In the traditional worldview of the Ainu, a hunting and gathering people of Hokkaido and Sakhalin (Japan), the world is a common territory shared by different orders of beings. The humans (Ainu) are one of these species and are totally dependent for their survival on the other species with which they share the world. There is a ritualized system of relationships between man and nature. The non-human species are known as *kamui*, which means “deity” in the dictionary sense only. The *kamui* are “gods” in the Paleolithic sense; that is, they are non-human beings who live in anthropomorphic form in their own separate god-worlds, invisible to human eyes, but who pay frequent visits to the humans in disguise. In the eyes of “primitive man,” writes Shternberg, “the animal form is only the integument in which the beasts appear to the sight, while actually they are the same kind of people as he himself.” To the Ainu, “animals” are gods in disguise.

Animals, plants, and even some man-made implements are *kamui* and are referred to plainly as *kamui*. “The Ainu world,” writes Watanabe, “was full of divine visitors: all the natural resources exploited by them were *kamui*-spirits in temporary guises. In consequence all their gathering activities implied social intercourse with *kamui*.” For the Ainu, the earth’s surface was “the carpet of *kamui* groups in their temporary guises. Every topographical feature such as hill, river and sea, was seen as the field of activity of these *kamui* groups.”

The interrelationships between gods and humans, which Watanabe characterizes as a “system of social solidarity between man and nature,” form the basic framework for the aesthetic outlook of Ainu epic poetry. In the Ainu world view, humans and deities are more or less equals, with the humans having a slight advantage over the gods. True, the gods can do some things which ordinary humans cannot. The gods have supernatural powers, can move from place to place quickly, can fly through the air, and can change their forms at will. (Among humans, only shamans have such powers.) But in certain matters the humans are superior to the gods. The gods fear the humans, depend on them, and are subject to their power. The gods admire the humans and wish very much to visit the human homeland (Ainu kotan or Ainu moshir). A god can enhance his social prestige in his own community when he is worshiped and given presents by the humans. In fact, the wealth of the gods consists of the presents they receive from humans.

The humans are also dependent on the gods. The humans are guarded and protected by the good deities, who are present everywhere inside and outside the dwellings of the humans and who have the responsibility of repelling evil from the humans. There are evil deities who seek to harm both the humans and the good deities, and calamities may occur if the benevolent deities relax their vigilance. It is essential for the humans to master the techniques of attracting and holding the attention of the good deities and of invoking the aid of extremely powerful deities who can ward off evil influences.

The gods are depicted in thoroughly anthropomorphic terms. No matter where they may be living—on earth, in the heavens, or in the underworld—their lives follow the human (Ainu) pattern closely. When they are at home in their god-worlds, they have human form, build themselves houses, form their own communities, wear human clothes, pray to their gods, fight battles, love their wives and children, and have drinking feasts. They love to dance and sing and to listen to epics. In fact, they are exactly like humans in their likes and dislikes and in their psychology. At the same time, their worlds are separated from the world of the humans, and there is a certain strangeness about
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The humans for them. The gods especially dislike the smell of humans. They hide themselves from the eyes of humans by wrapping themselves in billowing banks of white or black clouds, but if they choose to do so they can reveal themselves in their real forms, which are anthropomorphic but majestic. Or if they wish they can appear in their disguises as animals or plants.

The treasures of the gods are the presents of wine and of inau given them by the humans. The inau are elaborately whittled sticks of willow or other wood with beautiful curled shavings attached to them. The Ainu used to make large numbers of these ritual artifacts, and their gods prized them in the same way that the Ainu would prize their own treasures, which consisted of imported Japanese trade goods. (In many important ways, the attitude of give-and-take of the gods toward the humans resembles the attitude of the Ainu toward their neighbors, the Japanese.)

The gods enjoy traveling and sight-seeing, and they especially long to come and visit the land of the humans, which they find to be extremely beautiful. But when they come on their visits to the humans, the gods do not come only for sight-seeing purposes. They also have business (irauketupa) in mind. Their business is trade with the humans, and how this god-human barter is effected is the central mystery of the Ainu religion.

In their homes the gods have clothing racks where they hang their various costumes. When they come to visit the human homeland, they come in their disguises. If they intend to engage in trade on a visit, they put on their best costumes. The word for these costumes is hayokpe, an Ainu word which means “armor” as well as “disguise” or “costume.” The hayokpe of a god is a tangible disguise which the humans can physically see and which is economically beneficial to them. For instance, the god of the mountains (kimun kamui), the ruler of the mountain game, comes wearing a bear costume. The god of the sea (repun kamui), who rules the food animals in the ocean, comes in the guise of a grampus, or killer whale. Another important deity, the guardian spirit of the land (kotan-kor-kamui), assumes the form of an owl. Pestilence deities come in the form of flocks of little birds.

