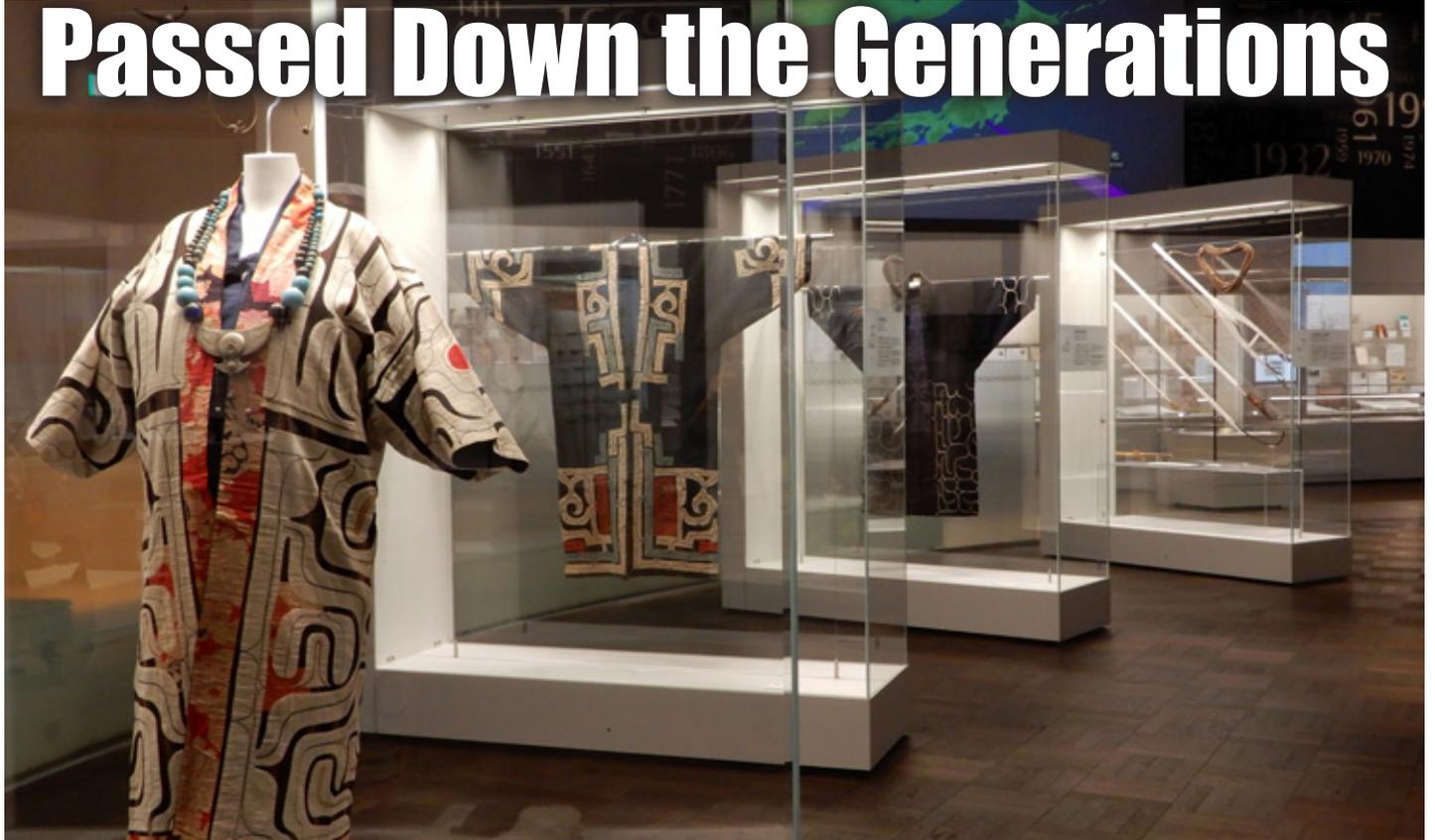


Dancers at Upopoy wearing clothing and headbands featuring Ainu patterns



# Traditional Ainu Patterns Passed Down the Generations



Traditional Ainu clothing on display at the National Ainu Museum

All Photos: Courtesy of the Foundation for Ainu Culture

**The Ainu, who are indigenous people mainly from Hokkaido, have for many generations employed a variety of patterns on their clothing and tools.**

