

Traditional Ainu Dance

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Various Inherited Dances in the Region

Ainu people have fostered traditional dance and song over the years, and each region has its own unique characteristics.

These performing arts have a range of functions and intentions from providing daily entertainment, to ritualistic dance, to movements that are simply done along with the repetitive motion of manual labor.

These traditions are closely linked to the religious outlook of Ainu, and many have been passed on in the home and the *kotan* (village) through song and dance.

There are a few different types of dances. Some are ritualistic dances that have a strong ceremonial aspect. Others simulate the movement of birds, beasts, and other things in the wild. Finally, there are dances that contain an element of play.

Through ceremonial movements and refined language, these dances are thought to convey the will of *kamuy*, and some of them can clue us into the



Photo A performance of hararaki (Dance of Cranes) by the Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Society (shot from the southside). A group lines up to represent one crane. These dances in and around the *chise* (houses) conjure up an air of Ainu culture.

origins of these dances (table 1).

The values of these art forms have been recognized as Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property in 1984, and in 2009, UNESCO registered Ainu dance on the list of intangible cultural heritage.

The Preservation and Dissemination of Ainu Dance

In Hokkaido, there are 18 organizations whose mission it is to preserve the Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property of traditional Ainu Dance. Among them is Hokkaido Ainu Traditional Dance Preservation Society Association of which the Biratori Ainu Cultural Preservation Association is associated with.

Performances of traditional Ainu dance held in and around Hokkaido have become integral to the preservation activities of many who seek to pass on Ainu culture.

Ainu traditional dance is also on the menu in the experiential learning workshops offered at the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, giving visitors the opportunity to learn this intangible folk culture.

The Origins of the Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Society

The early modern era of Japan saw a big shift in the environment surrounding the cultural tradition of

Table 1 Various Song and Dance

- Sitting Song with Several People: A few singers sit around the lid of a lacquered bowl and clap to create a beat to sing to. In the Biratori region, this type of song is called *upopo*.
- Dance in a Circle: Everyone lines up in a circle facing the center and dance clockwise while singing. In the Biratori region, this type of dance is called *horippa*.
- Song while Pounding Grain: This type of song is sung while pounding grain.
- Dance that Incorporates Animal Gestures: These dances incorporate animal gestures into the choreography. There are dances that represent cranes, snipes, swifts, mice, foxes, and grasshoppers.
- Men's Dances: These dances involve men slowly stepping the floor while moving their arms up and down. Some dances involve the performers holding bow and arrows and swords.

*There are many other dances that have not been included here.

(Hokkaido Ainu Culture Research Center, 2001)

the Ainu. This resulted in the increased difficulty of regionally specific art forms such as song and dance to be passed down correctly.

Though facing such difficulty, people still passed down the heritage of *Ainupuri* (Ainu way of life) and hum old songs throughout daily life.

In 1983, the Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Society was formed with the aim to preserve and pass down both the spiritual and material culture of Ainu, not only for archival purposes, but in order to preserve it as a culture which is alive and embedded in daily life.

In the children's classes of the Nibutani, Biratori-cho Ainu Language classes, Ainu people still native to the culture come and teach the children, along footage of traditional dance. After this, students present what they learned in the Shishirimuka Ainu Culture Festival and in other places around Hokkaido and the rest of Japan.

Classic Ainu Dance

In Ainu dance, there is what's called a sitting song, which functions to mark the beginning of a dance. In the Saru Region, this kind of sitting song is called *upopo*, in which people will sing in a *ukouk* style (in a round) to the rhythm of someone beating the lid of a *shintoko* (a fig 1, food box).

Horippa is a song and dance at the end of a performance in which members of the audience are asked to participate freely and dance in circles with and around the performers. Recently, fewer people have danced inside of the circle, preferring to stay on the margins.

Among the dances that mimic the movement of animals, birds are most common. In Biratori-cho, the most common of these dances are *hararaki*, *annahore*, and *chak piyak* (table 2). In *annahore* and *chak piyak*, dancers replace each other in position and dance in a circle along a detailed rhythm. This dance represents the brisk movements of birds fluttering in the sky, and is very satisfying to perform (Fig. 2).



Figure 1 A is an *upopo* in the Biratori Region and B is an *upopo* in the Kushiro region. There are differences between the lyrics and melodies of the two regions. (Ainu Cultural Promotion and Research Promotion Organization 2008)

Table 2 Dances Inherited in the Biratori Region

- Chak Piyak* (the Dance of Swifts): A wild dance that represents swifts flurrying in the sky.
- Huntori hunchikap* (the Dance of Ravens): A dance that represents ravens bathing and playing in water.
- Hararaki 1* (The Dance of the Crane): When there is enough room for many dancers, people line up in three rows. The middle row is the body of the crane and the two shorter rows on the sides form the wings of the crane.
- *Hararaki 2* (The Dance of the Crane): A Dance that represents a crane playing in the wetlands.
- U Humpe ne re* (The Dance of the Whale): A dance that represents an old woman who finds a whale, which has washed up ashore.
- Anna hore* (Bird Dance): A dance that represents an unspecified bird.

(Edited Excerpts from Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Society "Descriptions_of Ainu Dance")

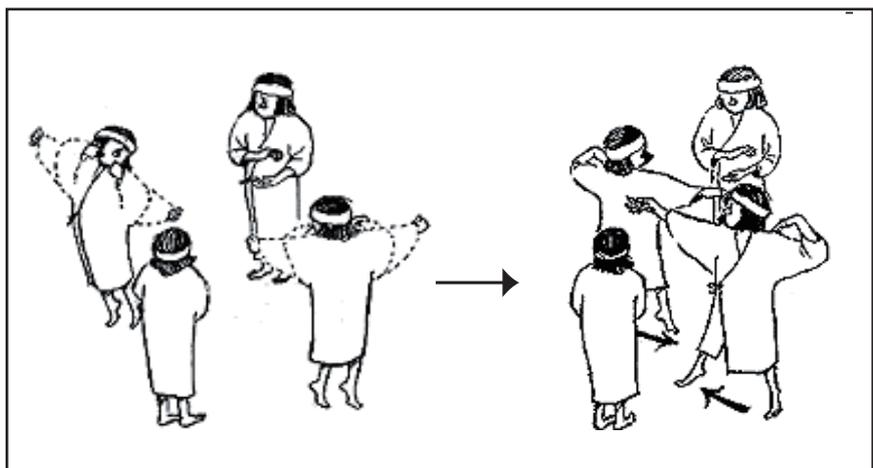


Figure 2 Part of the choreography of *annahore* (dance of the birds). This dance represents birds flapping and fluttering about. (Biratori-cho, 2004)

"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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