

# AINU: THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF NORTHERN JAPAN

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**A**tsushi Honjo was born on June 17, 1960 in Tokyo, Japan. Having been interested in the great mysteries of life since childhood, he found a new and promising outlet for his interests when he joined the Rosicrucian Order at the age of 19. Six years later he graduated from the College of Arts and Sciences of Tokyo University, majoring in physics and mathematics.

Thereafter Frater Honjo worked for the Toshiba Corporation for many years as a research engineer in the development of semiconductor integrated circuits. In 2003 he left that industry and was appointed as a Director and Administrator for the Japanese Grand Lodge of AMORC.

He was installed as Grand Master of the Japanese Language Jurisdiction by Imperator Christian Bernard in March 2007, in San Jose, CA, and has held that position since that time. Frater Honjo is also one of the Directors on the Board of the Supreme Grand Lodge of AMORC.

He is married and has one child, a son. His hobbies are badminton, backgammon, and the game of Go. In addition to AMORC, one of his greatest interests is the practice of Zen.

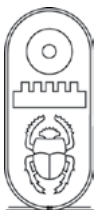


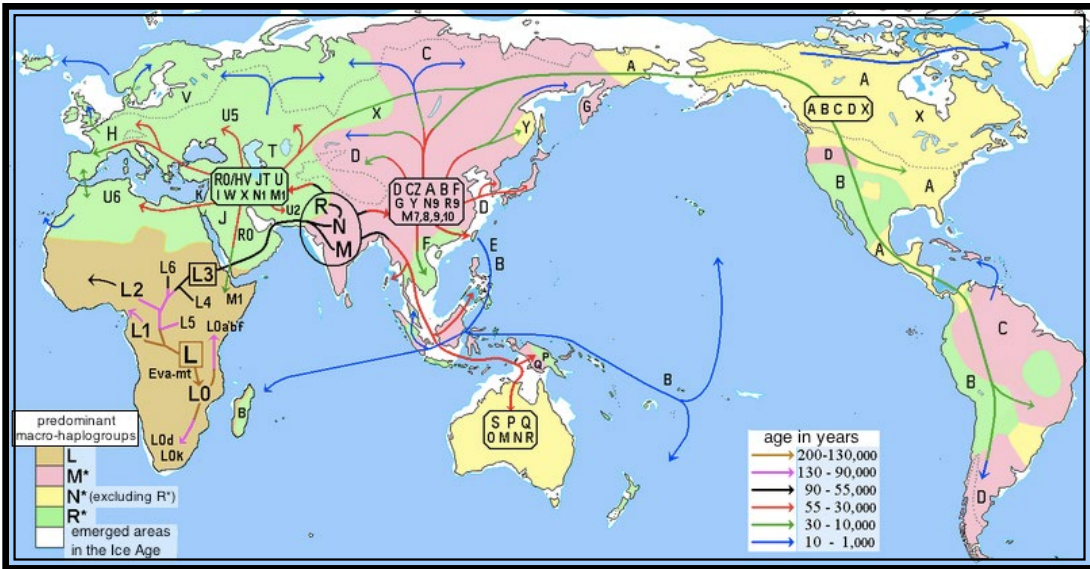
Sapporo is a Japanese city with a worldwide reputation for good beer. Its name comes from the Ainu expression “Sat Poro Bet” meaning “wide-dry-river.” Most of the names of places in Hokkaido, Japan’s second largest island, come from the Ainu language.



The Ainu are the oldest surviving indigenous people of Japan and live today mainly on Hokkaido. Although fully modern in their ways, they have inherited a unique arctic tradition of the worship of several deities representing various aspects of nature. In this discourse I will be introducing the Ainu world-view, or the little bit of it that remains, and highlight various concurrences with the Rosicrucian teachings as they relate to the souls of humans and animals.

Anthropologists classify the Ainu as belonging to so-called “northern peoples,” a cluster of ancient ethnic populations that evolved under conditions of extreme cold. There still exist today remnants of some thirty-eight ethnic groups from the northern peoples; three modern





representatives are the Inuit, the Ainu, and the Nivkh.

