

Bear Sending-Back Ceremonies

Sending-back ceremonies are central to Ainu culture. They are community-wide rituals held to thank a *kamuy* (spirit-deity) for its gifts and return its spirit to the realm of spirit-deities. *Kamuy* visit the human world in various forms: as animals, plants, natural phenomena, tools, and more. Iomante, sending-back ceremonies for bears, are among the most formal rituals.

Bears are prominent symbols in Ainu mythology and are referred to as spirit-deities of the mountains (*kimunkamuy*). They sustain communities with their meat and furs, and ceremonies for bears reflect the importance the mountain *kamuy* play in the Ainu way of life.

Iomante are held for bears found as newborn cubs. To be entrusted with the care of a cub is one of the greatest honors that can be bestowed by *kamuy*. The community nurtures the cub accordingly, raising it in the home and later housing it in a pen, ensuring it is healthy and well-nourished.

When the bear reaches one or two years of age, preparations begin for the sending-back ceremony.

These preparations can last several weeks and involve weaving ceremonial mats and carving ritual tools and gifts for the *kamuy*, such as decorative arrows. Alcohol is also brewed as an offering to the spirit-deity. The ceremony lasts several days and typically begins with prayers, songs, dances, and feasts. Many rituals follow, and the bear is eventually sacrificed to release the spirit of the *kamuy*. The *kamuy* is thanked with offerings and entertained with festivities through the night in the hope it will return to the human world again.