

***Nusasan* (Altar)**

The *nusasan* (altar) is a sacred space for worship found outside nearly every Ainu home on the east side, next to the sacred window (*rorun-puyar*). Ainu communities and villages may also have a large *nusasan* for the community. These altars are used for large ceremonies like the *iomante*, in which the spirits of important deities such as bears and Blakiston's fish owls are sent back to the spirit realm, and for smaller daily rituals and prayers. The *nusasan* can be as simple as an array of *inaw* (prayer sticks made from the shaved inner bark of the willow tree), or adorned with an intricately woven mat, plants, skulls, and offerings of food or precious objects.

The *nusasan* is regularly decorated with newly made prayer sticks each representing a different god (*kamuy*). In general, Ainu spirituality avoids direct, realistic depictions of *kamuy*, such as the bear or owl, instead favoring abstract patterns to attract the attention of the spirits and symbolic representations to show respect. It is feared the spirits could get confused if they see their form represented too realistically and become trapped in the image, unable to return to the realm of the gods.

Fire is vital to the traditional Ainu way of life, so every ceremony begins with prayers to *fuci*, the spirit of fire. Offerings of prayer sticks and of food and drink are made, and other spirits are worshipped. Bundles of herbs and plants such as bamboo grass or mugwort may also be burned for purification, and ceremonies often involve music and dancing.