding mission to the West, told Satow, Parkes's 'violent demeanour often damaged the effect of the sincere and friendly advice he offered to them'. With Parkes, you took the rough with the smooth – or perhaps the

forcefulness and acerbity with the more pragmatic judgments that underpinned his management of British policy.

There was another side to him – that of a loving family man. He married Fanny Plumer in 1855. They had seven children, one of whom died at 15. It was a devoted union, although it cannot have been an easy life for her. One reads her story with increasing admiration for her fortitude and spirit – surviving a ship collision in Yokohama harbour that cost over 100 lives, climbing Mt Fuji with her husband out of season – but also a sense of the emotional strain of her life in Japan. Depression set in during the 1870s: there are hints of suicidal thoughts. Parkes appears, from Fanny's account, to have been a more sensitive and caring husband than his public demeanour might have suggested. Eventually she returned to England with her children: Parkes's letter describing his anguish at arriving home just too late to be with her during her final illness is heart-rending. It is striking that his surviving daughters appear to have been similarly devoted to him (and that they all, intriguingly, married substantially older men).

As time went on, Parkes's influence in Japan declined. Treaty revision negotiations went nowhere and the Japanese became progressively resentful of his 'rough insensitive paternalism' (in Gordon Daniels' phrase). He was unsuited to a role that required a more subtle and emollient style. When he was finally posted to China as Minister in 1883, however, the Japanese paid dutiful tribute to his work over many years. The foreign community in China was delighted at the return of a hard man although the Chinese officials reacted badly to his (literal) table-thumping. Nonetheless, his year and a half in Peking did see outstanding claims resolved – as a colleague wrote after his death: '[they] were settled in desperation by the authorities... who knew they would have no peace until they had given in.'

When he died, almost certainly of overwork, but weakened by typhoid fever, flags were half-masted across East Asia. Robert Morton quotes contemporary comparisons with Gordon of Khartoum, who had died two months earlier, and whom Parkes had known well in China – his second son was christened Gordon. There are affinities – not least the almost uncontrollable, evangelical fervour with which Parkes pursued the interests of Britain and the Empire throughout his career. When Lytton Strachey dissected and debunked the legacy of Gordon in *Eminent Victorians*, it was the death-knell of an age. Parkes is a less complex figure.

But Robert Morton captures the different facets of his character sensitively: aggression undercut by vulnerability ('I sometimes wish I were a cleverer man', he wrote in 1865, bemoaning his 'nervous irritability'), and a compulsion to work hard, so as, he wrote to his daughter Minnie shortly before his death, to be worthy of her love. He must have been a nightmare to work for, although there are a few examples of his being (perhaps encouraged by Fanny, who was loved by all) a more considerate man than the conventional view of him suggests.

This well-illustrated biography (although a map would also have helped) is a suitable tribute to a man

revered in his time and profoundly unfashionable today. His bust was unveiled in St Paul's two years after his death, but the statue of him on the Bund in Shanghai was melted down by the Japanese during World War Two. Robert Morton records his life and achievements, as well as his personality – difficult, but not contemptible – in a balanced and judicious way, and with a biographer's voice that is an attractive mixture of chatty enthusiasm and rigorous scholarship. It is an excellent companion piece to his 2017 biography of A B Mitford, and a very enjoyable read. §

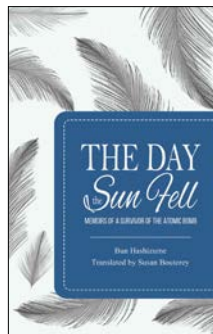
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## The Day the Sun Fell: Memoirs of a Survivor of the Atomic Bomb

by Hashizume Bun  
translated by Susan Bouterey

Austin Macauley Publishers (2019)  
ISBN-13: 978-1788780889

Review by Elizabeth Chappell



Hashizume Bun might be well-known to some readers since her experiences of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima were made into a short anime film for children, *A Hiroshima Girl's Story of Survival* for CBBC Newsround in 2016. Hashizume is a *hibakusha*, which means 'person of the bomb' in Japanese. Around 145,000 atomic bomb survivors are estimated to be still living according to a 2019 study.

