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CONCEPTS OF TIME AMONG THE
AINU OF THE NORTHWEST COAST
OF SAKHALIN¹

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Presented here is the basic cognitive structure underlying concepts of time among the Ainu of the northwest coast of southern Sakhalin, now resettled in Hokkaido. The temporal structure is examined by analyzing the Ainu units of what we call time and the cultural meaning attached to each unit. The Ainu time consists of a series of units in binary opposition. However, this opposition is not absolute but is relative to context. This temporal structure illustrates the dyadic structure of the Ainu world view, which has been the prime object of the author's study of the Ainu culture.

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I

My object here is to present the cognitive structure that seems to underly the conception of time among the Ainu of the northwest coast of Sakhalin. My discussion is based primarily on information I gathered in 1965-66 from *Husko*,² a gifted Sakhalin Ainu woman who is now sixty-eight years of age. I consider the use of one informant

for a study of cognitive structure to be methodologically sound because it allows the scholar to study in depth the whole cognitive structure of a single culture carrier. A study based on many informants, on the other hand, has to be reduced to the common denominator, because the cognitive structure of every culture carrier differs to some extent from those of his fellow men.

In what follows, I shall use the term "Ainu" to mean those Ainu who, in the recent past, inhabited the northwest coast of southern Sakhalin, north of *Rayčiska* (Japanese designation: Raichishika) to the former Russo-Japanese border.

II

The Ainu universe, called *mosiri*, is the total sphere of mental and physical activities and phenomena. The *aynu* (humans), living and dead, their deities (*kamuy*), and their demons (*oyasi*) have occupied it since time immemorial. It comprises southern Sakhalin, the adjacent sea, and the sky above. The Ainu conceive the universe spatially as well as temporally as analogous to a human body. Thus it has a head and posterior, and a limited life span.

The largest temporal unit of the Ainu, then, is the life span of the universe. The

Ainu call the beginning *mosiri sikah ohta* "when the universe was born" and refer to it simply as *husko ohta* "long ago." The world of today (*mosiri noskekehe*) is a long stretch of time that began many years ago and will continue until the end (*mosiri kes*), which is in the distant future; it is the world occupied by the living Ainu and their immediate ancestors.

For the Ainu, the beginning of the universe is characterized by the activities of the deities and the demons. In the beginning, the deities fought one another on air conveyances (*sinta*). They taught men knowledge of life through their culture hero *Yayresu:po*, who is half-deity. Just as the deities were very active in the beginning of the universe, so were the demons. However, since the deities instructed the Ainu in defense through dreams, the Ainu were able to escape from the attacks of the most fearful demons who often threatened to exterminate them. The Ainu also believe that at the beginning of the universe phenomena were the reverse of those known today. Thus, the Ainu were small in size; men, instead of women, menstruated; and locations of the sea and mountains were reversed. The Ainu have been told by the deities through shamans that the state of phenomena will be reversed again at the end of the universe.

The three stages of the life span of the universe thus are marked not quantitatively but qualitatively. Moreover, the opposing states of phenomena associated with these stages divides the life span of the universe basically into two parts: the beginning and end, and the present. Most importantly, the nonpresent is characterized by the activities of the deities and the demons, whereas the world of today is associated primarily with the Ainu activities. Since the Ainu consider the deities and demons as being more powerful than the Ainu, I shall use the term "super-Ainu" in describing these two types of beings of the Ainu universe and their attributes. Thus, the beginning and end of the universe are super-Ainu periods and the present an Ainu period.

The other temporal units are those dividing the time of the world of today. The largest are the seasons. The male subsistence economy, religious activities, and settlement pattern all divide the Ainu year (*pa:*) in

two seasons: cold (winter) and warm (summer).

