

“A Pointless Death, A Horrible Death”: The Role of Small Animals in Chiri Yukie’s *Ainu Shin’yōshū*.

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Abstract: “Therefore, rabbits of the future, take heed not to make mischief” proclaims the rabbit narrator at the end of “The Song the Rabbit God Sang” (28). This Ainu Oral Story is just one of thirteen recorded in Chiri Yukie’s *Ainu Shin'yōshū* (Collection of Ainu Chants of Spiritual Beings). In this paper, I examine “The Song the Rabbit Sang” alongside two other stories from Chiri’s collection, “The Song the Otter Sang” and “The Song the Frog Sang”, which characterize their animal narrators as mischievous ‘trickster’ figures. These stories follow a similar narrative structure wherein the ‘trickster’ animal defies an understood social boundary between itself and humans, is subsequently punished for its wrongdoing, and ultimately learns an important lesson which it shares with others of its species. Through examining these recurring narrative elements, I argue that the relationship between Ainu and these smaller, less symbolic animals as expressed in Oral Story reflects a complex system of reciprocity that lies at the heart of Ainu relationships with their land, spirits (*Kamui*), and the nonhuman world.

“A Pointless Death, A Horrible Death”; The Role of Small Animals in Chiri Yukie’s *Ainu Shin’yōshū*.

“I, born an Ainu and living among Ainu speakers, in my spare moments, in rainy evenings and snowy nights, have put together with my clumsy brush just one or two of the very least of the stories our ancestors told for amusement. If it should turn out that this work is read by some who are kind enough to understand us, then I shall share with our race’s ancestors joy without limit, happiness unsurpassable.”

Thus concludes Chiri Yukie in her prologue to *Ainu Shin’yōshū* (Collection of Ainu Chants of Spiritual Beings): a collection of thirteen Ainu Oral Stories translated and transcribed into Japanese and Romanized Ainu.¹ This text, completed when Chiri was only nineteen years old, marks the first written collection of Ainu Oral Literature to be compiled by an Ainu speaker (Chiri i). She worked on this collection over the summer of 1922 – just decades after the Japanese settler-colonialism of traditional Ainu lands. Writing during a time when Ainu language and culture were threatened by aggressive policies of colonial dispossession and assimilation, her prologue appeals to a distant reader for understanding and appreciation of the stories within, yet her apologetic tone suggests doubts that such kindness might ever be granted. Indeed, Oral Traditions, both of the Ainu and others, have historically been disregarded as legitimate forms of knowledge and are often excluded from a Western definition of “literature.” As Indigenous literary scholar Daniel Heath Justice notes in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, the category of ‘literature’ tends to refer solely to “alphabetic texts” (20). He adds that, when a text is not exclusively written, it “becomes ‘oral literature,’ ‘oral tradition,’ ‘oral history,’ etc., and the distinction is meaningful, as a social evolutionary bias presumes that the oral is a less developed version of the written” (20). This is an unfortunate tendency, since the stories Chiri recorded with her ‘clumsy brush’ are, in fact, rich sources of traditional Ainu knowledge that

¹ This paper follows the editorial guidelines offered by Gregory Younging in *Elements of Indigenous Style*: If “[...] the term relates to Indigenous identity, institutions, or rights [...] capitalization is probably in order” (77). ‘Oral Tradition’ and related terms are included among those in his section on “Capitalized terms for Indigenous institutions” (78-81).

reveal the complex relationships Ainu share with the natural world around them – relationships rooted in reciprocity and mediated by *Kamui*, or spirits, that inhabit all natural phenomena with which humans interact.

Her collection of stories is particularly valuable, since because Ainu language and literature is traditionally exclusively oral, most information regarding Ainu (particularly from the premodern period) has been reconstructed through Japanese documents. Until the early 18th century, “knowledge of the Ainu [in Europe] had been obtained through the Japanese either directly or at least in a surrounding dominated by Japanese” (Ölschleger 30). Representations of Ainu life and culture in global discourse were thus presented solely through external, biased perspectives and excluded Ainu voices themselves. These records, written by Japanese observers, present an image of Ainu as a more ‘primitive’ counterpart to themselves, akin to the trope of the ‘noble savage,’ which denotes “the concept of Man in his natural state and still in the possession of his inborn ethic and moral qualities, which otherwise degenerate to the point of vanishing in the process of being civilized” (29). Such descriptions are, of course, characterizations rooted in the colonial imagination rather than an accurate or objective representation of Indigenous peoples. As Ölschleger explains, “The topos of the noble savage is not a tool to describe ethnographic reality, but a political device [...]” to serve various “political and social” motivations (28). In this way, tropes such as the ‘noble savage’ have been deployed in place of presenting a more accurate or truthful understanding of Ainu culture.

Scientific inquiry under the guise of ‘Ainu Studies’ has long been driven by ulterior political purposes – namely, with the intent to “develop state and prefectural policy directives for colonizing and modernizing Ainu people” (Mark K. Watson et al. 3). A dominant means by which Japanese attempted to ‘colonize and modernize’ Ainu was to portray their traditional relationships with the natural world as ‘backwards’, thus serving to justify the aggressive

transformation of what they perceived as ‘empty land’ into an internal colony in the late 19th century (Siddle 71-72). In his essay “Ainu and Hunter-Gatherer Studies,” archaeologist Mark J. Hudson explores how the status of “hunter-gatherer” has been used to “bolster views of Ainu primitiveness in both academic and public perspectives” (117). As the Introduction to *Beyond Ainu Studies* explains, “Ainu subsistence practices such as hunting and fishing, together with the lack of a written language, became tagged as criteria to place Ainu in a lower evolutionary tier, and were used to rationalize assimilation policies such as agriculture” (Watson et al. 3). Thus, the damaging legacy of ‘Ainu Studies’ has been to discredit Oral Traditions as a legitimate source of knowledge and misrepresent Ainu ecological relationships as simply a ‘primitive’ version of Western worldviews.

Though recent scholarship is increasingly rooted in decolonization and centers Ainu voices, similar concepts of the ‘noble savage’ continue to be projected onto Ainu in the modern day. For example, through calls to environmental activism, activists have turned to Indigenous practices as a model for ‘sustainability’; recent writings have “begun to elaborate a narrative of Ainu as having lived in harmony with nature” (Watson et al. 16). Yet, this view fails to capture a full understanding of Ainu ecological relationships, instead imagining the Ainu as an overly romanticized, and perhaps even benign, ‘other’. These exaggerated stereotypes of Ainu continue to be damaging, as “the idealized image in popular culture of who Ainu should be, continues to be deployed in imagining what or how Ainu might choose to be” (16). Without developing a nuanced and complete understanding of Ainu worldviews, misunderstood external projections remain dominating in discourses surrounding Ainu relationships to their land and the natural world.

In my paper, I examine the representation of small, ordinary animals in Chiri's collection to explore how a study rooted in literature may serve to resist such inaccurate or incomplete understandings. As Kwakwaka-wakw geographer Sarah Hunt writes,

[l]ooking to Indigenous epistemologies for ways to get beyond the ontological limits of what is legible as western scholarship, a number of Indigenous scholars have pointed to stories, art, and metaphor as important transmitters of Indigenous knowledge. Stories and storytelling are widely acknowledged as culturally nuanced ways of knowing, produced within networks of relational meaning-making (27).

As Hunt argues, Oral Stories can transmit important cultural knowledge without being filtered through external biases or misunderstandings – they invite nuance and self-representation in a way that external scientific investigations often fail to do. Yet, it is important to consider that knowledge from Oral Stories may continue to be misrepresented if they are read strictly through a Western ontological framework. The term 'ontology' refers to the ways in which a group understands and experiences the concept of being, of existence, and of reality. Hunt, along with other scholars, discuss how non-Indigenous scholars have tended to approach studies involving Indigenous ontologies through a "profoundly colonial, homogenized, depoliticized understanding of Indigeneity" (Cameron et al 21). An understanding of 'Indigeneity' will be inaccurate in these ways if born through the misconception that the Western ontological framework is the *only* one – that there is a singular, universal understanding of reality that can simply be projected onto studies of different cultures. Yet, the beliefs and concepts we may hold to be 'truth' in Western cultures are not necessarily 'truth' in others and are thereby not reflected in the same way in various literary traditions. Projecting Western ontology onto Indigenous Literatures can lead to a misrepresentation of the literature in question, serving to reproduce inequalities and misconceptions born from colonialism.

