Symbolism of Symmetry in the Ainu Culture —From the Viewpoint of Analytical Psychology

小坂 和子*
Kazuko Kosaka-Tanaka

1. Introduction

There is a story of the Ainu, called “The Kamui’ of Orca and Soul Stealing”.

“I, Tomari Koro Kamui\(^1\) live peacefully on the seashore, guarding the houses and creeks every day. One day I felt quite sleepy. I lay down for a moment to rest, but fell asleep and had a dream. I look at the sea as usual and see a strange boat approaching. It must be Sir-kur. He says that he’ll steal the soul of a beautiful woman to get married. Other gods (spirits) also discuss how to invade. At last, the boat reaches my creek and they begin to build a cabin there. This makes me get extremely angry! I then woke up and hurried to take the Shinta (= a flying ship), by jumping out of my window. I did find a cabin by the creek, just as I had seen it in my dream. I shook the cabin and pushed it away into the river. They disappeared into the air. Then I returned home and stored my Shinta. Since then I have lived peacefully as usual, guarding my creek.”

\(^{1}\) Words in the Words Human in the Ainu language are indicated with an underscore, except for ‘Ainu (human)’ and ‘Kamui’ (god, spirit).
Several Ainu folk tales are narrated by the Kamui, gods (spirits), in a very informal oral language. The Kamui love human beings a lot and intend to share a peaceful world. This story, in particular, shows how close and friendly Ainu people feel towards the Fish-Kamui. The Ainu are carefully protected by this sleepy and gentle Kamui, who appreciates his dreams as precious treasures.

In the Ainu culture, the borders between ‘the Kamui world’ and ‘the human world’, between ‘humans’ and ‘animals, fish, and materials’, and between ‘death’ and ‘life’, are not as clear as those in modern cultures. In spite of this, the order in the world is maintained. Thus, it is valuable to understand the dynamic essence of this unique cosmology.

2. Cultural history of the Ainu people

Scholars know very little of the biological, linguistic, historical, and cultural origins of the Ainu. However, this does not mean that they are an isolated people without history. The history of the Ainu is intertwined with that of Northeast Asia, namely, Japan, Mongolia, and Siberia. The geography of these regions influenced various groups of Ainu and created obvious differences in their life styles. Nevertheless, all these Ainu groups seemed to share a similar religious beliefs and subscribed to a similar philosophy.

In the 15th century, over 150,000 people lived in Hokkaido, the northern island of ‘Japan’. The identification of the Ainu culture is based more on ‘the Hokkaido Ainu’ than other groups. This is because the Hokkaido Ainu were the largest of the Ainu groups and survived the Japanese and Russian conquests. Regrettably, these Ainu people in this ‘Japanese area’ have been oppressed, exiled from their homelands, and discriminated against for a long time, by ‘Japan’. The modern Ainu people, about 23,000 (in Hokkaido, 1993), who now live together with ‘Japanese’ people as ‘Japanese citizens’, are struggling to recover their own traditional identity and to pass their cultural heritage to their children.

Subsequently, we shall examine the geographical aspects of Ainu culture. The Ainu are the aboriginal people of Hokkaido, southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands. Hokkaido is an island of about 30,000 square miles, which is situated north of the main Japanese island of Honshu. The climate of Hokkaido is sub-arctic; its yearly mean temperature varies between 5.2 °C and 7.6 °C, with a long snow season of snow from November to May.

The island is well-wooded with fir, spruce, birch, oak and elm. Several rivers run through all over Hokkaido. Animals such as bear and deer live in the mountains and salmon are found in most rivers from May until October. The Ainu live mainly by hunting animals and fishing. Although they collected wild plants and berries, it is primarily a hunting society. They have lived primarily on salmon\(^2\), and as a result, have tended to dwell in groups along the rivers. The salmon in the river is given a special status in their culture, and is referred to as ‘Sipe’ (the genuine fish) or ‘Kamui-cep’ (the god-fish). Moreover, the rivers are considered to be the most important axis, which determines the spiritual topology behind the daily life. For example, every house has its own sacred window, which always opens towards the direction of the upper part of the river. The rivers represent the special stream, which has supported the life of the Ainu, externally and internally.

