Human Rhythm and Divine Rhythm in Ainu Epics

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The Ainu are still in existence, but their reduced numbers, now around 20,000, indicate how marginal their presence is even in Hokkaidô, their ancestral territory.[1] Moreover, they have undergone much *metissage*, in both ethnic[2] and cultural terms. Legally, the Ainu do not yet constitute an indigenous ethnic minority; they have only recently obtained some gestures of recognition from the government, such as the interruption of a dam project on a ritual site.[3] In 1994, for the first time in history, an Ainu, Kayano Shigeru,[4] was elected to the senate. The legislation concerning the Ainu lands,[5] dating from 1899,[6] has finally been revised. And with a boost from the International Year of Ethnic Minorities, in 1992, Ainu organizations managed to inflect the official Japanese doctrine that Japanese soil is home to only one community, that of the Japanese.[7]

But if the segregation and scorn to which the Ainu were subjugated have virtually disappeared, it is unfortunately in large part because the community that suffered them has also virtually disappeared, by being completely absorbed, so to speak, in the overwhelming mass of *Shamo* (the Japanese) that have now come to live on their ancestral lands, which they call *Ainu moshir*, "the land of Men." As in other centralized States – and France is one of the nations that have served as models to modern Japan – there was no question of tolerating or recognizing a radically different culture on national territory. The watchword was assimilation. Schooling, made compulsory for the Ainu as in the rest of the country as of 1899, was therefore conducted exclusively in Japanese. At first only missionaries,[8] and later linguists, showed any interest in the Ainu language and its riches. Major ethnographic research on Ainu culture was not undertaken until the 1960s.[9]

Rhythmic Language

If the pioneering scholars of Ainu culture, such as Kindaichi Kyôsuke (1882-1971) were impressed with the quality of the great works of Ainu oral literature, the major series that collect the great works of literature in Japan still ignore the *yukar*. These oral epics thus remain outside the sphere of Japanese culture. A similar phenomenon can be observed with the literature of Okinawa: curiously, the mythological songs known as *Omorosôshi* have been included in a series on Japanese thought, their poetic nature notwithstanding. Not until 1985 did the heading *yukar* appear in a dictionary of classical Japanese literature.[10]

For a non-literate people, many branches of which have disappeared without any attempts being made to record their oral traditions, and of which the last survivors have been almost completely assimilated into the Japanese population, to the point that they no longer understand their ancestral language,[11] the amount of material that has been preserved is considerable. All the texts collected since the end of the nineteenth century have yet to be published.

The earliest accounts of these "Barbarians of the East" were written in the eighteenth century by Japanese who, without even understanding the Ainu language, spoke of a distinct body of texts known as *yûkara*, the Japanese transcription of the *Ainu* term *yukar*.[12] The Japanese called the genre *ezo jôruri*,[13] assimilating it to the traditional Japanese recitative originating in *bunraku* puppet theater.

These texts are distinguished from other types of oral production by the use of a particular language, a formal language that could be termed literary, but which the Ainu call "beautiful language," "ornamental language," or again *sa-kor itak*, "rhythmic language," in contrast to the everyday speech they call "ordinary language." However, not all texts in *sa-kor itak* are *yukar;* the category also includes "expressions of formal salutation," "expressions of good omen," "propitiatory speech," "judgment speech,"[14] that is, in most cases, formulaic texts that usually have a strong ritual connotation. This rhythmic language, which is sometimes called *kamui itak*, "the language of the gods," differs from collo-

quial language in its use of a particular vocabulary and even its own syntax. This elevated language of culture, while clearly preserving elements that predate ordinary language, has most certainly been distinct from ordinary speech for quite some time, if not forever. Thus the first-person personal pronoun in the elegant language, *a-shinuma* (much used in the epics, which take the form of first-person narratives), is markedly different from the corresponding pronoun *ku-ani*, used in everyday speech.

But the most important distinguishing feature is probably rhythm. The most commonly used rhythmic segments[15] in these texts contain from three to seven syllables, with most made up of four syllables. When syntactic requirements make them shorter or longer, the performer slows down or accelerates his delivery in order to keep the meter more or less constant.