I recognize that I am approaching the Oral Stories of this study from the perspective of a non-Ainu student. None of the information or knowledge I have gained about these stories has

been obtained through lived experience and may thus be inaccurate or skewed due to my own limited perspective. Recognizing my limitations as such, centering Ainu voices, and following protocols outlined by Gregory Younging's *Elements of Indigenous Style* can hopefully reduce my voice in this paper as I work to bring attention to the *Kamui Yukar* and their lessons. A study of this kind would also greatly benefit from a further consultation of sources in Ainu or Japanese, although the language barrier has prevented me from doing so. I hope that my work will inspire others to pursue this topic more thoroughly in collaboration with Ainu, making more research available in English. Despite this paper's inevitable shortcomings, I am grateful for the opportunity to read and learn from these stories, and was driven to this study by Chiri Yukie's words, speaking to readers from almost exactly a century's distance. My primary aim with this paper is to give the space for understanding that Chiri asks for in her prologue, and to honour her and her ancestors with respect and admiration.

I will be focusing on three specific stories from Chiri Yukie's collection: "The Song the Rabbit Sang," "The Song the Frog Sang," and "The Song the Otter Sang," which center around relationships between Ainu and smaller animals. These animal stories can be classified as *Kamui-Yukar*, as they are narrated in the first person by a *Kamui*, or spirit, who recites their experiences living amongst humans, or Ainu, in the form of an animal. A *yukar* is generally defined as "Ainu epic poetry, particularly tales of heroes" (Ogihara 278). In these stories, the animal *Kamui*, or animal spirit, uses their own foul deeds or mistaken acts to teach a lesson to others. Stories centering highly symbolic and revered animals in Ainu culture, such as the bear and black fox, have attracted more attention in English-language scholarship. Takashi Irimoto's essay entitled "Ainu Worldview and Bear Hunting Strategies" uses stories of the bear to examine the various prayers, ceremonies, and gifts offered to *Kamui* to express gratitude while hunting these highly regarded animals. Sarah Strong's "The Most Revered of Foxes: Knowledge of

Animals and Animal Power in an Ainu Kamui Yukar” examines “The Song the Black Fox Sang” from Chiri Yukie’s collection, studying how the special powers of the black fox, or *shitunpe*, as seen in this story “reflect the Ainu understanding of the connection between more powerful animal spiritual beings and the particular location in the landscape where they are understood to dwell” (27). Such stories reveal great reverence for these animals, emphasizing acts of ceremony and respect that are expected when interacting with them. These animal spirits are understood as *Pase Kamui*, translated as ‘weighty’ or ‘eminent’ animals, as they carry high value and are generally understood to be “committed to using their power to help human beings” (Strong 107).

On the other hand, the rabbit, frog, and otter are considered *Koshne Kamui*, ‘of light weight’, translated as ‘a *Kamui* of low rank’ or ‘undistinguished.’ Such *Kamui* still possess power, though are not understood to be committed to using these powers “to the benefit of human beings and the maintenance of the ecological order” in the same way (Strong 107). The way such ‘ordinary’ animals are depicted in these Oral Stories provides unique insights into the relationships Ainu have with natural resources and the nonhuman world. Significantly, such animals are portrayed as ‘trickster’ figures – an archetypal character present in literary traditions around the world and generally defined by their mischievous defiance of social norms or boundaries. A key element of this common ‘trickster’ figure is the fact that their transgression is used to teach a lesson to listeners of the story. In the essay “Introducing the Fascinating and Perplexing Trickster Figure,” Hynes and Doty write that “the breaching and upending process initiated by tricksters in their challenges to the accepted ways of doing things highlights the possibilities within a society for creative reflection on and change of the society’s meanings” (8). Likewise, the rabbit, otter, and frog, through their mischievous actions, challenge understood boundaries between humans and themselves, ultimately reflecting on and sharing the importance of maintaining such social rules.

These stories all begin with the animal transgressing an understood boundary between themselves and humankind: the rabbit tampers with human traps, threatening Ainu food supply (Chiri 25); the frog violates personal space to which he is not welcome (51); and the otter insults the younger sisters of two Ainu culture heroes: Okikurumi and Samayunkar (59). All these actions negatively impact Okikurumi, the human figure in these stories, and violate the mutual respect that is expected between humans and animals for both to maintain a peaceful coexistence. After being punished violently for their actions, these stories all end with the animal narrator explicitly offering a lesson to others of its species based upon their own experiences.

Even though animals are the implied audience of these lessons, humans can also learn from them. The *Kamui Yukar* of the frog, otter, and rabbit do not only express how these animals and their mischievous actions impact humankind, but also imagine how our human reactions to such mischievous acts are understood by the ‘trickster’ in question. In her documented oration entitled “Oratory on Oratory,” Sto:lo poet and author Lee Maracle states, “Oratory is a human story in relation to the story of other beings, and so it is fiction, for it takes place in, while engaging, the imagination of ourselves in relation to all other beings” (151). Though we can only understand the conditions of existence from a human perspective, Maracle explains, stories allow us to imagine the ways in which other beings with whom we share space also exist and relate to us. Likewise, these *Kamui Yukar* narrate experiences of ‘ordinary’ animals who humans encounter on a regular basis, focusing on an interaction in which the animal offends or otherwise disrupts the daily life of a human figure. By violating the implicit boundary between humans and animals, this ‘trickster’ challenges this relationship through a transgression; the boundary is subsequently reaffirmed through a punishment.

Thus, these stories center primarily on the relationship and interactions *between* actors and not any specific actor themselves, including the human actor. By examining the relationship

between Ainu and small animals as expressed through these Oral Stories, I aim to highlight the unique role reciprocity plays in the Ainu worldview. Since both *Kamui* and Ainu possess powers which can place the other in a vulnerable position, reciprocity is pivotal to ensure that the relationship between them remains mutually beneficial. Yet, reciprocity is a delicate system to uphold, and requires a strong understanding of boundaries, respect, and the repercussions of breaching such respect to ensure all beings continue to behave in mutually beneficial ways. Understanding the lessons of reciprocity expressed in Oral Stories reaffirms the fact that historical understandings of Ainu as ‘primitive hunter-gatherers’ or living in ‘idyllic harmony’ with nature are inaccurate oversimplifications that fail to capture the complex relationship between Ainu and the nonhuman world. By rooting this analysis in literature, my paper aims to highlight the important role Oral Literature can play in transmitting knowledge in a way that incorporates Ainu ontology and worldview, thus leading to a more culturally nuanced understanding of the lessons within, which can serve to fight against such harmful, colonial stereotypes.

About Ainu and Chiri Yukie

The term *Ainu* refers to a diverse population with notable geographic and cultural differences. As Ainu scholar Kitty Chisato notes, people typically equate the term “Ainu” with only the Ainu of Hokkaido, and believe that even amongst Hokkaido Ainu, all communities are the same. However, she explains that historically there were “Ainu groups in Honshu such as the Tohoku Ainu, but there were also the Sakhalin Ainu, Kurile Ainu, Kamchatka Ainu” (Chisato 10). Indeed, Traditional Ainu territory not only includes the island of modern-day Hokkaido in Northern Japan, but parts of Northern Honshu, Sakhalin, the Kuril Islands, and Southern

Kamchatka (Watson et al, 2). When speaking of this more expanded territory, Ainu themselves use the term *Ainu Moshir*, or ‘land of the Ainu’, which I will also be using throughout this essay.

Chiri Yukie herself was from Noboribetsu, a city on the southern coast of Hokkaido (Strong 2). Chiri’s grandmother, Monashnouk, and aunt, Kannari Matsu, were both distinguished and respected reciters of Horobetsu Ainu Oral Stories. The climate of southwestern Hokkaido, the traditional territory of the Horobetsu Ainu, is relatively mild and supports traditional practices of coastal and river fishing, hunting, foraging, some agriculture, and trade (2). Japanese linguist Kinda’ichi Kyôshuke (1882-1971) visited the region in the early 20th century to study the Ainu language and was introduced to Chiri, a promising young Ainu student with a strong command of both the Japanese and Ainu languages. Kinda’ichi encouraged Chiri to write down the Oral Stories she had heard from her grandmother and aunt while growing up, and invited her to travel to Tokyo to work on this collection in the summer of 1922. Chiri used *romaji*, or the Latin alphabet, to transcribe these stories and provided Japanese translations alongside them, resulting in the collection *Ainu Shin’yôshû*.² Sadly, putting together this work was the first and last academic project Chiri engaged in, as she passed away at the end of that summer in 1922 at the young age of nineteen due to underlying health issues (Strong 2-3).