Analyses of Ainu bones and genes show that their ancestors lived in the mainland of East Asia and migrated from India approximately 40,000 years ago. Their ancestors are the forbears of both the first North Americans, and possibly even before them, of the Ainu, which may have entered the Japanese islands from the mainland through a land-bridge in the extreme south before the beginning of the Jomon period approximately 25,000 years ago.

It is always helpful to understand other cultures in order to better understand one's own. Ridding oneself of one's preconception is therefore essential in order to fully recognize the true nature of those other cultures. For example, some northern peoples may be considered unsanitary or barbarous because they eat raw meat and drink the blood of animals. But any sanitary problems associated with such practices are misplaced when we are dealing with places of such severe cold. Their diets have in fact been well adapted to their nutritional needs for thousands of years. Simply obtaining enough vitamins, for example, can only come from such raw flesh high protein diets.

Another misunderstanding concerns the "Tomante," the largest ceremony of the Ainu, in which a young bear is killed. For many, this would amount to animal cruelty, but on deeper investigation into the Ainu ways, we see that what is being expressed is their deep respect for nature and all its creatures, and is a surviving remnant of a very ancient tradition, one possibly extending tens of thousands of years into the past.

Let me give you an analogy between the culture of the northern peoples and the Agricultural Revolution which began in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East some 10,000 years ago. It is called a revolution for good reason, for it led to possibly the most dramatic change in human history since the first use of fire to process formerly inedible foods into foods that were nutritious and edible.

Many anthropologists believe that the only fully successful migration of *Homo sapiens*, modern humans, out of Africa occurred around 600,000 to 650,000 years ago. Those humans thrived and spread into all parts of the world.

*Homo sapiens* were generalists when it came to feeding habits and no doubt ate whatever they could, whether roots, fruits,

nuts, or on occasion, meat as well. But it is only very recently in evolutionary terms, roughly 10,000 years ago, that humans managed to start agriculture for the first time, and that brought about deep and lasting changes, which was possibly the main contributing factor in the eventual emergence of organized society and civilization.

At the end stage of the late Paleolithic period, around 13,000 years ago, a few thousand years before the shift to agricultural societies, the last glacial period was coming to a close. It is generally accepted that the settled lifestyles that eventually came with agriculture brought with it many advantages, including longer life-spans, more leisure time, and hence more time for social interaction and the passing on of family and tribal histories.

Even after the agricultural revolution spread to all parts of the inhabited world, many societies continued with nomadic hunter-gatherer ways for parts of the year, and maintained settled agricultural lifestyles during the growing and harvesting seasons. While traveling about, they would have brought with them only the bare essentials, such as stone implements, spears, firestones, and pelts. They almost certainly had little or no concept of property ownership.

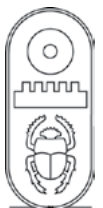
The more enlightened among them would no doubt have been grateful for the blessings that nature provided them. We can imagine that the first stirrings of petitioning of a higher power or god of sorts would have emerged around this time. Such invocations to their god or deities, as exists in a few remaining primitive societies even today, would have been performed routinely and possibly communally, but we can imagine that on many occasions, prayer was done alone and in the face of danger and hunger.

This was the beginning of systematically organized religious belief.

With small communities constantly on the brink of starvation or of perishing from extreme weather, there evolved the need for cooperation among community members, and to a lesser extent between different tribes. It must have been clear to everyone that such was a better system than merely living for oneself.

Hunting required the ability to sense acutely where game was, and people would therefore have been very good at observing the details of the situation of living creatures and Nature, and their intuition must have been much keener than modern people. And concerning medicinal herbs, we have possibly only scratched the surface of the accumulated rich knowledge that these ancient communities built up and which are lost to us today.

The transformation from wandering hunter-gatherer societies to ones based on agriculture, resulted in dramatic regional population growth. This “Agricultural Revolution” as it is called, is regarded by many anthropologists as the single most important contributor to modern, organized society and the many civilizations that rose and fell thereafter.



However, there was a darker side to this revolution, for whereas the world contained roughly 6,200 million hectares (15,320 million acres) of tree cover just before the widespread change to agriculture, this has decreased steadily and inexorably over the millennia until we get to the industrial revolution and its demand for timber and food, and so today, the forested area of the world stands at roughly 4,000 million hectares (9,884 million acres), primarily due to land being converted to agricultural use. Roughly 8 million hectares (19.8 million acres) of forest are being lost annually nowadays, an area roughly twice the size of Switzerland.

