

# The Concept of Shared Destiny in the Ainu Spiritual Belief

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The Ainu are the only ethnic minority officially recognized in Japan. Ainu culture is not only a new entry point for understanding Japanese culture, but also an important medium for exploring ancient Asian civilization. This article analyzes the Ainu folk songs and legends and other oral literature and discovers: The Ainu people respect and thank the gods, and accept the gifts and punishments of the gods. However, the Ainu claim that human beings have autonomy through the belief that humans have the right to punish gods, and those humans and gods can strive for an equal two-way relationship. In addition, the Ainu emphasize the importance of coexistence between humans and other creatures in nature. It is believed that hunting and fishing are not blasphemy, but acceptances of the gifts from the gods. However, it is advocated that human beings and other creatures should give each other living space and maintain the balance of symbiosis and coexistence. The Ainu belief in relative equality with gods and coexistence with nature reflects the concept of “shared destiny” in ancient Asian civilizations. It provides an important reference for the development of modern human society.

*Keywords:* Ainu people, divine ballads, legends, oral literature and art, community of destiny

## “Indigenous People” in the History of Cross-Cultural Communication in Northeast Asia

The Ainu are the only officially recognized aboriginal group in Japan to date. Now living in the northern part of Hokkaido and surrounding islands, they are known as the aboriginals of Hokkaido. The debate over the Ainu’s aboriginality can be said to be the starting point of Japanese ethnic study, which had two major schools of thought until the 1880s. One was the “mixed ethnicity theory”, which held that the Japanese nation was a mixture of later conquerors and aborigines. The other is the “mono-ethnic theory” which holds that Japan has been inhabited by Japanese people since the ancient times and that the Japanese people are a single ethnic group (Oguma, 2020). In 1823, the German physician and naturalist Siebold explained in his book *Japan* that the Ainu were the original inhabitants of the Japanese islands who left stone tools behind. The second son, Heinrich, continued and developed the theory that the Ainu, who left the cord marked pottery, used to live in Shikoku and Kyushu, but were later driven to the north by foreigners. John Milne, a British geologist, also agreed with the view that the Ainu were the original inhabitants of Japan. Japanese scholars, however, are divided between those who agree and those who disagree with this view. The proponents believe the idea that the Ainu are the aboriginal people of Japan, as proposed by European and American scholars, is scientific. The most prevailing theory is the Sushen theory, which was founded by a famous Confucian scholar and politician of the Edo period in Japan, Arai Hakuseki. He believed that the stone tools unearthed in various parts of Japan were not made by the gods and goddesses, but by the Sushen people (the ancient Chinese people of the

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northeast, the ancestors of the modern Manchu people) who invaded the northeast of the Japanese islands from the Asian continent. Kyouichi Saiti, a stone tool researcher in the Edo period, created the theory that the Sushen people were “Ezo” (Ainu), and this theory was accepted by some European and American scholars. In the case of the Ainu, the words “WO” and “WONU”, which are often recorded in ancient Chinese texts such as the *Shanhaijing*, are the translation of “Ainu”, the earliest native inhabitants of the Japanese islands (Yan & Liu, 2016). Scholars such as Zhang Minjie found that the Hezhe people in China, the Nanai people in Russia, and the Ainu people in Japan live in the same cultural belt through the investigation of cultural relics such as dwellings, living utensils, and artworks. The same natural conditions, fishing and hunting economy, and beliefs have produced a common heritage (Zhang & You, 2008). It can be seen that the Ainu culture was formed under a combination of internal and external factors such as internal integration with local ethnic groups and exchanges with various ethnic groups in Northeast Asia. After the Second World War, the myth of Japan’s “mono-ethnicity” fell from grace. The policy of discrimination and oppression against the Ainu was widely criticized by the international community (Zhang & You, 2008) and the need to build a modern society with multicultural coexistence in Japan, the question of the position of the Ainu in Japanese society, how to pass on the Ainu language and rebuild their culture (Lee, 2010), and how to establish a social system that supports the development of the Ainu (Yokoyama, 2007) became the focus of attention rather than debating the origin of the Japanese nation. Through the efforts of the Ainu people from all walks of life, the Japanese government has legally identified the Ainu people as aboriginal people, and has shifted its policy towards mending the conflict between the ethnic and national consciousness (Zhang & Wang, 2014). In 2020, Japan officially opened the “National Symbiosis Symbol Space”, a facility that symbolizes the coexistence of multiple cultures to share and spread the history and culture of the Ainu from all angles. The Ainu culture is an important entry point to deeply understand the history and culture of Japan and Northeast Asia. The Ainu nationality has a spoken language but no written language, and its national culture and history are passed down to this day through oral literature (folk literature). Among them, the narrative of gods runs through the Ainu culture and lifestyle. This article is in the framework of folklore, by analyzing the relationship between the Ainu and the gods shown in the oral literary and art of Ainu folklore, etc., to delve into the spiritual world of the Ainu people. This provides a new perspective for exploring ancient Asian civilizations.

