WHERE THE SARU RIVER FLOWS

A journey of Indigenous learning, relationship, and cultural exchange in Hokkaido

In August 2026, Kapiʻolani Community College students Nathalia Brown, Charli Rose Omura, and Cheyenne Kauʻi journeyed to Hokkaido, Japan, alongside Skye Kaupiko, Counselor and Kapoʻoloku Program Coordinator, and Puʻu Zablan, Professional Development Coordinator, for an experience rooted in Indigenous learning, relationship, and exchange.

The journey was part of SSCI 297: Indigenous Leadership Across Cultures, an experimental course exploring Indigenous identity, leadership, culture, resilience, and the ways Indigenous peoples carry knowledge forward across generations. For Nathalia, Charli Rose, and Cheyenne, Hokkaido became the classroom, and the Ainu people who welcomed us became our teachers.

We left Hawaiʻi on a Sunday afternoon and arrived in Hokkaido late Monday evening, not yet knowing that the people waiting for us would soon feel less like hosts and more like ʻohana.

There to greet us at Chitose airport was Sekine Kenji, a native of Osaka whose own journey brought him to Hokkaido some 35 years ago. He had met a young Ainu woman, fell in love with a family and a place, and never left. Deeply drawn to Ainu culture, Sekine-san spent decades learning from elders—their language, stories, traditions, and ways of life. Although he himself is not Ainu, he became a fluent speaker of the Ainu language. Today, Sekine-san continues to teach and share the language across generations, helping to keep it alive within the community.

From there, our journey took us to Biratori and the community of Nibutani, along the Saru River. Surrounded by mountains, forests, fields, and flowing water, we entered a place where Ainu culture was not simply something to be studied. It was alive—in families, in hands, in stories, in food, and in the land itself.

It was there that we met Sekine-san's family: his wife Maki; his mother-in-law and matriarch, Yukiko Kaizawa; his niece; his brothers-in-law; and an extended family of Ainu artists and cultural practitioners. They welcomed us not simply as visitors from Hawaiʻi, but as family.

Our days together were filled with the things that make relationships real. We ate. We laughed. We cried. We carved, embroidered, danced, sang, fished, listened, and learned.

Each day, Grandma Yukiko would sit quietly working with her hands. Sometimes we would be talking, laughing, or moving about the room, and there she would be—patiently twisting strands of fiber into thread, her hands carrying on work they had known for decades.

Yukiko is a leading practitioner of Nibutani attus, the traditional Ainu textile craft she has practiced for more than 65 years. The work begins with carefully harvesting and preparing tree bark, followed by a long process of separating and working the fibers, twisting them into thread, dyeing them, and eventually weaving them into cloth. Using plants from the surrounding area, Yukiko creates the soft, natural hues that distinguish her work. What appears effortless in her hands is the result of a lifetime of patience, discipline, and intimate knowledge of place.

Yet even after more than six decades, Yukiko still sees herself as a learner. She speaks of the work as challenging but rewarding, something she continues to study and, above all, enjoy. Her hands rarely seem to rest. In ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi, we might recognize Grandma Yukiko as a loea—a master whose ʻike lives not only in what she knows, but in what her hands can create and what she is willing to pass on. Her commitment extends beyond her own artistry to the transmission of Ainu culture and the training of future generations.

That devotion to craft and community runs deeply through the Kaizawa family. Yukiko's husband and Maki's father, Moriyuki Kaizawa, who passed away in 1977, was a devoted Ainu craftsman who loved his community and helped lay the foundation for generations of Nibutani artisans who followed. His passion for Ainu design filled the family home, where he decorated pillars, furniture, and everyday objects with traditional patterns. Art was not something separated from daily life—it surrounded the family.

Moriyuki's legacy continues through his children and grandchildren. Maki's brother, Mamoru Kaizawa, carries that spirit forward today as president of the Nibutani Folk Craft Association, which brings together artisans continuing the traditions Moriyuki helped nurture. Aunty Maki, as we affectionately came to call her, carries this inheritance forward in her own way through Katak, an Ainu cultural experience enterprise that invites visitors to learn through the traditions, stories, crafts, and lifeways of the people who continue to practice them.

Sitting with this family, we began to understand that cultural perpetuation is not simply about preserving something from the past. It is about keeping knowledge in motion—from land to hands, from elder to child, from one generation to the next.

In Nibutani, we also encountered the legacy of Kayano Shigeru, one of the most influential Ainu leaders of the twentieth century and the first Ainu person elected to Japan's National Diet. Kayano devoted his life to recording Ainu language and oral traditions, preserving cultural materials, and advocating for Ainu rights and recognition. His presence in Japan's national legislature brought an Ainu voice into spaces where decisions about Indigenous people had too often been made without them.

That legacy surrounded us. We stayed at Yanto House, operated by Kayano's grandson, and nearby stood a museum dedicated to preserving Kayano's life and work. History no longer felt distant. It was around us—in the community, in family stories, and in the people continuing the work today.

Our learning later brought us to Upopoy in Shiraoi, home to the National Ainu Museum and National Ainu Park. Opened in 2020 as a national center for learning about and supporting the revival and development of Ainu culture, Upopoy creates space for Ainu history, language, performance, food, craft, and contemporary cultural expression.

When the time finally came to leave our Ainu family and travel onward to Sapporo, there were tears.

We do not need to claim an ancestral relationship between Kanaka Maoli and Ainu to recognize something familiar in one another. Across thousands of miles, we found connections in our experiences as Indigenous peoples—in relationships to land and place, in the importance of language, in responsibility to elders and ancestors, in the strength of family, and in the determination to carry culture forward.

We arrived as visitors from Hawai‘i. Somewhere along the Saru River, we became ‘ohana—not by blood, but through aloha.

For Nathalia, Charli Rose, and Cheyenne, the journey offered far more than an opportunity to learn about another Indigenous people. In listening to Ainu stories, they were also challenged to think about their own. In witnessing another people work to protect language and culture, they reflected on what it means to carry their own identities, responsibilities, and relationships forward.

Sometimes we travel across an ocean hoping to understand another people, only to discover that their stories hold up a mirror to our own.

We went to Hokkaido to learn about the Ainu. We returned to Hawai‘i understanding a little more about ourselves—and what it means to carry culture forward.




aloha
irankarapte








木彫