

# A Look Into Harunire (Japanese Elm)

Location: Biratori-cho Memu, etc.

Related sheets: 6, 16, 22, 37, 65

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## Harunire (Japanese elm) Tells the Story of the Area's Modern History

The area around Biratori Honcho along Saru River was a vast and dry riverbed before the development of agricultural land beginning in the Meiji era. Rich soil accumulated around the river due to frequent overflowing leading to the growth of willow, *Alnus hirsuta*, and Japanese elm.

In the past, the current rice paddies used to be a shallow oxbow lake which nurtured *sarki* (reeds), *sikina* (cattail) and *pekanpe* (water caltrops). A similar kind of ecosystem is thought to have existed in Osachinai and Nukibetsu, where the ravines were wide enough for the rivers to bend. Plants useful to Ainu people, such as *turep* (*Cardiocrinum cordatum* var. *glehnii*) and *hay* (nettle) also are thought to have flourished in the Japanese elm forests.

On the other hand, the highland Nukabiragawa, where Memu village is located is thought to have been a forest with giant trees such as *tunni* (*Quercus dentata*), *pero* (water oak), *pinni* (swamp ash) and *chikisani*



**Photo:** A giant Japanese elm left as a tree providing shade in a town-owned pasture (Shukushubetsu district). The tree elegantly stretches out and highlights the contrast between the pasture and the sky. (Photo taken from the South East)

(harunire, Japanese elm). We are not certain how densely wooded this area used to be in the past.

The area with a thick pumice layer in Tarumae is home to a woodland with lush pampas grass and *sinkepu* (bicolor lespediza), and it is thought to have been a meadow that attracted *yuk* (Ezo-shika or *Cervus hortulorum*). The Japanese elms most likely grew in the dented landform in the highland created by the stream of water that flowed from the slopes of the mountain.

In the Meiji era, the harunire forests were ranked as "most suitable" for development and were rapidly transformed into agricultural land one after another.

Thus, it is a rare sight to see a *harunire* forest in such a good condition today.

## Inheriting the Harunire

*Harunire* has always been an essential material for traditional Ainu crafts. This is especially apparent seeing various Ainu place names (table 1). Many of these names have meanings related to fire starters or bark, and there are many folklore of the God of Humanities, *Ainurakkur*, which mention these names (table 2).

In these tales, *Ainurakkur*'s father is referred to by many names—as the Sun God, the Thunder God, or the God of Disease, depending on the area and its residents. However, the mother is consistently referred to as Princess *Harunire*.

Furthermore, there are many

**Table 1: Ainu names for Japanese elm**

1. *Chikisani*: chi (we), kisa (rub), ni (tree), stem <Hokkaido>
2. *Chikisanni*: stem <Bihoro, Kussharo>
3. *Karani*: kara (fire starter), ni (tree), stem <Shiroura, Maoka>
4. *Nikap*: ni (tree), kap (skin), birk <Iburi, Hidaka, Teshio>
5. *Nikapat*: nikap (birch), at (fiber from birch)  
Fiber from birk <Horobetsu>
6. *Ponat*: pon (small), at (fiber) fiber extracted from bark <Bihoro>  
Because this material was inferior to at (fiber of Ohyo, Manchurian elm), the diminutive pon is added.
7. *Ponatni* (the tree that takes Ponat) stem <Bihoro>

(Chiri 1953)

folklores related to the creation of fire (table 3) and in each of them, *harunire* is significant, telling us about the importance of the tree.

Useful Materials  
Seen in Ainu Artifacts

The fiber extracted from the bark of *harunire* is used to make *onikapunpe* (there, *harunire* fiber, contain, thing, patterned mat) (Iburi, Hidaka). It is also used to create *kerurunpe* (shoe, inside, insert, thing), which is an article of clothing similar to the modern-day sock (Bihoro, Kussharoko, Teshio).

Using a similar process to the making of *ohyonire* (lobed elm, Imus lacinata), various types of bags including backpacks and handbags were made. Additionally, people also used to make *nikap-attus* (*harunire* fiber, attus).

