

Ainu Spiritual Beliefs

Ainu culture emphasizes reverence for nature. Ainu traditionally believe that the human world is visited by *kamuy* (spirits) that are found in everything, including mountains, valleys, fire, water, plants and animals. They also believe there is another realm beyond this world where the *kamuy* come from, and where they return after completing their work here. Ceremonies are held to thank these spirits and send them back to their realm. When Ainu hunters kill a bear—which is considered a *kamuy* of many things including the mountains—they hold a ceremony to thank it and see its spirit off. Other important *kamuy* include orcas, regarded as spirits of the sea, and the Blakiston's fish owl, believed to be a protector of villages. An outdoor altar (*nusasan*) made of woven cattail is set up outdoors for ceremonies with offerings to the *kamuy* and a row of carved wooden ritual sticks (*inaw*), placed in front of the altar. A full-sized *nusasan* decorated with ritual objects is on display at the museum.