

33/Ainu Sociality

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WHEN DISCUSSING HUMAN relationships and their workings among the Ainu, the term "sociality" is more accurate than the older standard anthropological term "social organization," which fails to emphasize the interplay between individuals and their social group (fig. 33.1). Rather than discussing abstract principles of social organization, this essay will describe the day-to-day behavior of Ainu individuals (figs. 33.2, 33.3)—including the bear-sending ceremony (*iyomante*), shamanistic practice, and other activities—as more illustrative of the concept of sociality. Although this discussion refers to other Ainu groups, my ethnography depends more on the Ainu of the northwest coast of southern Sakhalin rather than the Hokkaido Ainu. My fieldwork among the Sakhalin Ainu took place after they moved to Hokkaido at the end of World War II, in several periods

between 1965 and 1973. While the present tense is used for ethnographic descriptions, some of the beliefs and practices described have changed or been discontinued.

At the outset, two common misconceptions about the Ainu people must be pointed out. First, the Ainu have never been a monolithic group. In addition to intragroup variations, the Ainu of Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and the Kuriles were distinct social groups who inhabited three different ecological zones. The Hokkaido Ainu formed permanent settlements in areas abundant in natural resources, and some of their settlements were quite large and their political organizations well developed and more formal. The Sakhalin Ainu, on the other hand, moved seasonally between their summer and winter settlements and had less formalized political organization. The Kurile Ainu, with smaller and more mobile settlement patterns, were the hardest-hit victims of the Russian and Japanese fur traders; the last of the Kurile Ainu died in 1941 (Ohnuki-Tierney 1974). Variations among these three groups are also due to the fact that each had been in contact with different outside cultures who influenced and were influenced by each group of Ainu in quite different ways.

The second misconception involves representations that the Ainu were bypassed by history; on the contrary, they have never been isolated but rather were successful, wide-ranging traders. What is rarely recognized is that their culture developed in dynamic ways owing to their interactions with others, and these historical dynamics profoundly affected the development of Ainu culture in general; these influences even affected religious practices and beliefs, which are often assumed, erroneously, to lie at the core of any culture and thus be shielded from outside influences. Needless to say, interaction also resulted in the devastating impact of Russian and Japanese colonialism (Takakura 1943, 1960).

IYOMANTE—

THE BEAR-SENDING CEREMONY

Of all the rituals of the Ainu, the bear-sending ceremony is by far the most elaborate (figs. 33.4, 33.5). This is the only ceremony shared by all Ainu in all regions (except the northern Kuriles), although it had much regional variation. The ceremony involves not only the members of the immediate settlement



33.1

but those from other communities as well, thus contributing to regional communication. It provides a significant opportunity for male elders to display their wealth, symbolizing personal and community political power to those from other settlements (Pilsudski 1915).

Items that connote wealth—especially such trade goods as Japanese lacquerware, swords, beads, and other materials acquired through the Santan trade—were considered the most respectful offerings to the deities. The Santan trade (Takakura 1939) was a very active trade network that stretched from Korea and Osaka (Japan), along the Sea of Japan coasts of Honshu, Hokkaido, and Sakhalin, throughout the lower Amur region, and all the way to Manchuria, involving many peoples. The objects are not items of wealth per se but are Ainu expressions of respect toward the deities. Thus, the bear-

as reassurance of their goodwill toward humans. The *iyomante* is the most important form of gift exchange, and it occurs at a cosmic scale—between humans and deities. It is noteworthy that the cycle is initiated by the deities, who first sacrifice themselves for humans by offering their meat and fur. It is the deities who establish the model for generosity, which is the human value most treasured by the Ainu, as we will see later.

The entire process of the bear ceremony normally takes at least two years and consists of three stages. Hunters first capture a bear cub, either while still in its den or shortly after emerging. It is usually raised by the Ainu for about a year and a half, and at times women nurse these newborn animals. Although the time of the ceremony differs according to region, it is most often held in the beginning of the cold season; for the Sakhalin Ainu, it takes place just before they

33.2 GREETING DEMONSTRATION

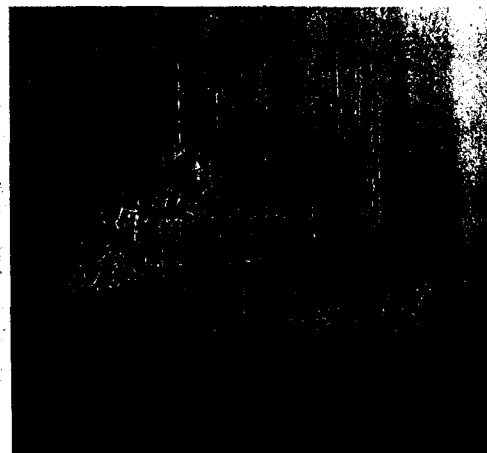
Jesse Tarbox Beals photographed Sangyea and Sangtukno demonstrating a greeting ceremony outside the Ainu house at the St. Louis Exposition in 1904. (NAA 93-10385)



