

Your turn: TANKA Translation

You will need the Tanka Translation sheets.

Why translate poetry? Junior High students explain:

“Words in a poem, unlike everyday language, have more than one meaning. **You need to pay attention to the context in order to find the meaning of words and the meaning of the poem.**”

“When I translate a poem I look for what the author is trying to tell us, but you have to figure it out. **You need to look at all the words and what they mean. It’s like a riddle.**”

[Center for the Art of Translation](#)

Tanka definition and origin

A form of *waka* (translates as Japanese poem), tanka translates as “short song.”

The earliest anthology of Japanese poetry, the *Man'yōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*, ca. 759), contains more than 4,200 poems in the tanka form. The form gradually developed into court poetry and became so popular that it marginalized all other forms.

The structure of tanka

The tanka is a thirty-one-syllable poem. In Japanese, a tanka is traditionally written in a single unbroken line. In English translation, the norm is five lines (5-7-5-7-7), though these are arbitrary and sometimes force divisions where there weren't any in the original.

The tanka is sometimes separated by the three upper lines and the two lower ones. The turn from the upper to the lower lines, which often signals a shift or expansion of subject matter, is one of the reasons the tanka has been compared to the sonnet.

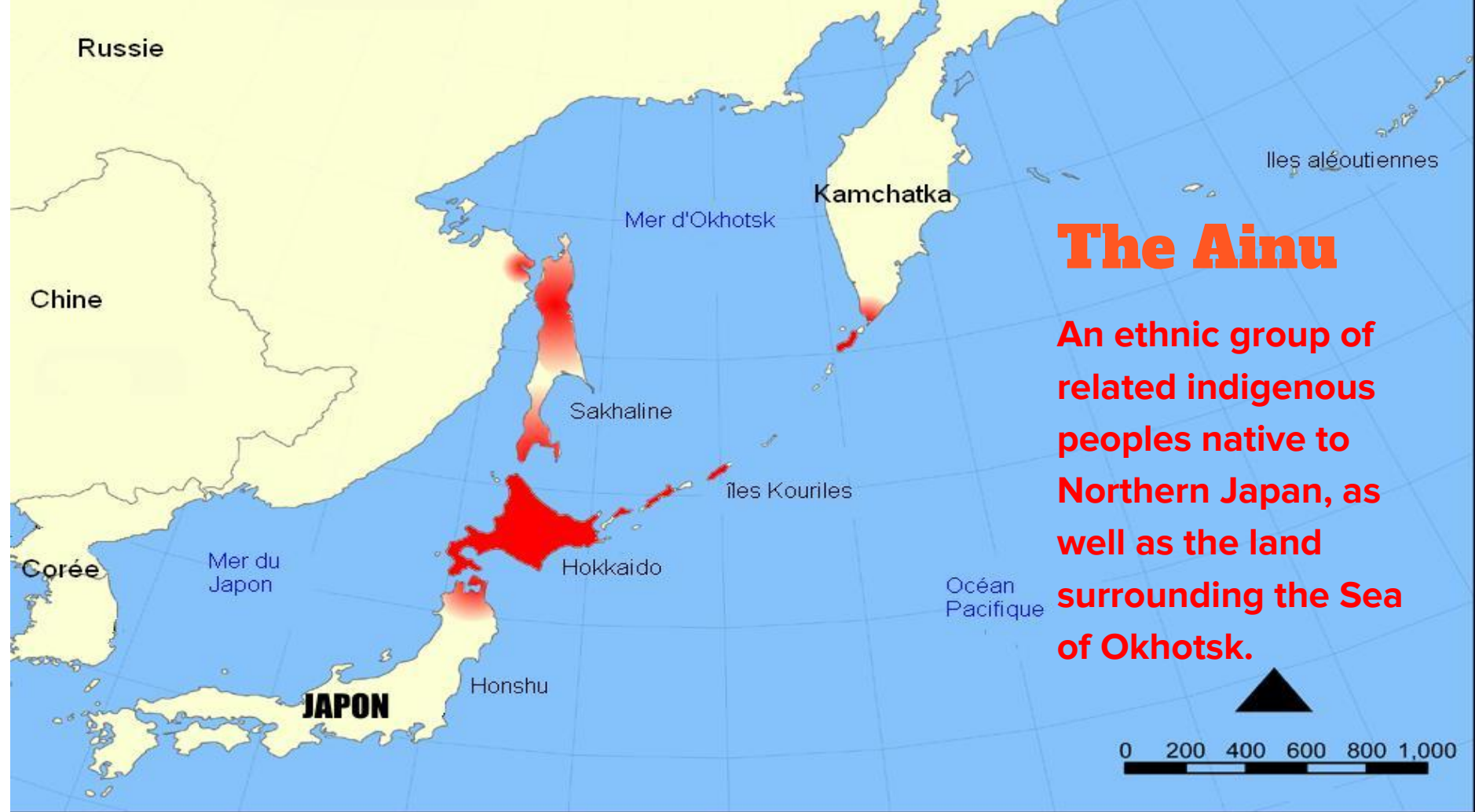
(from A Poet's Glossary, by Edward Hirsch)