Before the agricultural revolution, the variety of plants and tubers that humans ate easily exceeded 1,000 species. Today however, there are essentially only 20 species that feed the bulk of our human population, and this loss of diversity has had negative consequences for human health.

Moreover, with agriculture and the inevitable land ownership which followed, large-scale conflicts between clans, tribes, and later, nations, became common. However, many northern peoples continued their hunter gatherer ways until relatively recently because the frigid climates were unsuitable for large-scale agriculture.

Northern peoples such as the Ainu have retained a vast well of wisdom accumulated in times of extreme hardship when they depended wholly on their hunter-gatherer ways.

Let me now introduce you to the traditional beliefs of the Ainu. The Ainu classified all souls into three categories. The first consists of the souls of deities. The second group consists of the souls of humans. And the third group consists of the souls of tools, which I will explain in more detail shortly.

From the first group, the Ainu concept of deities was different from that of most other forms of animism. Deities were for them the souls of creatures having powers and abilities exceeding those of humans. For example, owls typically have far better night vision than humans; bears have far greater strength than humans; wolves have an endurance, sense of smell, and cunning far exceeding that of humans; killer whales and sea lions operate with ease and ferocity in a watery realm that humans seldom enter; and snakes, though much smaller than humans, still possess poisons that can easily kill. The souls of such creatures were all regarded as deities who wore their animal bodies only temporarily and gave them up to Ainu hunters when they were ready to enter the hereafter and by implication, therefore, allowed themselves to be successfully hunted. Fire, also in the first category, has the ability to cook food and to heat bodies, and was regarded as a goddess, the most intimate goddess of the Ainu.

As previously mentioned, the souls of humans are in the second category, the middle rank. The Ainu believed that humans needed these deities as much as the deities needed their human dependents. Humans needed the deities for food and clothing, and the deities derived their sanctity by the veneration shown to them by their human subjects. The deities rose and fell in rank, depending on the level of worship, appreciation, and gratitude shown by the Ainu.

The third category of souls consists of the souls of tools such as ships, knives, bows and arrows, sewing needles, dishes, etc., in other words utility items. They believed that souls dwelt in them as well. However, it is generally believed that these souls were lower in rank than either the deities or the souls of humans.



The Ainu believed that just as humans and deities were co-dependent, so too were tools and humans dependent on each other. The soul of a tool fulfills its function only as a human fashions an inanimate item into a utility item, namely a tool. On the other hand, humans can't survive without their tools and equally can't conduct rituals for displaying their gratitude towards the deities. Having inherited this ancient belief system, many present-day Ainu still treat their tools with great respect.

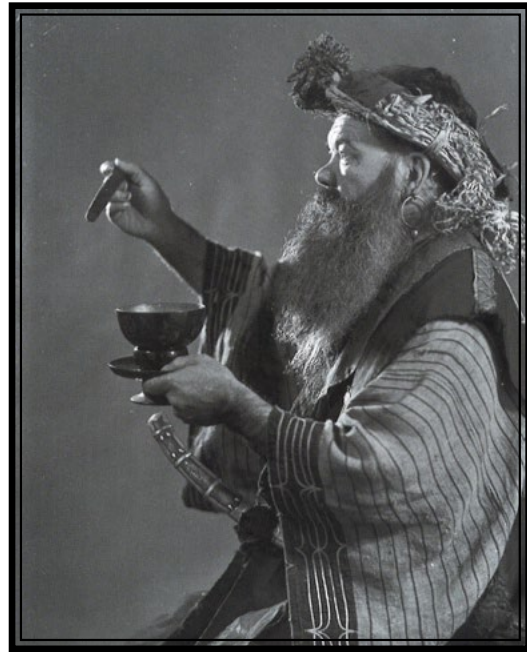
In traditional Ainu ways, tools that had become worn-out were not disposed of, but kept instead for the appearance of two special periods of the year, namely spring and autumn, when they were broken apart in order to release their souls. The ceremonies were solemn events at which the Ainu prayed and showed their gratitude to their former tools as they buried the pieces in special places.