The divisions in the male subsistence economy associated with these seasons are hunting and trapping (winter) and fishing (summer). For the Ainu men, the year starts with trapping in the mountains for marten (*hoynu*) (*Martes zibellina brachyura* Temminck [Chiri 1962:146]), an important game animal. During the midwinter when the snow is very deep, their economic activities are held to a minimum. Toward the end of the cold season, the men hunt for bear (*iso*) (*Ursus arctos colaris* [Chiri 1962:149])—the most important deities and game animal of the Ainu; bear cubs are also eagerly sought for the bear ceremony. Hunting seal (*tukara*) (*Phoca vitualis* [Chiri 1962:159]) at this time of the year is likewise one of the most important economic activities of the Ainu. At the beginning and the end of the cold season when the ice is not too thick, the Ainu men also engage in occasional ice-fishing (*peray*) as an alternative to hunting or trapping. However, the Ainu do not regard ice-fishing as real fishing since no boats are used and the catch is comparatively small. Thus, although major hunting, using weapons, and fishing from boats are strictly forbidden to women, whose smell of blood offends the deities of the mountains and the sea, women and children are not only allowed to ice-fish but are often the only ones who engage in it.

During the warm season, the Ainu males engage primarily in fishing in the sea, lakes, and rivers. The most important fishes are herring (*herohki*) (*Clupea pallasii* Cuvier et Valenciennes [Chiri 1962:13]), trout (*hemoy*) (*Oncorhynchus gorbuscha* Walbaum; *Salmo gorbuscha* Walbaum [Chiri 1962:55]), and salmon (*čuhčekh*) (*Oncorhynchus keta* Walbaum; *Salmo keta* Walbaum [Chiri 1962:35]). Trout and salmon are caught as they go up the rivers.

Religious activities, too, are divided by the seasons. The major religious ceremonies, which are carried out under male leadership, take place during the cold season. The first of the season is the bear ceremony, which is held when the marten hunters come back from the mountains. It is the rite of passage signifying the beginning of the cold season. In contrast, the performance of formal rites

are held to a minimum during the fishing season, since the Ainu are busy fishing and then drying and smoking the fish for their winter supply. They perform ceremonies spontaneously only when the weather is inclement.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the Ainu discontinued the use of both the separate winter settlement (*mata kotan*) and the traditional semisubterranean winter house (*riya čise*).³ Available information indicates that in the past the Ainu spent the cold seasons in a settlement along the upper reaches of a river in the hilly area and the warm seasons in a summer settlement on the shore (Chiri 1944:41-44; Sentoku 1929:20; Yamamoto 1943:17-43). This settlement pattern has profound significance because the Ainu attach special meanings to the mountains and the shore. The Ainu consider the mountains the most sacred place in the universe. They are the residence of the bear deities and other deified land mammals. Also the Ainu feel that many important phenomena of the universe ultimately belong to the mountains and use the expression *mako-raye*, which means to return to the ultimate place where one belongs; the term *mak* in *makoraye* means the mountains. They also explain that the purpose of the bear ceremony is to return the bear to the mountains where he belongs.⁴ On the other hand, the shore is the area that belongs to the Ainu. The Ainu settlements are located on the shore and their houses are built in a single line along the shoreline.

The above information suggests that the year too is divided into a super-Ainu portion and an Ainu portion. Thus, the cold season is the period when the major deities, namely, bears, seals, and other important land and sea mammals, provide their meat to the Ainu; it is the period when the Ainu perform religious ceremonies to express their appreciation and respect to the deities. And during this season they spend their life in the mountains—a super-Ainu part of the universe. In contrast, during the Ainu portion of the year, the Ainu engage in fishing. They consider fish the product of a sea deity (called *Čepehte Kamuy*), but the fish are not deities themselves.⁵ Ainu religious activities are not emphasized during this period and they live on the shore—the Ainu

part of the universe.

The above argument for Ainu division of the year into two seasons is based primarily on information my informant voluntarily provided as she talked about the subsistence economy, religious activities, and settlement pattern. When I specifically asked about the seasons, however, she recognized four, starting with spring—spring (*paykari*), summer (*saki:ta*), fall (*čuki:ta*), and winter (*matayta*). Although I lack conclusive evidence, I suspect that the four divisions starting with spring perhaps reflects recent influence from the Japanese.

