

# Intro

Golden Kamuy is a very popular and acclaimed anime, taking place after the Russo-Japanese War. The war was a foreshadowing to World War I, the Japanese Empire, modern mechanized warfare, and fascism.

The overarching plot is that Ainu, one of the minority ethnic groups of Japan, amassed a huge fortune of gold by mining the rivers of Hokkaido. Unfortunately, placer mining is devastating to river ecologies which meant the Ainu's most important food source, salmon, became scarce. Thus the gold was viewed as a curse and hidden away, and their mining operations were shut down.

Someone named Nopperabo killed several of the last Ainu who knew where the gold was. For that, he was sent to the most heavily-guarded prison in Japan. While he was there, he created a map to the gold's location by tattooing it on the prisoners' bodies. The guards caught wind and tried to move the prisoners to another facility, which allowed Hijikata, one of the last samurai and a political prisoner, to kill the guards and let everyone escape.

The main characters are Sugimoto Saishi, a soldier from the Russo-Japanese war known as "the Immortal" due to his fortune in not dying, and Asirpa, a young Ainu girl whose father was killed for the gold.

Since Kris only recently started the show and una only made it to chapter 50 before getting distracted trying to find information on the Matagi, I figure we'll just talk about what's in the first 50 chapters, a bit on the Uilta (who don't come in until ch 159), and what we've read so far in our historical/ethnographic research. I wanted to do multiple episodes on GK anyway so I plan to come back to it in the future, especially when S4 comes out.

## How much would the gold be worth in our money?

20[,000] *kan* of gold

20 *kan* is 75kg of gold

75kg is 2645.55

In 1914 1000 yen was worth about 25 oz of gold

<https://newworldeconomics.com/japan-the-yen-1914-1941/>

### 1910 Japanese Units

So, 20 *kan* of gold would be about 110k yen in 1914

Sugimoto's friend was trying to amass 200 yen to send his wife to the US and get her world-class eye surgery there.

The exchange rate with the dollar at the time was about \$0.50/yen.

2021 US Units

20 *kan* of gold in USD today using the 3/6/21 spot price of \$1700/oz would be about \$4.5M

We find out later that Noperabbou was downplaying the amount of gold, and that the real amount was about 20,000 *kan*, which would be \$4.5Bn. Ogata later calls it something like “a nation-building amount of money” (although today it wouldn’t put you anywhere near the top 20 richest people on earth).

## Forced Assimilation & Settlement

This show sort of sent me down a rabbit hole of reading about ethnic minorities and their relation to modern states. I had already picked up part of a realization from *Against the Grain*, the other James Scott book. Reading about the Ainu and getting to the parts of GK about Tatar and other minority oppression by Russia, along with other groups like the American first nations, the Sami, the Picts, and so on made me realize that all states are built on, if not genocide, certainly ethnocide.

A nation-state requires the creation of a national identity to which all of its citizens must adhere. It attempts to create a uniform culture and identity out of culturally distinct people with completely different ways of living, cultures, languages, belief systems, values, and so on; they may have been able to get that to work nonviolently if living in a nation-state was actually beneficial to all involved, perhaps across a few generations. But in practice, nation-states were all created through the banning of cultural practices & nomadic ways of life, the enforcement of national languages, forced religious conversion, name registration, land enclosure, and the destruction of the wilds.

Important steps for the emergence of modern states

- Eradication of indigenous people
- Poaching laws
- Hunting wolves to extinction

Ainu raise baby bears in their villages

Chitatap - Hand food made of ground squirrel meat and bones

Cepur - Fish leather clothing

Ikkakarr Ciranup - Trickster foxes that do bad things to humans, similar to kitsune in Japanese folklore. Asirpa says you can sell the pelts of foxes and river otters for 1Y each; 5Y for bear pelts. Shiraishi [bald guy] says you can buy six big bottles of sake for 1Y.

(everything is prefaced with according to the show)

Ainu only perceive two seasons, summer and winter. Winter is when men go to the mountains to hunt, and summer is when women gather lots of herbs and vegetables to preserve so no one will have to worry about starving during the long winter.

Hurep wine - a Sakhalin specialty, wine made from lingonberries

Sakhalin Ainu have a distinct way of life from Hokkaido Ainu. They rely more on fishing. They also have two homes each, a summer home and a winter home.

## Themes

I haven't done my usual in-depth note-taking and repeat watching of this show so my support for this is thin, but I think one of the major themes is an argument against pacifism and/or veganism as virtuous. The show is very violent and there are numerous motivations for and perspectives on violence. The only character who isn't violent is Shiraishi, but in a way he still causes others to get hurt and killed through others' need for him and vice-versa.

