

Some thoughts on the roots of the Ainu bear ritual *iomante*

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Abstract

The Ainu bear ritual *iomante*, in our opinion, began when hunters killed a she-bear and brought her cubs to their settlement, raised them, and then killed them to get their meat; this happened in a very distant past, perhaps even before the Jōmon period. While the cubs were raised, the people began to treat them as beings that had ontological status close to human beings. These bears already were not just prey, and so the killing of such bears should have implied an apology for the murder. Gradually the practice of propitiating the souls of bears developed, and the rites became more elaborated. Bear rituals could exist at least in the late Jōmon: in some sites attributed to this time were found clay figurines depicting bears. These figurines mean that there were certain special notions about bears, and so it is possible to suppose the existence of some bear rituals.

Keywords: Ainu beliefs; bear; bear ritual; Ainu; Jōmon

The bear ritual was one of the most important rituals in the system of Ainu rituals. The ritual is named *iomante* in the Ainu language, literally *iomante* means “sending”. The general outline of the ritual is the following: Ainu caught a bear cub in the forest at the end of winter or in early spring and brought it to the settlement where it was grown (usually 1 – 2 years) when the bear grew large enough, it was killed and then eaten. The killing of the bear and eating its meat is accompanied by special ritual actions intended to propitiate and pacify the soul of the bear (for more details about ritual actions forming the *iomante* ritual see Nonno, Akulov 2022). It is quite obvious that the ritual of *iomante* was formed gradually, but not in one day.

The *iomante* ritual, in our opinion, began with the fact that once in very distant, immemorial times, perhaps even before the Jōmon period, when hunters killed a she-bear in hunting and brought her cubs to their settlement, they raised them for some time, fattened them, and then killed to get their meat. However, during the time that the bear cubs lived with people, the people began to attach to them, they began to treat the cubs not just as prey, but as beings that had ontological status close to human beings. These bears already were not just prey. And even if they still needed to be killed and eaten, then it should not have been just killing like killing an animal on a hunt, this action should have already implied certain care about the soul (*ramat*¹) of these bears, a moment of apology for the murder.

This care for souls (*ramat*) was determined, foremost, by the desire to pacify the released souls/*ramat* of bears, which could become dangerous, and thereby protect oneself and one's

¹ Ainu word *ramat* literally means “vital energy exists”, i.e.: originally *ramat* means something like energy/ether that fills the universe (see Nonno 2015), however, in everyday practical usage in Ainu sacral poetry and in folklore narratives *ramat* means “soul” of a certain being, i.e.: vital energy ascribed to a certain particular being/item.

local group. The care for the soul of the killed bear was also apparently since the bear, having spent some time with people, was already considered by the latter as some kind of relative. Each of these factors made it necessary to carry out some actions aimed at calming the souls of killed bears, appeasing the bears. However, it is possible to suppose that the sacred component of these actions initially was minimal.

Step by step the practice of propitiating the soul of a bear developed, and the rites became more elaborated and acquired new details. Appeared a ban on the use of the real name of the bear. And the bear became a *kamuy*². The bear became a *kamuy* in the process of developing ritual actions aimed at propitiating its soul.

And if bears are *kamuy* then their place is the world of *kamuy*, and so the task of people is to send the soul/*ramat* of the killed bear back to the world of *kamuy*.

This is the general scheme showing the possible origin of the Ainu bear ritual *iomante*.

In Japanese anthropology there is a presupposition to state that the Ainu bear ritual is traced back to the so-called Okhotsk technocomplex that existed from 3rd to 13th centuries CE. The so-called Okhotsk technocomplex is supposed to be created by the ancient Nivkh people.