Hashizume always wanted to be a poet, as she tells us in *A Hiroshima Girl's Story of Survival*, and Hashizume's memoir *The Day the Sun Fell (Hiroshima kara no shuppatsu, 2014)* is indeed as much about her becoming a writer as it is about her experiences growing up in the aftermath of the atomic bomb. Although this narrative obviously falls into the category of "*genbaku bungaku*", atomic bomb literature, it can also be placed within a proud trajectory of memoirs written by authors from Hiroshima, including Hayashi Fumiko (1903-1951), born in Hiroshima prefecture the author of *Diary of a Vagabond*.

*The Day the Sun Fell* is an accessible emotional thriller through which we follow Hashizume and her family and friends as they try to recover from the bomb. The world in which Hashizume grew up was one in which *hibakusha* had been stripped, not only of spiritual and material sustenance but also of human

dignity. Despite its mixed form, *The Day the Sun Fell* is a rare work of personal recollection based on years of the author's efforts to tell and retell the story of the atomic bombing both in Japan and, increasingly, around the world. Many assume that, for survivors, there is an almost automatic desire to talk about the experience, however, detailed, reflective memoirs about Hiroshima and Nagasaki are rare. It takes time and effort to reflect on one's life and the majority of *hibakusha* who survived simply do not have the health, time, or education to look back.

Jonathan Schell, author of *The Gift of Time* (1998), wrote that the only sources that give us a glimpse of the 'human truth' behind Hiroshima and Nagasaki, are the stories of the survivors. Hashizume's memoir provides us with an extraordinarily precious insight into this 'human truth'. Aged 14, Hashizume was working for the Hiroshima Savings Bureau, a department of the Ministry of Communications, 1.5 km from ground zero. Her work was to process ledgers so her main relief was to look forward to practicing Arabic numerals in her breaks. Thus, like the majority of *jakunen hibakusha*, those who were children at the time of the bomb - whose stories are now coming to light - Hashizume has not been educated beyond reading, writing and arithmetic, "three 'R's". Her childhood was afflicted twice, both by the war and the aftermath of the atomic bomb. During the war, speaking and learning foreign languages and access to foreign culture was banned. It was only years after that Hashizume first heard foreign songs and classical music for the first time. In one strange episode in the book, Hashizume comes across classical musicians playing in the ruins of the Hiroshima Castle, now the museum of Hiroshima's history before World War II.

During the war, adolescent girls were mobilized for the war effort and most young men from Hiroshima would have been drafted to fight at sea or in Japan's colonies. Hashizume's father was a colonial administrator in Manchuria, who rarely came home on leave. From 10 March 1945, the US conducted intense low-flying bombing raids over Japanese cities. Hiroshima was spared, for the time being and more and more military and civilians were relocated to Hiroshima, swelling the population. By the summer, there was nothing much to eat: even soybeans were rare and white rice was rarely consumed, except by the military. Still, Hashizume describes how children could enjoy swimming and boat races in the local rivers as she and others watched fishermen cast their nets for *ayu*, sweet fish, in the many rivers that determine the layout of Hiroshima.

However, this relatively tranquil, if restricted, existence for children was annihilated by the atomic bombing. At work at the Savings Bureau when the Hiroshima bomb was dropped at 8.15 am on 6 August 1945, Hashizume's own escape from to the Red Cross hospital was by wading through the waters of the Motoyasu river, an extension of the river Ota. In this, Hashizume was aided by her colleague Ms Tomoyanaga, who ensured that she did not die that night. Sensing death was near, Hashizume escaped the flames encroaching the hospital and sheltered under a bush in the garden with another teenager, Mr Iida. Hashizume describes the intense feelings of loneliness they felt as they watched the city burn to the ground while discussing their hobbies which were 'reading and music'. Their futures were being consumed in a radioactive conflagration. Hashizume describes the scene: 'Truly everyone was like a dumbstruck, solitary lump of tattered rags. *No, they're not humans, it has to be a bad dream*, I thought.' (p. 22) She even felt embarrassed to cry out in human language when the only sounds others had available to them were groans and grunts.

Hashizume lost her seven-year-old brother Hideo as well as a dear uncle to the bomb although luckily most of her immediate family did survive including two of her grandparents, father and mother, another brother and two sisters. But afterwards, her immediate family suffered from radiation sickness, and she lost her younger sister to suicide while her older sister's looks were ruined. Hashizume spent ten years recovering from the internal effects of radiation in various hospitals, missing out on precious family life. The book reflects much of the detective work she had to do as

she tried to reconstruct 'that day' as well as revisit and reconnect with friends, relatives and those who saved her.