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2 See 4.
3 Salmon is the common name for several species of ‘Salmonidae’, which include trout.
The Ainu worship natural phenomenon as well as inanimate objects. Such beliefs lead them to fear several gods (or spirits) called 'Kamui'. These gods are mainly found mainly nature, e.g., the sun, moon, wind, thunder, fire, and water. As a result, the Ainu’s belief might be classified as animism. It is very interesting that these gods are believed to visit the Ainu world in disguise. In other words, the gods resemble humans and lead their lives in the Kamui Mosir (land of the gods) like the Ainu people. Whenever gods come to the earth, they transform themselves into a salmon, bear, etc.

On every occasion, the Ainu offer prayers and hold ceremonies for the gods. Indeed, they worship the Kamui as holy spirits, but we can also detect a unique and significant meaning in these ceremonies. The Ainu do consider hunting to be just a triumph over animals and fish. From their point of view, obtaining game means that the gods themselves are offering the Ainu people ‘their disguises’, that is, the meat of the animals and fish. In return, the Ainu people worship the gods through ‘sending ceremonies’. In other words, they regard the god’s return journey with great respect.

3. ‘Asircep-nomi’ (sending ceremony for the initial salmon)

In this chapter, I would like focus on ‘Asircep-nomi’, which is a special ritual for sending the initial hunted-salmon back to the land of gods. It is one of the important ceremonies of the Ainu people. Besides they also have the ‘Iwomantite’ (sending ceremony for the bear), which is a very dramatic ceremony and may be well known all over the world, though there are many significant ceremonies throughout the year. Salmon, in fact, are an essential resource in the life of the Ainu. They utilize salmon fish skins for clothes, shoes, and bags. Valuable medicines were also made from salmon. It follows that the sending ceremony for salmon is held with special respect and solemnity.

Let us examine this ceremony in details. In September, the salmon begin to ascend the river in order to return to the fresh water where they were born. At first, a special dugout canoe is built. The person, who makes the canoe, does not speak openly of his intention to do so and is very cautious in choosing a suitable tree and cutting it down carefully. While cutting down the tree, he makes no mention of boat building for the fear of attracting the attention of evil spirits, who might riddle the wood with wormholes.

Then, two men in special folk costumes take this canoe onto the river. The man in the back paddles and steers, and the man in the front hunts the salmon with a ‘Marep’ (special spear for catching salmon). The Ainu people catch the salmon individually, because fishing for salmon is considered to be serious hunting and requires face-to-face confrontation. As soon as the salmon is caught, the fisherman must hit it on the head with ‘Iwapa kikuni’ (a special club made from willow, about 30—45 cm), praying ‘Iwau kori, Iwau kori’ (please take ‘Iwau’ with you).” Iwau are sacred wooden sticks decorated with beautiful curls, and they are carved elegantly in an artistic manner, which are necessary for all the religious ceremonies in the Ainu culture. Every god has his own suitable ‘Iwau’. This willow club is considered to be a different version of the ‘Iwau’, and The salmon is believed to be extremely pleased and honoured to be killed by it, as he will then

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4 Since both the core sense and definition of ‘Kamui’ are absolutely different from those of ‘God’ in Christianity, it might be proper to equate ‘Kamui’ with ‘spirit’. However, several studies on the Ainu culture translate Kamui as ‘god’ as a colloquial expression in Japanese, which creates lots of confusion. This is because Kamui is personified and described like the gods in the Greek myths. In this paper, I use both translations according to context.
be ready to return home with his favourite beautiful ‘Isapa Kikumi-Inau’.

The master of the ceremony, usually the elder, receives ‘the initial salmon’, takes out its heart, and skewers it at the sacred hearth to offer it to the god of fire. On the other hand, the body of the salmon is placed at the altar and decorated with a lot of ‘Inau’ dedicated especially to this salmon-god. Then, the master prays and burns all ‘Inau’ together at the hearth to send off the salmon-god.

4. Interpretation : From the viewpoint of ethnology

1) “Logic of the symmetry”

There is no doubt that the Ainu’s belief in the Karum should be categorised as animism. As the first step in our analysis, we shall focus our attention on the animism of the Ainu culture.

In 1958, Levi-Strauss presented the idea that people perceive the world in terms of ‘binary opposites’. Rituals offer sacred ‘time and space’ for solving the opposites.