### **The Two-Way Relationship Between Man and God in the Rumors**

The Ainu divide the world into the heavenly world where the gods live, the earthly world where humans live, and the underground world where the dead live. The gods include nature gods, animal gods, plant gods, and object gods. For example, nature gods such as fire, water, and wind, animal gods such as bears, foxes, and owls, plant gods such as mushrooms, object gods such as boats and pots, and gods who protect such objects (Ainu Museum of Ethnology, 1996, p. 1). The heavenly realm, where the gods live, is beyond the sky in the east. The Ainu believed that the gods live like humans, building straw huts, wearing kimonos, burning fires, cooking, sewing, and carving (Frazer, 2010, p. 21). The humans who lived above ground were called Ainu. There are countless demons living in the underground world, and sinful humans who enter it after death.

The Ainu believe in gods and goddesses of good and evil. The good gods bring happiness, and the evil gods bring suffering. The good gods look after humans and provide them with salmon, deer, and other foods necessary for daily life. The Ainu believe in gods ranging from those high in the heavens to those who descend to the earth in the form of animals, wild birds, or plants and other objects useful to humans (Frazer, 2010, p. 21).

For example, when a god puts on the fur of a bear and becomes a bear, it brings food, fur, and other household items to humans. In gratitude and return, the Ainu would offer items that pleased the gods, such as sake, dried salmon, and inau (wooden coins used in religious ceremonies), at the place of worship, expecting the gods to grant more favors to humans. However, the good gods do not always protect, favor, and provide food for humans, and sometimes impose severe tests on them. There were also many evil gods who brought disease and disaster to mankind. In particular, smallpox and the evil gods who brought it were feared by humans. Therefore, in the daily life of the Ainu, in addition to the rituals for sacrificing and pleasing good gods, pujas to drive away evil gods were also performed (Ainu Museum of Ethnology, 1996, p. 14). However, for the Ainu, even the suffering brought by the evil gods may be a test or punishment of the gods for the human beings. As a result, the ritual of expelling the evil gods was a last resort. Therefore, there are few rituals to expel the evil gods and many sacrifices to please the good gods. This shows the Ainu's religious view of reliance on and reverence for the gods.

The Ainu have a wide variety of rituals, including tama, the raising of ancestors, the festival of new homes, and the pre-fishing festival, which are performed throughout the year. Among them, the most common is the tama (sending of the spirit). As mentioned above, the gods come to earth in the form of animals, plants, and other creatures to bring goods that humans need. The gods are then entertained and sent back to the world of the gods through these rituals. The most common ones are "IWAKUTE" and "IYOMANTE" (see Figure 1). "IWAKUTE" is a ritual of returning damaged, old, or unwanted daily utensils to the realm of the gods. "IYOMANTE" (bear festival) is a ceremony in which a baby bear caught in a winter cave is raised for about one or two years and then returned to the world of the gods with a feast. It is also the largest and most important ceremony to send back the spirit. *The Golden Bough* records the ritual language (to the effect) of the Ainu people in Hokkaido at the bear festival:

Ah, god, you were sent to this world for the purpose of hunting for us. Ah, noble god, we thank you, please listen to our thanks. We feed you and raise you with all our heart because we love you so much. Now that you have grown up, we want to send you back to your parents. When you get there, please praise us. Tell them how much we love you. Please come back later, we will continue to hold sacrifices for you. Please ask the gods to send more otters and sables in winter, Send us more seals and fish in summer. Please don't forget what we asked you to do. We love you so much, and our children will never forget you! (Frazer, 2010, p. 461)

The expression of the ritual language of the Ainu people on Sakhalin is more direct (the general meaning is as follows): We kill you to send you back to the forest god who loves you (Frazer, 2010, p. 463).



Figure 1. "IYOMANTE (Bear Festival)" (left side) and "Bear Cub God and God Coin Holder" (right side). Photo credit: "Ainu History and Culture" (Ainu Museum of Ethnology, 1996, p. 27 & p. 15).

Among the rumors recorded in *History and Folklore of the Ainu*, “the bear brought us a lot of dried fish and fresh fish luggage (meat)”, “six pieces of dried fish”, “6 pieces of raw fish luggage” (Sarashina, 1979, p. 22).