Thus, the majority of the book is taken up with the life stories of her friends and family members and as such it contains important details which will help future historians of Hiroshima. While they were attempting to survive, Hashizume's family also tried to help others but many neighbours committed suicide as they struggled and failed to support their families. Although Hashizume did go on to marry and have a healthy family (as instructed to by her father), she finds it hard, as she writes in the Preface, to 'express in writing the painful struggles I have faced over the years as I endured illnesses and other hardships.'

Learning English in her sixties has helped Hashizume to tell her story around the world. As the New Zealand peace activist Elsie Locke (1912-2001) told her, if she did not speak, 'important truths will sink into oblivion'. One of her best advocates is the translator Susan Bouterey who has translated Hashizume's mixed, *haibun* style, with delicacy. Hashizume has decided to update the book since the original Japanese edition including an appeal for nuclear abolition especially in the light of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster. These sections therefore read as something of an afterthought suffering from a certain repetitive and declarative style. The 'case study' style chapter titled 'My Health Since the Blast' (p. 209) may have seemed necessary to Hashizume, in order to reaffirm the internal effects of radiation; however, since these diagnoses are in themselves part of her story, the important information contained here could have been more powerfully conveyed if it had been woven into the main narrative.

The memoirs written by survivors of the atomic bomb have already changed the literary landscape of Japan forever. Works by *hibakusha* writers such as Kurihara Sadako, Hara Tamiki, Hayashi Kyoko, Toge Sankichi and Ota Yoko have been anthologised, translated and passed into the canon (the latter's *City of Corpses* was republished in 2018 in *The Penguin Book of Japanese Short Stories* edited by Jay Rubin). Drawing on the widely accepted and highly sophisticated personal memoir forms in Japanese letters, such memoirs are testament to the high value placed on the authenticity of the personal voice in Japanese literature. But the 'I' used is always contextual, anchored in the different audiences and readerships that give life to it.

In this light, then, we can come to see the divergence and coexistence of Hashizume's autobiographical voices. For instance, in the CBBC anime film for children, the narrator's voice tells us: 'I don't blame those who dropped the bomb... but I can never forgive the fact that human beings dropped the bomb on other human beings'. In *The Day the Sun Fell* Hashizume expresses considerable anger and frustration with those who do not understand, and she asserts, will never understand the grief she and other survivors she has gone through. The question of forgiveness for those who dropped the bomb, is not something Hashizume, as a *hibakusha*, thought about much until questioned by foreign audiences. Her

nuanced response is that an apology is necessary not merely to *hibakusha* but to 'all mankind' for the use and promotion of nuclear weapons. (p. 193).

Hashizume's memoir is a considerable and valuable addition, not only to the canon of atomic bomb literature, but also to women's *taiken-ki*, experiences of war. The genre of war memoir, especially by ex-soldiers, is well-established: personal recollections were the main source of storytelling in the culture of censorship and denial which arose in the long post-war. But women's self-authored recollections of war are much rarer and this is a superlative example. §

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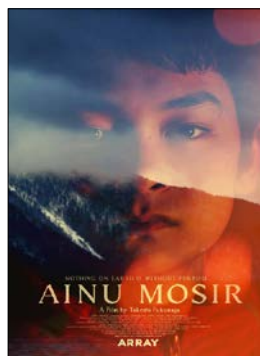
## Ainu Mosir

Written and directed by  
Fukunaga Takeshi

Cast: Shimokura Kanto, Akibe  
Debo, Shimokura Emi, Oki, Yūki  
Kōji, Miura Tōko, Lily Franky

Available on Netflix

Review by Susan Meehan



*Ainu Mosir* is a sensitively filmed slice of contemporary Ainu life, as well as a rites-of-passage story set in Lake Akan Ainu Village in Kushiro City, Hokkaido. While not a documentary, it is a realistic portrayal of the community. The cast is comprised of locals, which accounts for the strong and convincing connections between the characters.

