

AINU Bear Sacrifice - - Mircea Eliade

The Ainu, now living in Hokkaido (northern Japan), Sakhalin, and the Kurile Islands, are the descendants of an archaic ethnic group probably originating from central or northern Siberia. The bear festival, 'Iyomante,' or 'Kamui Omante' (lit. 'to see off' or 'to send off' the 'kamui,' i.e., the 'god') is the most important of the Ainu rituals.

Ainu bear-hunters are very proud if they can secure a bear cub or two to bring up at home for the purpose of holding a great bear feast. Men have been known to risk their lives in order to secure one, and when they do catch a cub they bring it home with great glee, and, of course, get very drunk in honour of the occasion. Sometimes very young cubs may be seen living in the huts with the people, where they play with the children, and are cared for with great affection. In fact, some of them are treated even better than the children themselves, and I have known cases when the people have wept greatly when the cub has died. But as soon as they are grown big and strong enough to cause a little pain when they hug a person, or when their claws are too powerful to be pleasant, they are placed in a cage strongly made of pieces of timber. Here they generally remain until they arrive at the age of two or three years, at which time they are killed for the feast. . . .

When a young bear is about to be sacrificed, the day before this, to us, cruel and barbarous feast takes place, the owner sends round to all his people of the village, and invites them to come and take part in the festivities. . . . The last form of invitation I heard was as follows: 'I, so and so, am about to sacrifice the dear little divine thing who resides among the mountains. My friends and masters, come ye to the feast; we will then unite in the great pleasure of sending the god away. Come.' . . .

As the guests arrive at the place of sacrifice they enter the hut and sit around the fireplace, the men in front and the women behind. Millet dumplings are boiled and toasted, and a kind of white thick beer is brewed from millet. The women get what drink their husbands choose to give them, which, I have noticed, is very little indeed if the drink be the more expensive sake rather than millet beer. But this is not the real feast, but merely a sort of preliminary breaking of the fast.

When the guests have all come in, the men make numbers of *inao*,¹ and stick them into the hearth, and worship is performed. All the gods are worshiped and invited to partake of the feast with them. When this has been done, most of the *inao* are taken up reverently and carried to the *nusa*² place outside, and there stuck up. Next, two long and thickish poles are laid at their base. The men now come out of the hut, ornamented with their totem crowns, and solemnly approach the cage containing the bear. The women and children follow and sing, dance, and clap their hands. By-and-by all are ordered to the *nusa* place, and made to sit in a large circle, the old men in front. After this an Ainu is chosen who, having approached the bear, sits down before it and tells it that they are about to send it forth to its ancestors. He prays pardon for what they are about to do, hopes it will not be angry, tells it what an honour is about to be conferred upon it,

and comforts it with the consolation that a large number of inao and plenty of wine, cakes, and other good cheer will be sent along with it. He also informs it that if it be a good and proper bear it will appear again to be treated in like manner. The last address I heard of ran thus: 'O thou divine one, thou wast sent into the world for us to hunt. O thou precious little divinity, we worship thee; pray hear our prayer. We have nourished thee and brought thee up with a deal of pains and trouble, all because we love thee so. Now, as thou hast grown big, we are about to send thee to thy father and mother. When thou comest to them please speak well of us, and tell them how kind we have been; please come to us again and we will sacrifice thee.'

After the prayer has been said another Ainu goes to the cub's cage and catches the victim's head in a rope having made a noose in it for that purpose. This noose is then passed round the neck and under the foreleg in such a manner as not to choke the animal when it struggles. Another noose is made in a second rope, and this is passed over the head in the same way, excepting that the end of it comes out on the opposite side of the bear. Thus, when the animal comes out of the cage it is led along by two men, one on each side. Sometimes, however, when the bear is a large one, a rope is put over the hind quarters, and a man walks behind holding it tightly and ready to aid in case there should be any dangerous display of temper.

As soon as the poor beast is out of the cage the people who have formed the ring shout and clap their hands while it is being led into their midst, and upon its arrival they take blunt arrows, which they call *Hepere-ai*, i.e. 'cub arrows,' and shoot at it, thus trying to work it up into a passion. The shouting now becomes deafening, and the bear sometimes furious. But the wilder the bear becomes the more delighted do the people get. Should, however, the animal refuse to move, he is brushed down with a stick called *Takusa*, the tuft on the top of which is made of *Arundinaria*. When the excited and struggling brute shows signs of exhaustion a stake is driven into the ground in the centre of the ring of people, and to it the bear is tied. This stake is ornamented with inao shavings and leaves of *Arundinaria*, and is called *Tushop-ni*, i.e. 'tree having the rope.'

As soon as all is secure the blunt arrows are shot with renewed vigour, and the beast tears and rages till it is quite tired out. Then comes the most exciting time and true test of valour. All at once some brave young Ainu will rush forward and seize the brute by the ears and fur of the face, whilst another suddenly rushes out and seizes it by the hind quarters. These men both pull at the animal with all their might. This causes it to open its mouth. Another man then rushes forward with a round piece of wood about two feet long; this he thrusts into the bear's jaws. The poor beast in his rage bites hard at this, and holds it tight between his teeth. Next two men come forward, one on each side of the bear, and seize its fore-legs and pull them out as far as they can. Then two others will in a like manner catch hold of the two hind-legs. When all this has been done quite satisfactorily, the two long poles which were laid by the *nitsa*, and which are called *Oh-numba ni*, i.e. 'Poles for strangling,' are brought forward. One is placed under its throat, and the other upon the nape of its neck.

