

The semantics of the Ainu bear ritual *iomante*: bear as a kind of *inaw*

Tresi Nonno

independent scholar; Chiba, Japan; e-mail: tresi_nonno@hotmail.com

Alexander Akulov

independent scholar; Saint Petersburg, Russia; e-mail: aynu@inbox.ru

Abstract

Bear was one of the most important beings for Ainu. Bears were not only named *kamuy*, but were considered as true *kamuy* by the Ainu. And bear ritual *iomante* was one of the most significant rituals in the system of Ainu rituals. In the system of Ainu religion *inaw* is a universal sacrifice, i.e.: a bridge between the world of people and the world of *kamuy*, a bridge through which *ramat* can flow from the world of *kamuy* to the world of people. And the *iomante* ritual serves to establish a connection/bridge with the world of *kamuy*, and grace from the world of *kamuy* flows over the bridge into the world of people: people become more successful in hunting. And thus, bear in the *iomante* ritual can be considered as a kind of *inaw*.

Keywords: Ainu beliefs; bear; bear ritual; bear feast; Ainu

1. Ainu notion about bears

Bear was one of the most important beings for Ainu.

In Ainu folklore narratives/poems bears are named simply *kamuy*¹. The use of the term *kamuy* in relation to bear is nothing else, but a hunting ban on pronouncing its true name. The original Ainu word for bear is *iso*, from this word come such words as *iso-itak* – “news”, literally “story [about] bears” and *iso-n* – “rich”/ “lucky” literally “bearful”, “a person who is good in hunting bears.”

And bears were not only named *kamuy*, but were considered as a true *kamuy* by the Ainu. It should be noted that not all beings were considered as *kamuy* by Ainu: animals and plants which could be easily caught/picked and that can do nothing good or bad to Ainu were not considered as *kamuy* (Ohnukey-Tierney 1974). According to Chiri Masihō, *kamuy* have a human appearance when they are in their *kamuy* world, and they live there like people (Ohnukey-Tierney 1974).

Bears were a true *kamuy*, and it is implemented in Ainu folklore. In a *menoko-yukar*² is described how a girl was saved by a bear. A girl was grown by her elder brother, they lived in the place named Rep-un-not³, also this elder brother hold a bear and one day he decided ‘to send’ bear, i.e.: to perform the bear ritual – *iomante* and went to a Japanese trading post to get some sake and rice for the ritual. When he came back, a woman from the lower end of the settlement said to the elder brother that his younger sister didn’t behave herself well, that she

¹ Ainu word *kamuy* means a being/item that is filled by vital energy *ramat* and can share *ramat* or to take it away (for more details see: Nonno 2015).

² *Menoko-yukar* is a type/genre of Ainu heroic poem (*yukar*) in which a central role is played by a girl/young woman (*menoko*).

³ Rep-un-not means “Sea Cape” in Ainu.

and the bear copulated like dogs. The elder brother ordered to unload all goods to the man of the lower end of the settlement. At night, in a dream the bear came to the girl and told her that the man who appeared to be her older brother was not her brother at all, that he kidnapped her when she was still a child to marry her later, and also the bear warned her that next morning people of the settlement led by her fake elder brother would try to kill the girl and the bear and explained what she should do. In the morning a mob of armed men gathered to kill the girl and the bear, but the bear killed most of them and he and the girl successfully escaped. Then the bear told the girl that his task is to take her to her home. Along the way the bear and the girl got into another skirmish, but finally successfully reached the home settlement of the girl where they were gladly welcomed by true brothers of the girl. Then the brothers of the girl 'sent' the bear to the world of *kamuy*, but then the bear returned in the form of a man, married the girl, and due to this her brothers were especially lucky in hunting (Nevsky 1972: 53 – 66).

At the end of this narrative there is a fragment from which it becomes clear that the bear is *kamuy*. When the bear returned in the form of a man he told the girl about his conversation with his father *kamuy*:

“...*kamuy a=ona-ha ene itak-i pase kamuy a=ne a hi-ne aynu menoko a=uk wa kamuy kotan ta e kor wa ne yak pase kamuy si-y-apapu-re a-ki ruwe ne na, e=kon rusuy pe aynu menoko ne hawe ne ciki or-ta arpa wa kor sekor kamuy a=ona-ha i=ye wa...*» –

«... *kamuy my father said the following: “as far as I am a great kamuy, so if you take an Ainu girl and keep her in the kamuy settlement, then they will speak badly about the great kamuy, since your desired is Ainu girl, so go there and own her ... ”* (Nevsky 1972: 66).