The Ainu: indigenous people of Japan

Ainu literally means “humans/people” in the Ainu language. Traditionally, the Ainu homeland—known as Ainu Mosir—included the very southern part of Kamchatka, the Kuril Islands, Sakhalin, Hokkaido, and the northern extreme of Honshu, encompassing parts of present-day northern Japan and eastern Russia. The Ainu have occupied these areas since before the arrival of the modern Japanese and Russians.

Today some 30,000 individuals self-identify as Ainu. Many continue to live on the island of Hokkaido, although tens of thousands more live across Japan, Russia, and in other communities throughout the world. While deep scars left by the colonial policies of previous centuries remain, thanks to the efforts of community leaders, Ainu culture is currently experiencing a revival.

<https://glam.uoregon.edu/s/uo-ainu-collections>



The Ainu

An ethnic group of related indigenous peoples native to Northern Japan, as well as the land surrounding the Sea of Okhotsk.

NEW YORK TIMES July 20, 2023:

Japan's Native Ainu Fight to Restore a Last Vestige of Their Identity

A group representing the Indigenous people has sued to regain the right, lost over a century ago, to freely fish for salmon in a Hokkaido river. . . . Japanese assimilation policies have stripped the Ainu of their land, forced them to give up hunting and fishing for farming or other menial jobs, and pushed them into Japanese-language schools.





Golden Kamuy (manga /anime)

By Satoru Noda
(2014 –) Over 23
million copies sold.

Pop culture has helped
with awareness of Ainu.
Set in Hokkaido, with
Ainu characters.
Grounds itself in
historical accuracy.

Iboshi Hokuto: Ainu waka poet, social activist.



Iboshi Hokuto (違星 北斗) 1901 – 1929

Hokuto devoted his life to improving the standing of the Ainu people, expressing his ideas as *tanka* in newspapers and magazines and influencing the Ainu youth of the time. He also circulated around the Ainu *kotan* (villages) of Hokkaido, preaching about the need for unity and the formation of an Ainu identity.

(Wikipedia)

Biography of Iboshi Hokuto

1901 Born in town of Yoichi. Father worked as herring fisherman, and was an accomplished bear hunter.

1908 Attended Jinjō Elementary School (not the government school for Ainu children). Suffered discrimination, developed pride in the Ainu culture. After his mother died, he decided not to continue his education past high school.

1914 After graduation, worked as a fisherman, in forestry & farming

1923: Drafted into the Imperial Army as a logistics officer, discharged. Formed the group *Chawashō Gakkai* with Ainu youth. Submitted haiku to the Tokyo poetry magazine *Nihihari*.

1925 Moved to Tokyo, worked as clerk, joined academic groups.

1927 Returned home, dedicated to helping fellow Ainu. Began writing tanka, published weekly in *Otaru Shimbun*. Traveled as a peddler, met & advocated for fellow Ainu.

1928 Moved back home, worked in fishing with his family. Literary success: his collected tanka published. Suffered from tuberculosis. From his sickbed, wrote tanka anthology (on right).

1929 Died at age 27.



TRANSLATION: THERE ARE NO RIGHT ANSWERS!

Step 1: Replace Japanese words with your choice of English words from the GLOSSARY.

*Kamuchakka
no hanashi nagara
ringo hitotsu
o futatsu ni warite
nakayoku kuuta*

Kamchatka
about talking while
apple one
Into two we divided
in harmony ate it

Step 2: Reorder the sentence and rearrange words to make syntactical sense.

Option 1:

While discussing Kamchatka
we divided one apple and
chewed it happily.

Option 2

Telling stories about Kamchatka,
We divide one apple in two
On good terms, we ate it
together

Step 3: Refine your word choice and choose your line breaks, weighing connotations and considering the mood of the poem. (Invoke your poetic license.)

Option 1

Telling stories about Kamchatka
we divide one apple in two
on good terms, we eat together.

Option 2

While discussing Kamchatka
we divided a single apple and
happily chewed our halves.

**Step 4: Share translations and discuss your choices.
Post your version in the chat.
Enjoy the variety!**