A good shot with the bow, who has been previously determined on by the men, now comes up and shoots the arrow into the beast's heart, and so ends its misery. Care has to be taken to strike the brute that no blood is shed, for, for some reason or other, it is considered unfortunate to allow any of the blood to fall upon the earth. . . .

As soon then as the bear has been shot in the heart it is carried to the two poles, which have been previously placed upon the ground for this purpose, and its head placed upon one of them, while the other is put over its neck. Now all the people shout and rush forward, every one eager to assist in squeezing the animal till life is quite extinct. It is said that they must be careful not to allow the poor beast to utter any cries during its death struggles, for this is thought to be very unlucky; why I cannot learn. People become so very excited at the time the cub is throttled that they sometimes trample on one another in their eagerness to have a hand in the death. And so the poor brute is killed, and the first part of the act of sacrifice accomplished.

As soon as it is strangled to death the bear is skinned and its head cut off, the skin, however, being left attached to the head. This is taken to the east window and placed upon a mat called *inao-so*, and ornamented with inao shavings, earrings, beads, and other things; indeed, on one occasion I even saw one decorated with old sword hilts and a Japanese mirror. After having been placed here a piece of its own flesh is cut off and placed under the snout. This is called *Not-pokomap*, i.e. 'that under the jaw.'

Then a piece of dried fish and a moustache lifter, neatly made up into a parcel, is put before it, also some millet dumplings, a cup of its own meat boiled, and some sake. The dried fish is called *Sat-chep Shike*, i.e. 'the bundle of dried fish.' The cup containing the boiled meat is called *marapto itangi*, i.e. 'the cup of the feast.' This having been done, a man worships, saying, 'O cub, we give you these inao cakes, and dried fish; take them to your parents, and say, 'I have been brought up for a long time by an Ainu father and mother, and have been kept from all trouble and harm. As I am now grown big I am come to thee. I have also brought these inao, cakes, and dried fish. Please rejoice.' If you say this to them they will be very glad.'

Another prayer ran thus: 'My dear cub, pray listen to me. I have cared for you a long time, and now present thee with inao, cakes, wine and other precious things. Do thou ride upon the inao, and other good things herewith presented to thee, and go to thy father and mother. Go happily and make them rejoice. When you arrive call together multitudes of divine guests, and make a great feast. Do thou again come to this world that I, who reared thee, may meet with thee again, and once more bring thee up for sacrifice. I salute thee, my dear cub; depart in peace.'

After this worship has been performed millet dumplings are threaded on sticks, and placed beside the head. These are said to be for the feast in the new world, for it would never do to appear before one's ancestors without a small present sufficient to provide viands for a meal. They are called *Imoka-shike*, i.e. 'remnants of the feast.' The men, now all readjust or don their crowns, for they have been either laid on one side or knocked off during the teasing and slaying of the cub. This done, they have a good dance altogether. . . . The dance over, they return to the hut, and make quantities of inao, which are carefully placed upon the bear's head. In the meantime some of the cub's flesh has been boiled. A cup of this is now taken, and set before the beast's snout, and he is said to be partaking of the *marapto itangi*, i.e. 'the cup of the feast.' After a little time has elapsed the man who presides at the feast says, 'The little divinity has now finished eating; come, ye friends, let us worship.' He then takes the cup, salutes it, and divides the contents - a very small portion for each-among all the assembled guests, for it seems to be absolutely essential that each person, young and old alike, should take a little. Besides being

called 'the cup of the feast,' this cup is also named *ipuni itangi*, i.e. 'the cup of offering.' This name refers to the fact of its having been offered to the divinity just sacrificed.

After this cup has been partaken of, more inao are made, while the rest of the beast is stewing in the pots. The entrails are then cut up fine, sprinkled with salt, and eaten raw. This, like the drinking of the blood, is said to be for the purpose of obtaining the prowess and other virtues of the bear. I must mention, also, that some of the men besmear themselves and their clothes with blood. This is said to be for the purpose of rendering themselves successful in hunting. This beastly habit is called *Yai-isho-ushi*, i.e. 'besmearing oneself with good sport,' or 'successful hunting.' . . .

As soon as the flesh has been sufficiently cooked it is shared out among the people present, and every member of the company partakes of some, however little it may be. It is thus that he obtains communion with his dear little divinity, as he calls the victim; and this appears to me to be the special way in which he shows his social and religious fellowship with his totem god and the people. Not to partake of this feast and not to make inao would be tantamount to confessing oneself outside the pale of Ainu fellowship. Every particle of the bear, bones excepted, formerly had to be eaten up, even to the entrails, though this rule is now relaxed. . . .

The head of the bear is at last detached from the skin and taken to the nusa heap, where it is placed among the other skulls. A tall pole is here set up having a fork in the top, the prongs of which are ornamented with *inao*. This pole is called *keomande-ni*, i.e. 'the pole for sending away

Notes

1 Wooden wands used for religious and ceremonial purposes.

2 A collection of inao.