

Moshir-eru-ushi

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Regarding Moshir-eru-ushi in Ainu Ethnography

In 1952, an anthropologist named Seiichi Izumi released “Moshir-eru-ushi”, a theory on the phenomenon of famine along the Saru River (Izumi 1952: see table 1).

To summarize, *mosir-eru-ushi* refers to a phenomenon that depletes all useful plants and animals in a low-lying flatland near the river, such that people can no longer live in that *kotan*. Considering “it happened often in different places,” this phenomenon seems to be a prominent characteristic inherent along this river.

Izumi constructed his theory based on the thoughts of Motozo Nabezawa of Pirakakotan, Kunimatsu Nitani of Niputanikotan, Sanukuno Kawakami of Penakorikotan, Dairoku Kowata of Sikerpekotan and Hachiro Kurokawa of Nupukipetkotan. Not too long after the war, these elders described their personal experiences and stories about the decline of villages along the river, which now have been recorded and expressed in the Ainu language.

We can assume that Kunimatsu Nitani was a particular influence on Izumi considering his extensive use of Nibutani as a representative case in explaining the phenomenon of *mosir-eru-ushi*.

In order to understand the etymology of *moshir-eru-ushi*, we must deepen our analysis of “*moshir eru ushi*”, which Izumi transcribed. However, from his theory of famine (table 1), we could also interpret the meaning of the word as “*mosir e rewe us*” (land, that is, distort, time/place).



Photo: A *harunire* forest that spreads across the low-lying flatlands along the river. Food supplies grow where these trees grow because the forest floors are rich in nutrition.

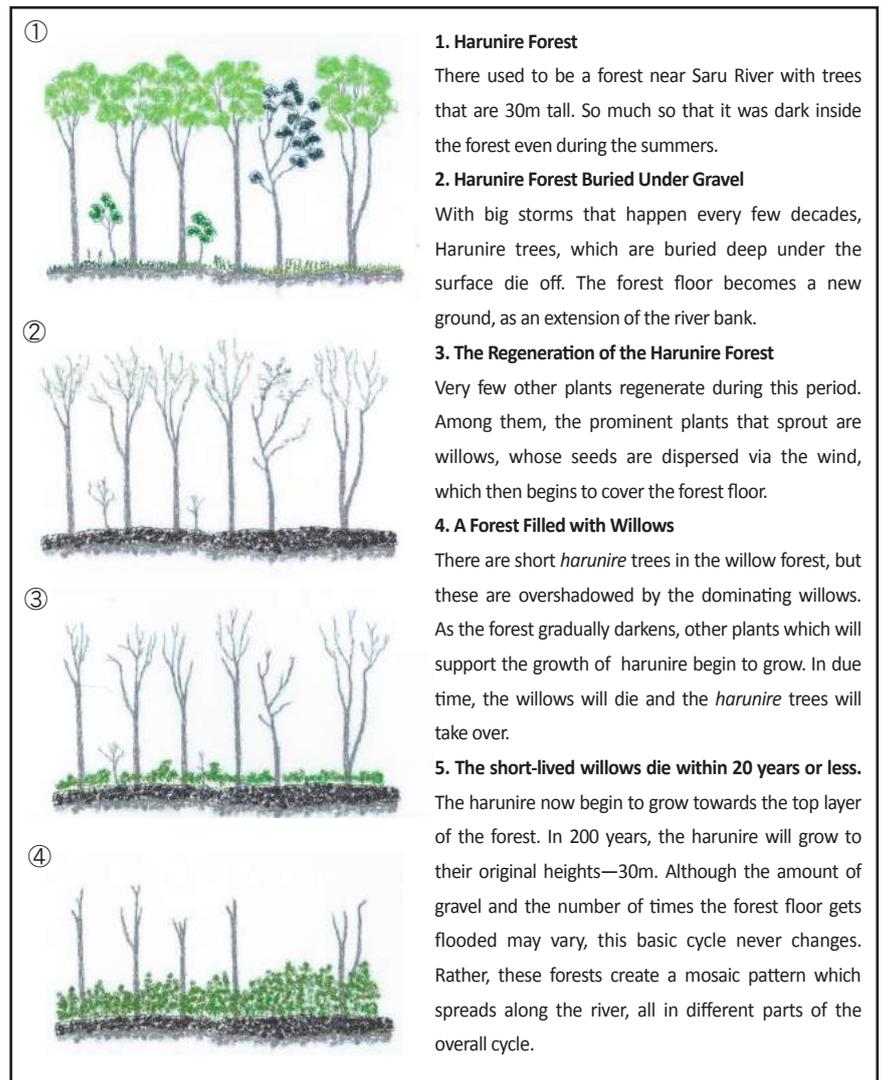


Fig: The theoretical model how *moshir-eru-ushi* restores the forest from a botanical point of view (Miki 2007). It illustrates the cycle of the *harunire* forest floor, which nurtures a variety of useful plants.

