MYTHOLOGIS

THE AINU MYTHOLOGY BOOK

The Kamuy, the Bear Spirit, and Hokkaido

GUILLAUME HENRY

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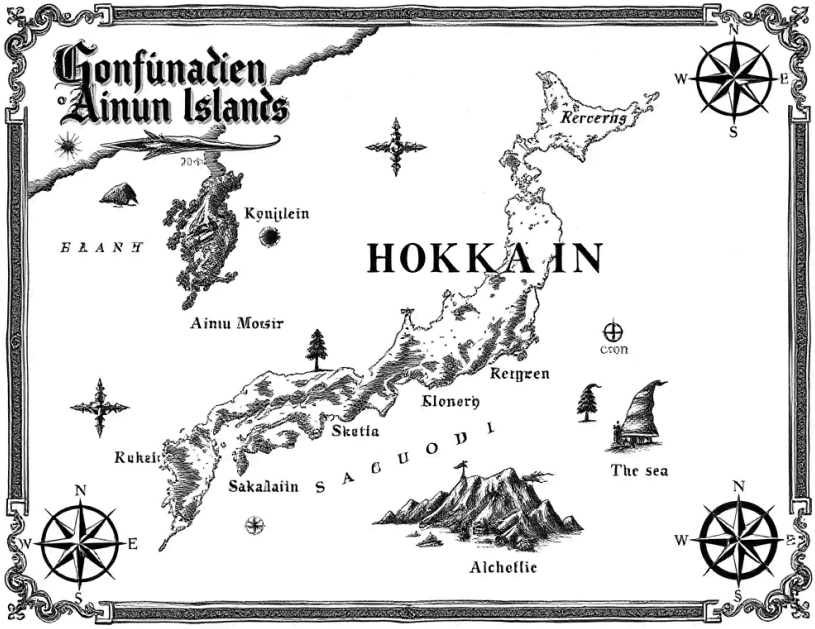
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Ainun Islands
HOKKAIN
Kyuijlein
Ainu Mosir
Rerceris
Reiyren
Elonerh
Skatia
Rukeir
Sakalaiin
SAGUODI
The sea
Alchoffie
N
W
E
S

For the Ainu elders who sang the yukar when no one else would listen.

INTRODUCTION

I am sitting cross-legged in a reconstructed cise, the traditional Ainu house, in Shiraoi, southern Hokkaido. The hearth fire in the center, the ape-uchi-kamuy, the fire goddess herself, crackles and throws shadows on the elm-bark walls. Outside, January wind off the Pacific cuts through the pines, but here the goddess keeps us warm, and I understand, suddenly and physically, what it means to say that everything is a god wearing a disguise. The smoke rises through the opening in the peaked roof. An elder across the fire is explaining that the bear we see in the forest is not simply a bear. It is a god who has put on the ramat, the disguise of fur and claw, to bring us a gift. When we receive that gift with the proper ceremony, the god sheds the ramat and returns to the kamuy mosir, the land of the gods, to tell the other deities how well we treated him. The fire pops. I write this down in my notebook, and my fingers are cold the moment they leave the heat. That was three years ago. I had come to Hokkaido because I kept encountering references to Ainu mythology in comparative studies, always brief, always tantalising, and always incomplete. The scholarship existed but remained scattered: nineteenth-century missionary transcriptions, mid-twentieth-century linguistic analyses, a few English translations that had gone out of print. I wanted to know why a cosmology this old and this coherent had stayed so quiet in the larger conversation about world mythology. The answer, as it turned out, was not mysterious. It was political, deliberate, and recent. The Ainu are the indigenous people of Hokkaido, the southern half of Sakhalin, the Kuril Islands, and the southern tip of Kamchatka. Archaeological evidence places continuous Ainu habitation in this region for at least 10,000 years, though some scholars argue the cultural continuity stretches further. They fished salmon in rivers that ran cold and