33.2

33.3 GREETING RITUAL

Ainu custom called for a simple greeting ritual when people met, as shown in this illustration from a version of Shimanojo Murakami's *Curious Sights of Ezo Island* (1799). These and other rituals were among the vivid memories of early visitors to the Ainu. (NMNH 392,023-25)



33.3

sending ceremony, *iyomante*, which is often considered to be quintessentially "Ainu," does not represent a "closed" culture and society because it was predicated upon Ainu involvement in trade; at the same time it is also an expression of a unique religious practice.

From the perspective of the Ainu, the bear-sending ceremony is a "ritual of rebirth" for the bear. This is an important point that is often misunderstood by outsiders. The ceremony's purpose is to send off the soul of the bear in a ritually proper way so that it will be reborn in the mountains where the bear deities (*kimun-kamuy*) reside. If humans treat the bear, which is affectionately referred to as "deity-grandchild," with love and respect and send its soul back with gifts and offerings to the bear deities, then the bear *kamuy* will be pleased and will revisit the Ainu with gifts of meat and fur

move from their summer settlements into the interior for the winter.

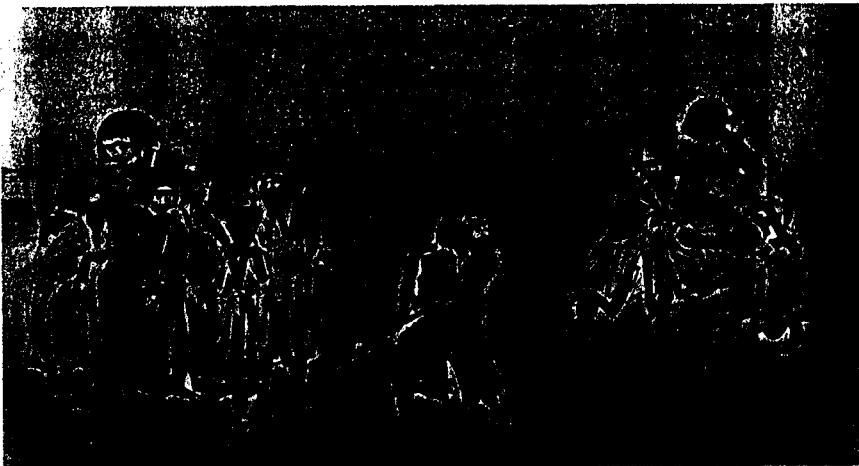
In the major ceremony, the bear is ritually killed and its soul is sent back to the mountains. The ceremony is multidimensional: it is religious, political, social, economic, and even joyful, with the merriment of eating, drinking, music, and dancing. But for the Ainu, for whom even the disposal of food waste is ritually controlled, religion is never isolated from life in general. All participants don their finest clothing and adornments for the *iyomante*. Prayers are offered to Fuchi, the fire goddess and the deity of the hearth and home, but the major focus of the ceremony is on the deity of the mountains who has sent the bear as a gift to humans.

Among the Sakhalin Ainu, after the bear is taken out of the bear house it is killed with

33.1 FESTIVAL SCENE

This hanging silk scroll, collected by Edward S. Morse and inscribed "Autumn, 1871," was painted by Byozan Hirasawa (1822-76). The painting shows a large group of Ainu people enjoying themselves in an exuberant social setting with an elder (*ekashi*) singing and playing the *tonkori*. One feels the warmth of the family atmosphere through details of facial expression, and all the clothes and hairstyles of people of different ages are carefully illustrated. (PEM 3279)

33.6



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33.6, 33.7 CORPORAL PUNISHMENT
Ainu social code included provisions for corporal punishment. Councils of elders considered the offense and prescribed the punishment. For serious crimes, the offender was beaten with a grooved wooden club that sometimes carried a carving of an animal, in this case, a snake. This image from *Illustrations of Ezo Livelihood* by Shimanojo Murakami dates to the early nineteenth century. (UPM A470B; NMNH 392,024)

elders must, however, consult a shaman before they make important decisions for the community, such as a declaration of a war.

The shamanistic ritual is held at night, for Ainu consider the daytime to be the time for humans and night the time for deities and demons. The ritual is held inside a house, at the hearth, which the Ainu consider to be a miniature universe and the abode of Fuchi, "Grandmother Hearth" and the most powerful female deity in the Ainu pantheon. She becomes the mediator between humans and other deities whose knowledge and power are being sought.

