

She Joins the Ancestral Host:

Death, Mourning, and Burial in Ainu Culture

Written by Samuel Foster

She Joins the Ancestral Host

My close family and I are gathered in our *chise* (house). I am sitting by the hearth with Ekashi (grandfather) and Acha (father) while my mother lies there. A few others are gathered here as well, near relatives and close friends. My mother name is Resunotek (Skilled at Child-Rearing), and her name is fitting; She was a good mother.

She has been lying there, delirious and staring, for some time now. Ekashi suspected *wen kamui* (evil spirits) were the cause of her illness, and he spent hours praying and pleading with the punishing spirits and offering prayers to *Kamui Fuchi*, Goddess of the Hearth. But now it is clear that his attempts at placating the *kamui* were unsuccessful. We know that she is dying, her *ramat* (spirit) ready for the journey through the Underworld.

With Ekashi sitting attentively at her side, Resunotek closes her eyes--going unconscious--her *ramat* leaving her body. To attract the attention of *Kamui Fuchi*, Ekashi gently draws an ember from the hearth.

"Fuo!" he exclaims, calling for the attention of the spirits. He prays to *Kamui Fuchi*, asking her to take care of Resunotek's spirit, to protect her. His words are as much a prayer from Resunotek as they are a prayer for her. Ekashi then kneels at the head of my mother, his daughter, and he bows over it, placing his palms on the floor.

"Fuo." he exclaims, calling to Resunotek. And he speaks, addressing her, sorrowing over the spiritless body. His words are a mixture of regret and reassurance. When he is done speaking, he bows low and weeps. Many gathered here begin to weep with him. We all join in a song of lament, a mournful repetition of 'o-yo-yo-pota' (oh, how tragic). Others are invited to



address Resunotek, to perform this last farewell, being brought to tears when they do. Even though we are all grieving, and we all feel *uko-noyoise* (altogether wilted), I find the harmony and power of our chanting strangely beautiful, like a *pirika kamui* (beautiful spirit).

---

Ekashi calls for my elder brother and sends him as a messenger to deliver the bad news. The relatives from our *kotan* (settlement) are the first to arrive, along with Resunotek's close friends. Now Resunotek is dead, but while she is not properly dressed to join the Ancestral Host, only near relatives and close friends are allowed in to see her. We feel *uko-yai-buri-anno*, a feeling of mutual embarrassment, as she lies there. She is embarrassed to be unable to rise and greet her friends and family, and we share that feeling with her.

Only the females are allowed to prepare her body, so the men, along with some of the women, leave the *chise* (house) while Fuchi (grandmother), Resunotek's sister, and a few other relatives begin the preparations.

While I wait, I worry about my mother's spirit as it is no longer present in her body. But

Ekashi tells me that my mother has been a good person, and that *Kamui Fuchi* will be there when her spirit reaches the Underworld. She will guide my mother's spirit to *Kamui Kotan*, the Settlement of the Spirits, where she will join the Ancestral Host. Ekashi's words ease my worries.

Later, when the preparations are complete and guests have arrived, we rejoin those inside the *chise*. On the floor north of the hearth lies a mat, laced up with a special cord of plaited black and white hemp. Resunotek's body lies there, her head pointing to the east. She has been washed from head to foot and dressed in her funeral clothes. Ekashi tells me that clean garments are essential for the journey to join the Ancestral Host. These clothes have been specifically made for this purpose.

She wears two tunics embroidered in white, with no bright colors: the first is worn as usual, but folded in reverse; the second is laid over her body, with the back lying on her chest. The tunics are worn like this to help her forget her memories of the *Ainu Moshir* (land of the humans) as she journeys to the *Kamui Kotan*. She also wears deer skin leggings and fur mittens, clean and unused. A necklace of *tamasai* (beads) is on her neck, and a *tara* (headband) of three woven herb cords is placed on her head.

We enter slowly and softly, our bodies bowed down with our hands at or below our knees. There are many more people here now, with relatives and guests from other *kotan* joining us. Those already inside begin their mournful chanting of 'o-yo-yo-pota', and those outside join them. Resunotek's close family sits near her body: Acha to the north-east next to Fuchi, along with her brothers and sisters. As guests enter, they say tearful farewells to Resunotek and give *umura-ipa* (sympathetic embraces) to her relatives before sitting. Elders from other families and from other *kotan* say short prayers to *Kamui Fuchi*. The farewells, prayers, and embraces last for a long time, over an hour, but they bring everyone much



comfort.

---

After we have finished this mourning ceremony, we prepare for the funeral feast. We all wash our hands in the river near our *kotan* while food is prepared. We return to our seats, with elders of our *kotan* to the east of the hearth and elders from other *kotan* opposite them. A cup of beer and a libation wand are passed around, and small offerings are made to *Kamui Fuchi*, *Kotan-koresu* (Village-raising) *Kamui*, and *Chisei-koro* (House-owning) *Kamui* by touching the beer with the wand and allowing a few drops to fall to the earthen floor. Trays of food, including stews and millet cakes, are placed near the lower hearth. A small portion of the food is taken from the hearth and presented to Resonutek, a gift from *Kamui Fuchi*. We ask *Kamui Fuchi* for permission to eat, and the feast begins.