clear. They hunted deer and bear in forests of oak and birch. They built their cosmology around reciprocity: the gods gave, humans received, and both parties honored the terms. Then, beginning in the Meiji period and accelerating through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Japanese state set about erasing them. The 1899 Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act banned Ainu language in schools, forbade traditional hunting and fishing practices, and seized communal land. The law was not rescinded until 1997, when the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act finally acknowledged that the Ainu existed and had rights. By then, the damage was thorough. Current population estimates suggest around 25,000 self-identified Ainu remain, though the real number is likely higher. Many families stopped teaching the language. Many stopped performing the ceremonies. The myths survived primarily because a handful of people, Ainu and outsider alike, wrote them down before they disappeared entirely. This book draws on those written records. I rely most heavily on John Batchelor, an Anglican missionary who lived among the Ainu from the 1880s onward and transcribed hundreds of yukar, the epic chants that carry the myths. Batchelor was a complicated figure: a missionary with all the blind spots that implies, but also a man who learned the language fluently and recorded what he heard with care. His 1901 collection, The Ainu and Their Folk-Lore, remains one of the most complete sources we have. I also draw on Chiri Mashiho, an Ainu linguist and scholar who, in the 1950s, categorized the oral tradition with precision. Chiri distinguished between kamuy yukar, the god-songs narrated by deities in the first person, and ainu yukar, the hero-songs that follow human protagonists. His 1953 Classification of Ainu Epics is the taxonomic backbone of everything that came after. Donald Philippi's 1979 anthology, Songs of Gods, Songs of Humans, gave English readers their first substantial access to these chants, translated directly from Ainu with scholarly rigor and a poet's ear. More recently, figures like Shigeru Kayano, an Ainu activist and Diet member who died in 2006, worked to preserve the language and the stories within living memory. I owe this book to all of them. The methodology here is straightforward. I am not an anthropologist. I am not Ainu. I am a former signals officer who spent years reading encrypted messages and started noticing that mythologies, too, have patterns. I read comparatively, the way a cryptographer reads ciphertext: looking for structure, repetition, the places where a culture's deepest logic shows through. What I found in Ainu mythology was a sys-

tem of thought that refuses the basic premise most of us grow up with, which is that humans are here and gods are there. In the Ainu view, gods are here. They wear the skins of animals, the bark of trees, the currents of rivers. They visit constantly. The myths are not fables from a distant past. They are user manuals for a world still alive with divinity. The kamuy concept is central. Everything that exists, everything that moves or changes or holds power, is a kamuy. The word is usually translated as god or deity, but neither English term quite fits. A kamuy is an entity of the spirit world, the kamuy mosir, that takes on a physical form, the ramat, to interact with humans. The bear is a kamuy. So is the owl, the killer whale, the salmon, the millet plant, the thunder, the smallpox demon, and the fire in your hearth. Some kamuy are benevolent. Others are capricious. A few are openly hostile. But all of them can be addressed, honored, and in some cases sent home with gifts so they speak well of you when they return to the other world. This is not animism in the vague sense the term is often used. It is a formal theology with rules. When an Ainu hunter kills a bear, he does not simply take meat. He performs the iyomante, the sending-away ceremony, in which the bear's spirit is honored, fed, and given inau, the carved prayer sticks, to carry back to the kamuy mosir. The logic is economic and relational: the bear gave his body as a gift, and the human returns the gift with respect and ritual wealth. If this sounds transactional, that is because it is. The Ainu myths are full of gods who complain when humans fail to show proper gratitude. The relationship is reciprocal, not worshipful in the kneeling sense. You do not beg the kamuy. You trade with them. The yukar themselves are strange and beautiful. Most are chanted in the first person, the god or hero speaking directly to the listener. Many begin with the phrase "I am a god, and this is my story." They are episodic, repetitive, and dense with formulaic phrases: the kind of oral poetry that lets a skilled chanter hold a narrative in memory for hours. Some yukar are short, a few hundred lines. Others stretch into the thousands. The longest, the epic of Poiyaumbe, runs to over 15,000 lines in some versions. They were performed at night, by firelight, often over multiple evenings. The language is archaic even by Ainu standards, full of words no longer used in daily speech. Chiri Mashiho noted that many younger Ainu in his time could no longer understand the full text without explanation. That poses a problem for this book. I am writing for English readers in the twenty-first century, most of whom have never heard of the Ainu and will not sit still for 15,000