The gods who are friendly to the humans leave their hayokpe as presents with their human friends. A human hunter does not choose and kill a bear or a deer. It is, instead, the deity masquerading as an animal who chooses the hunter and blesses him by leaving the animal costume as a present. The mystery of the archaic religion is the god-human business transaction, the exchange of gifts between the human species and the non-human. The presents given to the gods by the humans make up the wealth of the gods, and the presents left behind by visiting deities enable the humans to survive, indeed to accumulate a surplus. When the god of the mountains comes on a visit, he will leave his warm bear’s fur, his tasty meat, his marrow and blood, and his internal organs. The humans can make clothing of the fur and use it for trading; they will reverently and joyfully consume the flesh, the marrow, and the blood; and they will dry the gall, which is a valuable medicinal substance in the Far East.

When a god’s hayokpe is broken, his spirit is released. By slaying the animal, the humans set free the spirit of the deity trapped inside the disguise and enable him to return to his own world. If the deity comes in the form of a bear, after the humans kill him, they lay the bear’s head in state and make offerings of food, wine, and inau to him. After the god’s spirit has been released from the hayokpe, it remains for several days among the humans as an honored guest. The humans feast and drink, dance and sing in honor of the visiting deity, whose hayokpe is lying in state in the place of honor at the head of the fireplace, just under the sacred window (rorun puyar). The god delights in watching the humans dance and in hearing their songs and epics. At the same time, the god is being entertained by the household deities, especially by the ancient Fire Goddess (kamui huchi), who acts as the intermediary between gods and humans. Feasting and drinking are the most important cultic acts by which the Ainu attained communion with the deities.

After the feast is over, the divine visitor is sent home to his own world. This is called iomante, which means “sending-off” and is sometimes translated as “ritual dismissal.” The word iomante has come to be applied to the Bear Festival itself. After his send-off, the god returns home bearing many gifts from the humans. Upon his arrival, he finds his home beautifully decorated with the many gifts which have already been delivered from the humans. The more of these presents a deity receives, the more renowned will he be in the society of the gods, just
as an Ainu will have more social prestige the larger the amount of trade goods he has in his possession.

When the god returns to his native land, he will gather together his friends and relatives from near and far and will hold a magnificent feast, using the gifts of wine and food that he has received as presents from the humans. He will distribute one or two inau to each guest. His prestige will be greatly enhanced, and he will speak admiringly of the wonders of the land of the humans. The other gods will feel the desire to go and see the human homeland for themselves. The constant coming and going of divine visitors is a necessary condition for ensuring the prosperity of the humans.

The performance of the necessary ritual acts for the “animals” is a religious act essential for human survival. The very existence of the human community depends on the observance of the rituals by all hunters and fishermen. For example, Ainu fishermen gave inau symbolically to the salmon by beating each fish over the head with a special decorated club called i-sapa-kik-ni (“head-beating club”). The deer were also given presents of curled wood shavings (inau-kike), which had the same potency as the inau. The mythic songs emphasize that if the humans neglect to perform these hunting and fishing rituals, the spirits of the gods will go home in tears and will complain about the humans to their species rulers, the “masters” of the game or of the fish. Famine will inevitably result.

In order to survive in this world shared with the other non-human species, the humans elaborated techniques of communicating with the other species (the kamui). One of the common techniques in inter-species communication was prayer. The Ainu men were specialists at prayer. At home, they used to drop droplets of wine into the fire in the hearth while intoning prayers to the Fire Goddess, who acted as a messenger and would relay the prayer reliably to the proper deity. When they were out hunting, the Ainu men would address prayers to the gods who appeared to them in the guises of birds or animals. This is a prayer spoken by an Ainu hunter to game animals, probably deer, after they were shot:

A-kor moshir
moshit tapkashi
Let your spirits
return

Another means of communication with the non-human is through shamanism (called tusu or nupur in Hokkaido). In Sakhalin there were both male and female shamans, whose practices apparently were influenced by the shamanism of the Gilyaks and Oroks. In Hokkaido shamans were exclusively females. A god would possess a shamaness, borrow her lips, and speak to the humans about matters of interest to them. The prophecies, although uttered by the lips of a human being, would assume the first-person singular forms of diction. That is, the god himself would be speaking, using the personal pronouns “I” and “me.”

Still another means of inter-species communication was through dreams. Messages from the gods were imparted to humans in their dreams while they were asleep, and the oral folklore abounds in accounts of warnings and revelations given to humans by deities in dreams.

A fourth technique of inter-species communication is the oral poetry itself. The Ainu have a whole genre of narrative songs, the kamui yukar (“god epics”), in which the speakers are various deities who borrow the lips of the epic reciter in the same way that a god would use the lips of a shamaness. In their songs, the gods describe their world in the first-person singular and tell about their lives and adventures from their own, subjective standpoint. In these narratives, which are basically monologues spoken by deities, the entire body of archaic ideas which I have tried to outline above is expressed masterfully in aesthetically pleasing pictures. These mythic epics played an important
role in strengthening and confirming the world view of the Ainu people, who believed them to contain knowledge which was necessary for their own continued survival.