There is a traditional Ainu tool that has been passed down in the Saru area called *ikisap* (bow shaped fire starter). It starts the fire by rubbing *harunire* together. It is also said to be the etymology of *chikisani* (table 1).

Kayano writes that in the Saru area, “once the *karapas* (kindling) sparks, transfer the fire using dried *harunire*, then set the fire ablaze with the bark of Monarch birch, known as *ganbi* in Hokkaido.” (Kayano, 1978).

There are areas in which residents dry the root to use as kindling, or use the inner coat for washing hair (Tokachi). In Saru area, people have

Table 2: Legends of Princess Harunire and Ainurakkur

1. According to one myth, Princess Harunire was an extraordinarily beautiful goddess even amongst the heavens. The Thunder God was so enchanted by her beauty that he lost his footing and fell on top of her. Because of this, Princess Harunire became pregnant and gave birth to Ainurakkur. The top of the Harunire was too windy to raise a child, so she made him a robe using her own skin and gave him a sword that turns ablaze when drawn. After coming of age under the Creator of the Heavens, Ainurakkur descended onto the human world to establish the basis of human life.
2. The fact that Princess Harunire made a robe for her child using her skin reflects the folk origin of how Ainu people began to use the material for clothing. Additionally, the fact that Ainurakkur’s parents were the Thunder God and Harunire, and that his *attus* burned at the collar, and that the butt of his shieth was ablaze, and his sword aflame, all point to the origin of fire as thunder, and kindling as the tree of *harunire*.

(Chiri 1953)

Table 3: Transmission of Harunire and Creation of Fire

When “Kotankorkamuy” \*2 created the human world, the first to be created in the west were the Japanese poplar and Pteridium, and in the east, it was the Japanese elm and mugwort. The “Kotankorkamui” tried to gift humans fire by rubbing a Japanese poplar stick and base together, but it would not start. So he tried it again with Japanese elm and for the first time, there was fire (Saru).

From this myth we learn that not only 1) why Japanese poplar is called *yay-ni* (ordinary, tree) and 2), why Japanese elm is called *chi-ki-sani* (we, rub, tree), but also 3) and that mugwort was also kneaded and used as touchwood. In addition, it also teaches us that the name “*noya*” means mugwort and is associated with “*chikisani*” in regards to the original meaning of “knead.”

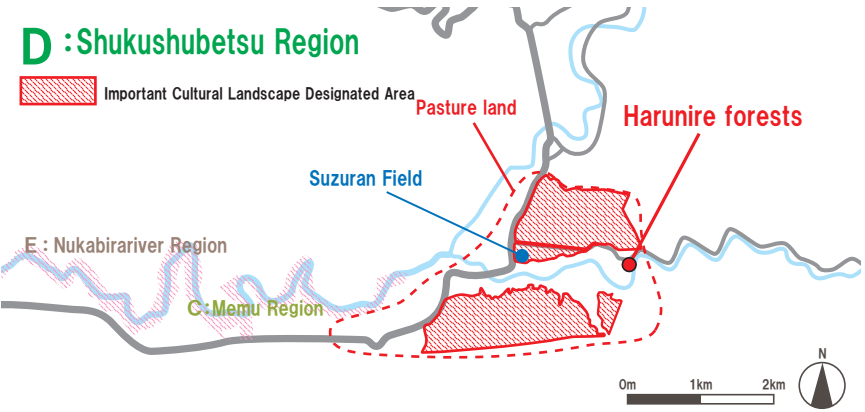
\*2: After analyzing the legend of Kotankorkamuy, Chiri concluded that the origin of him was “a shaman in ancient society”.  
(Chiri 1953)

passed on the technique of using *rasupakap* (bark of *Hydrangea paniculata*) for washing hair.

It is also used as the material for

areuwematapurip (rake) in this area as a tool to gather garbage and fallen leaves, using the branches that look like fingers.

\*1: “Chikisani root has a thick pith and once dry, it turns into a straw.”  
(Kayano)



“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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