lines of formulaic chant. My task is to present the mythology in a form that respects the sources but does not bury the reader. I have chosen to retell the myths in prose, not verse, and to streamline the repetitions while keeping the first-person voice wherever the original uses it. Where Batchelor or Philippi provides a full translation, I cite it. Where the sources disagree, I say so. Where I am uncertain, I do not invent. Each chapter of this book takes one figure, one story, one piece of the cosmology, and sets it in context. I open each chapter with a sensory scene, something to let you inhabit the world before we examine it. Then I bring in the scholarship: the sources, the variants, the historical background. Then another scene. Then more analysis. I close each chapter with an image, something to carry with you. I want you to finish each chapter and remember one vivid detail and learn two things you did not know. That is the contract. I also want you to take the Ainu seriously. That sounds obvious, but it is not. Indigenous cosmologies are often presented as curiosities, footnotes to the Greek and Norse traditions that dominate popular mythology. The Ainu deserve better. Their mythology is as old as any in Eurasia, as internally consistent as the Eddas, and in some ways more radical. It imagines a world where divinity is not distant but constant, where every meal and every hunt is a conversation with the sacred. That worldview was nearly destroyed. It was not destroyed. It is still here, carried by people who chose to remember when forgetting would have been easier. This book is my attempt to bring that memory into English in a form that does justice to the material. If you are holding this, you are about to meet gods who wear the skins of animals, heroes who marry goddesses, and a cosmology built on the idea that reciprocity is not a virtue but the structure of reality itself. The fire goddess is still burning. The salmon are still running. The gods are still here, wearing their disguises, waiting to see if we will recognize them. Turn the page. Step into the cise. The first story begins at the hearth.



CHAPTER 1

THE WORLD OF THE KAMUY

The snow lies six feet deep in the Hidaka Mountains. It has been falling since October, and it will not fully melt until May. In the valleys between peaks, Yezo spruce stand black against white, their branches weighted and silent. The Saru River, normally audible from a mile away, moves under a lid of ice thick enough to bear a man. At the river's edge, where a hot spring keeps a small patch of ground bare, a brown bear has left tracks. The paw prints are eighteen inches long, claws included. The bear weighs perhaps four hundred kilograms. For the people who have lived here since the Jomon period, this animal is not simply a predator to be avoided or a resource to be managed. It is a god who has descended from the kamuy mosir, the realm above, wearing the ramat of fur and claw. The bear has come to bring a gift. In the cise, the traditional house built of elm bark and reed thatch, the hearth fire burns day and night. The ape-uchi-kamuy, the goddess of fire, lives in the flames. She is ancient beyond measure, and she is always hungry. The family feeds her with split alder, with dried salmon skin, with the shavings of sacred inaw. The smoke rises through the opening in the peaked roof and carries prayers upward. The fire's heat pushes back the cold, but its purpose is older than comfort. The hearth is the threshold between worlds. The goddess who lives there watches the humans sleep, watches them wake, watches them prepare food and mend nets and tell stories. She listens. She remembers. When the kamuy from the

mountains and rivers visit in their disguises, she is the one who welcomes them, the one who translates petition into smoke, smoke into language the gods can hear. Outside, the wind off the Sea of Okhotsk cuts through the pines with a sound like tearing silk. The cold is absolute. The light at midwinter lasts seven hours. This is Ainu Mosir, the quiet land, the land of humans. It extends from the southern tip of Hokkaido to the northern reaches of Sakhalin, from the Kuril Islands in the east to the mouth of the Amur River in the west. The archaeological record shows continuous habitation here from the late Jomon period, circa 1000 BCE, through the Satsumon culture of the eighth to thirteenth centuries. The people who live here do not write. They sing. The yukar, the long narrative epics, are passed from grandmother to granddaughter, mother to daughter, elder to child. The songs describe a world in which every mountain has a name, every river a temperament, every animal a divine original. The world is not empty. It is crowded with gods. The snow keeps falling. The bear, in its den, sleeps through the worst of the winter. The fire goddess, in the hearth, never sleeps at all. The Ainu called their homeland Ainu Mosir, which translates most simply as the land of humans, though the word ainu itself means "human" in a sense broader and more theological than mere biology. The term distinguishes the people of this world from the kamuy, the divine beings who inhabit the upper realm, and from the creatures of the pokna mosir, the underworld beneath. The geography of Ainu territory at its greatest extent included all of Hokkaido, the southern half of Sakhalin, and the Kuril archipelago stretching northeast toward Kamchatka. Linguistic evidence, particularly the place-name studies conducted by Chiri Mashiho in the 1930s and 1940s, suggests that Ainu speakers once ranged farther south, into northern Honshu, and that the boundary between Ainu and Japanese linguistic zones shifted northward over the course of the medieval period as the authority of the Kamakura and later the Tokugawa shogunates extended into what had been autonomous Ainu lands. The archaeological record preserves this history in layered sediment. The late Jomon period, from roughly 1000 BCE, shows settlements along river valleys and coastal plains, with subsistence based on salmon fishing, deer hunting, and the collection of wild plants. The Satsumon culture, which flourished from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries, displays continuities with the Jomon tradition but also shows increasing contact with continental populations through trade networks linking Hokkaido with the Amur basin and the

