

Ainu Stories and Oral History

Ainu traditionally preserved their history and traditions through oral storytelling. Passed down through generations, these stories often reflected the deep connection between people and *kamuy* (spirit-deities).

Some were mythological interpretations of historical events. In one tale from Asahikawa, a cuckoo warns an Ainu child about an impending tsunami. The child and their mother flee together to the mountains and hide in a pine tree. By morning, though many homes have been swept away, they are safe, saved by the cuckoo, a *kamuy* in bird form. The story is believed to reference a tsunami that struck Ishikawa Bay in 1834.

Stories and epics

Ainu oral stories are classified into three broad categories: heroic epics, mythic epics, and prose tales. Heroic epics, known as *yukar*, involve daring protagonists in dramatic situations. Performers sing these tales to their own

melody, using wooden blocks for percussive emphasis. Mythic epics, called *kamuyyukar* or *oyna*, are told from the perspective of *kamuy*. They are sung to repetitive melodies and often include onomatopoeic refrains. Everyday prose tales called *uepeker* or *tuytak* are recited in a conversational tone. Some serve as moral tales, focusing on humans and their relationships with *kamuy*.

Preserving culture through storytelling

The Meiji government's assimilation policies that began in 1869 discouraged Ainu language and traditions, diminishing this form of storytelling. However, efforts by Ainu scholars to record these stories in written form, such as *Ainu shin'yoshu* (Collection of Ainu Chants of Spiritual Beings) by Chiri Yukie (1903–1922), have saved many of these stories for the future.