Despite her short life, Chiri Yukie’s contributions have been crucial in preserving and sharing Ainu Literature at a particularly pivotal moment in Ainu history. A year after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan established the Development Commission (*Kaitakushi*) through which they forcefully transformed the land they named ‘Hokkaido’ into an internal colony

² This collection’s title, *Ainu Shin’yôshû*, phonetically resembles the title of the *Man’yôshû* (“Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves”) – an important, ancient collection of classical Japanese poetry. The title of Chiri’s work suggests a vision for it to serve as a seminal collection of Ainu Literature equal in value to the *Man’yôshû*’s significance to Japanese literature. Dr. Ortabasi remarks, “[...] the choice of title clearly ranks Ainu lore alongside any other lore as worthy of collection and posterity” (Melek Ortabasi, email message to author, August 9th 2021).

(Siddle 72). As a mass immigration of Japanese moved to Hokkaido, Ainu communities were dispossessed of their land and forced to move onto reservations with poor soil and infrastructure. Traditional practices of hunting and gathering were disrupted by the depletion of natural resources, and Ainu were thus forced to convert to a farming lifestyle. By the end of the nineteenth century, their population numbered around 17,000, making up only approximately 2 percent of the population of Hokkaido; Ainu had quickly become a minority in their own land (72). Because resources upon which Ainu traditional life depended were destroyed by this aggressive settler colonialism, “by the early twentieth century most Ainu were sunk in chronic destitution and only barely managing to survive” (Siddle 72). Ainu culture and language were threatened, and yet, by Chiri’s generation in the 1920s and 1930s, there arose a wave of resistance and activism. Despite the colonial government’s campaigns of assimilation and dispossession, these young Ainu “remained proud of their heritage and helped create a new, though fragile, sense of Ainu unity” (Siddle 73). Chiri Yukie is respected as a key figure in this movement of young Ainu. Her work in preserving and translating Oral Stories was crucial in this endeavor to revive Ainu culture, as narratives are “a particular source of enjoyment and meaning in Ainu life” (Strong 6).

Ainu Oral Traditions and *Kamui Yukar*

Ainu Oral Traditions exist in a variety of different forms; anthropologist Ohnuki-Tierney estimates that there are over twenty-seven different kinds of Ainu Oral Story genres (Strong 6). The stories in *Ainu Shin'yōshū* are classified as *Kamui Yukar*, which roughly translates to “chants of the spiritual beings” or “chants of the gods” (3). These stories are also sometimes translated as ‘songs’ due to their traditional recitation in lines of four beats (Strong 9). Strong explains that first-person speakers in *Kamui Yukar* are almost always some natural phenomena

such as plants, atmospheric phenomena such as thunder, important resources such as fire and water, and most commonly, animals. A fundamental notion underpinning *Kamui Yukar* is that “nonhumans such as animals and plants have a subjectivity that is in every way similar to that of humans and that, as conscious subjects, these nonhumans can have things to say” (7). It is important to understand that the narrative voices of these stories are not necessarily the animals themselves, but rather *Kamui* within the body of each animal. Though *Kamui* is often translated into Japanese and English as *kami* or ‘gods,’ some scholars, including Strong, prefer the term ‘spiritual being’ as a more accurate English translation (Strong 6). Hisakazu Fujimura defines the term *Kamui* as a “generic term for both physical and immaterial entities on the earth who possess abilities superior to those of man” (193). Furthermore, Strong explains that “*kamui* are understood to have both a visible form as an animal or other natural phenomenon and an invisible spiritual existence with cognition, emotions, and agency similar to those of human beings” (7).

In these stories, *Kamui* have taken the form of a rabbit, frog, and otter to visit *Ainu Moshir*, or the land of the Ainu. Thus, the frog, rabbit, and otter are *real* animals in the sense that they have physical bodies, behaviors, and appearances characteristic to their species. However, they each also possess a spiritual aspect, the *Kamui*, with sensibilities and awareness much like those of humans (Strong 105-106). This understanding of animals existing as *both* the physical body of an animal and as a sentient, spiritual being is common to Ainu worldview, though can be difficult to understand for non-Ainu readers. Ainu scholar Kitty Chisato writes, “It is important to understand that we do not worship nature per se. All things in nature are spirits sent to Ainu mosir disguised as bears, trees, wind, etc” (6). The frog, rabbit, and otter stories in Chiri Yukie’s collection are narrated by the *Kamui* within each animal describing their experiences in the human world. In fact, many scholars, including the linguist Kinda’ichi Kyosuke who worked

directly with Chiri Yukie, have argued that *Kamui Yukar* were traditionally told by shamans who were understood to be possessed by the *Kamui* narrator, thus explaining the first-person perspective of these stories (Strong 7).

Because *Kamui* exist as ‘natural phenomena,’ they control the resources upon which Ainu depend on for survival. If *Kamui* are offended or otherwise choose to, they can stop providing resources such as animals or fish for Ainu survival or can manipulate the elements to bring about natural disasters. In his study of Ainu bear-hunting mythology, Takashi Irimoto writes, “The Ainu imagined hunting to be a visit of the spirit (*kamui*) of the game animal, from the world of *kamui* (*Kamui moshir*) to the world of man (*Ainu moshir*)” (293). In other words, ‘hunting’ is not understood as the happenstance encounter between a human and an animal but a purposeful transaction wherein a *Kamui* sends the body of an animal and its products to be used by Ainu. In this way, Ainu rely on resources gifted by *Kamui* for subsistence; it is crucial for Ainu to maintain respect with *Kamui* to ensure that the world remains balanced and bountiful. Whereas *Kamui* and ‘things’ can exist independently of others and do not rely on gifts from humans for survival, humans cannot exist in an environment independent from gifts from *Kamui*. As Hisakazu Fujimura explains, “The relationship among gods, humans, and things is that the life of humans is supported by things provided by gods; thus, humans are dependent on the other two and cannot live without them” (194). Due to this dependency, humans can, in some senses, be considered the weakest beings on earth.

Yet, humans are not entirely helpless within this dynamic because they possess an important talent in greater ability than both gods and things — their ability with language and rituals (194). With this power, humans can “[...] eternally bind gods, unethical humans, and things, who are released only by the words of those who initially bound them. The words of living humans, therefore, are feared by the dead spirits” (196). Just like humans are not all-

powerful in the face of *Kamui* as they depend on *Kamui* for resources, *Kamui* are not all-powerful in the face of humans due to the power of words and curses. Since both *Kamui* and Ainu possess powers which can place the other in a vulnerable position, reciprocity is pivotal to ensure that the relationship between both remains mutually beneficial.

Though all natural phenomena in *Ainu Moshir* contain a *Kamui*, or spirit, sent directly from the parallel world of *Kamui*, or *Kamui Moshir*, not all *Kamui* are equal. Whereas some *Kamui*, such as *Apehuchi*, who Chiri describes as “‘Fire Grandmother,’ goddess of the hearth and of fire in general” (9), and the *Kamui* of bears were highly revered and respected, smaller *Kamui* such as those of the otter, frog, and rabbit did not have the same status. Strong outlines several binary sets of categories among *Kamui* to distinguish their characteristics and relationship to Ainu, with a primary binary being the distinction between *pase* (weighty) as opposed to *koshne* (light). *Pase Kamui* typically translates to ‘weighty,’ referring to a conceptual weight of significant importance and status (Strong 106). Ainu linguist and anthropologist Chiri Mashiho (1909-1961), who was also Chiri Yukie’s brother, defined this as “eminent,” or *erai* in Japanese. *Pase Kamui* are highly venerated by Ainu and believed to help human beings with their powers. These qualities contrast with *Koshne*, ‘of light weight,’ indicating a lack of importance or status. These *Kamui* still possess powers, though less than those of *Pase Kamui*, and are not typically venerated by Ainu (107). Strong writes, “Many *koshne kamui* mock the humans by performing nasty tricks or slights [...] Because of this, ethnographers often identify *koshne kamui* as mischievous gods” (107). The mischievous frog, otter, and rabbit can be considered *Koshne* rather than *Pase Kamui*.

Further, within the literary category of *Kamui Yukar*, there are several distinct types of narratives. Scholar Shinko Ogihara describes one major type of story as one in which an animal “narrates his own failure or bitter experience while living in the human world” (276). In this type

of story, “an evil deed or foul disposition usually leads the subject to a miserable death, and in this case the hero-animal ends his narration with words addressed to his animal fellows” (276). The stories of the rabbit, otter, and frog all fit into this category, as the mischievous *Koshne Kamui* perform disrespectful tricks against humans which lead each animal to a pointless and horrible death. However, through their shortcomings, these animals ultimately all learn an important lesson to pass on to others of their species. I have identified four common elements that reappear throughout each narrative. First, at the beginning of each story, the animal narrator acts mischievously towards a human character or to some element of the human world. Second, this human kills or harms the animal narrator with a “god-like strength” as punishment for their mischievous actions. Third, the identity of this human in two of the stories is revealed to be Okikurumi: an Ainu culture hero. Finally, at the end of all three stories, the animal narrator shares a lesson it has learned with others of its species. In the following pages, I will be breaking down each of these four elements in greater detail to explore how these animals go from careless ‘tricksters’ who gain pleasure from causing mischief to being repentant and reflective, ultimately sharing an important lesson with others about how to properly behave amongst humankind.