northern reaches of the Japanese archipelago. The material culture of the Satsumon people, pottery in particular, shares stylistic features with both the Okhotsk culture of Sakhalin and the northern Honshu Emishi. By the fourteenth century, as recorded in Japanese sources such as the Suwa Daimyojin Ekotoba, the people the Japanese called Ezo were recognisably Ainu in language and custom, though the ethnic boundary was fluid and the term itself was applied inconsistently by outside observers. The cosmos the Ainu described in their oral epics was not a single plane but three distinct realms stacked vertically. The kamuy mosir, the land of the gods, lay above the human world. It was described in the kamuy yukar, the songs of the gods themselves, as a place of abundance where the divine beings lived in great houses and wore robes that never wore out. The ainu mosir, the middle realm, was the land where humans built their cise, raised their children, and performed the ceremonies that maintained the reciprocal relationships between the worlds. The pokna mosir, the underworld, was a place of shadows and silence, though it was not a place of punishment in the Christian or Buddhist sense. The dead went there, and certain demons and malevolent spirits lived there, but it was not conceived as hell. The tripartite structure appears consistently in the yukar recorded by Kubodera Itsuhiko in the 1920s and in the transcriptions made by Chiri Mashiho and later by Kayano Shigeru in the postwar period. The kamuy themselves were not gods in the Greek or Norse sense. They were not immortal beings with fixed forms and permanent residences on a distant mountain. The word kamuy, which Chiri Mashiho analysed in his 1953 essay "Classification of Ainu Epics", refers to any being or force that possesses spiritual power and that originates in the kamuy mosir. Fire is a kamuy. Water is a kamuy. The bear, the owl, the killer whale, the fox: all are kamuy. So too are smallpox, famine, and the tsunami. The essential characteristic of a kamuy is that it wears a ramat, a disguise or outer garment, when it descends to the human world. The bear that the hunter sees in the forest is not the kamuy itself but the disguise the kamuy wears. When the bear is killed and its flesh is eaten and its skull is honoured in the Iyomante ceremony, the kamuy sheds the ramat and returns to the kamuy mosir. The relationship is not one of domination but of hospitality. The kamuy visits, bringing a gift, and the humans receive that gift with gratitude and ceremony. The ceremony ensures that the kamuy will visit again. The fire goddess, known as Ape-huci-kamuy or Ape-uchi-kamuy depending on dialect, occupies a central place in this system. She is

called grandmother fire, and she is the oldest of the kamuy who dwell continuously in the human world. The hearth is her body. The flames are her voice. Every cise is built around the hearth, and the position of the hearth determines the orientation of the house itself. The hearth is located slightly east of the central post, and the seat of honour, the place where the head of the household sits and where guests are received, is on the eastern side of the fire, the side closest to the kamuy mosir. The side opposite, to the west, is the domain of women and daily work. The fire goddess mediates between the human residents and the visiting kamuy. She receives the offerings, the strips of dried salmon and the libations of sacred wine, and she transforms them into smoke that rises to the kamuy mosir. Without her, communication with the divine realm is impossible. She is never allowed to go out. If a family must move or if a house is abandoned, the fire is carefully carried to the new hearth, often in a smouldering log wrapped in bark. Water, like fire, is both substance and divinity. The kamuy of water, Wakka-us-kamuy, inhabits rivers, lakes, and springs. The word wakka means water, and us means "to be plentiful" or "to possess". The kamuy of a particular river is not an abstract spirit but a localised presence with a known temperament. The Ishikari River, the longest in Hokkaido, is a powerful kamuy, one who must be approached with care. The hot springs that dot the volcanic landscape of Hokkaido are places where the boundary between the human and divine realms is thin. The steam that rises from the springs is the breath of the kamuy. The ritual offerings of inaw, the carved willow wands with their spiraling shavings, are placed at springs and riverbanks as gifts to the water kamuy. The form of the inaw, which Munro described in detail in his 1962 study Ainu Creed and Cult, varies by region and by the identity of the recipient kamuy. Those made for the fire goddess are smaller and more finely carved than those made for the bear kamuy. The number of shavings, the direction of the curl, and the type of wood used all carry meaning. An elder from the Saru River valley stands at the edge of the water in early summer. The ice has broken, and the river is high with snowmelt. The sound is a steady roar. He holds an inaw in his right hand, a fresh-cut willow wand with six tight spirals of shaved wood curling upward. He speaks to the water kamuy in Ainu, a prayer that begins "Wakka-us-kamuy, please listen." The words are not memorised but extemporaneous, following a pattern learned in childhood. He asks for the kamuy's protection, for safe passage during the salmon run, for abundant