Among the Sakhalin Ainu, the ritual begins with drumming by the shaman, drumming announces the beginning of the ritual, expels evil spirits, and helps the shaman reach a state of trance. The shaman's

assistant produces an aromatic smoke by burning Ezo spruce or larch, a plant called *nubcha*, and minced dried leek. Throughout the rite the shaman frequently drinks a solution—considered too salty for ordinary human consumption—consisting of seawater (or river water during winter), Ezo spruce, *nubcha*, and dried kelp coated with sea salt. Shamans do not wear special garments except for a headdress, a headband to which various charms are attached, a necklace, and two *inaw* (for Ainu shamanism see M. Chiri 1973c; Ohnuki-Tierney 1976a, 1976b, 1981).

From a symbolic perspective, several aspects of shamanism reveal the importance of the female principle in Ainu culture: the rite is held in the woman's domain, inside the house, and most importantly, beside the hearth where Fuchi, the female counterpart of the bear deity, resides. It is here that women prepare the daily meals, converting natural resources into culturally edible food; for Ainu this is accomplished by thorough cooking, as distinct from their neighbors, the Nivkhi (formerly known as Gilyaks, a people of northern Sakhalin and the lower Amur delta region) and the Japanese, whose diet often includes raw food.

In other words, shamanism is expressive of the act of cooking, the conversion of raw natural products into culturally acceptable food, and it also involves healing, the way humans prevent a person from returning to nature through death. In this sense, it



33.8 TOBACCO POUCH

As in other cultures, smoking was one of the most enjoyable forms of male and female social activity, and great

amounts of time went into acquiring

tobacco and making smoking kits and paraphernalia. Women did not usually participate in the production of smoking equipment, but this pouch, collected in Sakhalin, was probably made by women and may have been imported. Bleached sealskin pouches with dyed skin and colored embroidery were common among mainland Amur River peoples. (FMC 32075)



33.9 PRAYING WITH INAW

Inaw, usually made of willow sticks shaved into different shapes and forms (depending on the ceremony or use) helped carry human prayers to the gods. Each *inaw* was carved in a form recognizable to the god for which it was intended. Men, who had responsibility for communicating with the gods, had to learn to carve *inaw* correctly, with precision and beauty, as well as how to pray in the appropriate language and with the prescribed rituals. This scene comes from *Drawings of Travels Through Ezo*, painted by Gentan Tani in 1799. (HML)

has the same symbolic purpose as the bear ceremony—the use of deities and nature for human spiritual and physical nourishment. However, while the role of women is expressed

privately as an individual act in shamanism, the bear ceremony expresses the role of men in the political structure, in their public role.

SOCIAL HIERARCHIES AND GENDER

Among the Ainu, women are generally assigned a lower social status than men. This status is given a clear cultural explanation: women are considered to be a defiling presence because of the smell of menstrual and parturient blood, which in Ainu belief does not disappear after washing. This is why women retreat (in Sakhalin custom) to their houses when the bear is being killed during the *iyomante*. Despite this, extraordinary power is assigned to female blood. When an epidemic, such as smallpox, threatens a settlement, male elders recite a sacred epic to ward off disease, believed to be spread by demons. However, if their recitation fails and victims begin to sicken, the only antidote considered effective is women's menstrual blood, which is applied to the afflicted spots of the sick person's body. In this case, young women hold powers complementary to that of older men. Similarly, the belief in the power of menstrual and parturient blood led to a practice whereby hunters always carry part of a woman's undergarment—such as underclothing from his mother or sister—close to him because of the power of the blood to protect him from deities and demons. These biological factors define the female body only during its reproductive years; therefore “uncontaminated” women past menstruation gain considerable power and collectively have higher status than young men.

The social hierarchy of Ainu women and men is further complicated by age, which is another important factor in determining the rank of individuals within society. The Ainu believe that the aged, both men and women, are closer to the deities than the young, and they alone have the privilege of using a special language of the aged, *onme-itak*. Only male elders, who are the officiants of the bear-sending ceremony, can recite the most sacred oral tradition, which is narrated in the language of the deities, called *kamuy-itak* (fig. 33.9). It is the older women who become official caretakers of the bear cubs.

The importance of age among the Ainu, whose economy is based upon hunting and gathering, means that the cultural valuation of individuals and the resultant social hierarchy are not based on a utilitarian criterion.

For example, elders who are no longer the major food providers are assigned more power than the young. Ainu notions of men/women and the aged/young transcend the biological givens of contemporary Western society.

The intricate hierarchy between men and women and the aged and the young is played out not only in ceremonial situations but in everyday life. Above all, it is expressed in the seating arrangement around the hearth. The most important direction in the Ainu universe is that facing the mountains; this is east for the Ainu of western Sakhalin, with north being next in importance. Among the Sakhalin Ainu, the sacred window through which the slain bear is brought into the house during the bear-sending ceremony is built into the wall facing the mountain side, usually north. The master of the house and his wife sit on the north side, and male elders who are guests sit on the mountain side. Young males sit on the south side, whereas young women sit on the west side, the lowest in the hierarchy of directions.