Characteristics of Saru River

The etymology of Saru River is *sar* in Ainu. It is also known as *sisirmuka* (table 2). Both of them evoke the image of flourishing flora due to erosion and sedimentation of the land around the river.

Pikutatoy, a form of Ainu grain farming (table 3) also shows a tactful way that the Ainu utilized the overflow of the river. Nukibetsu River (nupki pet: become muddy, river), a tributary of Nukibara River, also implies such characteristics.

Although Izumi does not talk about the cause of *moshir-eru-ushi*, from these characteristics of Saru River, we can assume that the sedimentation of gravel and the riverside forests are largely related to this phenomenon.

A Botanical Analysis

A botanist named Noboru Miki is currently researching *moshir-eru-ushi* (fig: Miki, 2007). The keyword here is the *harunire* (Japanese elm) forest that forms by rivers or wide creeks.

The forest floor of a *harunire* forest nurtures useful plants of Ainu such as *turep* (*Cardiocrinum cordatum* var. *glehnii*) and *pukusa* (Alpine leek).

These low-lying flatlands occasionally become flooded by the overflow of the river. Gravel accumulates and suffocates the roots, thereby killing any useful flora. As a result, what we see is an awkward, hollowed out landscape amidst a lush forest.

This could lead to the depletion of food supply for the local residents.

However, the seeds of various plants become rooted in the bare soil, which will lead to plants that the next generation of Ainu could use.

Seeds from *harunire* from the surrounding take root, but the fast-growing willows are usually the first to grow. Within 20 years, these two types of trees alternate—the

Table 1: “*Moshir-eru-ushi*” by Seiichi Izumi

According to a study by Kubodera, the primary edible plants harvested in the *iwor* are *turep* (the bulb of *Cardiocrinum cordatum* var. *glehnii*), and *pukusakina* (Alpine leek)...etc. No particular family has the exclusive right to these special areas for collecting edible plants. For bulbs, the residents use a wooden stick called *itani*. This is a woman’s job. Among these plants, the most commonly eaten is *turep* (the bulb of *Cardiocrinum cordatum* var. *glehnii*). According to Kunimatsu Nitani, the women of the *Niputani-kotan-un-iwor* went to the *naipar-kot* (the basin of a creek) of the kenash creek, where *turep* grew in abundance under a big tree. However, after this big tree eventually withered, and smaller trees began crowding the area, they were not able to collect any wild vegetables.

This phenomenon is called *moshir-eru-ushi*, and it has apparently occurred often in various areas throughout history. The animals migrate along with this phenomenon, contributing to a phenomenon of famine for the *kotan*. In these cases, the *iwor* will lose all of the resources to sustain the people in the *kotan*. They say that *kotan* have moved locations due to this kind of depletion of *iwor*.

(Izumi 1952)

Table 2: The Etymology of Saru River and its Characteristics

Sar - reed bed, reed field, marsh.

Sisirmuka - Saru River’s old name. si - really, sir - around, mu - clog, ka - make.

Every time it rained, the water brought gravel from the upstream and made the estuary of the river move towards Monbetsu or Mukawa. Ainu people thought of this as the river’s mouth-clogging, which is why they named the river, “the river that clogs the area.”

(Kayano 1996)

Table 3: Regarding Piktatoy (river bank rice fields)

In the summers past, there was a flood, which brought mud and gravel to the willow forest. This sediment accumulates and creates a sandbank-like place where no grass grows.

This is called piktatoy (pikta = sandbank, toy = field). Since grass doesn’t grow for the first two years, it is easy to use it as a rice field. So in the beginning of May, we would go out with a *tonka* (an iron hoe with open windows) or a triangular hoe, and an *iyokpe* (sickle). We would cut the wild grass with the *tonka*, plowed furrows, and sowed millet seeds.

In early June, we’d remove the grass between the furrows. In late July, we’d remove the grass that grows inside the furrows called *negusa*, then wait for autumn to arrive.

(Kayano 1979)

willows die and *harunire* takeover.

This cycle of life and death of the *harunire* forest along the sprawling river is what allows useful plants to grow in a sustainable manner.

This phenomenon is unique to this particular area in the Hidaka coast. It is a synchronous phenomenon that produces a unique landscape of flora

and cliffs in these areas.

“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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