Obviously there are some totally depraved characters, especially Edogai and Tsurumi. In Tsurumi's case, there is a clear transformation into his character during the events of the series.

But for most of the characters, violence is a means of survival, whether to avoid getting killed in a war, or simply to live off the land.

Sugimoto: "During the war I said the enemy weren't like us and didn't suffer when they died. Otherwise, we couldn't have survived."

Sugimoto says the more violent characters are those whose hearts never left the battlefield. Asirpa asks if Sugimoto has a favorite food, and he says dried persimmons, which he hasn't eaten since before the war.

Asirpa: "If you eat [dried persimmons] will you go back to who you were before the war?" (Episode 17)

Asirpa's father was named Wilk, the Polish word for wolf, because of something that happened in his childhood that was extremely influential to him. He saw a lone wolf outside his village, which would howl every night, with his pack howling in response. He realized the wolf wanted to return to the pack but was alone because it had some kind of illness. The wolves came for the sick wolf and killed him.

This was told in the frame of another story about Wilk, where they were being chased by the Okhrana with a severely injured comrade who couldn't walk and soon passed out. The group was very close to getting caught and Wilk quickly slit the injured man's throat to avoid detection.

## Minority ethnic groups of Japan

The majority ethnic group of Japan is the Yamato, who originally lived on Honshu, in what is now the Nara Prefecture, but spread to the entire Japanese island chain.

### Ainu

The dominant culture of "Ezogashima" (Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and Kuril) during the Edo period. They are primarily hunters, fishers, and gatherers, who practiced occasional small-scale agriculture. They tend to locate their villages near the mouths of rivers due to the rich supply of mammals and fish.

### Matagi

A Honshu culture (I don't know if it's considered an ethnic group) centered around highly spiritual hunting practices. The earliest evidence of them dates to the 17th century.

Tanigaki in GK is a matagi, and reveals a bit about them. They hunt in groups, with a scout, two shooters, and two chasers. They carry survival mochi with them, which besides being great emergency food, also seems to have some sort of spiritual significance (Tanigaki put miso in his despite that being against the rules for his clan/village).

In Ani, the Matagi village that Tanigaki is from, there are only 35 Matagi today.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2017/11/matagi-hunting-tradition-japan/>  
<http://english.agrinenews.co.jp/?p=4436>

The people who were involved in the National Geographic article put together a book on the history of the Matagi, which I might fuck around and order so I can scan it and make it available to pirates: <https://oakstories.bigcartel.com/product/matagi-book>

### Emishi

An agricultural ethnicity or culture from the Mutsu region that disappeared in the early Edo period. It seems that "Emishi" may have just been a term for barbarians, but later it was perceived as a distinct culture outside the realm of the Japanese state. Certainly the most famous Emishi is Ashitaka from *Princess Mononoke*.

They seemed to have had a mostly tributary relationship to the Japanese state, bringing horses.

There is also a group that was called the “Watarishima Emishi” that may have actually been the Ainu. Rather than horses, they brought animal skins as tribute. Their name translates to “Emishi who cross from the island”, as in Ezo.

There is speculation that the Hiraizumi Fujiwara, the most powerful military clan in Northern Honshu in the Heian period, may have had Emishi people in important positions, based on their and their childrens’ bodies being mummified. Mummification was also done on Sakhalin Ainu chiefs, as well as the Tungus (indigenous Siberians) and other Eurasian people.

The Hiraizumi Fujiwara conquered and destroyed most Emishi villages by the 12th century. They remained in the northern tip of Honshu, Hokkaido, southern Sakhalin, and the Kuril Archipelago. From that point they began to be referred to as Ezo rather than Emishi.

## Satsumon

Another extinct ethnic group from northern Honshu (Tsugaru peninsula) and southern Hokkaido.

The “Watarishima Emishi” show similarities with the Satsumon culture, who had a certain type of earthenware production and square domiciles with indoor cooking hearths. They had many metal items such as harpoons, arrowheads, sickles, hoes, and ornaments. The Satsumon had small-scale grain agriculture (barley, millet, barnyard grass, and buckwheat). They also apparently made fabric, earthenware tools, metal, and cement.

Matsumae Satsumon practiced small-scale agriculture and salmon fishing, which the Ainu did as well. From *The Conquest of Ainu Lands*:

Satsumon agriculture, for its part, shares similarities with later Ainu small-scale farming, but it also resembles the agriculture of eighth-century Japan, again suggesting early technological exchange among the major ethnic groups on the Japanese Archipelago. One example frequently cited is the use of elevated grain storehouses to keep out mice. These clever devices also became a standard feature of the Ainu villages of the Tokugawa years (see figure 3). Emori Susumu posits that this increased contact with the Japanese of Dewa sparked many of the changes that marked the transition from the Epi-Jōmon culture to the Satsumon-dominated proto-Ainu culture. The prominent place of foreign metal items acquired in trade and technological exchange in the arena of agriculture and pottery remain the primary cases in point (23).