It is clear why element one and element two feature so prominently in these stories: these two elements make up the ‘trick’, or the mischievous act, and the ‘punishment’, or that animal’s death. However, following these there appear two further elements: the revealed identity of Okikurumi, an Ainu culture hero, and finally an explicit lesson offered. These final two elements serve to represent the ‘recognition’ of the wrongdoing and ‘restoration’ of the transgressed boundary. As opposed to the unique and varied first two elements, these final two are presented in a consistent format in all three stories. Furthermore, even though the elements of punishment, recognition, and restoration make up three out of four of the repeated elements, combined they take up less space in the story than the trick itself, which the animal narrator describes

committing in great and extended detail. Looking at the structural makeup of these stories thus reveals a contrast between the unique and exciting ‘crime’ of all three animals, followed by a structured and ritualized lesson that follows it. These stories thus carefully balance transgression and restoration, chaos and order, or thoughtless action and thoughtful reaction elegantly, revealing a narrative structure designed to both entertain and teach.

Element One: “The Trick” – Animal is Mischievous Towards Humans

Setting an initially light-hearted and innocent tone, the stories of the rabbit, frog, and otter all begin with the voice of the animal narrator speaking about a day spent in leisure and enjoyment. In “The Song the Rabbit Sang,” the rabbit narrator describes following his big brother as they play and run through the mountains. In “The Song the Frog Sang”, the frog narrator describes how he had been amusing himself by “hopping over the plains” (Chiri 51). Finally, the otter narrator in “The Song the Otter Sang” explains that he had been on a swim along a stream. All three animals are engaged in harmless acts unsurprising to the characteristics of their species. However, as they travel across their respective habitats, these animals quickly encounter some element of the human toward which they decide to act in mischievous or disrespectful ways. These mischievous acts suggest that the rabbit, frog, and otter play the role of the ‘trickster’ in these stories. In the essay “Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide”, William Hynes outlines six characteristics common to many trickster figures, keeping in mind that the term ‘trickster’ refers to a rich and diverse trope spanning across cultures and thus cannot be defined within a singular and strict definition (33). The second of his six characteristics describes the ‘trickster’ as “the *prima causa* of disruptions and disorders, misfortunes and improprieties” (35). In these three stories, we can see the rabbit, frog, and otter acting as this root of disruptions through their decision to play a trick on the human element they

come across: a human trap in the rabbit's story, the human house in the frog's story, and an actual human in the otter's.

This 'trick' may be considered the inciting incident of each narrative. In the rabbit's story, the rabbit narrator describes how, when running through valleys with his brother on days like this, "sometimes There'd be crossbow traps set by humans And he would break them and I would always laugh" (25). This particular day appears to be no exception, as the younger brother rabbit suddenly hears shouting and finds his older brother caught in a wormwood trap that he was trying to tamper with.³ Ainu commonly hunted rabbits using traps, as small animal pelts were a primary trade item with neighboring groups such as *Wajin*, or ethnic Japanese (Koji 148-149). Moreover, rabbit meat was eaten and valued, despite being less nourishing and tasty than more coveted, fattier meats such as that of the bear or whale (Strong 166). In the short introduction to this story, Chiri explains the significance of the rabbit tampering with the trap he comes across, as it "means endangering the food supply and compromising the commerce between man and *kamui*" (25). Thus, the rabbit attempting to break this trap threatens Ainu subsistence and trade, transgressing an implicit boundary of respect between Ainu and *Kamui*.

Far from being a valuable source of fur and meat, the lowly frog narrator of "The Song the Frog Sang" describes coming across a house while he hops through the plains. He peeps through the door to find a young man sitting on a dais beside a pile of treasures. The frog then states, "I thought I'd play a little trick on him"; he sits on the threshold of the house and loudly bellows: "TORORO HANROK HANROK!" (51). The young man, hearing this call, chuckles and asks: "Do I hear a solemn recitation? Or do I hear a joyful ditty? Ah, if only I could hear

³ The story's footnotes added by the collection's translator, Benjamin Peterson, provide some context regarding these traps, stating "The trap is a *yuwari*, a rather sophisticated trap used by the Ainu which consists of a crossbow firing a barbed harpoon into any unlucky animal that triggers it" (25).

more!” (51). The young man’s response comes across as sarcastic, because it is hard to mistake a frog’s inelegant croak for a sacred or beautiful song. This irony is strengthened when the frog repeats his call again and the man responds by asking whether the sound he hears is a *yukar* or *sakehaw*. The footnotes explain that a *sakehaw* is a “boisterous drinking song that would be hard to mistake for a yukar” (51). In comparison, a *yukar* is generally defined as “Ainu epic poetry, particularly tales of heroes” (Ogihara 278). This irony makes clear that the young man is not seriously enchanted by the frog’s call, while the frog does not notice this sarcastic tone. Again, flattered, the frog repeats this call, though this time hops into the house, or *chise*, and sits on the lower seat near the hearth to bellow his call again. For a final time, the young man asks, “Do I hear you sing a noble *yukar*? Or do I hear a boisterous *sakehaw*?” (52). This time, the frog hops up to the high seat before bellowing his refrain a final time.

The frog’s “crime” here is not only annoying a stranger with his obnoxious croak but occupying the high seat by the east window: a sacred part of an Ainu *chise* which is reserved for respected Ainu and *Kamui*. As Chiri Yukie explains in a footnote elsewhere in her collection, “Only men could sit in the eastern area, and those inferior to the house’s owner were barred” (7). Thus, not only does the lowly frog disrespect the young man by bellowing his loud call, but is also encroaching on a seat to which a *Kamui* of his status is not welcome. One of Hynes’ six traits to describe a ‘trickster’ figure is the trickster as a situation-inverter, or a character who “exhibits typically the ability to overturn any person, place, or belief, no matter how prestigious” (Hynes 37). Hynes continues, “What prevails is toppled, what is bottom becomes top, what is outside turns inside, what is inside turns outside, and on and on in an unending concatenation of contingency” (37). We can see this quality of the ‘trickster’ perhaps most clearly in the frog’s story through his inadvertent perversion of sacred Ainu beliefs. The human character’s repeated, ironic comparisons of the frog’s obnoxious croak to noble or solemn oral traditions inverts the

boundary between profane and sacred utterances. Furthermore, by encroaching on the high seat of this house, the frog transgresses the boundaries of a social order within which he occupies a low position. About this characteristic of the ‘trickster’, Hynes writes that “the more sacred a belief, the more likely is the trickster to be found profaning it” (37). Notably, in this story, the frog can be seen gradually profaning a more sacred social order with each call: the young man in the house begins by describing the call as a ‘joyful ditty’, then a ‘yukar’, then finally a ‘noble yukar’, with the frog accepting these increasingly ironic comparisons with each croak. Moreover, the frog begins on the threshold of the house, moving then to the lower seat by the hearth, and finally to the high seat. With each transgression, the frog inverts a more significant boundary between his position as a low-ranking animal *Kamui* and the human inside.

Finally, in “The Song the Otter Sang”, the otter narrator begins his story swimming down a stream until he “swam down to the place where Samayunkur draws water” (59). The human figure in this story is not initially unknown or anonymous as he is in the other two stories — rather, the otter directly acknowledges the identity of Samayunkur. Samayunkur is an Ainu figure who appears in many *Oina Kamui*, a genre of Ainu Oral Story which centers “stories of the origins of Ainu culture” and involves a culture-hero, who can be called *Ainurakkar*, *Okikurumi*, or *Oina-Kamui* depending on where the story originates (Ogihara 274-275).⁴ The character Okikurumi appears later in all three stories of my study; in a footnote, Chiri Yukie describes him as “the most important of all Ainu heroes, wise and brave. There are innumerable stories about him. By comparison, at least, Samayunkur is shallow, indecisive, and weak” (19). However they are related to each other, both Samayunkur and Okikurumi are superior to humans in some

⁴ Ogihara argues that stories naming ‘Okikurumi’ are believed to have a Northern origin, whereas stories that name *Ainurakkar* are from the Iburi and Hidaka regions (275).

measure, and can thereby be best described as half-*Kamui*, half-human foil characters who live amongst and teach valuable lessons to Ainu.

