

***Kamuy* and the Ainu: Spiritual Harmony with Nature**

At the heart of Ainu spirituality is a deep respect for the harmony between the physical and spiritual worlds. Ainu believe that all things in the natural world have a *ramat*, or spirit, including animals, plants, natural phenomena, and even objects. Among these, some are revered as *kamuy* (spirit-deities), believed to visit the human world in temporary forms (as animals, plants, weather, and even tools), providing gifts essential for survival such as meat, furs, and materials for weaving and woodworking.

In return for these gifts, Ainu perform rituals and make offerings to maintain mutually beneficial relationships with *kamuy*. Two of the most highly revered *kamuy* are the brown bear, the spirit-deity of the mountains (*kimunkamuy*), and the Blakiston's fish owl, which protects the village (*kotankorkamuy*).

The Iomante ceremony, in which the spirit of a *kamuy* is sent back to its

realm, is one of the most important rituals in Ainu culture. This multiday ceremony includes prayers, songs, dances to entertain the *kamuy*, and offerings of gratitude. The *kamuy* is honored and sent off with respect in the hope that they will return, bringing new gifts and blessings to the human world.