When we are finished, Ekashi's brother, an important elder in our *kotan*, makes a short address to *Kamui Fuchi* before kneeling at Resunotek's head like Ekashi did before. He delivers a final address to her, expressing everyone's sorrow at her dying so young. His speech is full of passion, bringing himself and many of us back to tears. After some time, he finishes his address by reminding Resunotek that she has had her last meal with us, that she is ready to make the journey to *Kamui Kotan* to be with the ancestors, that she must follow *Kamui Fuchi* and be careful not to lose her way.

The mat is wrapped around her and tied to a carrying pole with a special cord of white hemp. Before we leave, Ekashi makes one last request of *Kamui Fuchi*. He has packed many goods for her to bring with her to the *Kamui Kotan*: a bowl, a knife, a sickle, a digging-stick, a loom and spindle, a few needles of various sizes. All of these are broken, dead like Resunotek, so their *ramat* can go with her.

We walk to the grave site, carrying Resunotek's mat with the carrying pole. Ekashi walks alone ahead of the group, carrying a mat-bag full of the grave-goods. We arrive, and a grave is dug while we wait for sunset. To deceive the evil spirits, the grave is lined with matting and two food bowls filled with earth are placed on the ground near the west end. Resunotek's near relatives gather near the grave, and we begin the sad chant of '*o-yo-yo-pota*'. At sunset, she is lowered gently into the grave. A food bowl and chopsticks are placed at her head, and the rest of her grave-goods are placed at her feet. Together, we begin *toi-toi a uko-chupo* (earth earth thus together replacing). Her relatives each take a handful of the dug-up earth and drop it into the grave. The other guests do the same soon after. When the grave is re-filled, the grave post is inserted at the head, and Ekashi brushes the grave with switches and throws some *ikema* root over the grave to purify it.

Finally, a lacquered vessel of water is carried to the grave. Some water is poured over

the two bowls of earth, and the rest is poured over the grave post. The lid of the vessel is crushed over the post, and the empty vessel is inverted and forced down so that it lies with its rim around the post. This fills the grave post with *ramat*, transforming it into *Irura Kamui* (Guide Kamui), who will act on *Kamui Fuchi*'s behalf to guide Resunotek and see her safely through her journey. Weeping relatives, myself included, kneel at the foot of the grave post. We take mud from the bowls and coat the lower part of the grave post, stroking it downward.

While we were at the grave, those who were left at home have cleaned the house and prepared a final meal. We return and wash our hands, and Ekashi's brother thanks *Kamui Fuchi* for all that she has done. For many months after, while sitting by the hearth, I will pray to *Kamui Fuchi* for my mother's safe journey to *Kamui Kotan*, and at the Feast of All Souls for many years to come, I will make small offerings to her.



Glossary of Terms:

*Acha*: uncle/father (not necessarily related)

*Ainu*: human beings

*Chise*: dwelling, house

*Ekashi*: elder, grandfather, ancestor

*Fuchi*: grandmother, ancestress

*Irura*: guide

*Kamui*: god, spirit

*Kotan*: village, settlement, community

*Mawe*: magic

*Moshir*: land

*O-yo-yo-pota*: mourning chant

*Pase*: important

*Pirika*: good, beautiful

*Ramat*: spirit, soul

*Tamasai*: beads

*Uko-noyouse*: altogether wilted

*Wen*: evil, malicious



### Interpretation

This narrative attempts to portray the death, mourning, funeral, and burial rites of *Ainu* culture as they were before modern influences. There are a few difficulties in accurately portraying that culture, the primary being the extent to which the *Ainu* adapt to the Wajin (majority Japanese) over time. One such adaptation was the loss of pottery-making knowledge with the sudden abundance of iron available through trade with the Wajin in the 14th century. Other changes can be seen as you approach modern times, such as the use of coffins rather than folding mats to hold corpses. For this narrative, I have attempted to portray *Ainu* culture after its development (from the 14th to 16th centuries) but before external modern influences.

While some of the details of the *Ainu* death rites may change over time, their influences on individuals and on communities remain mostly unchanged. The general tone of the death ceremonies varies depending on the age of the deceased. If the deceased is young, and not supposed to die, their death is seen as a great misfortune (almost certainly caused by *wen kamui*). The rites that follow are mournful and somber. However, if the deceased is an elder, whose death is expected, the tone shifts towards celebration and peace. There is still mourning and lamenting, but there is also joy and congratulation. Regardless of age, these death rites provide closure to the relatives and friends of the deceased, allowing them to express their feelings and continue with their lives. They bring communities together, for mourning or celebration, and create community ties between *kotan*.