This presupposition is very weird since Ainu people met bears and hunted bears for some thousands of years before they met any Nivkh at all, there were many bears in the forests of the Jōmon period; proofs corroborating that the people of Jōmon were ancient Ainu can be seen in Akulov 2015 and Nonno 2021. And it would be completely unnatural and illogical to suppose that Ainu could not elaborate bear rites by themselves and waited till the Nivkh people come and show them bear rituals. Bear ritual is one of the most fundamental practices, and it was invented many times in many places independently by all ethnic groups that practiced hunting as one of their main activity, so it's just an uttermost degree of stupidity and possibly the worst case of diffusionism to think that a certain ethnic group practicing hunting borrowed bear ritual from another.

Also we should note that in Japanese anthropology there is a tendency to inflate the representation of Okhotsk technocomplex as an independent culture³ separated from Jōmon. Actually the so-called Okhotsk culture is nothing else, but an artificially created concept, Okhotsk technocomplex was a local variant of late Jōmon since it continued all main practices of Jōmon⁴ and so there are no grounds to invent an independent culture.

² *Kamuy* is a being/item that is filled by vital energy *ramat* and can share *ramat* or take it away (for more details see: Nonno 2015).

³ The term technocomplex is a basic concept of archaeology, technocomplex means a set of material items regularly met upon a certain territory and belong to a certain period. The term technocomplex should not be used as an analogue of term culture that is used in cultural anthropology: not every technocomplex supposes the existence of the corresponding independent culture; the same culture can produce different technocomplexes. However, archaeologists often have serious difficulties with these issues: they often try to invent an independent culture for each technocomplex.

And also in the case of Okhotsk technocomplex archaeological misconception is enforced by racist/nationalist tendencies existing in Japanese anthropology. The representation of Ainu as a 'northern savage tribe civilized by Japanese' is somehow profitable in the context of the discourse of the so-called Northern territories. And if they recognize that Ainu came from the South and that Jōmon people = ancient Ainu then it means that Ainu played a significant role in the formation of Japanese ethnicity and this discourse is very offensive/unpleasant for Japanese.

⁴ For instance, shell-mounds were a characteristic feature of Jōmon, but the creation of shell mound continued in the time of Okhotsk technocomplex, and people continued to bury their dead persons in shell mounds that is a label of Jōmon, and moreover, in the aspect of physical anthropology the remains found in these shell mounds often are closer to Jōmon/Ainu rather than to Mongoloid (Spevakovsky 1994).

Also they usually point to the fact that in the genetic aspect the people of the Okhotsk technocomplex are close to modern Nivkh, however, one should always keep in mind that a culture is not determined by genetics. Jōmon people demonstrate a notorious genetic homogeneity, but it doesn't mean that people with other genetics could not be bearers of Jōmon culture, for instance about 3rd – 2nd millennia BCE upon the Japanese islands appeared people bearing Y haplogroup O (see Hammer et al 2006), however, Jōmon culture didn't end, and we suppose that somehow alike scenario took place in the case of the co-called Okhotsk technocomplex.

It is possible to state that certain bear rituals, certain prefigurations of the *iomante* ritual existed at least in the late stages of the Jōmon period yet.

A direct proof of the existence of bear rituals in the Jōmon period would be, for instance, a find of bears' skulls placed in a special hidden place, i.e.: ritually preserved bear skulls. Unfortunately, we have no direct proof yet. However, there are some indirect proofs.

Any ritual is always accompanied by certain notions/ideas. We suppose that first appears a certain practice, and then appears certain myths explaining the practice. Any bear ritual is accompanied by some notions/myths about bears, and these notions can be implemented in different material items. For instance, figurines depicting bears can be considered as manifestations of certain special notions about bears existing in the corresponding culture.

In some sites attributed to the late Jōmon period (2470–1250 BCE) were found figurines depicting bears (see fig.1, fig. 2)



Fig. 1. A clay figurine depicting a bear from Onoeyama site, Aomori prefecture (image source – Jomon Japan)



Fig. 2. A clay figurine of a bear from the Tōtsurazawa site, Aomori prefecture (image source – Tōkyōdaigaku sōgō kenkyū hakubutsukan...)