The question now arises: Do the Kamui and the Ainu oppose each other at all? The folklore referred to in the Introduction shows that they live closely together in peace. ‘Kamui’ is not absolutely superior to ‘Ainu’. Moreover, humans are not superior to animals, and animals are not superior to fish. The classification of Kamui, human beings, animals, and fish are ephemeral, because they are latently changeable or circular. The result is that they feel a kind of kinship as equal and mutually beneficial partners.

Japanese anthropologist Nakazawa develops the theory of ‘the binary opposites’ into ‘the logic of the symmetry’. He describes the relationship of two opponents as one of symmetry, in which they do not conflict but maintain a harmonious order, with a boundary between the two. Indeed this logic also belongs to ‘the opposites’, however, the visually symmetrical image allows us to picture the cosmology of the Ainu vividly.

2) ‘The boundary’ as a space for hunting

In symmetrical logic, the boundary does not activate the conflict. To use a biological model, the boundary in the Ainu’s cosmology might be said to function like a ‘cell membrane’ or ‘semi-permeable membrane’, which not only acts as a barrier to avoid the contamination of the two fields, but also allows certain molecules to move from one to the other. In the Ainu perception, we can detect such a mild separation here and there. Without the image of this kind of a boundary, it is impossible to establish such an aesthetic ‘sending-ceremony’. This image is also reminiscent of the mandala.

The act of hunting fish involves an important and inevitable crossing of the border so that the human being might survive. However, from the viewpoint of Ainu animism, even such a reasonable act might bring about the ultimate collapse of their cosmology, since hunting can be considered to be a ‘war’ between two tribes. This anxiety should not be dismissed as an overstatement, because in our modern society, we have, in fact, fundamentally threatened nature and caused the extinction of several precious species.

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5 It is widely seen that fishermen hit the heads of big fish. The main reason for this is very practical, and differs completely from that of the Ainu. Fisherman typically need to kill fish immediately in order to (1) stop the struggling, (2) keep them fresh and (3) preserve the body and spawn perfectly.

6 the highest god
3) ‘Sending-ceremony’ as restoration and our future

In order to maintain the symmetrical cosmology, the wisdom of the Ainu people has created a unique ‘sending-ceremony’, which serves to restore ‘the logic of the symmetry’. For example, when a person hunts a fish, and then cooks and eats it, he/she becomes a superior destroyer and apparently overwhelms the fish as game. However, by recognizing the fish ‘Kamui’, he/she is ready to transform this ‘superior-inferior relationship’ into a balanced one. I would call this process as a restoration of symmetry. Such a recovery process has an extreme effect, in particular, at the exact moment of ‘killing’ the fish, when the ultimate asymmetry between humans and fish appears. As it is described before, the fisherman is strictly obliged to use a special club not as a practical weapon but a holy wand. Any wild passion and excitement is carefully and aesthetically controlled by the special prayers. At this stage, it is believed that the soul of the Kamui-fish returns partly. We can consider that the whole symmetry system is gradually recovered step by step. The last ceremony is performed before cooking and eating the salmon. Taking the heart out of a salmon implies a kind of sacrifice, and at the same time, it reminds us that the primary procedure for cooking fish is gutting. The brutal acts of gutting and scaling are purified through a sophisticated ritual by the old wise master.

This solemn ritual of ‘sending the Kamui-fish’ assures all the members and villagers that this salmon is not just conquered game, but is coming and returning with its own intention. The former represents the vertical asymmetry, but the latter preserves the horizontal symmetry. Some scholars have classified this sending ceremony as an expression of primitive nature worship; however, rather than regarding it as simple and naïve, we consider it to be much more imaginative, deep, complicated and profound.

It is clear that the logic of the symmetry is so effective in maintaining harmony, and yet is vulnerable to ‘the confrontation of the opposition’. This has brought about a cruel tragedy for the Ainu. History shows that this social boundary activated a real war and completely destroyed the Ainu world. Nevertheless, we believe that our generation could re-create our own inner ‘sending ceremony’ in order to restore the logic of c, including the relationship between the Ainu and non-Ainu, in this ‘modern’ and ‘Oriental’ world.

5. Interpretation: From the viewpoint of analytical psychology

1) The Kamui as the unconscious, and the Ainu as the conscious

The image of the interaction between the Kamui and the Ainu, reminds me of ‘the psyche’ and of the dynamics throughout the analytical process.