Chiri, too, interprets both the Hokkaido and Sakhalin Ainu year as being divided into two major seasons of summer and winter. He points out that the terms or the concepts of spring and fall seldom appear in Ainu oral traditions, whereas summer and winter are very frequently mentioned (Chiri 1944:41-43). As an example supporting this argument, he refers to a passage from a *yu:kara* (Ainu epic) among the Hidaka Ainu of Hokkaido in which six years are expressed as six summers and six winters (Kindaichi 1942:292).⁶

The next unit in the Ainu scheme of time is the lunar month (*čuh*), which is the time duration between the waxing crescent (*pon čuh* = small moon) and the waning crescent of the moon (*ninčuh*). The lunar month likewise is divided in two sections: the period between the waxing crescent and the full moon and the rest of the month. This division has profound significance in the Ainu religious life since only during the first half of the month can they perform *inawkara*, which is the rite of making and offering the ritual sticks (*inaw*), the favorite of the deities. Since the *inawkara* is a significant part of all the major religious ceremonies, the Ainu can perform most of their religious ceremonies only during the first half of the month. This regulation is based on the belief that only during this period is the Goddess of Moon and Sun cheerful. When the moon wanes, it means that the Goddess is crying, and hence during the latter half of the month, one's prayer will not reach her. Thus, the first half of the lunar month is the super-Ainu portion of the month, whereas the latter half of the month is the Ainu portion.⁷

The smallest unit of time is the day,

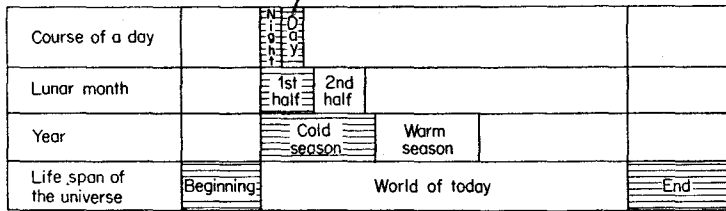


FIGURE 1

which consists of two parts: the time when it is dark, i.e., the night (*kunne*), and the time when it is light, i.e., the daytime (*to:no*). The night is allocated for the deities and demons to engage in their daily activities: the time between midnight and early morning is when the deities walk around, whereas the time for demons is between sunset and midnight. The Ainu day starts with the barking of sled dogs who, like roosters or an alarm clock, notify the Ainu of the beginning of their time. It seems that this scheme of time allocations is based on the reasoning that the day and night are reversed between the Ainu world and the worlds of the super-Ainu beings of the universe. Thus, while the Ainu do their daily activities, the deities and demons sleep; and while the Ainu sleep, the other two occupy the universe and engage in their activities.

III

In summary, it appears that all the temporal units of the Ainu are divided into a super-Ainu and an Ainu part: the beginning and end and the world of today in the life span of the universe; the cold and warm seasons of a year; the first and second half of a lunar month; and the dark and light halves of the day. Thus, it seems that the Ainu characterize what we call time with two opposing qualities, super-Ainu and Ainu, to comprise a unit. The nature of opposition of the two qualities is not a polar one; rather the Ainu part of a unit lacks the super-Ainu. Thus, the temporal units comprise contrast sets in binary opposition with the super-Ainu quality as the minimal distinctive feature.

This characterization of time supports E. Leach's argument that some, if not all, "primitives" think that time is "a succession of

alternations and full stops" or "a discontinuity of repeated contrasts" (Leach 1963:131, 133, 134). I must point out, however, that an important feature in the Ainu notion of time, and perhaps also in that of the Kachins as Leach's data indicate, is "repeated contrasts" that operate on several levels and are not simply repeated in a linear progression of time. This means that the contrasts or the opposing qualities characterizing a temporal unit are not absolute.