The Ainu, Hokkaido's indigenous people (the Ainu population of Japan is currently around 25,000), faced repression and discrimination, and many Ainu customs were outlawed when Hokkaido was assimilated by mainland Japan in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The timing of the film is important. It wasn't until 1997 that the Japanese government passed the Act on the Promotion of Ainu Culture, and as recently as 2019, the Japanese government passed a bill officially recognising the Ainu as an indigenous people of Japan [1]. Interest in all aspects of Ainu culture has visibly grown in recent years, and in July 2020, a national cultural facility, Upopoy, opened in Shiraoi, Hokkaido to promote Ainu culture and arts.

14-year-old Kanto is the film's contemplative protagonist and his mother in the film is in fact, his mother in real life. Both use their real names in the film, Kanto and Emi.

As the film begins, the viewer is immediately immersed into the verdant and abundant nature in and around Akan, while also made aware of the Ainu Village's economic reliance on tourism. We see a shot of beautiful Lake Akan and scenes with plentiful, crisp snow. In another scene we see a shop abundantly stocked with Ainu-style wooden carvings, headbands, and instruments including the *mukkuri* (mouth harp). The main street in the Ainu Village is nothing but a strip of tourist shops.

Visitors from abroad and mainland Japan are shown to be captivated by the souvenirs for sale and crowd the shop where Kanto's mother works. It is comical when a Japanese tourist compliments Emi on her spoken Japanese, causing her to smile and mischievously say she has been studying hard. The viewer is in on the joke having witnessed Kanto's mother in class for beginners learning the Ainu language.[2] The tourists, happily buying into the tourist trap, are complicit in fomenting this double life.

While Emi and others in the village seem to wholeheartedly embrace their Ainu heritage, Kanto is torn – it's the classic struggle between yearning for independence and the pressures of conformity and submission – not just within the familial context but within the community as well.

Kanto doesn't feel that Akan is normal because he has to do Ainu things. His mother, on the other hand, sells Ainu craft and is eagerly asked by customers if she is Ainu – furthering and giving reason to her Ainu identity.

Even though he has not been brought up to speak the Ainu language, Kanto feels there is no escape from this oppressive Ainu-ness. His rock-band mates consider incorporating Ainu instruments to





© AINU MOSIR

complement their electric guitars and a drum set, but Kanto resists wondering why everything they do needs to have an Ainu angle.

Enter Debo - a friend of Kanto's recently deceased father. Debo takes his Ainu identity very seriously and more so than any of the elders in the village. They are reluctant to assert their identity to the extent of further "othering" themselves, thereby alienating the non-Ainu Japanese.

Debo gently tries to kindle Kanto's interest in Ainu culture, and tasks him with caring for a very cute bear cub. This will be their secret. Kanto thrives on his clandestine visits to the cub - its confinement akin to Kanto's feeling of claustrophobia.

Kanto continues to struggle with his feelings, engaging the viewer's empathy. To what extent should traditions be forced on the younger generation, and what about traditions that are out of synch with modern life and modern beliefs? Is it healthy to live in a village which relies on its touristy theme-park image and sense of cultural difference to keep it afloat?

His eyes are opened to the inescapability of his background, as well as the richness that can be unearthed. His struggles are similar to those of second-generation migrants, though in his case his family

have not even moved village. The struggles are also generational, adding to the universality of the film.

Perhaps the 2020 bill, which obliges the government to adopt policies to protect and support the cultural identity of the Ainu will help Kanto re-evaluate his inheritance and learn to esteem and reclaim it as his own. Promoting Ainu culture will only add to the richness and diversity of Japan, and redress the lack of attention it has tended to receive.

The film's director, Takeshi Fukunaga, was born in Date, Hokkaido in 1982. Despite being raised in Hokkaido, he didn't really become aware of the Ainu until moving to the United States in 2007 to major in film at City University of New York Brooklyn College.[3]

#### Notes

[1] 'Japan's Ainu recognition bill: What does it mean for Hokkaido's indigenous people?', *The Japan Times*, 25 February 2019.

[2] Though few speakers of the Ainu language exist, it seems to be undergoing something of a renaissance.

[3] Matsumoto Takuya, 'To Know the Ainu Is to Know Japan: An Interview with "Ainu Mosir" Director Fukunaga Takeshi', *Nippon*, 23 December 2020. §

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