As the otter in this *Kamui Yukar* swims towards the place where Samayunkar frequently visits, he suddenly sees Samayunkar's little sister come along holding a bucket and a bundle of rushes. Seeing her, the otter decides to poke his head out of the water and ask, "Have you a father? Have you a mother?" (59). Samayunkar's sister turns to look at the otter with "the colour of anger appear[ing] in her face" (59). She says to the otter, "Oh, horrible flat-head, bad flat-head is showing no respect. Dogs! Get him!" (59). It is clear that the otter has offended Samayunkar's little sister. A footnote added by Chiri Yukie explains, "the word she uses [for 'no respect'] is *okapushpa*, which means to speak lightly of someone's dead relatives, or to reveal personal secrets" (59). Chiri's brief introduction to this story provides further context as to the disrespectful nature of this comment, explaining that Samayunkar and Okikurumi are understood to be half-gods and therefore have no mother or father (59). Thus, the otter would have already known the answer to his question, and directing it at Samayunkar's sister is obviously a great offense. For making this insensitive comment, Samayunkar's little sister sends a pack of dogs to chase the otter to the bottom of the river.⁵

When describing the common intentions of literary 'trickster' figures, Hynes states that the trickster's mischief "may derive from the trickster being simply an unconscious numbskull, or, at other times, from being a malicious spoiler" (35). In the stories of the rabbit, frog, and otter, these long, entertaining sections wherein each animal *Kamui* describes their 'crime' or

⁵ Takashi Irimoto discusses the symbolism of dogs in Ainu culture, explaining that dogs were believed to be messengers between the world of *Kamui* and the world of man (296). Dogs were used for assistance in hunting and were believed to be able to detect dead people's souls which could not be seen by the living (295-296). In this way, dogs were very important to Ainu. Whereas the otter can be considered a *Koshne Kamui* for its lack of respect, the dogs would be considered *Pase Kamui* for their great powers and dedication to helping humankind.

‘trick’ focuses much more heavily on their amusing actions rather than their intentions or thought processes; only one short line in the rabbit and frog’s stories suggest what their motivations may be. Clearly, the rabbit has tampered with the human trap it has come across out of mischievous rather than malicious intent in a short line where he describes breaking humans’ traps every day as “just the normal way to amuse myself ” (26). Similarly, when seeing the human inside his house, the frog states “I thought I’d play a little trick on him” before bellowing his first croak (51). Including terms such as ‘little’ before ‘trick’ or describing the trick as a ‘normal’ means of ‘amusement’ diminishes the seriousness of their actions and suggests that both animals see these acts as a harmless joke rather than as a serious transgression of social boundaries.

Element Two, “The Punishment”: Human Character Kills or Threatens the Animal with “A Pointless Death, A Horrible Death”

Although these animals appear to regard their actions as a harmless ‘joke’, upon offending or otherwise upsetting the human character of these stories, the rabbit, frog, and otter are punished violently. This apparently extreme reaction makes more sense when we remember that the narrator of these stories is not simply an animal, but the animal *Kamui* having taken the form of that animal. *Kamui*, with awareness and sentience much like that of Ainu, would be expected to understand the boundaries of respect between themselves and Ainu. Accounting for the physical and spiritual separation of these animal characters reminds us that, even though the animal’s physical body may die or become severely injured after they incur their violent punishments, their spirits are able to continue perceiving and narrating the actions that unfold.

After the older-brother rabbit in “The Song the Rabbit Sang” becomes stuck in the trap he was tampering with, he appeals to his younger brother to seek help. The younger brother describes doing so, going back to their village with the intent to tell everyone what had

happened, but when he gets there the words completely slip his mind (26). The younger brother returns to where he had left his older brother only to find the brother and the trap gone, with only marks of the rabbit's blood remaining. Here, the narration shifts from the point of view of the younger brother to the older brother. After having sent his younger brother away to seek help, he had waited silently until a human appears: "He was a youth As beautiful as a god, smiling broadly" (27). The human's identity remains unknown as he takes the rabbit to a big house filled with treasures. The man then builds a fire, prepares a pot, and cuts the rabbit's body apart. The rabbit is desperate to escape and explains how he "searched for some kind of weak spot in this man; There was none, and not for a second Did he take his eyes off me" (27). The rabbit thus acknowledges the inevitability of his death, lamenting "Whatever I do I'll die a pointless death, a horrible death" (27). However, suddenly, the rabbit, "in the form of a slice of [his] own flesh" (27), finds an opportunity to escape. He runs out of the pot and out the door, crying as he hurries back to his own village. The rabbit is the only animal of the three who does not die, though he faces a severe punishment as he is cut down to a single slice of his flesh, thus drastically reduced in size.

Whereas the rabbit faces a long, drawn-out punishment which ultimately ends in escape, the frog is quickly and unequivocally killed. After he bellows his fourth "TORORO HANROK HANROK!", the young man who had been amusing himself with sarcastic compliments suddenly "jumped up Brandishing a big burning stick from the fire — Hurling it at me — there was a horrible sort of crunch — And that's when I lost consciousness" (52). The frog *Kamui* comes to and finds himself at the top of a big rubbish pile. The difference between the rabbit and frog's fates may result from the different purposes they serve for Ainu: whereas the rabbit is an important source of food and fur, frogs do not have the same utility. As Strong explains, frogs were generally disliked due to their association with "dankness and mud" (170); indeed, it was

understood that frogs “do not live in such places because they are kind-hearted beings. People consider that they were undoubtedly made to live there because they did something bad. That appears to be the reason they are loathed” (Nakagawa, qtd. in Strong, pp. 170). Thus, the rabbit is skinned and sliced with care as if he were to be eaten, finding a means of escape within that process. However, the frog is not viewed as a similarly valuable source of food, instead being killed and thrown onto a rubbish pile quickly with no opportunity to flee.

Finally, after having escaped from the pack of dogs unleashed by Samayunkur’s little sister, the otter in “The Song the Otter Sang” comes to a place in the river where Okikurumi draws water. He sticks his head out to see Okikurumi’s little sister, and not learning from his previous lesson, asks her the same question: “Have you a father? Have you a mother?” (60). Again, Okikurumi’s little sister is angered and calls on a pack of dogs to chase the otter. He dives into the river, despite having “no idea that the dogs Would do exactly the same thing” (60); the dogs chase the otter to the bottom of the river, ripping him with their teeth until he loses consciousness. Like the rabbit’s story, the manner in which the otter is punished reflects the otter’s status as an animal hunted regularly for its meat and fur. Strong explains, “The Ainu generally hunted the river otter with dogs, but in the case of lakes and big rivers, the otters could dive down and get away [...]” (173). Even though the otter is able to get away when he first insults Samayunkur’s sister, he does not take advantage of this initial opportunity to flee as the rabbit does and returns to commit the same crime again, ultimately being killed for this final transgression.

Notably, all three characters refer to their punishment as “a pointless death, a horrible death” (Chiri 27, 52, 60). As anthropologist Hisakazu Fujimura explains, when the physical body of a being dies, whether human or nonhuman, the immortal soul or spirit (*Kamui*) leaves the mortal body in *Ainu Moshir*, the world of the humans, and returns to *Kamui Moshir*, the world of

spirits. Ainu believe that most spirits continue to exist through reincarnation and eventually return to *Ainu Moshir* in a different physical body. To aid *Kamui* in returning to *Kamui Moshir* after their physical bodies die, Ainu traditionally perform spirit-sending rituals. These can range in scale from a grand, community-wide ceremony for highly revered animals such as domesticated bears, a practice referred to as *iyomante*, to smaller altars, gifts, and simple ceremonies for more ‘ordinary’ animals hunted in larger numbers (Shigeki 251-253). Ainu language teacher Kenji Sekine explains that a *Kamui*’s return to *Kamui Moshir* is not immediate, and that “After you kill an animal god to send back the soul of it to Gods land [...] it’ll stay inside the house where the feast is going and the soul of the animal [can] enjoy the entertainments like recited oral hero epics(YUKAR) and people’s dances [...]” (Kenji Sekine, email message to author, September 2, 2021). For respected *Kamui*, Sekine explains that Ainu would place this animal’s fur on the important upper seat of the house so that the *Kamui* “[...] sits between the ears and enjoys watching the banquet,” which “motivates them to come back again [to *Ainu Moshir*] with its new meat and fur as a gift for humans” (Sekine, email message to author, September 2, 2021).