The Ainu themselves distinguish between two categories within the *yukar* genre[16]: *kamui yukar* and *yukar* proper or *ainu yukar.*

Kamui *Yukar*

The "stories of the gods" known as *kamui yukar* are narrated by divine heroes that included a considerable number of animals. Besides this typical subject matter, their principal feature is the presence of *sakehe,* a type of formula of varying length that is repeated as part of each line, forming a sort of drone that accompanies the narration. These *sakehe* generally resist linguistic analysis. A certain number of them, however, can be seen as onomatopoetic phrases that mimic animal cries.[17] The salient aspect remains the unique connection between a particular *yukar* and its *sakehe.*[18] In some cases, several *sakehe* occur in a single *yukar,* particularly when several narrators take turns: each one possesses its own *sakehe.* It also happens that a *sakehe* will not accompany the entire text of the *yukar,* but only certain passages. Nevertheless, the presence of the *sakehe* is what brings the *yukar* into the category of *yukar* of the gods, even if the narrator-hero himself is not always a deity strictly speaking. Thus Ainurakkur and his children Wariunekur or Pon Okikurmi, "Little Okikurmi," who straddle the border between the world of the gods and the world of men, are heros of *kamui yukar.*

Another important feature of the *kamui yukar* is their relative concision. They can sometimes consist of as few as one hundred lines; most often they are made up of two or three hundred, and only rarely do they extend beyond this length, never attaining a thousand lines. The story is thus concentrated, centered around one adventure, without further development, without any leeway for interruption: the recitation took place in one sitting.

These *yukar,* the words of gods, were uttered through women's mouths. This seems to have been one of the functions of shamanesses, known as *tusu menoko* or, in the elegant language, *nupur mat.* As in many other cultures, these women acted as vessels for deities that descended into them and spoke through them. The trance was accompanied and propelled by the beating of a drum known as the *kachô*, a circle of wood over which was stretched an animal skin – seal, deer, or reindeer – and beaten with a short "rhythm stick," or *repni.* The gods' words, uttered in a low voice resembling a male voice, took the form of a song, *tusu shinocha.* It is thus quite natural to presume some filiation between this form of shamanistic song and the *yukar* of the gods, in which the deity always tells his adventure in the first person.

The result is sometimes strange, since it can take some time to understand who is speaking when, for example, the voice is that of a killer whale, especially when, like anyone else, he spends his free time carving and engraving scabbards for his sabers. The story never begins with the explicit information "I am such and such a god and I am going to tell you my story," but rather with something like "Today I went out to the beach ...," and it is only at the end that the woman reciting the story distinguishes herself from the deity to whom she has lent her voice, saying for example "These words were spoken by the Young Killer Whale."

The deities that speak through women are quite diverse: Thunder, Sky, Fire, Guardian of the House, Master of the Hunt, Master of Water, Master of the Wind, Master of Plagues, but also Bear, Wolf, Hare, Fox, Badger, Otter, Snake, Viper, Earthworm, Squirrel, Grasshopper, Spider, Firefly, Killer Whale, Whale, Sparrow, Eagle, Cuckoo, Owl, Narrow-beaked Crow, Woodpecker, Woodcock, Crane, and even Boat or Mortar, any of which can embody a god and speak for him.

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Kamui *Yukar* and Rites

A certain number of *kamui yukar* are directly associated with major rites of Ainu society. Thus the song of the bear, of which several versions survive, tells in the first person of his life among men up to the time when he must leave, that is, when he is put to death in the rite of "Sending (the bear) back to god."[19]

[...]
Uewewe we tane anakne and then
Uewewe we ai omante kuni time to send my back
Uewewe we ne ruwe ne it was
[...]

The bear cub that was captured and then raised as a child is sacrificed after a year. His head is given pride of place at the table. The bear can thus revel in the feast that celebrates his being "sent back" to his divine family. From that time on he can return to protect men.

Owl, Killer Whale, the Master of the Sea, and others also have their own *kamui yukar* that tell of their sacrifices for men. These tales are set at the time of great beginnings, the time of the gods, but are made present again through the experience of song itself and its accompanying rites.

Ainu *Yukar*

Before examining the question of time in *ainu yukar,* I would like to consider briefly the problem of the way in which these human *yukar* are designated. The general practice among not only Japanese but also Ainu researchers is to refer to them simply as *yukar,* as if the general term applied first of all to this type of song. The term *yukar* would thus denote above all the tales that recount human exploits. The *kamui yukar* then would not be a primary reference but rather a particular case of the broader genre of *yukar,* which are first the songs of men. The term *ainu yukar* is used only to emphasize that a given epic does not belong to the subset of *kamui yukar.*

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Behind this minor problem of terminology lies a more general question that I can touch on only in passing here: this question concerns the pertinence of an excessively chronological schema that runs from the shamanesses' trance singing, through the *yukar* of the gods, to the *yukar* of men, in other words, charting a gradual loss of the sacred quality presumed to have been present at the origin.[20] It is obvious that the degree of sacredness varies according to the type of narrative; it is less clear that it follows a linear evolution, unless we resort to a theoretical schema that bears all too much resemblance to mythical thought in that it posits an original simplicity that can never be proven.

