

The Language, Culture, and Traditional Cooking of the Ainu

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Summary

The Ainu, known as the indigenous people of Hokkaido, has a very unique food culture. While they basically lived on hunting and gathering, their way to use these natural resources seems to be highly rational and efficient. It would suffice to remember a very popular traditional dish, *pone rur* 'bone soup' to point out this fact: even animal bones are made use of and are not to be discarded carelessly. However, we must also remember that it is necessary to take into account their religious beliefs in order to understand their food culture better. According to their belief, all wild plants and animals are *kamuy*, or 'deity' and are believed to live in the same way as human beings in their own world (*kamuy mosir*). However when these deities want to visit the human world (*aynu mosir*), they must change themselves into wild plants or animals. In fact, they must be killed by human beings to return to their own world. Only after being killed and worshiped correctly, can their spirits (*ramat*) return and they leave food (i.e., their bodies) to human beings as presents. We can easily see that under such a belief, to destroy the natural environment aimlessly or to treat food without due respect leads to a serious taboo: it would mean to destroy the houses of deities or to treat badly the precious presents from them. Therefore, even today the Ainu traditional ideas of nature have not lost its significance for us from an ecological point of view. On the contrary, it seems to warm us to recognize the importance of nature and food.