fish. He pours a libation of sake, though in earlier generations it would have been home-brewed millet beer, into the current. The sake is not for the kamuy to drink, not literally, but for the kamuy to receive in the same way that the fire goddess receives the smoke from burning offerings. The offering is transformed in transit. The human sends up material gifts; the kamuy, in return, sends down blessings, which arrive in the disguise of game and fish and health and good weather. The elder plants the inaw at the river's edge, pushing the sharpened end into the mud so that the shavings flutter in the wind. The willow is fresh, and it will take root if the water does not rise too high. Some inaw placed in autumn are still standing the following spring, sprouted and green. This is considered a very good sign. The elder bows once, turns, and walks back to the cise. The prayer is finished. The concept of ramat, the disguise or cloak, is central to understanding the Ainu view of nature. John Batchelor, the Anglican missionary who lived among the Ainu from 1877 until his death in 1944, recorded the term repeatedly in his Ainu-English-Japanese Dictionary and in his 1901 ethnographic work The Ainu and Their Folk-Lore, though he translated it variously as "dress", "appearance", and "material form". The term is more precise than any of those renderings suggest. Ramat refers specifically to the outer covering that the kamuy wears when it enters the human world. The bear's ramat is its hide, its bones, its claws. The salmon's ramat is its scales, its flesh, its swimming body. The owl's ramat is its feathers and its nocturnal voice. When the kamuy wishes to visit the ainu mosir, it dons the ramat. When the visit is concluded, it sheds the ramat and returns to its true form in the kamuy mosir. The human role in this process is to receive the gift that the kamuy brings, to use it with gratitude and without waste, and to send the kamuy home with ceremony. The ceremony transforms killing into hospitality. The hunter who kills a bear is not a conqueror but a host. This theological structure has analogues in other northern indigenous traditions, though the specific vocabulary and ritual forms are distinctively Ainu. The Sakha people of Siberia describe a layered cosmos with an upper world of spirits, a middle world of humans, and a lower world of the dead, a cosmology strikingly similar to the Ainu tripartite structure. The Evenki, who live along the Amur basin and whose territory once overlapped with the northern extent of Ainu settlement, also speak of animal spirits who must be honoured and sent back to the spirit realm after their physical bodies are taken. Comparative studies, particularly those by the ethnographer Waldemar

Jochelson in the early twentieth century and later by Anna Reid and others, suggest that these shared features reflect both ancient cultural contact and the common ecological pressures of living in subarctic environments where hunting and fishing are primary modes of subsistence. The reciprocal relationship between humans and animals is not sentimentality but survival strategy made sacred. The yukar, the oral epics, preserve the theology in narrative form. The term yukar is a broad category that includes several sub-genres, which Chiri Mashiho classified in his systematic typology. The kamuy yukar are sung from the perspective of the kamuy themselves, often in the first person, describing their journeys to the human world and their interactions with the Ainu. The ainu yukar are sung from the perspective of human heroes, often young men or women who face supernatural challenges and emerge victorious or who fail and die honourably. The oina are shorter, more personal songs, often describing domestic life and local events. The kamuy yukar are the oldest and most sacred. They describe the creation of the world, the establishment of the rituals, and the first visits of the great kamuy to the ainu mosir. They are sung in a rhythmic, chanting style, with a repeated refrain that marks the transition between narrative episodes. The language of the kamuy yukar is archaic, often difficult even for fluent Ainu speakers to understand fully without training, and it includes vocabulary and grammatical structures that are not used in everyday speech. The transmission of the yukar was traditionally a female responsibility. Grandmothers taught granddaughters, mothers taught daughters. Men sang the ainu yukar, the hero songs, but the kamuy yukar, the songs of the gods, were the domain of women. This gender distinction is linked to the structure of the household and the role of women as the primary keepers of the hearth. The fire goddess is female, and the women who tend the fire are her closest human companions. The yukar were sung at night, after the evening meal, with the family gathered around the hearth. The performance could last for hours. Some of the longer kamuy yukar, such as the epic of the killer whale kamuy who marries a human woman, take several nights to complete. The singer did not memorise the text word for word but learned the narrative structure, the key phrases, and the rhythm, and then reconstructed the song in performance. Each performance was unique, though the core narrative remained stable. The earliest transcriptions of the yukar were made by John Batchelor in the 1880s. His collection, published in Ainu Folklore in 1888, includes summaries and partial