The biggest difference between *yukar* and *kamui yukar* lies first of all, as we have seen, in the presence of *sakehe* in the latter, where the drone probably accentuates the rhythm of the tale. Unfortunately, we have little information about the real conditions under which these stories were recited; such information would go a long way towards clarifying the differences in status between the two types of text. Collectors and their Ainu informants concentrated all of their efforts on preserving a heritage that was in the process of vanishing with the dwindling memories of the rapidly decreasing number of individuals capable of memorizing these long poems. Thus the Ainu themselves, such as Kannari Matsu (1875-1961), set down in writing the songs that they knew, divorced from any performance context. This was also the case with many of the tales recorded by researchers such as Kubodera Itsuhiko (1902-1971), for the simple reason that the performance conditions of traditional recitation had disappeared as the society and culture of the Ainu were dispossessed starting in the second half of the nineteenth century.

No doubt this explains the fact that the great majority of informants were women, even for the *yukar kur,* the heroic *yukar* which, as we know from the sources from the Edo period, were recited by men. In a drawing that is often reproduced,[21] the bard is shown reclining on his back, beating time on his belly (quite a round one, at that). More recent accounts tell of performers of both *kamui yukar* and heroic *yukar* marking time as they sing by striking the edge of the hearth with a *repni* or "rhythm stick." In addition, the audience was not idle: they also beat time by striking the wooden

frame of the hearth their own *repni*, and in the case of the heroic *yukar*, they would cry *het, hot* in time with the recitation, varying the intensity to accentuate the most exciting passages. The disappearance of an audience capable of understanding the epics recited in elevated language or of grasping the beauty of a given passage made it nearly impossible to recite long *yukar* even when a singer could be found who knew the tale. Only the texts – most often incomplete – have been saved for posterity.

The *ainu yukar*[22] often revolve around the figure of a young boy, an orphan raised by his older brother and sister, who learns the cause of his parents' death and sets out on a quest for vengeance. The very name of the hero emphasizes his small size. Many epics tell of Poyyanpe or Pon yaunpe[23]: *poy* or *pon* means small, and the name can be translated as "The Little One of the Land." It would appear that these long tales serve to present a series of initiation trials through which the young boy makes the transition to adulthood. This young hero is a human being, but possesses qualities that are godlike. For example, he can fly in the air, penetrate the ground, and so forth. He is often assisted by women who exhibit even more superhuman abilities than he does – women who possess a number of traits associated with shamanesses. For example, it is said that they possess the magic wand of shamans, *tusu repni*.[24]

Yukar and History

Among the most common settings for the exploits of the young hero are meetings or wars with the sea people, *Repun kur*, a term that is often used to designate a foreigner. It is a known fact that the Ainu were in contact and conflict with a culture that (in the absence of any written records) is termed the culture of the Okhotsk sea, to which the term *Repun kur*, the people of the high seas, may be an allusion. Certain commentators have gone so far as to think that the Ainu epics could be the echo of a clash between *Repun kur*, "the people of the high seas," and *Yaun kur*, "the people of the land," or the Ainu themselves.[25] The utter lack of any other sources obviously makes this seductive interpretation a somewhat risky one, particularly since the epics tend to avoid any elements

that might resemble a historical description. These sea people do not appear to differ fundamentally from the Ainu, who are themselves people of the sea. Many epics end with the young hero's marriage to a woman belonging to the people of the high seas.

If the epics that portray *Repun kur* bear some trace of historical reality, the period in question would be what archaeologists call the "pre-Ainu period," which runs from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries. This period saw the development in Hokkaidô of a particular style of pottery known as *Satsumon*, "with rubbed decorations," coexisting with another type of flat-bottomed pottery found along the Okhotsk seacoast. It is generally agreed that this period was the foundation of what developed into Ainu culture, which was however to abandon pottery for iron and wooden tools. From this standpoint, the historical reality described in the epics could be seen as referring to a sort of Ainu prehistory, in the course of which a certain number of features of Ainu society took shape. In this sense, the factual content of these epics could be seen as secondary.