These acts of respect presented to animals after their death are reserved for respected *Kamui* – they are not granted to all. As Sekine explains, “frogs have no chance to be placed upon the upper seat and offered entertainment from the first place” due to their low status (Kenji Sekine, email message to author, September 9, 2021). As for otters, Sekine explains that because they are relatively large, important mammals, they may be given such displays of respect varying from region to region. In general, he writes, “[...] people don’t have to treat [*Kamui*] equally and in some cases people can ignore some of them and sometimes even some *Kamui* are punished by people for their bad deeds” (Sekine, email message to author, September 9, 2021). The otter and frog in these stories are most likely not granted such spirit sending rituals and are instead killed

unceremoniously and violently as punishment for their disrespectful actions; they die a pointless, horrible death in the sense that it is a death without proper appreciation and respect. As such, we can see that spirit sending rituals and ceremonies reflect reciprocity – if a *Kamui* graciously offers the body of an animal for consumption and use, they are thanked with proper respect and gifts. Yet, because the frog and otter did not respect Ainu, they in turn do not receive respect and offerings of entertainment, gifts, and encouragement to return to *Ainu Moshir* once again. The frog *Kamui* even regains consciousness at the top of a “big rubbish pile (52)”, further indicating the unceremonious nature of his death, as he is tossed away like garbage.

The rabbit is not punished with death in the same way that the frog and otter are, but is rather granted an opportunity to escape. About Okikurumi’s actions, the rabbit remarks, “He took pity on me And when I fled he did not pursue me” (28). Indeed, in the face of one who possesses such a “godlike strength” (27) as Okikurumi does, it is unlikely that the mutilated rabbit would be able to outmaneuver him; Okikurumi had made the conscious decision to let him flee. As discussed above, rabbit fur and meat is of great value to Ainu for sustenance and trade, which would indicate this animal’s more important utility in comparison to a despised animal such as the frog. Yet, the now-extinct river otter’s meat and fur were also highly valued in Ainu culture, with their pelts serving as an important commercial trade item during the Tokugawa period (Strong 173). Several further factors may indicate why the rabbit is left alive, though with a severe punishment. Most clearly, the rabbit’s story refers to him as the “Chief of Rabbits” (28), suggesting that this *Kamui* has a higher status than the regular frog and otter *Kamui*. When reflecting on his escape from Okikurumi, the rabbit recognizes Okikurumi’s pity must stem from the fact that he is “no mere insignificant god, And because it would be a shame if [he] died” (28). Thus, the rabbit attributes Okikurumi’s pity to his higher status.

However, another important factor indicates why the rabbit *Kamui* may have been spared, which is reflected through the ways each animal approaches their crime; the frog and otter are described in ways that suggest they explicitly approach or seek out the elements of the ‘human’ they come across, whereas the rabbit’s case appears more incidental. The younger brother rabbit begins the story by describing how he followed his brother “up to the mountains” (25). As Strong notes, through this line, “we can see the younger brother hare setting out not downstream in the direction of the human village but towards the mountains, an area normally lived in by *kamui* but also an area where the humans hunt” (182). Thus, even though the older brother rabbit elects to tamper with a human trap, he does not seem to be purposely seeking them out. The casualness of the encounter is strengthened as the younger brother describes how, “Every day I’d follow him, and sometimes There’d be crossbow traps set by the humans” (Chiri 25). The contrast between embarking on such trips ‘everyday’ versus coming across human traps ‘sometimes’ suggests that the purpose of these trips is not necessarily to find and break these traps. In contrast, although the frog appears to come across this house by happenstance as he hops through the plains, he elects to approach and then gradually enter this house uninvited, continuing to transgress increasingly more sacred boundaries in the Ainu *chise* with each croak. Similarly, the otter vaguely describes how he “swam down to the place where Samayunkar draws water” (59), suggesting that he approached the area knowing of his likelihood to encounter this godlike figure. After insulting Samayunkar’s sister, the otter then seeks out the place where he is likely to encounter Okikurumi to offer the same insult. Thus, for actively seeking out or pursuing a means to ‘trick’ or deceive humans, the otter and frog face the harsher punishment of a “horrible, pointless death.”

Furthermore, whereas the rabbit tampers with and gets stuck in a human trap in a way that may be considered accidental or expected of its species, the frog and rabbit both imitate the language of humans to offend or disturb the humans they encounter. Mimicking human language

may be considered a more severe breach of the boundary between humans and *Kamui* due to the important power language has within this relationship; this ability with language gives humans a unique power over *Kamui*, with the ability to insult, punish, or curse *Kamui* who disrespect them. Using these skills, humans “act as the medium between the gods and things, trying to create harmony among the three, which is thought to be the first step in creating a peaceful world” (Fujimura 195). The frog and otter use language in a way that does not promote peace, instead using their voices with intent to cause mischief or offense.

The significance of the frog and otter mimicking language can be demonstrated through the *sakehe*, or characteristic refrain, of each story. Following each narrative phrase of a *Kamui Yukar*, a refrain, referred to as a *sakehe*, in a four-count meter is also repeated, and is thought to represent the “characteristic cry or other signature sound [...] of the spiritual being whose first-person voice is narrating the story of the chant” (Strong 9). This *sakehe* can often be translated as well to reveal a deeper meaning within the story. The frog’s characteristic refrain, “Tororo Hanrok Hanrok!” has been glossed by Chiri Mashihō as meaning “in the marsh sit down, sit down” (Strong 184). As discussed above, the marsh carries ominous implications due to its characteristic dankness and muddiness. Thus, not only does the frog disrupt a human stranger with an obnoxious croak, but does so while repeating an ominous command, accepting comparisons of this sound to solemn and sacred traditions. The otter’s refrain, reading as “Kappa Reureu Kappa” (Chiri 59), is not explicitly exclaimed by the otter narrator within the story as the frog’s refrain is but is rather repeated as a rhythmic meter characteristic of *Kamui Yukar*. Chiri Mashihō has glossed this *sakehe* as meaning “Flattened head, stop! Stop! Flattened Head” (Strong 186-187), referring to the insult Samayunkar’s sister cries after being disrespected: “Oh, horrible flat-head, bad flat-head” (Chiri 59). Verbal insults are of great significance in Ainu culture and are believed to have serious repercussions; anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney

explains, “[...] if a person verbally assaults another, someone in the community will suffer from this illness” (245). Because of the weight of such insults, “when someone gets angry and utters harsh words against another, people in the community reprimand the offender [...] social disharmony is not simply a matter of one individual against another but affects everyone” (245). Thus, the *sakehe* within the frog and otter’s stories refer explicitly to the weight of language and the dangers of its abuse by ill-intentioned beings.

In contrast, the older brother rabbit’s refrain, “Ketka Woiwoi Ketka, Ketka Woiwoi Ketka” (Chiri 26), is not definitely known, but could possibly refer to “the frame on which tanned skins are stretched” and indicate “the state of a spiritual being who has been killed and skinned and whose spirit is crying *woi woi* above the stretching frame” (Strong 183). Though still referring to the rabbit’s punishment, this refrain does not explicitly relate back to the weight of verbal insults. Instead, it points back to the rabbit’s status as a resource for fur and meat. Although the rabbit still transgresses an accepted boundary between Ainu and *Kamui* by playfully tampering with a human trap, he does so in a way that may still be seen as accidental and does not violate the important powers of humans. On the other hand, the anthropomorphized actions of the frog and otter might be considered more serious transgressions due to their manipulation of language to cause harm or disrespect. Due to these crimes, the frog and rabbit are punished by an unceremonious death: perhaps the worst punishment a *Kamui* can suffer.

All three animals’ mischievous personalities can be attributed to the nature of these small animals as ‘ordinary’ creatures who are frequently encountered due to their proximity to human communities and historically numerous populations. Thus, Ainu listeners of these stories may relate to having been inconvenienced by these animals at some point themselves. As Strong writes, “Their proximity to humans allows them at times to challenge the boundaries between the human and the animal/*kamui* worlds” (162). These animals all demonstrate testing this boundary

through what they initially believe to be a harmless, ‘little’ trick. Yet, a punishment serves to signify the dangerous nature of such transgressions, especially when the transgression is carried out with more obvious intent to cause harm or utilizes language in a disrespectful or insulting manner.

Element Three “Recognition”: Man Turns Out to be Okikurumi

The human figure in these stories is not a typical human, but Okikurumi: a culture-hero who appears in many Ainu Oral Stories. Okikurumi is a “half-god, half human hero who descended from the land of the gods to the land of the Ainu (humans), to teach how to make fire, hunt, and cultivate” (Selden 1). Thus, Okikurumi possesses skills and abilities that surpass those of a regular human. The frog and rabbit are initially unaware that they are interacting with such a prestigious figure, while recognizing that this stranger is as “beautiful as a god” and possesses super-human strength (Chiri 27). Only when looking back on the events that have transpired does the rabbit recognize that “What I thought was just a human, just a youth, Was surely Okikurumi, godlike in strength” (27). Similarly, after coming back to consciousness, the frog *Kamui* recognizes that he had been killed by Okikurumi, stating, “what I thought was an ordinary house Was actually that of Okikurumi, godlike in strength” (52).