### SAWAJI OSAMU

**T**HE National Ainu Museum and Park, nicknamed “Upopoy”<sup>i</sup> and located in Shiraoi Town, Hokkaido, is engaged in exhibitions, investigative study, the communication of information, and more related to the history and culture of the indigenous Ainu people from the northern region of the Japanese archipelago, particularly Hokkaido. One of the main facilities at Upopoy is the National Ainu Museum, and displayed in the museum’s exhibition room are many valuable items, including tools used by the Ainu people for ceremonies and hunting.

Among the exhibits, the cotton garments will catch the eye of visitors. These traditional Ainu garments resemble kimono but are typically not lined, and many of them have *mojiri* sleeves of a trapezoid shape with narrow cuffs. The back and hems of the garments feature a variety of Ainu pattern designs. Some garments feature thorn-shaped patterns that are embroidered onto the fabric, a design that some fabric designers refer to as *kiraw* and others as *ay’us*, both of which mean “horn” in the Ainu language. There are also whirlpool-like patterns called *morew*. According to a dictionary compiled by Kayano Shigeru<sup>ii</sup>, *morew* is a “pattern used for sculptures,” but others consider it to be a pattern for clothing. The names of Ainu patterns differ based on the region where they are used and the people who made them. There are some patterns whose names have not been handed down.

Kitajima Isayka, curator of the National Ainu Museum, says, “There are many Ainu patterns because the Ainu have long made patterned garments for people to wear. But we have few clues to help us understand the meanings and origins of Ainu patterns, and there are many things that we have yet to learn.”

According to Kitajima, there are roughly three methods for creating these patterns on clothing. First, through embroidery. Second, by sewing multiple thin strips of fabric onto the garment to form patterns and then embroidering the fabric strips. And third, by cutting out broad pieces of fabric to form a pattern, then sewing the pattern onto the garment and embroidering it. The patterns are created using one or a combination of these methods.

In addition to clothing, a variety of patterns are depicted on various objects made of textiles or wood and so on—items such as headbands, aprons, and tools used for ceremonies and hunting. For example, patterns can be found on the wooden sheaths and handles of the short knives used for wood carving, hunting, cooking, and a variety of other uses.

While some believe the Ainu patterns were meant to ward off evil, according to Kitajima this cannot be confirmed

because there are few written records remaining about Ainu patterns. “However, if the people who make the patterns say they are intended to ward off evil, then they are meant to ward off evil,” says Kitajima.

Ainu patterns have been passed down from parent to child. In addition to passing on these patterns, courses have been offered in recent years to teach pattern embroidery, and it has become possible for anyone to learn. Kitajima, who is herself Ainu, has been embroidering for around 15 years since she began taking courses in around her mid 30s.

She says, “Ainu patterns are truly beautiful and powerful, and an energy seems to pour out when looking at them. It is also fun to sew the patterns. My teacher and other kind people are delighted when I show them the patterns I have completed. I’m able to feel connected to various people through creating patterns.”

At Upopoy, where the museum<sup>iii</sup> Kitajima works at is located, there is an experience-based field museum, the National Ainu Park. A variety of programs are held here, including performances of traditional performing arts and cooking. At the workshop (named *ikar usi*) within the park, guests can see wood carving and embroidery being made, and can also experience Ainu patterns being embroidered into items such as coasters and masks.

Why not encounter the charm of Ainu patterns at Upopoy? **V**

i See *Highlighting Japan* December 2020 “Upopoy: A Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony” [https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202012/202012\\_02\\_en.html](https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202012/202012_02_en.html)

ii Kayano Shigeru (1926–2006) is a leading Ainu figure who devoted himself to preserving Ainu culture such as by recording the Ainu language and folktales and collecting tools.

iii The National Ainu Museum is holding the exhibition “*uaynukor kotan a=kar*: Ainu language and history of the National Ainu Museum and Park” between December 13, 2022 and February 12, 2023.



A visitor learns how to make Ainu embroidery at the *ikar usi* workshop in the National Ainu Park