## Okhotsk

A heavily continental culture concentrated in the Northeast of the Japanese archipelago. The prevailing theory on their formation is through the interaction of various ethnic groups of Sakhalin and Khabarovsk, including Nivkh & Ul’chi, and the Epi-Jomon, especially during the

Mongol invasion. The early modern Ainu emerged from the Epi-Jomon, Satsumon, and Okhotsk.

The Okhotsk are the likely source of bear worship in Ainu culture.

## Orok/Uilta

Reside in the western part of Karafuto Sakhalin. They practice sky burial, and their culture was disappearing by the time of the series due to conversion to Russian orthodox christianity. They live in tents and herd reindeer. Kiroranke says they measure their wealth by the number of reindeer they have. Due to this, and because the meat supposedly tastes worse, they never kill and eat the ones they travel with, hunting wild reindeer for food instead.

Another bit that I liked was that (Ogata?) gave an Uilta woman a set of needles, which are extremely important to them: he says there's a well-known saying among the Uilta that the woman who doesn't cry when she loses a child still cries when she loses a needle.

The Uilta were able to freely cross the Japanese/Russian border, so Kiroranke's group posed as Uilta and crossed the border in a sled pulled by reindeer.

## Gilyak/Nivkh

Reside in the northern half of Sakhalin. We don't really see them until ~chapter 150 so I won't talk much about them.

# Ainu Historical Background

## Matsumae Clan

It's hard to talk about Ainu history without introducing the Matsumae clan. The Matsumae clan controlled Hokkaido during the Edo period. They resided in Wajinchi, a province on the southern peninsula of Hokkaido. Most of their wealth and power, however, was derived from Ezo and the Ainu, in a very one-way vassal relationship. The border between Wajinchi and Ezochi was similarly one-way, as most borders are. The point was to keep Ainu out, not to have some sort of mutual demarcation of boundaries. Very many Wajin depended on the ability to cross the border to ply their trades.

## Emergence of Ainu

Starting from 1223, Tosaminato, an official port city on the Tsugaru Peninsula, established trade between Honshu and Ezogashima. The Emishi sent salmon and animal skins on tax-exempt ships and received Japanese goods in return. This trade and the increased administration of the

border between Honshu and Ezo led to the emergence of Ainu culture, as well as hierarchs on the Ainu side to manage trade with the Japanese.

## Shakushain's War

Compared to King Philip's War in the pre-US America.

Koshamain's war was an important early event between the Japanese and Ainu that began with a small argument and ended with twelve Japanese forts in Ezo being destroyed.

Background of Shakushain's war:

The Ainu of the Ishikari region believed that they shared a sacred relationship with the animals that lived there: the animals let themselves be hunted so that Ainu might live, and Ainu played the roles of liberators, freeing the godlike essences (kamuy) of animals via the slaughter. As this spiritual relationship with animals and kamuy eroded in the face of a market culture, which was epitomized by activity at trading posts, so too did the acceptance of chiefdom borders. The growing Ainu demand for trade goods, which sparked competition among Ainu chiefdoms, lured Ainu into fighting among themselves, which dissolved any hope of a unified front against Japanese advances.

The major parties in the war were the Japanese, represented mainly by the Matsumae family; the Hae Ainu, who were accommodators of the Japanese in Hokkaido; the Shibuchari Ainu, who were both hostile to the Japanese and to traditional relations with the Hae.

A conflict similar to King Philip's War occurred in Ezo at about the same time: Shakushain's War of 1669. A multilayered struggle, Shakushain's War eludes categorization; at times it was an ethnic war, pitting Japanese armies against Ainu loyal to Shakushain, but it was also a conflict among Ainu chiefdoms themselves, an example of the violent fighting that erupted as certain Ainu groups maneuvered for better access to the animals traded with the Japanese. The war began when Hae and Shibuchari Ainu, the two main groups involved, engaged in deadly fighting that largely stemmed from disputes over access to fisheries and fur-bearing animals, over contested borders along the Shibuchari River, and over the lofty ambitions of certain chiefs.

There are different ways to interpret the war, one of which is mutual ethnic hatred. Shakushain warned that the Japanese planned to poison all the Ainu elders and wanted to "slash their way to the capital" as in Kyoto.

