

# THE JOMON OF JAPAN: The most successful culture in history?

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## Japan

I'll begin with a brief introduction to Japan, including a visit to some of my favourite places there. My research focusses on Hokkaido and has been based in Sapporo and Hakodate. From my first days in Japan I couldn't help but be puzzled by how the native people of the north, the Ainu, fit into the history of Japan. I'll fill you in on what I learned.

## What is "Jomon?"

Before we can understand the Jomon's success, we need to know what the Jomon is and when it existed. "Jomon" is a Japanese word meaning "cord-marking" or "rope-pattern." It refers to how their pottery was decorated, that's all. We'll look at their many accomplishments: pottery, figurines, architecture, etc. I'll share some of the discoveries we, and others, have made over the years.

## My Research

This section focusses on what I've been investigating. I'm trained in archaeology, anthropology, botany and ecology. My specialty is "palaeoethnobotany," a subdiscipline of archaeology that explores the relationships between plants and people in the past.

I try to make the case that the longevity (success) of the Jomon cultures is a result of their "resilience." The resilience was based on decisions not to specialize in hunting and gathering or agriculture. They maintained a broad range of resources, managed certain habitats, provided opportunities for plants and animals around their villages that increased the abundance and variety of organisms. But they didn't overdo it or focus on specific resources until very late in their existence. We'll look at some case studies involving trees, weedy herbs, the case for lacquer production, bottle gourd, *Cannabis*, soybeans, and pigs. A curious issue is the case of Japanese millet, something I've investigated for a long time.

## How did the Jomon end?

After approximately 15,000 years, the Jomon began to transform into something else. It's long run was coming to end. What was different? The major influences came from the outside. Who was involved?

## The Ainu

The indigenous people of the north, the Ainu, were once thought to have been primitive hold-overs of the Jomon era. Beginning in the 1980s our team challenged this idea. What happened?

## Recommended reading:

I have a brief outline of my work here: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/hokkaido/ainu.html>

Another interesting compilation: <http://jomon-japan.jp/en/>

A review of, and reference for a book: <https://www.world-archaeology.com/books/jomon-reflections-forager-life-culture-in-the-prehistoric-japanese-archipelago/>