The Kamui as ‘the unconscious’ are invisible and amorphous, but they live like human beings in their region. This means that the unconscious can be originally very understandable with the language and theory of our daily life. We can not see the unconscious itself directly, but experience it just through the disguised figures, i.e., the symbols. It is significant that all the conscious mind can do is simply waiting for the visit of the unconscious, in ‘the appropriate space and time’ through an ‘appropriate preparation’. The conscious cannot control the unconscious process.

Furthermore, a visit from the Kamui connects me with the ‘dreaming process’. Jung said, ‘The dream is a spontaneous self-portrayal, in symbolic form, of the actual situation in the unconscious’ (C.W.8). Every dream presents images that can convey a message, and inform the dreamer of something unknown, but which is of vital importance and full of energy regarding the dreamer’s psyche. The Kamui as an a priori existent, needs to be dressed in metaphor, allegory and symbols across the boundary. Preparation is always
necessary for both sides. Several Ainu folk tales, including the one cited in the Introduction, demonstrate the Kamui’s own intention to contribute towards the human, which is very impressive and moving.

2) The psychological meaning of ‘salmon-hunting’ as a symbol

The encounter between the two takes place during the scene of ‘hunting the salmon’. It is reasonable to regard this series of sequences as a ‘dream series’.

Hunting has two aspects in symbolism: one aspect is concerned with slaying the game, and the other is the spiritual quest. The symbolism of fishing emphasizes the latter. It derived from the fact the fish itself lives in the water, which represents a source of life, purity, and regeneration. Psychologically, we can make tow important observations. First, in order to complete the process, the conscious side must leave itself open to spontaneous forces, which are formed at the moment of real confrontation. The genuine wisdom appears at ‘the waterline’. It tells us about the necessity of the analytical setting, which exists as ‘the boundary area’ (waterline), between two worlds and contains ‘analytical spontaneous forces’, known as ‘transference’. Next, through the process of fishing, the fisherman interacts and struggles with both the fish and the water. In other words, a fish transforms itself gradually in three stages: first, it is ‘the unknown’, then it is ‘the object’, which partly shows itself with resistance and finally it is ‘the known material’, which is ready for assimilation.

In the Ainu culture, holy instruments and rituals play important roles. As shown before, they are important tools for restoring the cosmology. From the perspective of analytical psychology, we can see this dynamism as a function of compensation or self-regulation. Each ritual aesthetically punctuates the whole process so that the real dialogue may develop systematically. Then, it will be possible for the conscious to assimilate the deep and careful experience. The rituals also protect the psyche from the contamination of the unconscious and the conscious. In analytical processes as well as sacred fishing, gradual progress is required.

Last, we need to understand the salmon symbolism. Salmon is sacred and is also appreciated as a staple food. This emphasizes of its ‘popularity’. On the other hand, it is well known that the salmon has a characteristic trait, ‘anadormy’, namely, the return to spawn. This shows that the salmon is unique and different from other fish. We can see that the symbol of the salmon contains various ‘bipolarity’, as well as being a symbol of the unconscious. The unconscious should be dealt from diverse points, including the subjective and objective.

6. The psychological meaning of ‘sending-off’, as a lysis

A series of rituals ends with sending off the Fish-Kamui back home. I presented a rather passive possibility of ‘restoration of the symmetry’, ethologically. However, we can see a more active psychological aspect. At first, it seems reasonable to suppose that the unconscious, whose message was accepted appropriately, should be divided again from the conscious throughout the rite. For the purpose of confrontation, the conscious needs to open to the unconscious. In addition, for closing, the special ritual should be set more carefully than for opening. The conscious cannot follow the unconscious. To state it paradoxically, while the conscious sees off the unconscious, the unconscious sees off the conscious. At this final stage, the movement of confrontation is reversed into the separation. It will also function towards guarding the newly developed psyche as a whole. And this counter-dynamism creates another possibility
for a new encounter in the future. Our psyche should accept the provisional termination by anticipating a new beginning.

For the ‘real-ization of the soul of the Ainu culture’, the modern psyche needs to experience the whole process ‘really and deeply’. It is important not to excavate what belonged to the past, but to re-create and re-fix what belongs to the present and future.

This is invaluable not only for the archaic Ainu, but also for our modern psyche.

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