These death rites also illustrate some fascinating aspects of *Ainu* beliefs and cultural values. The two most important beliefs are of *ramat* and *kamui*. *Ramat* is an all-pervading, indestructible spiritual essence, that can be transferred (through death, rituals, or *kamui mawe*) but never diminished. *Kamui* are the *Ainu* deities and spirits. *Kamui* can be found almost everywhere, in almost anything of significance which contains *ramat*. *Kamui* can be traditional

and important (*pase kamui*), like *Kamui Fuchi* (often called the Spirit of the Hearth, or the Great Ancestress), or personal and simple, like the house-protecting or guiding *kamui*. Three examples of the transference of *ramat* are the departing of *ramat* from the body during unconsciousness, the releasing of *ramat* from tools through breaking (a symbolic death), and the pouring of river water on the *kuwa* to transform it into *Irura Kamui*.

Another significant part of the *Ainu* death rites is the knowledge that the *ramat* of the deceased will go on (if they are judged to be good by *Kamui Fuchi*) to join the Ancestral Host in the *Kamui Kotan*. A large part of the mourning, rituals, and burial go towards preparing the deceased for that journey. Those ancestors who make it to the *Kamui Kotan* continue to be respected and remembered through the other rites, stories, and prayers of the *Ainu*.

### Reflection

I find the *Ainu* culture and beliefs to be particularly fascinating because of how vastly different they are from my own. The *Ainu* see inherent spirit and spirits everywhere and in everything, giving meaning to all actions and events. They have reasons to be respectful and reverent to all things: plants, animals, tools, people, the hearth, ancestors... I see spirit inherent in nothing, and gods nowhere. For me to find significance and meaning in actions and events, I have to create that significance and meaning myself or borrow from someone else's values. While my views leave me open to accepting new ideas, empathizing with others, and temporarily adopting alternate perspectives, they leave many gaps unfilled. I am occasionally envious of other worldviews, the *Ainu kamui* and *ramat*, Christian faith, Buddhist karma, but I find myself unable to fully accept them as my own.

However, there are some aspects of the *Ainu* death rites that I find similar and complementary to my own beliefs. The preparation for and journey to the *Kamui Kotan* is, in a way, similar to my own belief in the importance of remembering and being remembered by those who are close to you. By thinking of your ancestors as being in the *Kamui Kotan*, you remember them, and they are not really gone. This has parallels to one of my beliefs that the dead 'live on' through the memories of the living. In addition, the heartfelt speeches delivered for the dead by many of the relatives and friends of the deceased further support this belief by allowing their memories to be collected and shared. While the dead do not remember the living (the *Ainu* try to make the deceased forget the *Ainu Moshir*, while I see no evidence of memories after death), our memories of the dead give them continued meaning and agency in the world.

### Annotated Bibliography

#### **Ainu Creed & Cult:**

This book is based on the anthropological work of Neil Munro, one of the primary sources on *Ainu* culture, from the early 1900's with footnotes and corrections based on more-recent research. Munro's purpose in writing his works was to give an account of his observations of the *Ainu* and their customs. Because I am primarily working with the pre-contact *Ainu*, the recency of the work is of little importance. However, the more-recent footnotes and corrections are helpful, as Munro's work had some inaccuracies and biases associated with it. While the original work was Munro's, there are numerous citations in footnotes and corrections to other bodies of work. I chose this source as it is a thorough and (relatively) accurate account of *Ainu* culture.

#### **Harukor: An Ainu Woman's Tale:**

This book attempts to create an anthropological reconstruction of *Ainu* life while incorporating details from many sources. This book, being published more recently, contains references to a large body of factual research on many subjects. The author is one of Japan's leading journalists and writers, who often writes on controversial political and historical topics. She is presenting a representation of the *Ainu* in order to paint a positive picture of their life and culture. I chose this source in order to provide feeling to my narrative, as well as for minor details that wouldn't be included in Munro's work.

#### **Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People:**

This book, while more recent than Munro's work and less recent than Harukor, provides first-hand interviews and images of *Ainu* living in Japan at the time. There may be some bias

towards the *Ainu* and against the Japanese, but I avoided using sections of this book most susceptible to bias. While the book is based primarily on first-hand accounts, gaps are filled and explanations given based on many other works. I chose this source primarily for the imagery as well as to gain an understanding of the contrast between modern and pre-modern *Ainu*.

### Bibliography

Honda, Katsuichi, and Kyoko I. Selden. *Harukor: An Ainu Woman's Tale*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000. Print.

Hilger, M I. *Together with the Ainu: A Vanishing People*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971. Print.

Kayano, Shigeru. *Our Land Was a Forest: An Ainu Memoir*. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1994. Print.

Munro, Neil G. *Ainu Creed and Cult*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1963. Print.