These cultural institutions express complex complementarity among the principles that govern social categories and hierarchy. As hunters of land and sea mammals, young men bring meat that not only sustains the body but enriches humans through the spiritual power embodied in meat and fish, the flesh of deities or the products of deities. Young women, on the other hand, gather plants and engage in daily cooking and in healing, other tasks important for sustaining human life. The aged, both men and women, are revered for their knowledge of religious

(*ikupasuy*), could take almost limitless shapes and forms, so men were free to express their personalities, artistic natures, and carving skills. The carver of this pipe took a highly unconventional approach. (UPM 56.8.9)

paramount moral value. Its practice starts with Ainu deities who offer their own bodies and flesh to humans for the sustainment of life. Political leaders are chosen on the basis of generosity—a person who is willing to share, for example, if he catches a deer. The bear

individual achievements and qualities.

Generosity is the most important human value among the Ainu, and complementarity is the cardinal principle of Ainu sociality. These are not abstract notions; they are working principles in Ainu daily life.

33.10 PIPE WITH CARVED DECORATION
Ainu pipes (*kiseri*) were decorated with beautiful and intricate carvings on portions of their stems. Sometimes, as here, the carvings covered the entire length of the stem and served as a public advertisement of a man's artistic skill. Pipe carving was one of the most challenging carving tasks a man could undertake. (PMC 86052)

matters, including shamanism, their wisdom is the most precious reservoir of human knowledge about the deities that govern the Ainu universe.

In cases where political organization was more developed, as with the Hokkaido Ainu, the bear ceremony and its political significance came to overshadow shamanism. Shamanism then became culturally devalued and was relegated to women, a common phenomenon in many parts of the world. Among the Hokkaido Ainu, men cannot start the healing process without a woman shaman's diagnosis, the male political leader cannot declare a war or make other important decisions without a woman shaman's ritual performance for prognosis and diagnosis, and at times aged women even held more power than aged men, as in the case of an older Sakhalin Ainu woman who overturned the verdict of accidental homicide that had been agreed upon by a body of male elders.

Contrary to some Marxist scholars' romanticized image of the egalitarian society of hunter-gathers, principles of hierarchy and social division prevail among the Ainu as in any other population. These principles, however, are fluid and complementary rather than being inflexible rules upholding a linear model in which those above enjoy exclusive power over those below. Therefore, among the Ainu the relationship between men and women is one of complementarity rather than antagonism or power inequality (the latter being enormously important components of the contemporary Western sense of "gender").

The basis of the Ainu notion of sociality is the emphasis on a person's generosity as the paramount moral value. Its practice starts with Ainu deities who offer their own bodies and flesh to humans for the sustainment of life. Political leaders are chosen on the basis of generosity—a person who is willing to share, for example, if he catches a deer. The bear

ceremony is at once an expression of mutual generosity—the sharing of the bear meat by all—and an expression of social hierarchy demonstrated by the order in which the meat was partaken, with male elders eating first.

But no society is without conflicts. The Ainu principle of conflict resolution also indicates the primacy placed upon the sociality of individuals, i.e., individuals who are members of a social group. Here again shamanism offers a supreme example: One category of illness that shamans use in their diagnoses is called *aymawko abun* (penetration by the spirit of an arrow). The symptom of this illness is a patient's experience of a sudden sharp pain, localized, for example, in the stomach, chest, or side of the torso, like an arrow wound. This may happen if someone utters words of hostility toward another, but the victim is often neither the instigator nor the one verbally attacked; there may be no particular relationship, kinship or otherwise, between the offender and the victim. The idea is that if a person verbally assaults another, someone in the community will suffer from this illness. Therefore, when someone gets angry and utters harsh words against another, people in the community reprimand the offender. It is the collective responsibility of the members of the community to uphold this code of ethic, social disharmony is not simply a matter of one individual against another but affects everyone (Ohnuki-Tierney 1981: 66).

Generosity is a moral value that links an individual to his/her society. It is expressive of the way in which Ainu society works, not by rigid principles but through the combination of principles of social organization with individual achievements and qualities. Generosity is the most important human value among the Ainu, and complementarity is the cardinal principle of Ainu sociality. These are not abstract notions; they are working principles in Ainu daily life.

33.11 PIPE WITH BURL BOWL
Pipes, like men's prayer sticks (*ikupasuy*), could take almost limitless shapes and forms, so men were free to express their personalities, artistic natures, and carving skills. The carver of this pipe took a highly unconventional approach. (UPM 56.8.9)