translations of several kamuy yukar, though his command of the Ainu language was limited, and his Christian perspective coloured his interpretations. He described the kamuy as "spirits" and the rituals as "superstition", and he attempted to draw parallels between Ainu religious practices and biblical narratives, an approach that tells us more about Batchelor's evangelical agenda than about the Ainu worldview. More reliable transcriptions began in the 1920s with the work of Kubodera Itsuhiko, a Japanese ethnographer who recorded yukar performances in the Hidaka region, and especially with the work of Chiri Mashiho, a native Ainu speaker and linguist who was born in 1909 and died tragically young in 1961. Chiri's transcriptions, published in a series of volumes beginning in 1936, include full texts in Ainu with Japanese translations and extensive linguistic and cultural annotations. His work remains the gold standard for yukar scholarship, and his Classification of Ainu Epics is still the basis for all subsequent typologies. The reciprocal relationship between humans and kamuy is not a metaphor. It is a system of exchange that governs every aspect of Ainu life. The kamuy provide gifts: meat, fish, water, fire, medicinal plants, good weather. The humans provide gifts in return: inaw, libations of sacred wine, prayers, songs, and above all the proper performance of the sending ceremonies that allow the kamuy to return to the kamuy mosir. The most important of these ceremonies is the Iyomante, the bear-sending ceremony, which will be described in detail in a later chapter. The Iyomante is the apex of the ritual system, the ceremony that makes visible the entire theology of the ramat and the journey of the kamuy. But smaller sending ceremonies are performed throughout the year for the salmon, for the owl, for the fox, for any kamuy who has visited in a form that can be killed and used. The kamuynomi, the libation of sacred wine, is the simplest and most frequent offering. The term nomi means "to drink" but also "to offer drink". The wine, called tonoto in some dialects and sake in others after contact with the Japanese, is poured onto the fire or onto the ground as a gift to the kamuy. In the case of the fire goddess, the wine is poured directly onto the flames, where it hisses and evaporates and rises as fragrant steam. In the case of the water kamuy or the mountain kamuy, the wine is poured onto the earth or into the river. The human does not drink first. The kamuy receives the first portion, always. This hierarchy is absolute. To drink before offering is to insult the kamuy and to risk their displeasure, which can manifest as illness, accident, or failed hunts. The nomi is accompanied by a brief prayer, spo-

ken or chanted, that identifies the kamuy being addressed, states the purpose of the offering, and asks for continued blessings. The prayer ends with a repeated refrain, often a simple phrase such as "please listen, please remember." The spring thaw has come. The Saru River runs brown and fast, carrying logs and ice floes and the debris of winter down from the mountains. At the mouth of the river, where the fresh water meets the sea, the salmon are beginning to gather. They have spent two years in the Pacific, and now they are returning to spawn. The first runs are small, scouts, but within a month the river will be thick with fish. A fisherman stands on the bank with a marek, a pronged spear, waiting. He is not hunting in the modern sense. He is receiving visitors. The salmon, in Ainu cosmology, are kamuy. They are divine beings who have travelled from the kamuy mosir in the disguise of fish to bring their flesh as a gift to the humans. The fisherman knows this. His grandfather taught him, and his grandfather's grandmother taught his grandfather. The salmon are not taken. They are welcomed. When the fisherman spears a salmon, he pulls it onto the bank and kills it quickly, with a blow to the head. He speaks to it in Ainu, thanking it for its journey, thanking it for its gift. He cuts an inaw from a willow branch growing nearby and plants it at the river's edge, an offering to the salmon kamuy who are still in the water, those who have not yet shed their ramat. He will carry the fish back to the cise, where it will be cooked and eaten, and the bones will be returned to the river so that the kamuy can reassemble its ramat and swim back to the kamuy mosir. The bones must not be burned. They must not be given to the dogs. They must be returned intact to the water, with ceremony, with gratitude. This is not metaphorical. The fisherman believes, in the same way that he believes his house is real and the river is cold, that the salmon is a god in disguise. The belief is not faith in the absence of evidence. It is knowledge transmitted through the yukar, through the ceremonies performed by his elders, through the structure of the language itself, which does not have a word for "animal" in the sense of a category separate from and inferior to humans. The word kamuy includes bears, salmon, owls, foxes, whales, and also fire, water, thunder, and the smallpox demon. The category is not zoological but theological. A kamuy is any being that originates in the kamuy mosir and that visits the ainu mosir wearing a ramat. The salmon, by that definition, is as much a god as the fire in the hearth. The fisherman carries the salmon home. His wife cleans it, working carefully to keep the skeleton intact. She saves the