Bear-cubs were raised by Ainu families for several winters before being given ritual dismissal at a bear ceremony. During their sojourn among the humans, the bear-cubs would be the center of interest of the families raising them, and the housewife would be assigned the role of cooking food for the bear-cub and feeding him. It was considered to be unpardonable to neglect this duty, to molest the bear-cub, or to force him to flee to seek refuge elsewhere. A bear-cub being raised among the Ainu was regarded, not so much as a revered guest, but rather as an adopted god-child. In the mythic epics, bear-cubs speak of their human masters as “my human father and my human mother.” Thus, a bear-cub would have two different sets of parents: his adoptive, human father and mother, and his divine father and mother.

Before holding the bear ceremony, the “human father” would, in the epics, go on a trading expedition to the land of the Japanese in order to obtain the wine and other luxury articles needed for the ceremonies. Some of the mythic epics deal with mishaps which occurred during the absence of the “human father.” For example, the bear-cub might be mistreated by the “human mother” (no doubt because she was bewitched by evil spirits) or by the servants, and he would break out of his cage and go to seek refuge with another Ainu family or with a deity living nearby. One of the most interesting mythic epics with bear-cubs as speakers is one which Dr. Kubodera recorded in writing in 1932 from the female reciter Hiraga Etenoa of Shin-Piraka village in the Saru area of Hokkaido. It is entitled “Song of a Bear-cub” (Peurep isoitet) and was sung with a burden Uwêwêwe wê, which is presumably an imitation of the bear’s growling.

The bear-cub begins his song by describing his upbringing. He then goes on to quote a speech made to him by his “human father.”

My human father
and my human mother
raised me,
and we lived

on and on
uneventfully.
Then,
one day,
my father
came outside
and walked up beside me.
He raised and lowered
his outstretched hands
again and again.
While doing so,
he uttered
these words:

“So exceedingly
do I love you that
I would be reluctant
to send you home
right away
this season.
Thus,
I want to keep you
this one winter.
Then, after you have
spent one winter,
you will go home,
bearing presents
of dumplings
and wine
to your divine father
and your divine mother.
I have
told
your divine father
and your divine mother
about this.”
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The bear-cub spends one winter uneventfully among the humans, who give him "a magnificent upbringing, a splendid upbringing." Then one day, his human father approaches him and announces:

"I intend to send you off this year, but before that I want to go trading with the Japanese. Then I will bring home trade wine, trade liquor, and I will worship you magnificently with it."

After the human father has sailed off in his trading boat, the bear-cub remains at home with his human mother and the servants. After a while, the human mother falls ill from some sickness or other and becomes too weak to cook food for the bear-cub. She commands the servants to cook carefully the best food and serve it to the bear-cub, but the servants disobey. They eat all the best food themselves and merely throw the broth at the bear-cub's cage. The bear-cub finally reaches a point close to death by starvation. One night, he breaks out of his cage and goes walking shakily into the mountains. Chestnut Tree Lady and Oak Lady both refuse his plea for lodgings, but Walnut Tree Lady takes him in and gives him lodging over the winter.

One day, Walnut Tree Lady speaks these words to the bear-cub:

"My bear-cub, listen well to these words I have to say! Since you are the child of a most weighty god, I would not dare to keep you with me forever. For this reason, I looked and discovered that your human father came home from his trading after you had gone. So angry was he at having come home after you were gone that he has been lying in bed all the time. Every once in a while, he would go traveling across many mountains, across countless mountains, in search of you, but he would be unable to find you and would come home. Then, being angry that he couldn't find you, he would remain lying in bed all the time. In the meantime, your human mother also still continues to grieve over you and does nothing but weep all the time. Therefore, I showed your human father in a dream how, while your human mother...

1. The trade wine obtained from the Japanese (Japanese sake), the native millet beer (called "Ainu wine"), and millet dumplings were necessary materials for celebrating the bear ceremony. In the world depicted in the Ainu epic songs, trading expeditions were necessary to obtain the trade wine which was such an important part of the presents to be taken home by the bear-cub.
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was suffering
from some sort of ailment,
some sort of sickness,
the servants
would always eat
without you,
and you went
without eating for so long
that you felt
that you were about to die
from extreme hunger.
Then you departed in indignation
and came here.
Thus,
I gave you lodging,
and I have raised you
through the whole winter.
This I showed
your human father in a dream.
Because of this,
he will come here
to look for you.
When he does,
I am going
to return you
to the humans.”