Figure 1 illustrates my interpretation. In it the shaded parts represent the super-Ainu portions of the temporal units. On each level a unit is divided into super-Ainu and Ainu parts. However, both super-Ainu and Ainu parts of a unit are included in either a super-Ainu or an Ainu part of a temporal unit of a lower level. For example, the present is an Ainu part of the life span of the universe, but included in it are both the super-Ainu cold season and the Ainu warm season of a year. The same holds for the rest. Therefore, I think that the dyadic structure or the dichotomizing principle is persistent and basic in the temporal concepts of the Ainu, but the opposing qualities do not characterize any parts of a temporal unit absolutely; they are relative to the context.⁸

NOTES

¹The basic idea presented in this paper was formulated in my dissertation where I discussed the Sakhalin Ainu concept of time as a part of their world view (Ohnuki-Tierney 1968: 116-122, 159-169). Further details of data are presented there. The fieldwork was carried out under a grant from the National Science Foundation. I am very grateful to the Foundation and to Dr. Chester S. Chard of the University of Wisconsin who acquired the grant for me. For their valuable suggestions about the discussion

of time in my dissertation, I would like to thank Drs. C. McClellan, Robert Miller, and Jan Vansina. I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the help of Dr. Leonard B. Glick and Mrs. Lyn Hanisch who read this version of the manuscript and offered helpful comments.

²All the italicized Ainu terms are in phonemic notation.

³The custom of using a winter settlement and winter houses were discontinued due to the introduction of the Russian-style log cabin, which enabled the Ainu to stay in their summer settlement on the shore even during midwinter. My informant was born in 1900 in a winter house in a winter settlement along the upper reaches of the *Masaramamma* River, which is a tributary of the *Tomarikesnayhe* (Japanese name: *Esutori-gawa*). Her family discontinued the custom soon after and she knows little about the settlement or the house structure for the cold season. Sentoku, an Ainu from Sakae-hama on the east coast of Sakhalin, writes that the Ainu on the east coast adopted the Russian-style houses and discontinued the custom around 1901 (Sentoku 1929:20).

⁴The Ainu consider the bear deities as a group male, although they recognize sex distinction of individual bears.

⁵My informant explicitly stated that fish are not deities themselves. She also said that the Ainu often call various beings in the universe *kamuy* 'deities' out of respect, but they are not real deities. This information contrasts with the interpretations of the Ainu concept of deities advanced by other scholars, most of whom include fish among the Ainu deities. I discussed in detail the opinions of other scholars in my dissertation (Ohnuki-Tierney 1968:262-264). I intend to investigate this problem further during fieldwork in the fall of 1968.

⁶The late Dr. Mashio Chiri was a Hokkaido Ainu from Noboribetsu who left most valuable records and interpretations of both the Hokkaido and Sakhalin Ainu culture. Among other positions, Dr. Chiri was professor of linguistics at the University of Tokyo and a member of the Sakhalin Museum staff.

⁷The designations for the lunar months as well as the number of the months in a year are both highly controversial among the Ainu. My informant pointed out that since many Ainu did not remember all the months in a year and their names, they often argued among themselves when they tried to give information on the Ainu months to Japanese. Her own accounts of the names of the months differed rather extensively on four separate occasions. Her points of reference in describing the Ainu life were consistently what we call natural phe-

nomena, such as the first frost.

⁸My super-Ainu/Ainu dualism corresponds roughly with the sacred and the profane used by many scholars (e.g., Durkheim 1965:52, et passim; Eliade 1961:10, et passim; Leach 1967:97; Van Gennep 1960:20, et passim). However, I did not use these terms since the present discussion is confined to my Ainu material and the terms "sacred" and "profane" may convey other meanings and connotations than I intend to convey in this discussion.

As is obvious, the Prague School distinctive feature concept was very useful in analyzing my data (see Jakobson, Fant, and Halle 1952:1-4, et passim).

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