What is certain is that the Ainu coalitions that fought with the Japanese starting in the fifteenth century,[26] under the leadership of prestigious chiefs such as Koshamin in 1457, did not become subject matter for the epic tales. Our knowledge of these conflicts comes not from the Ainu literary tradition, but from the archives of the Matsumae fiefdom, which took hold of the southern extremity of the island of Hokkaidô at the end of the fourteenth century. Ainu tradition has nothing comparable to the Japanese epic cycle centered around the war between the Taira and the Minamoto, which found its most elaborate expression in the *Heike monogatari* recited by blind monks accompanying themselves on the *biwa*. The only indirect account furnished by the *ainu yukar* is the importance of the warrior function in Ainu society before they were crushed by the Japanese during a series of conflicts that recall the Indian Wars in the United States.[27]

The *yukar*, then, are not historical accounts. But the period they evoke is no longer the primeval era of the *kamui yukar*. The adventures and battles are set in a distant past but within the time of men.

If rites such as "sending back the bear" nourished the ties between the *kamui yukar* and the reality of the village community,

it is quite clear that the Japanese state could not tolerate guerilla activities. Thus the relations between the *ainu yukar* and social reality slackened.

Extensive Tales for Mortal Men

Every student of heroic *yukar* has observed their extreme length: they contain thousands of lines. The *yukar* that are easily accessible in published collections are generally over seven thousand lines long, and there are descriptions of texts that are over fifteen thousand lines, which take days to recite. These immense tales are organized around episodes of battle. There are epics of three, six, eight, or more battles. This length explains in part why many epics have not come down to us in their entirety.[28] But there are grounds for thinking that both their length and form were less rigidly prescribed than those of the *kamui yukar.* One storyteller would embroider a battle scene without omitting a single blow or drop of blood, while another would emphasize the splendor of the chateau or *chashi.*

Perhaps it is because of their length, or perhaps it is the secular nature of these tales; but these heroic poems, truly epics, have drawn much less attention from literary specialists than have the *kamui yukar,* which have been published in many anthologies, including paperback editions.

Once again, we find a fascination with origins. The tales treating the great beginnings seem to be more ancient and thus more venerable than narratives of battle. As someone who has devoted quite a bit of time to the myths, I would not wish to underestimate their importance, but rather to underline the danger of interpreting the succession of events in myth that lead from the time of gods to that of men as indicating the date of the tales that speak of these events. Why should the heroic *yukar* be considered younger than the *kamui yukar*? They refer to two realities that may have coexisted for a long long time.

The major difference lies not in the length of the texts, but in the text's degree of openness. The presence of the *sakehe* or drone appears to be the mark of a closed text, with each verse sealed off

by the repetitive refrain. Moreover, the contents refers to a time or a space where gods and animals talked, where unique events took place, even if they could be reenacted ritually, as in the bear cycle. This gift of the gods is expressed in rites or *kamui yukar*, which are closed forms.

The open structure of the heroic *yukar*, their extensible character, should not be interpreted as the degeneration of a genre whose noble version is the sacred tale of origins, but rather as the mark of the world of men with respect to the world of the gods that is sung in the *kamui yukar.* For the finiteness of individual destinies is in a sense compensated by the repetition of battles or of generations. The coexistence of the two types of *yukar* therefore would not reflect an evolution leading from sacred tales to an autonomous secular literature, but rather the necessity of accounting for the two major components of the Ainu universe, the world of the gods and that of men.

Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage

Notes

1. In 1990, Hokkaidô had 5,643,647 inhabitants, of whom 23,380 were reported to be of Ainu descent according to surveys by Ainu organizations (data taken from Muriel Ninel, *Les Ainou: aborigènes ou citoyens* [master's thesis, Lyon III, 1996], p. 53). The present-day Ainu population remains approximately the same as estimates for 1822 (Donald L. Philippi, *Songs of Gods, Songs of Humans: The Epic Tradition of the Ainu* [Tokyo, 1979], p. 3.
2. This is not the place to consider the excesses of prewar physical anthropology, but the relative isolation of the Ainu brought forth a certain number of traits that distinguished them from their Japanese neighbors.
3. Decision handed down by the court in Sapporo on 27 March 1997.
4. In keeping with Japanese custom, this essay presents all personal names with the family name preceding the given name.
5. The bill for a "new law on the Ainu," *Aïnu shinpô*, was filed on 21 March 1997.
6. Instituted after the long period of legal vacuum that followed the major wave of colonization beginning in 1870, the law of 1899 ("law protecting the ancient indigenous peoples of Hokkaidô," *Hokkaidô kyû dojin hogo hô*) recognized the

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Ainu as individuals, even if it rejected their entire culture. While this law provided certain safeguards for the lands granted to the Ainu (lands that had previously been confiscated from them), it also stipulated (article 3) that the lands would be repossessed after fifteen years if they had not been cultivated.