When an Ainu house was built, the goddess of fire was invited to dwell in it through the performance of a special ritual. This goddess was an intermediary between humans and some of the deities. Traditional Ainu houses are therefore regarded as temples.

A fire-hole was made in the center of the house to warm the house and to cook food. Once the ritual of fire ignition had been performed, the goddess of the fire was believed to have entered and taken residence in the fire-hole and the fire had to be kept alive from then on.

The recently arrived goddess of the fire was called *abekakemat* meaning "the lady of fire," and after a period of a day or two, she was called *abefuchi* meaning "the grandmother of fire."

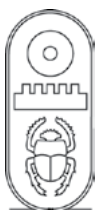
As previously explained, the Ainu believed that the souls of tools were lower in rank than the souls of humans, who were



in turn lower in rank than the souls of the deities. Therefore, when an Ainu hunter shot a bear with an arrow for example, it was believed that success in this endeavor could only come about if and when the bear-god permitted it, namely when the bear's soul wanted to be hit by the arrow.

The Ainu believed that every bear-god brought its body into the world for the benefit of humans; meat for food, fur for clothing, internal organs for medicines, and bones for tools. Only when the hunter lived an ethical life would the bear-soul give up its body to the hunter. When a hunter succeeded, he and his fellow hunters would carry the bear's skin and head carefully to his home together with the other parts. There, and without further processing of the skin, the hunter folded it up into a pile and placed it in the place of highest honor in his house, the northeast point of his fire-hole. And finally he placed the bear's head on the folded skin with respect.

These actions ensured that the bear's soul would remain on its former head and talk leisurely with the goddess of fire, while the Ainu honored the bear's soul through their devotion to its remains.



Offering prayers of thanks to the bear-god for having visited the hunter's home, the Ainu then conducted a ritual for returning the bear's soul to the realm of the deities by making various offerings of sanctified brewage, foods, and Inau which were carved skillfully from a white wooden stick.

The Ainu believed that when animals and plants were living, they occupied the temporary forms represented by their physical bodies. However, their true forms in the world of the deities were the same as those of humans, and there they spoke and acted as humans.

It was also believed that when the bear soul arrived in the realm of the deities, the offerings they brought with them were increased six-fold, and the soul could invite the souls of other bears and animals to join in the celebrations.

The bear-god spoke of the lavish reception, gratitude, and offerings it had received from the humans, and on hearing this, the invited souls yearned to offer their bodies to the hunters from the village spoken of by the bear-god.

As a result of this, the invited souls went to a high mountain or deep forest and there assumed the bodies of animals and visited the woods near the village. The Ainu therefore thought the success of hunting in the future was guaranteed by sending the souls of the hunted animals politely back to the world of deities.

However, the Ainu did not conduct the sending-back rituals for their own benefit only. Many aged Ainu believed it was important to welcome the souls of recently deceased animals, to nurture, love, and appreciate them, and then to send them back to the realm of deities. The prayers and rituals that only humans could perform, assured the smooth circulation of souls, and these rituals were regarded by

the Ainu as the most important function of humans.