## Kunashiri-Menashi Uprising

Tokugawa historian Iwasaki Naoko discusses this 1789 uprising in relation to the idea that the Ainu were simply exploited by the Matsumae clan. She argues that this view flattens and homogenizes the Ainu to simply suffering at the hands of the Japanese. However, the

Matsumae mainly operated by exploiting existing political conflicts and systems of control. This worked until 1788 when a labor dispute at a Japanese fishery erupted into ethnic violence. The Matsumae “responded swiftly and uncharacteristically harshly to the conflict, sending troops who eventually beheaded [37] Ainu. (Howell 112)” The suppression of the conflict was supposedly helped by Ainu leaders of Kunashiri and other areas.

By 1799 the shogunate decided that the Matsumae’s mistreatment of the Ainu was causing problems and took over management of Hokkaido themselves. Shogunate officials were sent to Hokkaido which limited the power of Ainu leaders and subjected the Ainu people directly to the Japanese state. They then recruited local “community leaders” to be intermediaries.

## Ainu Ecology and Subsistence Practice

In *The Conquest of Ainu Lands*, Walker mentions a study by Richard White on the history of the Choctaw, Pawnee, and Navajo nations’ decline. He concludes that “the cultural and economic impact of the market economy, more than any other single force, destroyed Native American subsistence systems and undermined their autonomy. (Walker 74)” The increase in hunting to sell to the market would deplete prey below levels needed for subsistence and thus created a dependency on European traders for subsistence.

The Matsumae clan’s vassals built trading posts in locations seen as potentially most lucrative, such as watersheds, coastal streams, bays, and near Ainu communities. Next they identified “animals of enterprise,” a term used by White, to commodify parts of the ecosystem that the Ainu depended on. In doing so, hunting and fishing, rather than being a spiritual practice connected to survival, became a materialist practice connected to political power and wealth.

It wasn’t long before they had over-hunted and overfished, disrupting their ability to subsist on hunting and fishing, making trade a necessity for survival.

Walker says “no two Ainu communities undertook exactly the same subsistence activity. (Walker 76)”

## Ainu Political Economy

*Petiwor* were chiefdoms formed of several villages along a watershed or river. They were divided along the boundaries of subsistence practices. A *petiwor*’s inhabitants linked their identity to a *sine itokpa*, a patrilineal household which was the center of the *petiwor*. The Ainu in a *petiwor* had “self-declared rights to exploit resources within that productive space, [which] were articulated and sanctioned metaphysically rather than economically or politically, [...] authenticated by a sacred relationship that Ainu groups cultivated with local *kamuy*. (Walker 76)”

Deer hunts in the autumn provided survival food for the winter. Salmon and trout were also very important food sources. Because animals move around, the boundaries of *petiwor* were fluid



and sometimes overlapping. This could sometimes cause conflict between chiefdoms who had overlapping claims on fish or game, and that conflict was escalated when *shamo* trading posts went up. In the early 17th century, the Matsumae began running salmon fisheries and placer mining operations (i.e. mining by filtering water/sediment) which spread all over Hokkaido and sped the depletion of subsistence resources.

There is a very specific description of how Japanese mining operations work from a Portuguese missionary:

Their way of extracting gold from these mines is as follows. When they have decided on the mountain range in which, according to experts, there ought to be gold, friends and acquaintances get together and united in a body purchase from the *dono* of Matsumae so many *ells* [one *ell* is about forty-five inches] of one of the rivers which flow through the said range, for so many bars of gold, and they must needs [sic] pay these bars whether they find gold or not. And when a great number of such groups come to the river, they divert the flow of water along a different course and then dig into the sand which remains, until they reach the living stone and rock beneath the river bed. And the sand lodged in the rents and fissures of the rock is found gold as fine as beach gravel.  
(Walker 83)

The consequences of this sort of mining can be severe. In 1724 there were reports of widespread Ainu starvation due to poor salmon runs. There was even an Ainu epic poem that suggested that gold mining was the cause of Shakushain's War. A report from a Hirosaki spy also connects Shakushain's War to poor salmon runs, but because of shamo merchants using huge nets to catch salmon for sale.

Ainu in the 18th century imported a lot of rice from Wajinchi, and there is some evidence of Matsumae prohibitions on Ainu grain farming. There is a report of an attempt by Ainu to grow rice being destroyed and punished by officials. In 1788 a report showed that the Matsumae family imported 66.7k koku of rice and used 10k of it for trade with Ezo.

## Ainu Spirituality

Ainu spiritual beliefs have a close connection to ecology. They subsist mainly off of hunting and fishing, and consider most living things to have a spirit or *kamuy* (*kamuy* is likely a derivation of *kami*, or vice-versa).