7. This position was reaffirmed in 1986 by Prime Minister Nakasone.
8. Homage is due John Batchelor (1854-1944), the author not only of a Bible translation into the Ainu language but of the first true dictionary of this language and of numerous transcriptions and translations of epic songs. See John Batchelor, *The Ainu and Their Folk-Lore* (London, 1901); *Ainu Life and Lore: Echoes of a Departing Race* (New York, 1971).
9. The report *Ainu minzoku shiryô chôsa hôkoku* was published in 1969 by the Hokkaidô kyôiku iinkai.
10. *Nihon kotenbungaku daijiten* (Iwanami).
11. According to a survey conducted in 1990, 0.8 per cent of those who identify themselves as Ainu speak *itak Ainu;* 54.8 per cent can neither speak nor understand it; 5.4 per cent can speak a little; 37.1 per cent cannot speak it but can understand a little (NINEL, p. 60). This means that virtually no Ainu have access to the classical culture embodied in the *Yukar.*
12. *Yukar* can be broken down into *I,* thing or fact, and *ukar,* to imitate, that is, to imitate with words what has really taken place. Kubodera Itsuhiko, ed., *Ainugo-nihongo jiten kô* manuscript for an Ainu-Japanese dictionary, (Sapporo, Hokaidô kyôiku iinkai, 1992).
13. Murasaki Kyôko, Kojima Kyôko, and Yoshimoto Takaaki, *Yûkara- omorosaushi* (Tokyo, Shinchôsha, Shinchôkotenbungaku arubamu, 1992), p. 71.
14. Kubodera Itsuhiko, *Ainu no bungaku* (Tokyo, Iwanami shoten, Iwanami shinsho 989, 1977), p. 5.
15. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the term *line* hereafter.
16. The term *yukar* is used by most authors for the sake of convenience, though it is but one of the terms used to designate this type of narrative. A number of other expressions were used depending on the dialect. See the table in Murasaki *et al.* (1992), p. 64.
17. See Roberte Hamayon, "La voix de l'autre, animal ou mort," in *Pour une anthropologie des voix,* p. 334.
18. Published editions of *yukar* generally note the *sakehe* immediately following the title given to the *yukar,* but do not transcribe them each time they appear.
19. *Puerep kamui isoitak,* "tale of the bear cub," in Kubodera Itsuhiko, *Ainu jojishi shinyô seiden no kenkyû* (Tokyo, Iwanami shoten, 1977), p. 92. A summary description of the bear ritual can be found in Arlette and André Leroi-Gourhan, *Un Voyage chez les Aïnous - Hokkaido 1938* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1989), pp. 115-121. There is also a film by Himeda Takayoshi, *Iomante-kuma okuri* [Sending back the bear], 103 minutes, Minzoku bunka eizô kenkyûjo (Center for Visual Documentation), Tokyo.
20. This hypothesis was developed by Kindaichi Kyôkuke, *Kindaichi zenshû,* vol. 8 (Tokyo, Sanseidô, 1993; 1st ed., 1931), pp. 311-332.
21. *Ezo kodai fûzoku,* preserved at the municipal library of Hakodate (Hokkaidô).
22. There are also *yukar* with heroines: *menoko yukar, mat yukar.*
23. *Yaun* is also found in the expression *Yaun kur,* "the people of the land," as opposed to *Repun kur,* "the people of the high seas."

24. *Shupne shirka*, in Kindaichi Kyônosuke, *Ainu jojishi yukara shû VIII* (Tokyo, Sanseidô, 1968), p. 232.
25. Philippi, *Songs of Gods, Songs of Humans*, p. 40 ff.
26. On the wars between the Japanese and the Ainu, the reader is referred to Takakura Shinichirô, *The Ainu of Northern Japan - A Study in Conquest and Acculturation* (Philadelphia, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series, vol. 50, part 4, 1960).
27. After this first clash, the conflicts recurred continually until the end of the eighteenth century: 1471, 1501, 1515, 1525, 1531, and 1536, followed by the major defeat (for the Ainu) of 1669 and sporadic revolts in 1737, 1758, and 1789.
28. The tales were offered to gods as well as men, and the Ainu hoped to ensure the gods' return by leaving the story unfinished, as the gods, like men, would want to hear what came next.

Bibliography

For a fairly complete bibliography of Western works concerning the Ainu, the reader is referred to the following works:

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Philippi, Donald, *Song of Gods, Song of Humans - The Epic Tradition of the Ainu* (Tokyo, University of Tokyo Press, 1979).

For an annotated bibliography of the principal sources and studies, mainly Japanese, consult:

Ainu Minzokuhakubutsukan, ed., *Ainu bunka no kiso chishiki* [Basic information about Ainu culture] (Tokyo, Sofukan, 1993).

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