

# The Legends of Okikurumi

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## Legendary Sites of Okikurumi Along the Saru River

There are several legendary sites related to Okikurumi which have been passed on through the *upaskuma* (folklore) of the region.

Okikurumi is known as the *kamuy* who taught people the way of human life. It is said that Okikurumi descended on Saru and lived here until he returned to the land of the *kamuy*.

The residents of the Saru River region are proud of this land in which Okikurumi is said to have lived.

The most well-known sites associated with Okikurumi are Hayopira (Biratori Hon-cho, Photo 1) and Okikurumi's *Chashi* (Nioi).

The Saru River region has been called “the birthplace of Ainu culture”, and the lores surrounding Okikurumi is said to have formed the basis for this belief. Although this belief is no longer accurate, the phrase still shines a light on the great deal of influence that Okikurumi had on the residents of the region.

Recently, the inheritance of these *upaskuma* has been in steady decline, which has thankfully fed the growing momentum amongst the residents of the region to protect the significant traditions and lore of the Saru River area.

## Scholarship on Okikurumi's Legends in the Saru River Region

Okikurumi has appeared in several Early-Modern Japanese literature as a figure supporting the legacy of Yoshitsune, beginning with Arai Hakuseki's *Ezo-shi* (1720), and again in books such as *Ezo Manhitsu-ki*, *Ezo-ki*, and *Ezo Zuihitsu* (Kindaichi, 1914).

After a period of modernization, Ainu people began autonomously



**Photo 1** In the Saru River region, there are countless tales which have survived surrounding Okikurumi, the culture-giving god. In the center of the photo, one can see Hayopira, the place considered to be one of the sites, which Okikurumi descended upon. (Shot from the east bank)

recording their own views of Okikurumi, which provided a clearer account of how the *kamuy* was worshipped in the region. (Batchelor, 1884; Palasamrec and Torii, 1895).

Subsequently, scholars such as Iwao Yoshida, Kyosuke Kindaichi, Itsuhiko Kubodera, Genzo Sarashina, and Hidezo Yamada, and local residents such as Shigeru Kayano and Yuji Kawakami have continuously studied the folk tales of the area, contributing to the ever-growing scholarship.

Thanks to the steadily growing accumulation of research, many tales and legends relating to Okikurumi have remained.

## Okikurumi in Ainu Oral Literature

In Ainu oral literature, Okikurumi's story is most frequently told as *kamuy yukar*.

Among these passed down in the Saru River region, the name *Sisirmuka* (Saru River) makes an appearance in many of them.

Because all of these stories with this name relate to Okikurumi, it must not be brushed off as mere coincidence, hinting at the close association between this region and the legendary god. It is especially of note considering there are barely any *kamuy yukar* that mention specific locations.

On the other hand, *upaskuma* are songs, which function as lessons about the origins of things, morals, and history of the land. However, many different kinds of oral literature, such as *yukar* and *uepeker*, are considered to be a subcategory of *upaskuma*.

In other words, *upaskuma* do not necessarily fit into a specific format,

### Table The Etymology of Hayopira

① hay o pira: swordfish, there is, cliff (Kindaichi, 1914)

② hayok pe pira: armored, cliff

(Biratori-cho Fiftieth Anniversary History Compilation Committee, 1952)

\*the text explains that the word *heieopira* came from the word, *hayok pe pira*.

③ hay o pira: oriental bittersweet, there is, cliff (Local residents)

but rather covers any kind of story that function to pass down knowledge generally. *Uepeker* and *yukar*, however, are stories with a specific form, and can only be considered *upaskuma* if the content of the story are educationally functional.

Within the category of *upaskuma*, Okikurumi has another name: *Ainurakkur*. However, in other types of stories such as *oina* and *kamuy yukar*, Okikurumi and Ainurakkur are separate and distinct, appearing in different stories.