When the task is understanding the mental mechanisms of a certain culture, then the most correct way is to give the word to it, i.e.: the best way to get into the mechanisms of a culture is to refer to the texts produced by this culture for itself.

2. A general outline of the Ainu bear ritual – *iomante*

Bear ritual⁴ was one of the most important rituals in the system of Ainu rituals. The ritual was generally named *iomante* which means “send someone”. The word-form *i-oman-te* consists of the following components: initial *i-* is a marker of an indefinite patient, *oman* is the singular stem of the verb “go”, and the suffix *-te* is a marker of causative.

The *iomante* ritual was not an exclusive bear ritual; it could be performed on any living creature, but the bear *iomante* is the most substantial/significant of them.

To perform the *iomante* ritual Ainu caught a bear cub in the forest at the end of winter or in early spring and brought it to the settlement where it was grown (usually 1 – 2 years). And when the bear grew large enough, it was killed and then eaten.

Bear was killed upon a special place decorated by *inaw*⁵. Usually a bear was killed by arrows, but also sometimes the bear's neck was squeezed with logs (fig. 2). These logs remind the device named *uray kinige* that was described by M. M. Dobrotvorskii (see Akulov, Nonno 2020: 12)

⁴ We suppose that the term *bear ritual* is more accurate than the term *bear feast*.

⁵ *Inaw* is usually a wooden stick arranged with shavings, *inaw* is an inseparable item of any Ainu ritual (for more details about *inaw* see Akulov, Nonno 2019)

Before the bear is shot by a usual hunting arrow it is shot by special arrows named *heperay* (fig. 1, fig. 3), the word *heperay* means “bear cub arrow”: *heper* – “bear cub” and *ay* – “arrow” (Kayano 402). At the very moment of killing the bear and immediately after that they usually shot *heperay* arrows in the sky to show the way to the *ramat* of the bear.



Fig.1. The moment of shooting a bear: the man with a bow is ready to shoot the bear with a usual arrow, and many *heperay* arrows that were shot before can be seen on the ground (a drawing by Murase Yoshinori on a folding screen, image source – lomante)



Fig. 2. A bear neck is squeezed by logs (Matsuura Takeshirō copy of a Murakami Shimanōjō's painting, image source – lomante)

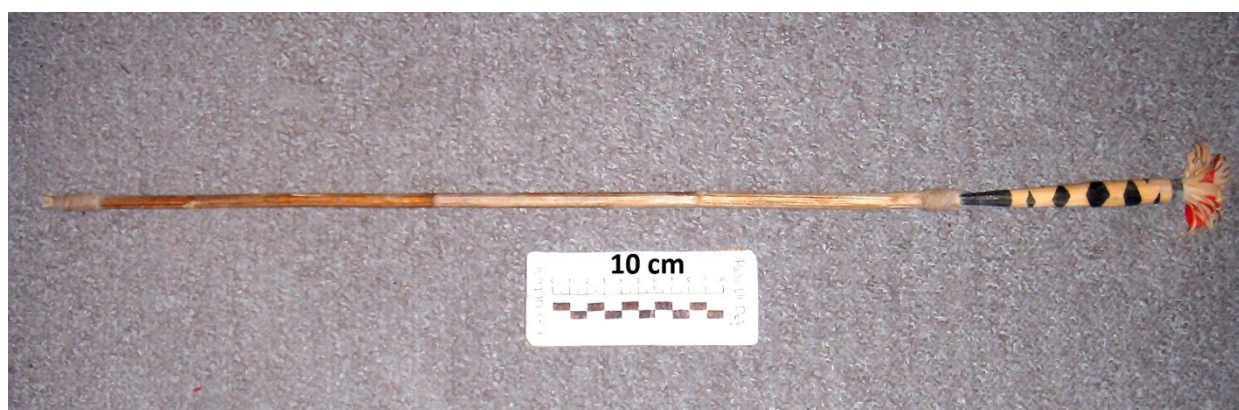


Fig. 3. *Heperay* arrow (photo by Alexander Akulov)