Several days later, the barking of a pack of dogs is heard outside the
abode of Walnut Tree Lady. As the bear-cub is looking out through
the big window at the dogs milling around outside, Walnut Tree Lady
unexpectedly seizes the bear-cub and shoves him outside the window.
Just then, his human father appears, beats off the pack of dogs, and
worships the bear-cub tearfully.
The bear-cub takes the human father’s hand and licks it, and they go
back together to the human father’s house, where the human mother
has been waiting. She rejoices at the recovery of the bear-cub. The rest
of the story is told by the bear-cub in the following words.

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After that
they raised me
with a magnificent upbringing.
During this while,
my human father
rushed about
busily
to brew wine.
After a while,
the wine
was now ready,
and crowds of women
and crowds of young men
gathered together.
Those who were straining the wine
darted their wicker baskets
together this way and that,
and those who were whittling inau
plied their whittling knives
together this way and that.
This went on
until finally
they said it was time
for me to be sent home.
After that
my father
went about with
the young men
and let me play ²
for a while until
finally
it was time
for me to be given dismissal.
I was worshiped

² On the second day of the bear festival, the bear-cub is led out of his cage and is paraded around
several times before the spectators, who bid farewell to him just before he is slain. This is called
“letting the bear play.”
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magnificently
with trade wine,
trade liquor,
and also
with Ainu wine,
as well as
bundles of dumplings
and bundles of inau.
My human father
also worshiped
Walnut Tree Lady
separately
with fine wine
and fine inau.
After that,
carrying
bundles of wine
and bundles of inau,
I came home
to the place of
my divine father
and my divine mother.
Before I arrived there,
the floor at the head of the fireplace
of our house
was filled
with much wine
as well as dumplings
and fine food,
so much of it that
the floor at the head of the fireplace was full.
Just at this point
I arrived there.
My divine father
and my divine mother
greeted me
with rejoicing,

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and my divine father
sent out messages [of invitation] to all
the gods living nearby
and the gods living far away.
The invited gods
were shown in
with much ceremony.
Then
we started to hold a feast
with the wine I had brought,
and
we celebrated
a matchless drinking feast.
After it was over,
all the gods
left for home,
expressing
their thanks.
After it was all over,
I became
such a weighty personage
that I
did not even
go outside the house,
and I remained
together with
my father
and my mother.
Then I turned back
and cast my glance at
my human mother
and my human father.
I looked and saw that
they had no children between them.
I felt so exceedingly
sorry for them
that I blessed them
blesses the childless human couple by giving them a son and a daughter. Ever since then, the human father has been fervently worshipping the bear deity as “his dearest god, his most honored god.”

The fundamental ideas of the Ainu world-view are presented in concrete, vivid images in mythic songs of this kind, in which a deity appears and tells his story in his own words. The Ainu epic reciter functions, not only as a repository for the accumulated wisdom of the people, but also as a vehicle for transmitting important messages from the non-human species to the human audience, very much in the manner of a shaman. The epic was one of the techniques used by the Ainu in their quest for inter-species communication. Underlying all of the techniques, however, was the belief in man as a species-being sharing a place in the world with other species and the whole complex of beliefs and rituals making up the “system of social solidarity between man and nature.”

Sources: Except where otherwise indicated, the description of the Ainu world-view is based on the writings of Kindaichi Kyōsuke, especially the first volume of his Ainu jojishi Yūkara no kenkyū (1931) and his Ainu na kenkyū (1924). Accounts by Chiri Mashiko and Kubodera Itsuhiko agree in the main with those of Kindaichi. The Ainu religion has been described by Neil Gordon Munro in his Ainu Creed and Cult (1962). The quotation from Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney is from her article “Another look at the Ainu-A Preliminary Report,” in Arctic Anthropology, vol. XI, suppl., 1974, pp. 193–194. Ohnuki-Tierney is the author of The Ainu of the Northwest Coast of Southern Sakhalin (1974). The quotations from Hitoshi Watanabe are from his The Ainu Ecosystem: Environment and Group Structure (1973), pp. 69, 78, and 81. The quotation from Lev Iakovlevich Shternberg is from “Shamanism and Religious Election,” in the collection Introduction to Soviet Ethnography, edited by Stephen P. Dunn and Ethel Dunn (1974), vol. I, p. 71. The text of the Ainu hunter’s prayer was taught to Kindaichi in 1915 by Utomriuk, chieftain of the village of Shumunkot in the Saru area of Hidaka, Hokkaido. Dr. Kindaichi allowed me to copy it from his field-notes. The “Song of the Bear-cub” was obtained by Kubodera Itsuhiko from the reciter Hiraga Etenpa on December 24, 1932, and is included in Dr. Kubodera’s Ph.D. dissertation, Ainu jojishi Shinyō, seiden no kenkyū. Dr. Kubodera kindly allowed me to use the materials in his dissertation.