

## The Indigenous Languages and Literature of East Asia: The Stories Beyond

By

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### Abstract

Indigenous and tribal peoples have their own cultures, languages, customs, and institutions, which distinguish them from other parts of the societies in which they find themselves. This article looks at the history, challenges, and future of the indigenous languages and literature of East Asia. The focus of this article is on the Aynu of China, Sakizaya of Taiwan, Ainu of Japan, Jeju indigenous people from South Korea, and the agenda of UNESCO in preserving indigenous languages and literature.

UNESCO is celebrating The International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) to draw attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve and revitalize them.

### Keywords

Äynu, Sakizaya, Ainu, Jeju, UNESCO, language

### Introduction

*“Language is what makes us human. When people’s freedom to use their language is not guaranteed, this limits their freedom of thought, opinion, and expression, as well as their access to rights and public services. This Decade must accelerate the mobilization of the international community to safeguard Indigenous languages in the long term.”*

*UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay Director-General of UNESCO on the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032)*

Language and culture are intertwined, it is the interactions, and communications that lead to the sense of shared values, and traditions that form the basis of a culture of a society. Literature comes from these both and the shared life experiences of a group of people in a community or a country.

Indigenous people, aboriginal people, or native people, are groups protected in international or national legislation as having a set of specific rights based on their linguistic and historical ties to a particular territory, and their cultural and historical distinctiveness from other populations.

## Äynu

The Äynu people are a Turkic ethnic group primarily located in the Xinjiang region of China, where they are not recognized as a distinct ethnic group but rather considered part of the Uyghurs. They speak the Äynu language, which has a strong influence from Persian and is part of the South Siberian Turkic branch of the Turkic language family.

The Äynu language is mainly spoken by the Äynu people, who are primarily nomadic and live on the fringe of the Taklamakan Desert in the Tarim Basin. It is usually spoken only at home, while Uyghur is spoken in public, by both Äynu men and women. The language has a mainly Iranian vocabulary and is spoken by around 6,600 people as per the last census.

One interesting aspect of the Äynu language is its use as a secret language. It is spoken only by adult men who use it to communicate with each other outside of their area of settlement without being understood by outsiders. Uyghur is spoken with outsiders who do not speak Äynu and at home when it is not necessary to disguise one's speech.

Due to the secretive nature of Äynu, as well as a lack of official status in the areas where it is spoken, the language does not have any widely used writing system. However, the Uyghur Arabic alphabet is typically used on the occasion where it needs to be written. It is

also interesting to note that older people tend to use Persian affixes while younger people use Uyghur-derived vocabulary and affixes.



**Image 1: An Äynu from China**

### **Sakizaya**

The Sakizaya people are an indigenous group in Taiwan with a population of around 1,000 people. They primarily reside in the Hualien region, where their culture is centered. As Austronesian people, they have cultural, linguistic, and genetic ties to other Austronesian ethnic groups, including those in the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Madagascar, and Oceania.

Their language, Sakizaya, is classified as a dialect of Nataoran Amis, a Formosan language that belongs to the Austronesian language family. There are approximately 2,000 speakers of the Sakizaya language. In addition to Sakizaya, the Sakizaya people also speak Amis and Mandarin, the official language of Taiwan.

In 2007, the Sakizaya people were recognized by the Taiwanese government, and since then, their language has been incorporated into school textbooks and indigenous special

admissions to universities. This recognition has contributed to the revitalization of their language, although most Sakizaya people do not use their language in daily life and instead use Amis or Mandarin.

According to the current language policy of the Taiwanese government, once a tribe is recognized by the government, their language status is confirmed, and language planning work follows. This policy has allowed for the development of Sakizaya textbooks for pupils in elementary and junior high schools and the inclusion of Sakizaya as part of indigenous special admissions to universities.

Overall, while the Sakizaya language is not widely spoken, the recognition by the Taiwanese government has helped to preserve and promote this unique language and culture.



**Image 2: A Sakizaya from Taiwan**

## Ainu

The Ainu people are the indigenous people of the lands surrounding the Sea of Okhotsk, including Hokkaido Island, Northeast Honshu Island, Sakhalin Island, the Kuril Islands, the Kamchatka Peninsula, and Khabarovsk Krai, before the arrival of the Yamato Japanese and Russians. These regions are referred to as Ezo in historical Japanese texts.

The Ainu language, called Hokkaido Ainu, is currently classified as a language isolate and is critically endangered. Most Ainu people also speak either the Japanese language or the Russian language. The language has had no indigenous system of writing and has historically been transliterated using the Japanese kana or Russian Cyrillic. As of 2019, it is typically written either in katakana or in the Latin alphabet.