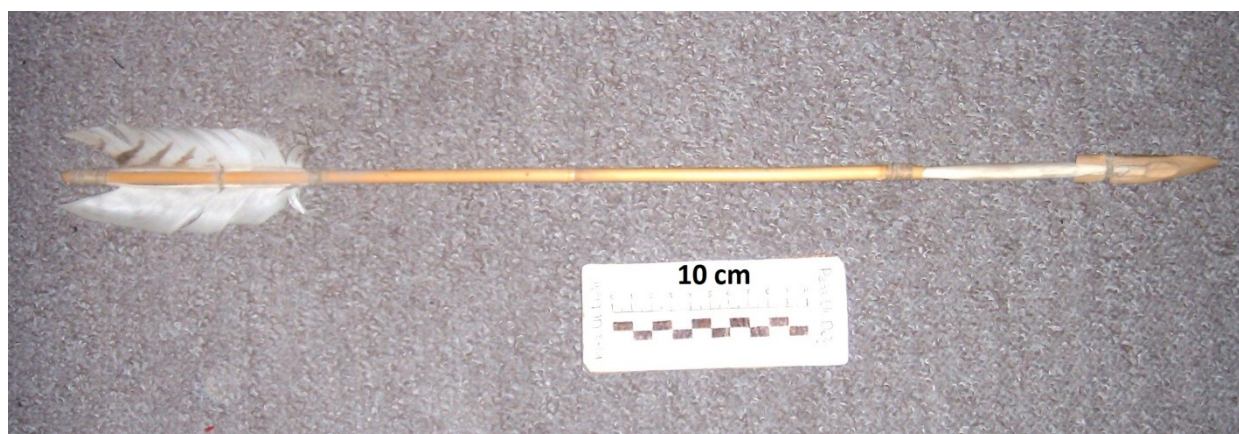


Fig. 4. Usual hunting arrow (photo by Alexander Akulov)

After the bear was killed, it was placed upon a special place arranged by *inaw* and other goods (fig. 5). And they offer sake and *inaw* to the bear.

The Ainu believed that *kamuy* in the form of bear was a guest of Ainu, and left its meat and skin as gifts to people, and so if people treated the bear well, then *kamuy* would send many other bears and also other animals to the hunters.

The Ainu believed that by performing the *iomante* ritual, they return the *ramat* (souls) of killed animals back, and thereby contribute to the maintenance/increase in the number of game animals.

3. Bear as an *inaw*

It is pretty noteworthy that in the *iomante* ritual are used many different *inaw* (the *heperay* arrow also can be considered as a kind of *inaw*). And we suppose that it is possible to state that bear itself can be considered as a kind of *inaw*.

Inaw is a universal 'pure' item that can hold and transmit *ramat*. In the system of Ainu religion *inaw* is a universal sacrifice, i.e.: a bridge between the world of people and the world of *kamuy*, a bridge through which *ramat* can flow from the world of *kamuy* to the world of people (Akulov, Nonno 2019).



Fig. 5. A fragment of Japanese painting depicting the Ainu bear ritual in 1870 (image source – Iomante)

A sacrificial object is a metonymic sign for the donator. Engaging a borderline person (a clergyman) to conduct a sacrifice ceremony in a boundary zone, the donator throws a bridge between the world of the deities and the world of people, and the power/grace of deities can flow to it over this bridge (Leach 1976).

At the first sight, the aim of the *iomante* ritual is in itself: the propitiation of bear soul and returning it to the world of *kamuy*. However, the *iomante* ritual serves to establish a connection/bridge with the world of *kamuy*, and grace from the world of *kamuy* flows over the bridge into the world of people: people become more successful in hunting.

And thus, bear in the *iomante* ritual can be considered as a kind of *inaw*.

Inaw is one of the key items in the system of Ainu beliefs, and it helps in the interpretation of many other issues.

References

Akulov A., Nonno T. 2019. *Inaw*. *Cultural Anthropology and Ethnosemiotics*, Vol. 5, № 4; pp: 65 – 69

Akulov A., Nonno T. 2020. The origin of *inaw*. *Cultural Anthropology and Ethnosemiotics*, Vol. 6, N 1; pp.: 7 – 18

CAES Vol. 8, № 1 (March 2022)

Iomante イオマンテ. Wikipedia. <https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/イオマンテ> – accessed March 2022

Kayano Shigeru 萱野茂 2005. *Ainugo jiten* アイヌ語辞典 (Ainu language dictionary). Sanseidō, Tokyo

Leach E. 1976. *Culture and communication: the logic by which symbols are connected. An introduction to the use of structuralist analysis in social anthropology*. Cambridge University Press, New York – accessed March 2022

Nevsky N. A. 1972. *Ainskii fol'klor* (Ainu folklore) Nauka, Moscow – Leningrad

Nonno T. 2015. On Ainu etymology of key concepts of Shintō: *tamashii* and *kami*. *Cultural Anthropology and Ethnosemiotics*, Vol. 1, № 1; pp.: 24 – 35

Ohnuki-Tierney E. 1974. *The Ainu of the northwest coast of southern Sakhalin*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., New York