

# Transmission of Food Culture and Use of Mountains

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## Food Culture Being Transmitted through Place Names

If we take a look at Ainu place names in the area, we can see that many of them are derived from edible plants (table 1).

This provides us with useful information in thinking about the flora and the surrounding environment along the Saru River since place names are often a reflection of everyday necessities, giving us a clue the importance of certain plants.

## The Wisdom of Food Culture and Neighboring Mountains

The town-owned forest on the right bank of Saru River in the Nibutani area is not utilized for transmitting Ainu culture as the Iwor Forest.

Several times a year, the residents take the public into these forests for activities such as mountain trailing and wild vegetable picking.

The key to secure a sustainable food supply is to maintain the biodiversity of flora in the forests and to make sure that these resources will not be depleted. Protecting the environment does not only protect the people's food but also supports the habitat for local animals.



**Photo 1:** People harvest wild vegetables during spring every year in the Iwor Forest in the Nibutani area to learn the varieties and the harvesting time of edible plants and transmit the traditional Ainu dishes to future generations.

The traditional Ainu way of utilizing plants is widely respected. For example, one of the fundamental etiquettes of Ainu food culture is to take everything but the root. There are also food storage techniques that are still valued. Additionally, Ainu have extensive knowledge of processing plants for medicinal use, which teaches us about all of the edible plants in nearby forests.

## Transmitting Ainu Cooking Techniques

Most of the ingredients of popular Ainu dishes, such as *ohau*, *rur* (soup)

and *rataskep* (stew) are wild vegetables.

*Ohaw* and *rur* consist of *pukusa* (Alpine leek), *pukusakina* (anemone flaccida), and *ukurkina* (hosta albo-marginata), cooked along with poultry or fish and seasoned with oils, fish fat, or bear or deer meat.

*Rataskeskep* is made with vegetables such as *sikerpekina* (symplocarpus nipponicus Makino), *pukusa*, *pittok* (cow parsnip), *sikerpe* (fruit of Amur cork tree) and beans stewed until the liquid is gone, then seasoned with the fat of fish or animal meat just like *ohaw*, but does not contain poultry or fish.

Food storage techniques play a big role in order for these ingredients to be used off-season. Usually, these Ainu food preservation techniques consist of sun drying, boiling then sun drying, and also pounding things to extract starch (table 2).

Foods which have been treated for preservation were placed on top of a *tuna* (wooden shelf above the hearth) or stored in a *pu* (raised-floor storage) near a *chise*.



**Photo 2:** *Turep* (*Cardiocrinum cordatum* var. *glehnii*) and *pukusakina* (soft windflower) flourish in lowlands near water. The forest floor of Japanese elm is an important place for many useful plants.



Table 1: Ainu Place Names that Indicate Edible Plants

1. *sikerpe* (Nibutani, Nioi, Toyonuka) Fruit of Amur cork tree.
2. *turepusnay* (Asahi) *Cardiocrinum cordatum* var. *glehnii*, a place where flourish, creek.
3. *kikinni* (Asahi) *Prunus padus*
4. *penkeyamue* (penkeyame), *pankeyamue* (pankeyame) (Kawamukai) *penkeyame*, *pankeyame* (upstream, downstream), chestnut, (place to) eat  
(Hokkaido map at a reduced scale of 1/50,000th, published in 1896)

Table 2: Storage Method for wild vegetables (excerpt)

- Sun dry  
*Pukusa* (Alpine leek), *pukusakina* (*Anemone Flaccida*), *puy* (*Caltha palustris* var. *barthei*), *aha* (*Amphicarpaea bracteata* subsp. *edgeworthii*), *Ninum* (fruit of walnut), *Yam* (fruit of chestnut), *Nisew* (acorn), etc.
- Boil, then sundry  
*Korkoni* (giant butterbur), *noya* (mugwort), *sorma* (cinnamon fern), etc.
- Pound the root to extract starch. Form the starch into a donut shape, then sundry.  
*Turep* (*Cardiocrinum cordatum* var. *glehnii*), *eskerimrim* (dogtooth violet), etc.



Photo 3: Examples of traditional Ainu dishes. In the old days, *apeoi* (hearth) inside the *chise* was the place to stew and grill the food.

1. *Chipororataskep* (mashed potatoes mixed with salmon roe)
2. *Chiporoshito* (salmon roe dumplings)
3. *Kompushito* (dumplings with konbu sauce)
4. *Kosayo* (porridge)
5. *Chepuohaw* (fish soup)
6. *Chiporosayo* (salmon roe porridge)
7. Grilled *shipe* (salmon)



Photo 4: *Sapuskep* (*Panicum miliaceum*) at harvest time. It is an annually growing plant. Once harvested, the seeds have to be planted for the following season. It is one of the grains that grow in *pikutatoy* (river sandbank field) and it is an ingredient used to make various dishes such as *shito* (dumplings) and *kosayo* (porridge).

## The History of Ainu Food Culture

In the journals of Takeshiro Matsuura, who visited Saru area in 1858, it is recorded that the Ainu people ate “millet, barnyard millet, greens, radish, black-eyed peas, cucumbers, tobacco, potatoes and pumpkins” in the village of Horosaru (interpreted by Akiba 1985).

This indicates that Saru River also grew a variety of vegetables commonly available in Honshu (mainland Japan) at the time. Many of these vegetables were brought to Japan around the medieval and modern times.

In the latter half of the Edo era, corn was brought into Hokkaido. Along with the cultivation and development of Hokkaido in recent years, corn has become a mass-manufactured crop using an American style of farming. In Saru Ainu, corn was referred to as *kimi*, derived from Japanese.

It seems to have been popularized as a delicious, convenient food after Takeshiro’s visit.

“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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