Despite the small number of native speakers of Ainu, there is an active movement to revitalize the language, mainly in Hokkaidō, but also elsewhere such as Kanto. The publication of dictionaries, textbooks, and bilingual Ainu-Japanese collections of Ainu oral literature is increasing year by year. A private radio station in Sapporo has been broadcasting a weekly Ainu language class program over Hokkaido territory since the 1980s, and museums to appreciate the oral traditions have come up through displays and renditions of sound and images of the language.



**Image 3: Ainu from Taiwan**

## Jeju

The Jeju people or Jejuans are a subgroup of Koreans who live on Jeju Island, South Korea. Jeju is the indigenous language of the Jejuans and is listed as "critically endangered" by UNESCO, with most of its speakers being elderly. The younger generation tends to speak Korean. Jeju is not mutually intelligible with the mainland dialects of South Korea and has its own writing system using Hangul.

The language was severely undermined by the Jeju uprising of 1948, the Korean War, and the modernization of South Korea. All fluent speakers remaining in Jeju Island are now over seventy years old. Most people in Jeju Island now speak a variety of Korean with a Jeju substratum. The language may be somewhat more vigorous in a diaspora community in Osaka, Japan, as many Jeju people migrated to Osaka in the 1920s, but even there, younger members of the community speak Japanese.

Since 2010, UNESCO has designated the language as critically endangered, the highest level of language endangerment possible. Revitalization efforts are ongoing, including the promulgation of the Language Act for the Preservation and Promotion of the Jeju Language by the Jeju provincial government in 2007, which established five-year plans for state-backed language preservation. The Act encouraged public schools on Jeju Island to offer Jeju as an extracurricular activity, as well as to incorporate the language as a part of regular classes if relevant and feasible.

UNESCO is celebrating the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) to draw attention to the future of indigenous languages and the work that needs to be done to preserve and revitalize them. At least 40% of the world's 6,700 languages are threatened with extinction, which would have severe consequences for cultural diversity and the preservation of valuable knowledge. Additionally, less than 2% of languages have a presence online, hindering the participation of indigenous language speakers in society. UNESCO aims to raise awareness, mobilize stakeholders, and create a multilingual digital world to safeguard indigenous languages and promote freedom of thought, expression, and access to rights and services.



**Image 4: Jeju from South Korea**

## Conclusion

3,000 of the over 7,000 languages spoken worldwide are at risk of vanishing by the end of the 21st century, and 6,700 of these languages are indigenous. According to the United Nations, 10% of languages spoken today are classified as "critically endangered," 9% as "severely endangered," 11% as "definitely endangered," and 10% as "vulnerable." UNESCO is concerned that these languages may disappear by the end of this century.

The loss of linguistic diversity has a significant impact on different aspects of human life, including social, cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions. For instance, when a language dies, it can lead to a loss of social cohesion, as younger generations become disconnected from their cultural heritage, and there is a breakdown in intergenerational communication. This loss can also lead to social exclusion and marginalization, as well as the erosion of traditional knowledge and practices.

Stopping the critical endangerment of indigenous languages in East Asia requires a concerted effort by governments, educational institutions, and communities. Here are some ways to prevent the loss of indigenous languages:

- ***Increase support for language revitalization programs:*** Governments and educational institutions can provide support for language revitalization programs that focus on preserving and promoting indigenous languages. These programs can include language classes, cultural events, and workshops to increase language use and awareness.
- ***Encourage intergenerational language transmission:*** Encouraging parents and grandparents to pass on their language to younger generations can help ensure the survival of the language. This can be done through storytelling, language immersion programs, and other intergenerational activities.
- ***Develop educational materials in indigenous languages:*** Developing educational materials in indigenous languages can help preserve the language and promote its use in daily life. This can include textbooks, dictionaries, and language-learning apps.
- ***Promote bilingual education:*** Bilingual education programs can help students learn both their indigenous language and the dominant language of the region. This approach can help students maintain a connection to their cultural heritage while also learning skills that are valuable in the wider society.
- ***Provide legal recognition and protection of indigenous languages:*** Providing legal recognition and protection of indigenous languages can help prevent their loss and promote their use in official settings. This can include the use of indigenous languages in legal proceedings, government documents, and public signage.

Overall, preventing the critical endangerment of indigenous languages in East Asia requires a long-term commitment from all stakeholders. It requires acknowledging the importance of linguistic, cultural diversity and investing in the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages.



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Ms. Komal Gupta is an award-winning Indian poetess and writer. She writes under the pen name of tejaswiniaura. She is an avid reader with a penchant for the extraordinary and mundane aspects of life. A keen observer of life, words to her are an extension of perceptions. Komal continues to push the boundaries of what defines poetry, writing with her unique style of narration and reflections.

