

# The Perception of Seasons in Ainu Tradition and the Regional Climate

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## The Climate and Industrial Landscape of Saru River

Hidaka area, located along the Pacific coast in the Southwest Hokkaido, enjoys a relatively warm weather. It is generally divided into 2 sections: Pacific coastal area and inland area.

In the inland area, the amount of snowfall and precipitation is high, whereas in the coastal area it is low.

Biratori is located at the west end of Hidaka. It is 52.4km long and 41.2km wide, with an area of 747.22 km<sup>2</sup>.

From June to September, the climate is quite calm. During these months, the wind does not exceed 10m/sec. In the winter, from December through February, the average precipitation is 47mm. It is an area with relatively little snowfall.

This kind of climate is perfect for raising horses. The land in this area has been used as the nation's largest producer of light breed horses since the Meiji era. It is impossible to discuss the history of Biratori-cho without thinking about the industry of horses.



**Photo 1:** Biratori Wagyu in the town-owned pasture (Shukushubetsu area). The cows graze during May and October is a local industry that characterizes the *mata* (summer) landscape along the Saru River (shot from the North).

The square measure of the farmland in Hidaka area is 41,000ha, of which 16.9% is rice paddy, 6.9% is a regular field, and 76.1% is pasture land.

The majority of the pasture is being used to produce light breed horses.

The scale of horse production in Biratori is smaller than that of Hidaka-cho, Shin Hidaka-cho, and Urakawa-cho. Areas including Kawamukai, Hon-cho, Nibutani districts are maintaining pastures for light

breed horses. Additionally, Memu's town-owned pasture is mainly reserved for raising Wagyu Beef (Japanese beef) cows.

## The Perception of Seasons in Ainu Culture

We must pay attention to “the Legendary Sense of the Seasons of the Ainu” when trying to understand the mountains, forests, and rivers of Hokkaido.

In his book, Mashiho Chiri mentions the Ainu way of perceiving seasons in his book (Chiri, 1956).

Based on the analysis of the descriptions of seasons seen in Ainu folklore, we can tell that Ainu used to divide a year into two seasons: *saku* (summer) and *mata* (winter) (table 1). The folklores also indicate that before then, Ainu thought that *sakpa* (year of summer) and *matapa* (year of winter), alternated.

In relation to the flora and snowfall, *saku* was the timeframe from the time budding of broadleaved trees to the time before snowfall. *Mata* was the time after snowfall until the time the snow melts.

One can assume that there was no



**Photo 2:** Pasture for light breed horses in *mata* (winter) (shot from the West). The relatively warm weather with a little snow is suitable for horse grazing. The mountains in the background are traditional Ainu land in the Obira district. They are named Penketokomu (of upstream, lumpy mountain), Pankekotomu (of downstream, lumpy mountain) respectively, from left to right.

need to differentiate *paykar* (spring) and *chuk* (autumn) in order to manage life throughout the year. Another way of differentiating the seasons related to gender roles within society—the time to harvest mountain vegetables was a female season, whereas the time to hunt in the mountains during the winter was considered a male season (table 2).

## Finding Ainu Tradition in the Landscape of Mata

We can feel the depth of Ainu cultural inheritance in the Saru region during the season of *mata* (winter). The leaves from the broadleaves fall, revealing the unique characteristics of the forests along the river. Due to the Hidaka area's climate with little snow, it is easier to see the rocks, which the local residents invoked with a cultural significance.

The *iomante*, an important Ainu ceremony, used to take place during *mata*.

This is because Ainu would hunt *kimunkamui* (bears) while they hibernate. Once the *heper* (bear cubs) were captured, they would welcome the cubs into the *kotan* during *mata* as well.

The residents must have seen many *kamuy* while hunting in the mountains during the male season.

*Ukaeroski* is a landscape in Nibutani that is in the shape of a parent bear and bear cubs, which is an iconic spot that represents the local landscape of *mata* (photo 3). It is a precious land for Ainu tradition that transmits their faith in *kamuy*.

The origin of the word *U-ka-e-roski* is "each other, on, top of, stand." It used to show its complete contours only when the leaves of the broadleaves surrounding it fell. However, due to the recent pruning in the surrounding area, we can now see 3 bears throughout out the year.

One can imagine Okikurumi running through these mountains in hunt looking at the landscape during the male season.



**Photo 3:** Ukaeroski in *mata* (winter). It is also called *pewrepokka* (pewrep okka: bear cub, on top) (shot from Northeast).

**Table 1:** Traditional Perception of Seasons in Ainu Culture

The Ainu elders today consider a year to be four seasons. In the past, however, they did not distinguish *paykar* (spring) or *chuk* (fall). Spring and fall are not mentioned in any old place names, songs, or folklores. In these examples, there are only *sak* (summer) and *mata* (winter) which always oppose each other.

(Chiri, 1956)

**Table 2:** Interpretation of *Sakpa* (summer, year), *Matapa* (winter, year)

In the old days, Ainu people lived by the sea and fished from spring to fall. The house they lived during that time was called *sak-chise* (summer, house), and the place where these houses were was called *sak-kotan* (summer, village). The period of time when people lived in the summer house in the summer village by the shore was called *sak* in Ainu. Although we interpret it as the summer for convenience's sake, the actual meaning is quite different from how we define summer.

At the end of fall, people left the summer houses for the winter houses in the mountains and spent their winter in the caves until the following spring. Those houses are called *toy-chise* (dirt, house) and where those houses were is called *mata-kotan* (winter, house). Alternatively, it was also called *riya-kotan* (for welcoming the new year, village). The time when people lived in the dirt house in the winter village in the mountains was called *mata*. Again, although we interpret it as winter, the actual meaning is quite different from how we define winter.

It is believed that the origin of the word, *mata* is *mak-ta* (deep, be in - stay deep on the mountain). It probably transitioned from *mak-ta* to *mat-ta*, then to *mata*. On the other hand, *sak* is believed to have originated from *sa-ta* (beach, at). It probably transitioned from *sa-ta* to *sat-ta* and then to *sak-ta*, which is the opposite of how *mata* evolved. (Chiri 1956)

"Cultural landscapes of the Saru Valley formed by Ainu tradition and modern development"  
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