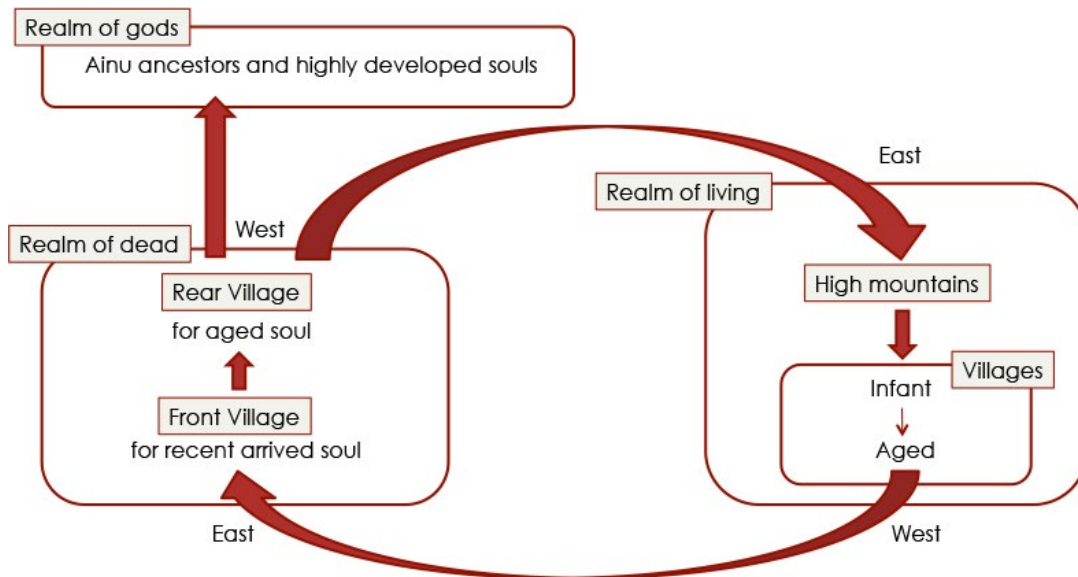
The Ainu believed that humans were composed of two parts, a body and a soul to which it was attached. When a person passed through transition, the soul separated from its body and returned to the realm of the dead located to the west of the world of the living. Upon arriving there, the soul would visit the realm where the souls of relatives who had previously passed away now lived.

Aged or dying Ainu believed that after having spent a period of time in the world of the dead, their soul would progress to the high mountain of the world of the living and there eventually enter the body of a child at birth. And it was believed that highly developed souls were freed from the need to return to Earth and were born instead as deities in the realm of deities.

Human souls born in the realm of deities were believed to gravitate to souls of like mind and experience, there to discuss the various problems that had occurred in the worlds they had traversed. They also discussed when, where, and which human soul should be allowed to reincarnate as well as the best way to assist and guide the human souls that had recently passed through transition.

The Ainu had no written language, but like many other non-literate societies, their stories were orally conveyed from generation to generation over thousands of years. Word of mouth was the only way in which their traditions could be perpetuated. They believed conversations between deities sounded like music and their stories were therefore sung in epic tone poems called *Yukar*.

Elderly women sang these stories to their grandchildren and thereby perpetuated the tradition of appreciation to and admiration of the deities and Nature. For example,



Ainu Beliefs about the Reincarnation of Human Souls

in their traditional lifestyle the Ainu gathered firewood by collecting dead tree trunks and dry twigs but seldom acquired them by cutting down living trees. They respected the river-god and never drained dirty or contaminated water into a river or washed in a river; for all water courses were considered sacred and therefore had to be kept pristine.

Virtually all Ainu today are fully modern in all their ways and well adapted to modern life; but many still offer up prayers of greetings to the forest-god when entering a forest for the collecting of firewood or food. And when they find herbs or mushrooms, instead of taking all they can, they take only a few, preferring to thin them out and take only what they believe to be an adequate and necessary share. Taking all they can, for the simple reason that they can, is regarded as an act of shame. The collected mushrooms are placed in a coarse basket and the spores are scattered in the forest to enhance their reproduction.

As in the old days of the Ainu, many modern Ainu also show deep appreciation to the souls of animals and the plants they harvest, being acutely aware that humans

must gain their nourishment from the bodies that these animals and plants give up for them.

In a few words I have tried to convey the ancient beliefs and beauty of Ainu culture. A great deal more should be said to do justice to this topic, but my time is now almost up. But I'm sure you will have noticed a few correspondences between their ancient belief system and the much more recent philosophies and beliefs of modern humans, Rosicrucians included.

The Ainu achieved excellence in many fields, such as arts and crafts, dressmaking, music, dancing, and story-telling. In these fields, Ainu culture is still active, and many traditional Ainu seek out and employ the best possible ways of using their skills and wisdom for contributing to the welfare of all human beings. If you are interested in learning more, I strongly recommend that you one day visit an Ainu museum or village in Japan, and there immerse yourself in their ancient, nature-friendly, and harmonious culture, developed over a vast period of time and manifested to this day through the pristine and beautiful forests, lakes, seashores, and other natural habitats in their care.