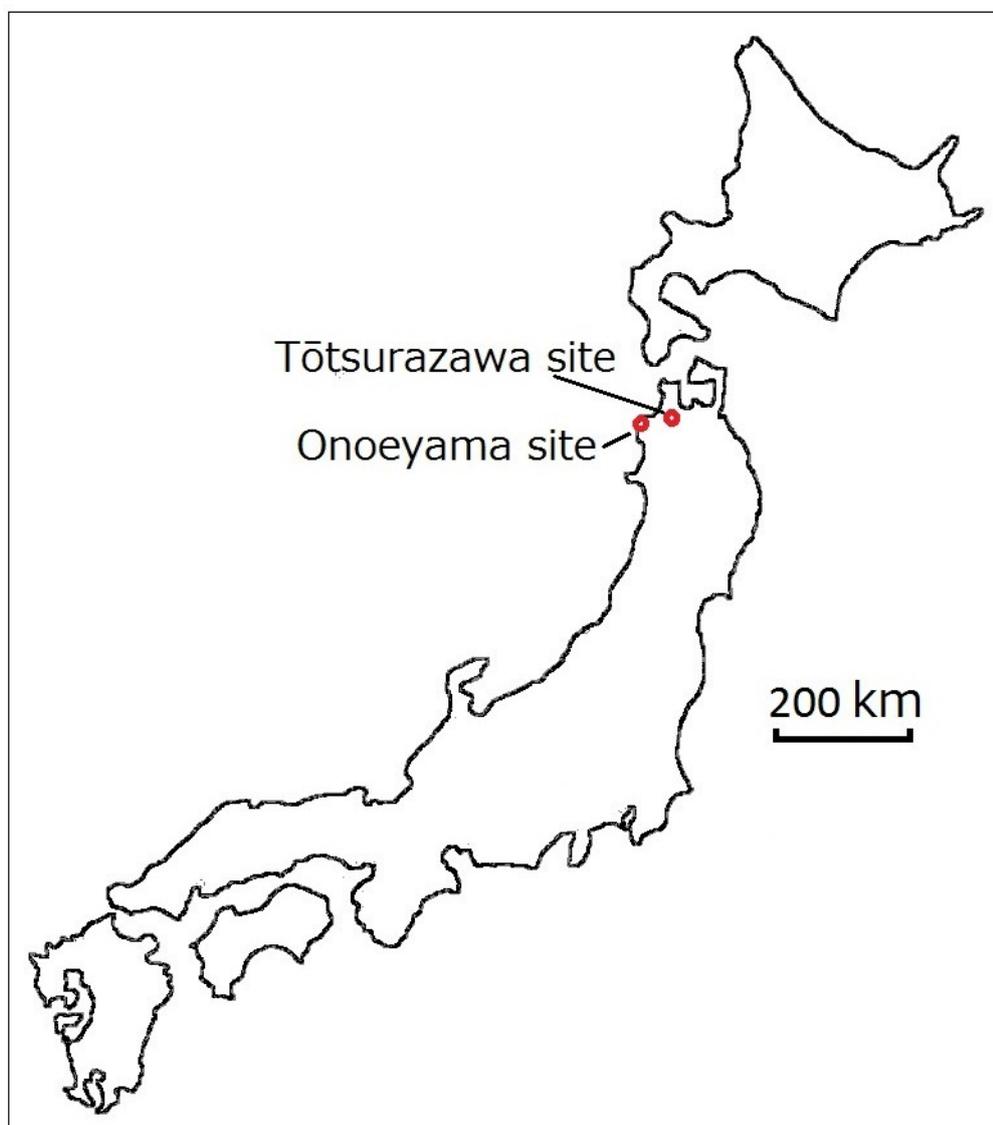


Fig. 3. Map showing the location of sites mentioned in the text

We suppose that such figurines are pieces of evidence of the existence of certain notions about bears as outstanding beings in the late Jōmon period, and since there is no smoke without fire it is possible to suppose that there were also some bear rituals in this period.

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