The description of the sacred rhyme in the bear festival shows that although the Ainu believe that there are gods in all things and that hunting animals for survival needs is not considered blasphemy, they consider bears to be gifts brought to humans by the gods who wear bear furs. That is, the bear’s flesh is a gift from the gods. Since humans could not see the original image of the gods, they needed to be returned to the world of the gods through a spirit sending ceremony. The spirits returning to god’s world will wear the magnificent clothes offered by humans. A wealth of food, wine, and beautiful costumes will be prepared during the gifting ceremony. When the gods return to the world of the gods, they will put on the gorgeous clothes that mankind enshrine and bring delicious food. There is a two-way relationship between the Ainu and the gods in the mutual giving of gifts.

### **The Consciousness of Restriction Between Humans and Gods in Folk Legends**

So far, in most religious beliefs in the world that we know, the relationship between gods and humans is basically an unequal relationship between superiors and subordinates. The gods have absolute authority over human beings, and they can discipline human beings who make mistakes. Humans do not have the right to discipline the gods who make mistakes. The gods are punished in the world of the gods for their mistakes. The Ainu view of religion is similar and different in this respect. The same is the respect and obedience to the gods. In the folklore of the Ainu people, if humans make a mistake or show disrespect to the gods, they will definitely be punished by the gods. In the Ainu mythology, for example, humans angered the gods in charge of deer and salmon by wasting the deer and salmon, resulting in the punishment of starvation by the gods. Also, humans may suffer undeserved disaster or death at the whim of the gods even if they have not done anything wrong. In this case, the Ainu religious view is that humans will hold grudges against the gods and even curse them, and that humans may not forgive the gods. That is to say, human beings do not have absolute and unlimited obedience to the gods, and they can also not forgive the gods and have a certain right of punishment. For example, even though the bear is the most revered Ainu deity among all the gods, if a bear injured or killed a human, the elders of the Ainu tribe would protest by stomping on the ground with their feet while admonishing, “You are a god, but you have broken the law. You can be forgiven if you can use this power to compensate humans. If you do not, we will no longer worship you as a god and will throw you into hell”. If a bear kills a human, and the human kills the bear on the spot, then the Ainu would bury part of the bear’s body with the dead human and curse, “With the smell of the dead on you, you will not rise again as a god” (Sarashina, 1979, pp. 21-22). Mankind resist natural disasters through faith and sacrifices to gods and prayers for survival, health and peace. However, in the Ainu belief in gods, humans also have the right to punish gods. There are certain restrictions on the behavior of the gods. This is also a part of the unique belief of the Ainu for the coexistence with the gods under the premise of mutual restraint.

There are not only many descriptions of the punishments between gods and human beings, but also the giving and receiving of gifts in Ainu folk songs. There are also exhortations that teach people how to coexist peacefully with other creatures in nature. For example,

The fox and the otter were hunted by humans to a fallen country where there was no grass and no life because they had stolen fish caught by humans. In retaliation, they spread disease to the human world, leading to the extinction of the tribe. Therefore, even if the foxes steal the fish, do not kill them all. (Ainu Museum of Ethnology, 1996, pp. 20-21)

Through the exhortation story, we can see the spiritual activities of Ainu people living in symbiosis with other creatures in nature, which is another interpretation of the sense of “shared destiny”.

### Conclusions

The Ainu believe that there are gods in everything. Through oral literary analysis of sacred ballads and legends, we can see that the Ainu believe that human beings survive because of the gifts from gods. Therefore, human beings must fear the gods, worship the gods, thank and give back to the gods. Of course, one should also accept the punishments bestowed by the gods. However, the Ainu believe that humans and gods are not a one-sided and subordinate relationship of absolute obedience. If the gods do unreasonable harm to humans, humans can protest, and even punish or admonish the gods. The Ainu emphasize that human beings have autonomy and can coexist on an equal basis with gods. Regarding the treatment of other creatures in nature, the Ainu believe that bear, deer, fish and other objects are gifted by gods. Therefore, hunting for survival supplies is not considered to harm the gods. However, the Ainu do not want to hunt animals for their own material needs. It is advocated that even if other creatures infringe on the interests of mankind, they should leave room for each other to survive, otherwise humans will lose their living space. The Ainu strive for reciprocal relationship with the gods, and the emphasis of symbiosis with other creatures in nature reflects the belief of “shared destiny” in the civilizations of Northeast Asia. Modern people once believed that “man will conquer the sky”, and wantonly destruction of nature has caused human society to encounter an existential crisis. With the in-depth development of globalization, especially since the epidemic has swept the world, a shared destiny with the Earth has become the global consensus. Ainu’s “shared destiny” belief and survival wisdom provide a good reference for the development of modern society.

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