

## **Ainu Oral Tradition**

Ainu history, stories, and customs were passed down orally through songs and recited stories. These stories fall into three broad categories: heroic epics, mythic epics, and prose tales.

Heroic epics involving daring protagonists in dramatic situations are called *yukar*, although other names exist in different regions of Hokkaido.

Performers sing these tales to their own melody and use wooden sticks for percussive emphasis. These epics can last up to several hours.

Mythic epics, known as *kamuyyukar* or *oyna*, are often told from the perspective of a *kamuy*, or spirit-deity. These stories are sung to a repetitive melody and feature refrains with onomatopoeic sounds. They can last from a few minutes to over an hour.

Everyday prose tales called *uepeker* or *tuytak* are recited in a diction similar to that of everyday conversation. Some are moral tales that center around

human characters and their connection to *kamuy*.

From the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, Ainu were encouraged to learn Japanese, and education in schools was conducted exclusively in Japanese. As a result, the Ainu language became less-spoken at home, and the practice of Ainu storytelling diminished. Around the 1970s, a resurgence of interest in the Ainu language led to initiatives to revive and preserve these stories. The Ainu language was listed as an endangered language by UNESCO in 2009.