

# Shishirimuka Ainu Cultural Festival

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## The Shishirimuka Ainu Cultural Festival and its Significance

The Shishirimuka Ainu Cultural festival is held in the Biratori-cho Public Hall on a mid-February Sunday, every year. This festival started in 1990 and has continued every single year since as a regionally specific Ainu Cultural Recital.

Ainu culture, once nurtured in daily life, has been changing ever since globalization in modern society. Now, Ainu culture is nurtured in a more institutionalized manner. The Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Association, the Nibutani Biratori-cho Ainu Language Classes, and the Iwor Restoration Projects are representative of contemporary Ainu cultural inheritance.

In addition to the festival, Dr. Munro Remembrance Day in June, and Chipsanke in August, is a place to regularly showcase the cultural activities, providing an opportunity for people who are interested in Ainu Culture in and outside the town to gather and meet.

## Recitals by Local Children

The education of children in the



**Photo 1** Performance of the traditional Ainu dance, "Erumushino (Dance of the Rat)" by Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Society. Performing in front of a large audience is an important site of preserving and passing on dance culture.

region is a significant challenge when considering the inheritance of Ainu culture.

Every year, the children's section of the Nibutani Ainu Language Class holds a reading of handmade picture books and games. Some participate in traditional Ainu dances and learn while having fun along with the adults.

## Ainu Language Theater

Recently, residents in the Saru River region have performed Ainu language plays based on Ainu oral

literature. So far, stories such as, "God Who Played with Children" and "The Fox's Charanke" have been performed.

"God Who Played with Children" is based on a recorded *uepeker* (poetic prose) told by Konumatan Kimura from Nioi Village in 1961. The story is about a snake god who receives gifts and returns to the land of the *kamuy* after playing with the children of Okikurumi Kamui.

"The Fox's Charanke" is adapted from a *kamuy yukar* told by Nepuki Nabezawa from Saruba in 1968. The story, which takes place in current Chitose city, is about a negotiation between a fox and a human, which teaches the value of sharing food such as salmon and fruits.

It has been very difficult to learn the Ainu language in modern society dominated by Japanese.

However, creating a piece of theater in collaboration with others in the community has led to an increased motivation of learning the language from a different perspective.



**Photo 2** Performance of an Ainu language play by the Nibutani Ainu language class. The incorporation of a stage performance has given the students a different perspective in learning conversation and expressions of the Ainu language.

## Showcasing

### Ainu Oral Literature

Among the various genres of Ainu oral literature, such as legends, song, and prayers, it is common to categorize them into three: heroic epics (*yukar*, in the Saru region), legends (*kamui yukar*), and poetic prose (*uepeker*).

The Saru region is known to have a wealth of Ainu oral literature passed down today.

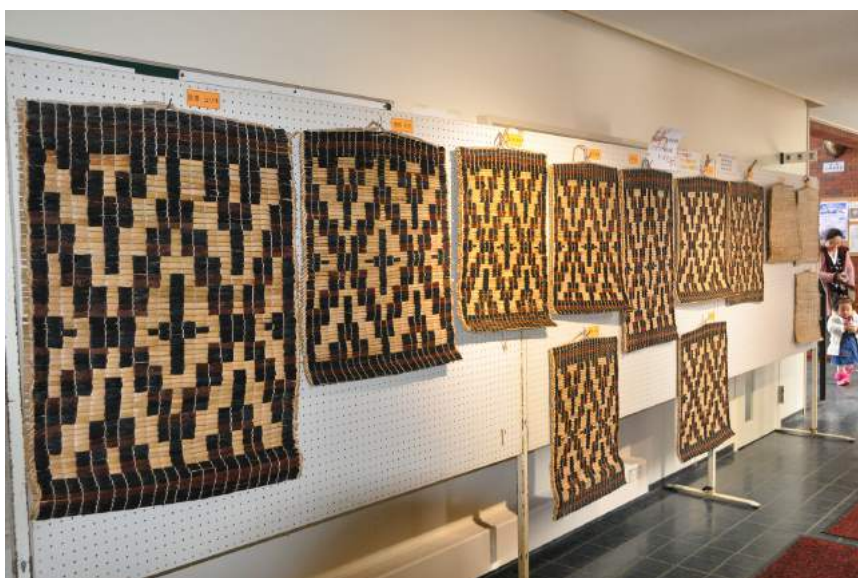
There are some residents who express the desire to learn *kamuy yukar*, which they heard during childhood. Some of these residents practice every day using audio recordings left by their elders.

### Traditional Ainu Dance

The Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Society puts on performances of dances in the Saru River Region, such as *upopo* (sitting song), *hararaki* (dance of the crane), and *chak piyak* (Dance of the swifts). Furthermore, Ainu dance organizations are invited to special lectures to talk about the Ainu tradition.

Visitors in Nibutani can enjoy the Saru Region's nimble dances that mimic birds. In other regions, there are dances that represent farming or kelp picking.

Additionally, it is common for the



**Photo 3** An exhibition of an *inawso* (a mat with patterns) created by the students at Hokkaido Prefectural Tomakomai Technical Training School. Having an outlet to exhibit work has encouraged creators to continue the craft.

dancers to wear a full set of traditional clothing at the Traditional Ainu Dance performed at cultural festivals. Seeing the dynamism of these regional patterns is also quite pleasurable.

### Towards a Future of Cultural Inheritance

In the pre-modern era, Ainu language was used everyday, and faith in *kamuy* was the foundation of daily life. Since modernity, contemporary society has seen the movement of people and goods across the Japanese archipelago, and many people have been forced to change their way of life.

Against this backdrop of flux, a different form of inheriting Ainu traditions has formed in contrast with passing down oral literature and dance in the home or village: efforts to pass on this culture in non-daily sites, such as Ainu Cultural Festivals and Speech contests and performances.

In 2011, six parents and children from Biratori-cho performed tongue twisters called "*Onnepasikur* (old crow)" at an Ainu speech contest called Itakanro, and were awarded the grand prize for the section.

Furthermore, Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Society holds performances of Ainu traditional dance in other festivals in Hokkaido.

In recent years, cultural festival tours from Sapporo have brought people from urban areas to the smaller Ainu villages to see the efforts of Ainu cultural inheritance. We continue to promote the residences' livelihood by increasing and continuing regional efforts.



**Photo 4** Iyuta (grain pounding) experience. Pounding *piyapa* and *munchiro* (types of millet) has been important work for refined women. A few people would do this together while singing song.

"Cultural landscapes of the Saru Valley formed by Ainu tradition and modern development"  
Designated as Important Cultural Landscape as of July 26th, 2007

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