Through these moments of recognition regarding Okikurumi’s identity, these animals are simultaneously able to reflect on the serious nature of their transgressions. Only after escaping does the rabbit *Kamui* recognize the reason for his punishment, stating, “By disarming his traps every day Thinking an ordinary human had set them I had angered Okikurumi, making him set His wormwood arrows against me” (27). Similarly, at the end of his story, the frog *Kamui* remarks, “I had tried to play a trick Not realizing that it was Okikurumi himself. And now I die a pointless death, a horrible death” (52). Even though he is always aware of the identity of those he

messes with, the otter *Kamui* also recognizes, “I had mocked Samayunkar and Okikurumi Knowing that they had neither father nor mother And my punishment was To be killed by Okikurumi’s dogs” (60).

Notably, all three lines highlight the mischievous actions the animals themselves committed and frame Okikurumi’s violence as simply a response to their initial transgression; the rabbit notes that his actions ‘made’ Okikurumi react violently, and both the frog and otter speak of their punishment in a passive voice, not mentioning Okikurumi or his sister’s direct role in the punishment at all. By having Okikurumi fill the role of the human figure in these stories, his violent responses to the animals’ transgressions are not called into question. Indeed, none of the animal narrators complain that they had been wrongfully punished or try to defend their actions. Okikurumi thus serves as a figure of authority in these stories, helping their mischievous narrators recognize their faults; he acts to restore balance between these ‘trickster’ animals and humankind in a way understood to be unequivocal and just. Ultimately, all three describe the “pointless, horrible deaths” they face as if it were a natural response, claiming full responsibility for their own fates.

Okikurumi’s high status and superhuman abilities position him as a guardian of humankind. Kayano Shigeru (1926-2006), a prominent scholar and preserver of Ainu culture, describes Okikurumi’s role as “the guardian god of the Ainu [...] who teaches skills of livelihood to humans. He lives in the village of the Ainu, teaches how to live, encourages the gods to protect, and occasionally [...] punishes gods who play wicked tricks” (7). We can see Okikurumi fill this powerful role in the narratives of the frog, otter, and rabbit – he issues harsh punishments to help prevent the ‘tricks’ he was personally victim to from being played on regular humans in the future. The presence of Okikurumi in these stories points to the fact that they lack any ‘real’ human characters. Yet, an invisible human presence remains central to the action that unfolds:

particularly in the rabbit and frog's stories, the inciting incident begins when these animals decide to play a 'trick' on what they assume to be a regular human, and Okikurumi punishes each of them in order to protect humans from future mischief. Thus, as 'guardian god of the Ainu', Okikurumi's presence may serve to reassure humans that, even in their absence, understood social boundaries must be respected by *Kamui*. Moreover, as Okikurumi is understood as a figure from the origins of Ainu culture, his presence can serve to reaffirm the sanctity of the rules he restores – rules that have existed and been reinforced since the beginning of time. The revealed identity of Okikurumi in these stories thus embodies the process of 'tricksters' recognizing the serious nature of their transgressions, leading them to finally repent for such wrongdoings.

Element Four "Restoration": Lesson to Others of its Species

At the end of each story, having recognized their faults, the animal narrators offer a lesson directly to others of their species. This final element represents the important process of 'restoration' wherein the animal has been able to recognize its faults and now seeks to restore the balance they had disturbed. The frog's story ends with the warning: "And therefore, frogs of the future, Without fail, refrain from taunting humans!" (52). Likewise, the otter warns, "Otters of the future, take care to behave yourselves!" (60). The rabbit's ending is slightly different, as he explains "Because I couldn't resist meddling, Whereas rabbits were as big as deer before We've become as small as a single slice of meat. All my kind from now on Are going to be as small as this" (28). Thus, the rabbit explains that his mischievous actions not only affect his own form, but the form of all subsequent rabbits. Strong explains that, at the beginning of this story, the rabbit would have been understood to be about the size of a deer. Only after escaping "in the form of a slice of my own flesh" (27) do this rabbit and all subsequent rabbits assume the smaller

size rabbits now have.⁶ Thus, for disrespecting Ainu, the rabbit is literally “cut down to size.” Doomed to be smaller forever, the rabbit ends his story by stating, “Therefore, rabbits of the future, take heed not to make mischief!” (28). Through sharing such lessons, these animals not only demonstrate having personally recognized their faults, but make up for them by advising future animals against playing similar ‘tricks’ in the future.

Whereas the tricks all three animals commit are varied and unique to the characteristics of their species, the lessons they offer are applicable beyond the unique situations from which they are learned; these stories do not offer a lesson to refrain from breaking traps, bellowing obnoxious croaks, or insulting one's relatives, but instead offer lessons which are much broader in scope. The specificity of these tricks compared to the universality of their lessons suggests that the moral of these stories is meant to be shared by all beings in *Ainu Moshir* in their varied circumstances, not just frogs coming across *chise*, rabbits tempted to tamper with traps, and otters who issue verbal insults. Indeed, even though these animals deliver a lesson directed to others of their species, they also serve to teach human listeners about social boundaries between humans and *Kamui*. Trickster stories across cultures tend to serve as “moral examples reaffirming the rules of society; or rather they serve as a model for these rules, demonstrating what happens if the prescriptions laid down by society are not observed” (Brian Street, qtd. in Hynes and Doty, pp. 6-7). Through their shortcomings, these animals demonstrate the importance of upholding such universal rules as to not taunt, be mischievous, or act carelessly towards others – rules that are just as applicable to animals and *Kamui* as they are to Ainu listeners. Through

⁶ Strong writes, “Okikurumi, like the older brother hare before his downsizing, is a larger-than-life figure, and we can assume that what constitutes a piece of meat for Okikirmui is much larger than what constitutes a piece of meat for an ordinary human” (184).

stories of characters transgressing social rules, humans can understand the purpose that these rules serve and the importance of maintaining them.

Portraying smaller, less powerful animals as the transgressors of these rules – rather than humans – provides distance between the human listeners of these stories and the devious ‘trickster’ figure. As Melek Ortabasi writes in her article “(Re)animating Folklore: Raccoon Dogs, Foxes, and Other Supernatural Japanese Citizens in Takahata Isao’s *Heisei tanuki gassen pompoko*, “Animals in oral and written literature have long served as objectified others on which to project the fears and desires of the human self, much as racial others have functioned in imperialist narratives” (255). We can similarly read the animals in these *Kamui Yukar* as representations of the ‘other’ upon which Ainu can cast their own fears and desires. By projecting the characteristics of the ‘trickster’ onto these animals, humans can safely imagine a situation wherein the relationship between humans and *Kamui* is transgressed while allowing themselves to remain absolved of guilt for committing such crimes. Ortabasi further explains, “Because they cannot write or talk back, animals enact the role of the other in a more extreme fashion than the colonized. In effect, the distinct culture that the animals represent is really a space within which humans can inscribe their own questions about identity” (255). Indeed, when a rabbit tampers with a human trap, or a frog bellows a loud croak, or an otter sticks its head above water in daily life, it is most likely not doing so with the intent to cause disrespect. Yet, because these animals ‘cannot talk back’, mischievous or otherwise devious intent can be projected onto these actions through story. These transgressions can thus be read as reflections of Ainu fears and curiosities; despite being played out by animals, they remain reflections of the human, and so too do their lessons. By exploring the ways social orders are disrupted through trickster figures, stories allow the human audience to play out and prevent such catastrophic transgressions.

Thus, the final lessons offered by animal narrators prove to be a key element of these stories. The significant span of time between when these three animals first decide to play a trick on Okikurumi and when they are punished suggests that Okikurumi's primary purpose in punishing them is to ensure that a lesson is learned. All three have an opportunity to avoid this punishment before it occurs: the frog bellows his call four times before he is killed, and the otter incurs a minor punishment for insulting Samayunkar's little sister before insulting Okikurumi's little sister in the exact same way. Likewise, the rabbit describes having tampered with traps prior to this occasion, and is stuck in the trap for a while before he is taken back to Okikurumi's house. Even when his younger brother is not able to save him, Okikurumi eventually gives the rabbit an opportunity to escape. Thus, Okikurumi gives all three animals a chance to first learn a lesson from their initial transgressions, and only punishes them once they demonstrate having failed to learn that lesson. The ultimate purpose for their death or punishment, and thus the bulk of each narrative, is to ensure that the *Kamui* ultimately understand their mistakes and can pass that lesson on to others.