Hunting is very spiritualized by the Ainu, who view the killing of animals through the lens of their spirit allowing a worthy person to release them from the prison of the body:

Drawing on Ainu folklore, for example, Honda Katsuichi emphasizes this point through a fictional Ainu orator, or *ekashi*, who transports us into the mind of the bear god. "Even the highest-ranked gods must visit the land of the ainu [humans] every few years," the bear god explains. "They don't visit just any ainu, of course, but they pick one who's skilled at making *inau* [ceremonial fetishes] and is good-natured."

In the description of a hunt here, the animal is almost portrayed as more intelligent than humans:

In Honda's story, having found such a worthy Ainu, the bear god describes his encounter with the Ainu hunter, "[I] **wandered out purposefully** to be seen by him, whereupon he swiftly hid behind a tree and put an arrow to his bow as he waited for me. **Pretending not to notice, I passed by him.** The twang of the bowstring sounded, and the god of the arrow pierced me. As I heard the bowstring sound two or three times more, I lost consciousness. **The hunter then brings the large bear back to his kotan, where "songs and dances were performed,"** and the bear is struck by the dancing of a youth. Exposing Ainu attitudes about the kill, the bear explains, **"I again received many gifts and was sent back to the land of the gods, but still remained in the dark about the youth. I went down to Ainu Moshir repeatedly in order to be shot by an arrow and invited to the kotan so that I could find out about him and see more of his mesmerizing dances."** (Walker 78-79)

In fact, the success of the hunt has nothing to do with intelligence or strategy or fitness:

Ainu hunters killed these animal-gods, in other words, because they chose to be killed. James Serpell, writing of hunting peoples in general, makes this point as well. He explains that the **"successful hunter achieves his goal, not primarily through practical knowledge or skill, but rather by virtue of his respectful attitudes and behavior toward the quarry."** Only then, Serpell continues, "will the animals consider him worthy of the gift of meat and allow themselves to be killed." These observations, for the most part, hold true for Ainu as well, as highlighted by the above ethnographic account. (Walker 79)

Much of this is explained by Asirpa in episode 19. Asirpa says the Kamuy Hopunire is a sending-off ritual for a wild bear where they give it sake and inaw and other gifts only humans can make, so its spirit tells the other kamuy that the human world is a good place.

## Ainu Colonization

From 1899 to 1997 Ainu cultural practices were essentially outlawed.

<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/ainu-restaurants>

## Ainu Identity

Are the Ainu part of Japanese history or not? The conflict is on one hand to give the Ainu agency as historical subjects, but on the other to give them agency in the modern Japanese nation-state. Furthermore, by making the Ainu completely distinct from the Japanese,

Japaneseness becomes culturally and ethnically monolithic. Many histories basically make the Ainu non-distinct from the Japanese, because the only history they have is essentially in relation to them.

Sasaki Toshikazu wrote a short piece in 1988 on this conflict. He said even the best-intentioned attempts to incorporate the Ainu into narratives of Japanese history will relegate them to the fringes, because from the center of the Japanese state, they were. But by focusing on Ainu history, the Ainu realm, this relationship can be inverted. He also notes that the way history was generally written had a teleology of development, making Ainu the primitives and Japanese the culturally and technologically superior group.

Sasaki also points out the problem with ethnonyms for the majority *minzoku* (ethnic group) of Japan. To use “*nihonjin*” would eliminate the distinction between the Japanese state and the Japanese ethnic group and exclude minorities. *Yamato* is somewhat common but has associations with fascism. *Wajin* is another choice that is little-known outside of scholarship. Sasaki elects to use *shamo*, which is an Ainu term that’s somewhat like *haole*, which is fitting for narratives of Ainu history since it centers them.

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## Russian Connection

It is revealed in S3 that Kiroranke was a member of Narodnaya Volya, the Russian anarchist/communist group that killed Tsar Alexander II with a bomb attack. He is also half Tatar and half Ainu. One interesting aspect of this is that the threat of support from the Tatars was a major part of the Japanese of the Ainu in Shakushain's War (the Manchu had conquered China only a few decades before).

## Soviet Deportations and Resettlements

I will skip this section in the recording and only mention the above.

## Koreans

Order number 1428-326cc, signed Aug 21, 1937, forcibly relocated ethnic Koreans from the far East of Russia to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. They began an assimilation process in 1957 after Stalin died and liberalization began.

## Episodes

- 1,2 Sets up the story and many of the characters
- 17 - Really good episode with an emotional ending
- 18 - Centers around Tanigaki and the Matagi culture
- 22 - Ainu and salmon