

Ainu and the Stars

The Ainu used the stars for both navigation and storytelling. Constellations were seen as depicting mythological figures, animals, and aspects of daily life. In Asahikawa, the Ainu name for the North Star is Poronociw, meaning “great star.” The nearby Big Dipper is known as Upoponociw or “dancing stars,” whose seven bright stars are believed to represent seven girls joyfully singing and dancing in a circle. The Pleiades cluster, called Arwannociw, tells a contrasting story of seven girls portrayed as lazy, fleeing from their farming duties.

Some stars are closely tied to the joys and sorrows of Ainu life. Venus, traditionally known as Onumannociw (“evening star”), took on a new name during the eighteenth century: Suwaranociw. During the peak autumn salmon fishing season, Ainu laborers at commercial fisheries in Ishikari Bay were not allowed to rest until around 9:00 p.m., which is when Venus disappeared from the western sky in those days. This star became a symbol

of the exploitation of Ainu workers by Wajin (ethnic Japanese) and their separation from loved ones. “Suwara” was the name of the Wajin site manager who oversaw the grueling labor. For Ainu, Suwaranociw serves as a somber reminder of the hardships endured by their ancestors.