head. The roe, if there is any, is a particular delicacy, a gift within the gift. The flesh is grilled over the fire, and the fire goddess receives the first portion, a small piece of skin and fat thrown onto the flames. The smell of cooking salmon fills the cise. The family eats in silence, or near silence. There is no prayer at the meal, because the prayer was already spoken at the river. The meal itself is the continuation of the ceremony. When the fish is eaten, the bones are wrapped in bark and taken back to the river. The fisherman's son, a boy of eight, carries the bundle. He plants another inaw at the water's edge and places the bones in the current. They sink slowly, turning in the flow, and disappear. The salmon kamuy has gone home. The cosmos the Ainu described in their epics and rituals was not a distant, abstract structure but an immediate and practical map of the world they inhabited. The kamuy mosir was not heaven in the Christian sense. It was not a reward for virtue or a place one reached after death. It was a parallel realm, spatially above the human world but temporally simultaneous with it. The kamuy lived there in their true forms, without the ramat, in houses larger and more beautiful than any human cise, surrounded by abundance. They descended to the ainu mosir not because they needed anything from the humans but because they chose to visit, because the exchange of gifts maintained the relationship, and because the relationship was the foundation of the cosmos. Without the visits of the kamuy, there would be no game, no fish, no fire, no water. Without the ceremonies of the humans, the kamuy would have no reason to return. The pokna mosir, the underworld, was less clearly defined. The term pokna means "below" or "under", and mosir means "land" or "world". It was the destination of the dead, though not a place of punishment or suffering in the Buddhist or Christian sense. The dead went there, and they lived there in a manner not substantially different from their lives in the ainu mosir, though the light was dimmer and the air was colder. The demons who caused disease and misfortune lived there as well, though they were also considered a type of kamuy, malevolent kamuy whose visits were unwelcome but whose existence was necessary. The cosmos required a place for the harmful as well as the beneficial. The rituals designed to repel demons, such as the use of sacred arrows or the burning of mugwort, were not exorcisms but polite refusals. The human says to the demon, in effect, "Thank you for your visit, but we do not wish to receive your gift. Please return to the pokna mosir." Chiri Mashiho, who was born into an Ainu family in Noboribetsu and who trained as a lin-

guist at Hokkaido Imperial University, spent his short life attempting to record and analyse the yukar before the last fluent speakers died. His work was urgent. By the 1920s, when he began his systematic recordings, the number of people who could perform the kamuy yukar in the traditional style was already small, and the pressures of assimilation into Japanese society were accelerating. The Meiji government, which came to power in 1868, pursued a policy of forced assimilation that included banning the Ainu language in schools, prohibiting traditional ceremonies such as the Iyomante, and seizing Ainu land for Japanese settlement. The result was cultural collapse. By the mid-twentieth century, the majority of ethnic Ainu were monolingual in Japanese, and the yukar were no longer sung in most households. Chiri's transcriptions, published in a series of volumes in the 1930s, 1940s, and posthumously in the 1960s, preserved thousands of lines of text that would otherwise have been lost. His commentary, written in Japanese but dense with linguistic and anthropological insight, remains the foundation for all subsequent work on Ainu oral literature. I find it telling that Chiri died at the age of fifty-one, overworked and under-resourced, having spent his entire adult life racing to record a tradition that the Japanese state was actively trying to erase. His work was not antiquarian nostalgia. It was an act of resistance, a refusal to let the kamuy yukar disappear without a trace. The songs he recorded, the cosmology they describe, and the theology of reciprocity they encode are now accessible to anyone who can read Japanese, but they are no longer part of a living oral tradition in most Ainu communities. The last native speakers of Ainu, those who learned the language as children and who could perform the yukar from memory, died in the 1990s and early 2000s. The language now exists primarily in recordings, transcriptions, and the efforts of revitalisation programmes. The fishing nets are mended and hung to dry. The salmon run is over for the season. The river will freeze again in a few months, and the cycle will begin anew. The fire goddess, in her hearth, watches the smoke rise through the roof. She is older than the mountains. She was here before the first humans built the first cise, and she will be here when the last cise collapses into the earth. She is not watching over the humans in the sense of a guardian. She is simply present, as fire is present, as the gods are present in every stone and stream and storm. The snow begins to fall again. The kamuy of the north wind is walking down from the mountains, wearing the ramat of ice and cold. The world is a gift. The world is thick with gods.