As Lee Maracle explains, stories allow us to explore social structures, "which lend themselves to creative, re-creative formation and transformation. That is how oratory is born" (151). She continues, "Oratory is a painting; it is about the freedom between beings and cherishing the distance between them; it is about relationship, and as such it is about life" (151). The *Kamui Yukar* of the rabbit, frog, and otter present a creative re-affirmation of the relationship between lowly, ordinary animals and the highest and most noble human. Despite the hierarchical nature of these relationships, both parties must respect each other. Okikurumi gives space and opportunity for these animals to learn from their mistakes, only punishing them when they fail to do so. Even still, he allows room for forgiveness and escape. Likewise, as the victim of mischievous actions, Okikurumi is not immune to the most trivial nuisances from *Kamui*. All

beings in *Ainu Moshir* must maintain respect towards an established social order to ensure that all can remain existing with a cherished distance between them, and these Oral Stories teach the importance of this balance by portraying a deviation from the established social order. Through their final lessons, these animals restore the boundaries they had previously disrupted between themselves and humans, providing human listeners with a reminder that they are subject to this reciprocity as well.

The Role of Reciprocity

Reciprocity is particularly pivotal in the relationship between Ainu and *Kamui* due to their mutual dependency. Humans can be considered the weakest beings on earth in the Ainu worldview, as they cannot live independently from *Kamui* and ‘things’ to provide them with sustenance, protection, and resources. As such, it is clear why Ainu must maintain respect for *Kamui* and take care not to upset them. Kitty Chisato notes, “Traditionally all Ainu activities were based on respect for the gods. If humans were not respectful, the evil gods (wen-kamuy) would wreak havoc on the people” (6). Yet, the stories of the rabbit, frog, and otter all offer lessons to *animals* advising not to make mischief, misbehave, or taunt humans. These stories illustrate that this expectation of respect goes both ways: if *Kamui* are not respectful towards Ainu, Ainu can also punish them back. In this case, the punishment takes the form of a violent death issued by the powerful Okikurumi.

Yet, the punishment these *Kamui* fear is not necessarily the violence itself: they do not lament facing pain or physical suffering, but rather a “pointless, horrible death” – an unceremonious death without displays of respect or a spirit sending ritual. Thus, even though ordinary humans may not have the ‘god-like strength’ of Okikurumi, all have the power of language and ritual, or to withhold such rituals. In this way, the lessons that all three animals

share at the end of these stories emphasizes the importance of respecting boundaries with *all* humans. They do not warn to avoid Okikurumi or to ensure the humans they are interacting with are not Okikurumi, instead emphasizing that all humans should be treated with respect regardless of their status. Likewise, Ainu have a right to demand the proper respect they should expect from *Kamui* as long as they remain committed to offering equal respect in return. As Kenji Sekine summarizes, “Sometimes Kamui blames Ainu and sometimes Ainu blames Kamui. In that way you can say Kamui and Ainu (human beings) have an equal relationship” (Kenji Sekine, email message to author, September 9, 2021). Reciprocity, in this way, is core to Ainu ecological relationships, and proves to be a delicate system that relies upon all beings understanding established rules and boundaries; these carefully crafted stories serve to teach about how to maintain this complex relationship among balance, mutual respect, and order.

Conclusion

Despite a history of being overlooked as an important source of knowledge, Oral Stories carry valuable insight into the ways Ainu traditionally understand their position within and relationship to the natural world around them; they demonstrate the role of reciprocity in maintaining coexistence in the land upon which they live, and explore the repercussions of such a delicate balance being threatened. For example, over-hunting or disrupting natural habitats would anger *Kamui*, thus leading them to discontinue the flow of such resources. Other stories in Chiri Yukie’s collection speak explicitly of such occurrences committed by human characters: “A Song Pon Okikurumi Sang” describes Okikirmui as a young boy coming across another boy contaminating a river, leading *Kamui* to stop sending salmon down the stream (53-54). Only when the stakes that were muddying the water have been removed do the *Kamui* resume sending salmon for Ainu to fish and eat. Reading and understanding these Oral Stories can thus provide

crucial insight into traditional Ainu forms of land stewardship. Even though humans have an obligation to treat the natural world with respect, the stories of the rabbit, frog, and otter demonstrate that humans, in turn, have the right to demand respect from the nonhuman world. Whereas humans should not disrupt *Kamui* in their various forms, *Kamui* must also not disrupt human life. When the otter, frog, and rabbit *Kamui* do just that, Okikurumi steps in to defend humankind, even when physical humans are not present, ensuring that mutual respect remains among all beings in *Ainu Moshir*. Thus, these stories make clear an understanding that humans are a part of and equal to the system of the natural world, rather than external or even above it.

By centering reciprocity when interacting with the natural world, Ainu have been able to maintain a balanced relationship with resources and animals for centuries – something Japanese settlers failed to do when they colonized *Ainu Moshir* in the late 19th century, quickly exploiting natural resources to depletion. The significant decline in populations of such animals as deer and fish impacted Ainu most, as traditional Ainu lifeways and culture are closely tied to such resources. Chiri Yukie herself expresses fear and sadness about the changing landscape of *Ainu Moshir* in her prologue to this collection. Following a long paragraph describing beautiful images of *Ainu Moshir*, Chiri writes:

Oh, what a wonderful way of life it must have been! That tranquil state of mind is already a thing of the past, a dream torn apart by the passing decades, for this earth is changing quickly, with hills and meadows becoming villages and villages becoming cities one after another (1).

Throughout her prologue, Chiri continues to lament the decline of this bountiful form of Nature, diminishing more and more with each passing year, slowly being relegated to simply a memory. She further expresses a sense of helplessness, writing, “the few of us who remain of our race do nothing but stare in astonishment at the way the world has gone” in just a few decades of settler-colonialism (1).

Yet, not sitting back and ‘staring in astonishment’, modern Ainu actively fight to reclaim their land and gain back what has been lost. As contemporary Ainu activist and scholar Koichi Kaizawa notes, “in Hokkaido, when our ancestors were alive, it was full of trees. Moreover, in the forest, our ancestors lived a rich life, receiving everything they needed from nature. But, after only 200 years, nature in Hokkaido has been totally destroyed” (8). Not only does he lament the destruction of the natural landscape of *Ainu Moshir* that Chiri Yukie does in her prologue, but he acknowledges the inherent connection between this landscape and traditional Ainu culture: he writes that, in losing this traditional relationship to the natural, “we have lost the ground on which to succeed with our culture” (8). He explains that a campaign to replant the ‘real forest’ in Hokkaido has started to ensure that the landscape of *Ainu Moshir* may be brought back to life in 200 to 300 years (8). He continues, “I am not able to witness that forest, but my grandchildren or great grandchildren or their descendants will look at that forest, and realize that the Ainu people constructed their culture in that real forest in Hokkaido” (8). After decades of aggressive settler-colonialism, Ainu efforts to rebuild the ‘real forest’ in *Ainu Moshir* ensures that the “tranquil state of mind” Chiri speaks of can persist and thrive into the modern day rather than being relegated to the past. Though the impact of colonization continues to pose threats to the intergenerational consciousness of nature within Ainu communities, the work of modern activists and the sharing of Oral Stories can continue to connect new generations of Ainu to the ‘real forest’ that once was and will continue to be in the future.

Constructing a complete and accurate understanding of Ainu ecological relationships is thus not only pivotal to gaining important knowledge regarding ways to preserve the natural landscape of *Ainu Moshir*, but valuable for gaining insight into that “wonderful way of life” Chiri Yukie speaks of in her prologue: the rich legacy of traditional Ainu culture and practices. Without developing a complete and nuanced understanding of Ainu ecological relationships, the

ability of Ainu to maintain natural resources and live in reciprocity with the land can be viewed mistakenly as an inherent quality or passive consequence of Ainu lifeways, perpetuating such harmful tropes as the idea of Ainu as “noble savages” who live “closer to nature.” As Mark J. Hudson argues in “Ainu and Hunter-Gatherer Studies”, “we need to discard the conceit that some human groups are closer to nature than others; all of us depend on the natural environment for our survival and all of us exploit that environment through culture” (134). Through a study of Oral Story, we can see the ways in which carefully crafted narrations are designed to develop, teach, and share lessons about the importance of maintaining reciprocity among humans, *Kamui*, and ‘things’ – elements and resources in the natural world. Though some stories emphasize the importance of humans maintaining such respect towards the nonhuman, stories of small, ‘trickster’ animals such as the otter, frog, and rabbit demonstrate that this respect must be mutual – humans also have the right to be treated with respect, and those who violate this expectation can be punished. Through their “pointless, horrible deaths,” these animals encourage future generations of *Kamui* and Ainu alike in *Ainu Moshir* to maintain a respect for the reciprocal relationships that sustain them, so that the ‘real forest’ and ‘wonderful way of life’ they share may be able to continue well into the future.

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