

Mt. Apei Geopark of Samani and Ainu cultural heritage

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Mt. Apei is a mountain in Samani Town of Hokkaido, Japan. It is famous for its unique flora and geological features.

The name of the mountain comes from the original name given by Ainu people, the indigenous people of the northern part of Japan including Hokkaido. "Apei" comes from "Ape-o-i", meaning "place where fire exists". They believe fire is a goddess which is important for the life of human. They believe[BS1] that the mountain itself is a goddess and sacred. There is a legend that in ancient times Ainu people had a fire ceremony at the top of the mountain praying for deer, which they believed to be gifts from gods and were part of an important diet for them. Not only the name of the mountain, but also most of the place names of Hokkaido, such as Samani, Sapporo, Niseko and Toya, come from Ainu place names. Samani was inhabited by Ainu people before immigrants from the Japanese mainland.

The Ainu culture and language, much like other indigenous cultures and languages around the world, were repressed as a result of the colonization of Hokkaido and the Government's assimilation policies. But Ainu people in Samani created an organization, in cooperation with the town office, to maintain their culture and language and have been trying to pass them down to the next generation. Not only Ainu people, but also non-Ainu Japanese people are now becoming more interested in Ainu culture, understanding that it is an important part of the heritage of their community.