CHAPTER 2

KAMUY FUCHI, GODDESS OF THE HEARTH

The fire never goes out. In the cise, the rectangular house with its east-facing window and elm-bark walls, the hearth sits at the center, and the fire on it burns day and night. This is not metaphor. This is not symbol. The fire is Kamuy Fuchi, the old woman goddess of the hearth, and she lives here, in these flames, in this house, in every house where the Ainu have ever dwelt. She is called Ape-huci-kamuy in the Saru River dialect: ape meaning fire, huci meaning grandmother or old woman, kamuy meaning god. She is the first to receive offerings. She is the last to sleep, which is to say she does not sleep at all. The flames leap and subside, leap and subside, fed with split alder and dried birch bark. The wood is never thrown. It is placed, with two hands, with a word of greeting. The woman of the house kneels at the western side of the hearth, the side reserved for daily work, and sets three small logs across the coals. The logs catch quickly. The heat pushes outward in a wave. The woman pours a measure of sake, home-brewed from millet, into a lacquered cup and tilts the cup over the flames. The sake hisses and evaporates, and the smell rises: sweet, alcoholic, smoky. The woman speaks in Ainu, low and steady. "Kamuy Fuchi, please listen. We give you this wine. We ask for your protection. We ask that you carry our words to the other kamuy." The prayer is not memorised. It follows a structure learned in childhood, taught by her grandmother, who learned it from her grandmother. The structure is old.

The words change slightly with each repetition, but the form is stable. The woman bows once, her forehead nearly touching the earth floor, and rises. She returns to her work, grinding millet in a wooden mortar. The fire goddess watches. She is always watching. Outside, the January wind cuts through the pines with a sound like tearing cloth. The snow lies thick on the ground, thick on the roof. The valley is silent except for the wind and the occasional crack of a branch breaking under the weight of ice. Inside, the fire burns, and the goddess is warm, and the humans are warm because the goddess permits it. The hearth is not simply a convenience. It is the theological center of the house. The cise is built around it. The ridgepole runs east to west, and the hearth is located slightly to the east of the central post, the post that holds up the roof and anchors the structure to the earth. The seat of honour, where the head of the household sits and where guests are received, is on the eastern side of the fire, the side closest to the kamuy mosir, the divine realm above. The woman's side, the side where food is prepared and children are nursed and daily work is done, is to the west. The division is not casual. It is cosmological. The fire mediates between the two sides, between male and female, between the sacred and the domestic, between the human realm and the realm of the gods. The smoke rises through the opening in the peaked roof, a rectangular hole lined with bark to prevent the thatch from catching fire. The smoke does not simply disperse. It climbs, carrying the scent of offerings, carrying the words of prayers, carrying the petitions and gratitude of the household up to the kamuy mosir, where the other gods live in their great houses and wear robes that never wear out. Without the fire goddess, the prayers would not reach them. Without her, the offerings would remain mere matter, wood and wine and food, inert and meaningless. She transforms them. She translates substance into language the gods can hear. The fire goddess occupies a unique position in the Ainu pantheon, one documented extensively in John Batchelor's 1901 ethnographic study The Ainu and Their Folk-Lore. Batchelor, an Anglican missionary who lived among the Ainu from 1877 until his death in 1944, devoted an entire chapter to the rituals surrounding the hearth, and while his Christian perspective colours his interpretations, his descriptions of daily practice are precise. He records that no meal begins without an offering to Kamuy Fuchi, no prayer is spoken without her mediation, and no kamuy is honoured without first honouring her. She is not the most powerful of the gods in terms of raw force. The bear kamuy, Kimun Kamuy,