*Oina*, mentioned above, are stories in which Ainurakkur talks in the first person. Interesting, considering there are hardly any tales in which Okikurumi talks in the first person. Some stories come close, however. In Kubodera's *Seiden* 13 (1977) "The Autobiography of the God of Okikurumi," Okikurumi tells the



**Photo 2** This is *chinomishir*, (We, pray, mountain: one of Okikurumi's legendary sites) seen from the base of Hayopira. The riverbank in the foreground (on the right bank of the Saru River), is currently being used as the Iwor waterfront where the residents have been cultivating millet (*piyapa*: the grain which is said to have been brought by Okikurumi). (Shot from the northeast bank).

origin story of cicadas, but even this cannot be considered a story about Okikurumi in the first person. There is a story entitled "The Autobiography of Little Okikurumi" in *Seiden* 15, however Okikurumi's name is never

actually mentioned in the tale itself.

Lastly, Ainurakkur makes an appearance in a few *yukar*, but there has yet to be any recorded *yukar*, in which Okikurumi appears.

#### The Coming of Okikurumi - The Legend of Hayopira (excerpt)

According to the tale told by Wakarpa of Saru, the rivers overflowed with fish, ripe fruit grew on all of the trees on the land when the god of creation created the human world. The pure, beautiful land was unseen even in the heavens. Competition sprung when came time to decide who among the gods would own this beautiful land. Okikurumi was the most promising among these gods, but the others were envious and decided to conspire against him. They created various challenges for Okikurumi to best before he could own the land. The first of these was to face extreme cold.

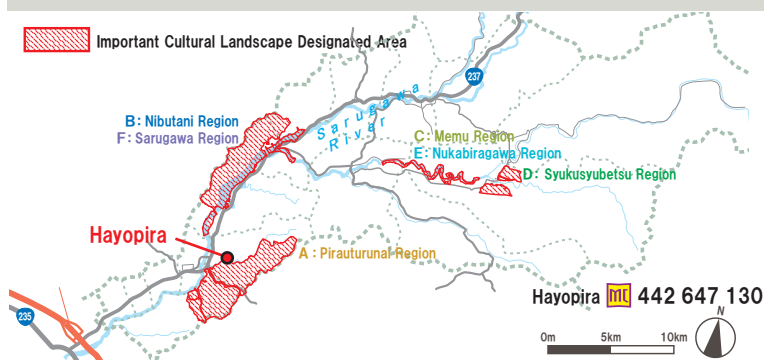
Okikurumi would fail if he exclaimed "cold!" in pain. His flesh tore and fingers froze, yet not once did he utter the word "cold" and passed the challenge. Next, he faced the challenge of extreme heat. His skin suffered hideous burns and melted bone, yet Okikurumi never uttered the word "hot" and passed the challenge.

"This is no good," exclaimed the jealous gods, and conspired for a third challenge. Okikurumi was banned from laughing. The jealous gods joked around, trying to make him laugh, but Okikurumi endured. The gods began to talk of men and women of lust, mimicking the act of blind love. At this, Okikurumi let out a chuckle and was revoked of the ownership of the land. To this, Okikurumi finally exclaimed, "I have endured the cold and the hot. I have endured everything until now. It is unfair to disqualify me for such foolishness." He fought the gods and forced his way to the land below.

There is an anecdote here—When Okikurumi escaped, he suspected that the land below would not have grains, though it has bountiful fish and beasts, and so he greasped a handful of millet seeds as an allowance for his travels. He slit his shins to hide the grains and hurried out of heaven.

The land which Okikurumi descended upon was top the high cliffs of a place called Hayopira of Sisirmuka, now called the River of Saru. Grandfathers of current elders around the age fifty say that in their youth, there was a beak (hay) of a swordfish there. The name Hayopira came from this—pira denotes cliff, the 'o' of hayo, or hai-o means on, or to ride. Therefore, Hayopira would mean "the cliff with the beak of a swordfish."

(Kindaichi, 1925)



"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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