Contents / Sommaire / Inhalt

Editors & Editorial board ................................................................................................................ 5

Articles / Aufsätze
Tina Adcock & Peder Roberts, Nations, Natures, and Networks. The New Environments of Northern Studies ................................................................................................................ 7
Rafico Ruiz, Media Environments. Icebergs/Screens/History ................................................................ 33
Janet Martin-Nielsen, Re-Conceptualizing the North. A Historiographic Discussion ....................................................................................................................................................... 51
Dagomar Degroot, Exploring the North in a Changing Climate. The Little Ice Age and the Journals of Henry Hudson, 1607–1611 ........................................................................................................... 69
Sverker Sörlin, The Emerging Arctic Humanities. A Forward-Looking Post-Script 93

Reviews / Comptes rendus / Besprechungen
Jonas Harvard & Peter Stadius (eds.), Communicating the North. Media Structures and Images in the Making of the Nordic Region, Farnham: Ashgate 2013 (Annegrret Heitmann) .................................................................................. 129
Takashi Irimoto, The Ainu Bear Festival, Sapporo: Hokkaido University Press 2014 (Olle Sundström) ................................................................................................................. 133
Iain G. MacDonald, Clerics and Clansmen. The Diocese of Argyll between the Twelfth and Sixteenth Centuries, Leiden & Boston: Brill 2013 (Bertil Nilsson) ........................................ 137
Osmo Pekonen & Anouchka Vasak, Maupertuis en Laponie. À la recherche de la figure de la Terre, Paris: Éditions Hermann, 2014 (Karin Becker) ................................................................. 143
Grete Swensen (ed.), Å lage kulturminner. Hvordan kulturav forstås, formes og forvaltes, Oslo: Novus Forlag 2013 (Peter Aronsson) ................................................................. 148

Kathrin Zickermann, Across the German Sea. Early Modern Scottish Connections with the Wider Elbe-Weser Region, Leiden & Boston: Brill 2013 (Thomas Riis) .............. 152

Instructions to Authors ........................................................................................................ 155

Takashi Irimoto’s *The Ainu Bear Festival* is the first real comprehensive study of this ritual among the Ainu, the indigenous people of Hokkaido, the Kurile Islands and southern Sakhalin, who traditionally subsist on hunting, fishing and gathering. The study is based on an anthropological approach which the author calls *shizenshi* ['naturography'] in Japanese. This denotes an attempt to describe and analyze human cultural behavior both systematically and holistically, taking social as well as biological and ecological aspects into account. It seems to be similar to what, in the Euro-American anthropological tradition, has been called *cultural ecology* or *human ecology*. Irimoto’s study also includes a survey of the historical and regional variations in what can be termed “the Ainu bear festival.”

The Ainu bear festival is a complex ritual in which the spirit of a slain bear is “sent off,” or rather sent back to where it is supposed to have originated. In the traditional Ainu conception a bear was an incarnation of a *kimun kamui*, ‘mountain deity,’ just as every animal and plant was a physical expression of the *kamui* of its species. Game animals were conceived of as deities visiting the realm of humans (*ainu moshir*). In the belief system of the Ainu the fire deity, *ape kamui* or *ape huchi* ['old lady of the fire’], invited *kimun kamui* to come to the human village in the shape of a bear, through her envoy, a hunting dog (*mintar us kur*, ‘the deity residing in the yard’). *Kimun kamui* visited people only to receive appreciation and gifts before it returned to the realm of the deities (*kamui moshir*) in the sky. When the *kimun kamui* returned home s/he invited the other deities to feast on the gifts received, which came in the form of food (millet cakes), drink (sake) and *inau* (a particular form of offering sticks with wooden shavings). The deity thereby gained a higher status among its own kind and encouraged other *kimun kamui* to pay visits to the *ainu moshir*. The gain for the humans in this reciprocal exchange was the meat, the hide and the gallbladder from the bear, but also that the correct treatment of the bear would keep “bad” kamui away. Thus, as Irimoto makes clear, the bear festival is not a sacrifice to deities or other beings, but the treatment of a deity itself and as such, in Irimoto’s analysis, it is an exchange between the realm of the humans and that of the deities, with the bear/deity functioning as the messenger between them.

There were actually two types of bear festivals among the Ainu, one for the sending off of a hunted wild bear and one for the sending off
of a 2–3 year old bear cub, reared from early infancy in an Ainu village. The first mentioned ritual was called *omante* [‘sending off’], a term also used for minor rituals connected with “sending off” other game animals and birds. The term *iomante* [literally: ‘sending off a thing’] was reserved exclusively for the ritual attending the slaying and sending off of a bear raised in an Ainu village. Historically ceremonies and rituals involving slain bears are common among many hunting and gathering peoples in the circumpolar area, from Scandinavia to Labrador, and in many ways have been the most prominent hunting ritual among these peoples. This alone makes the book an important contribution to the comparative study of hunting and bear rituals in northern areas, even if the practice of rearing cubs—conditioned partly by the sedentary living of the Ainu—particularly for such an event is peculiar to the Ainu and a couple of their neighbouring peoples (e.g. the Nivkh on Sakhalin and on the mainland around the mouth of the Amur River).

Irimoto meticulously and systematically presents the various aspects of the ritual: the technical and material, as well as the symbolic, aspects of the hunt; the preparation for and execution of the feast in the village (Ch. 1–2); regional differences in the ritual among various groups of Ainu (Ch. 3); and historical variations in the festival, from the earliest recorded traces of it from the end of the sixteenth to the twentieth century (Ch. 5). One cannot but admire the author’s detailed and careful comparisons of the festival’s regional and historical variations.

In the analysis of the significance of the bear festival (Ch. 4), Irimoto points out the many aspects of such an elaborated ritual. Basically it was what the author calls an “active behavioral strategy for hunting success,” but he also discusses the festival’s significance in displaying and establishing social ranking among the Ainu. The festival was organized, on a rotating basis, by different local units, which were based on patrilineal descent. These units formed social and political groupings, and seatings during certain phases of the ritual were assigned according to rankings based on age, gender and political power within the groups. Invited guests also had their fixed seats and positions in this system, but during the festival seats and roles were exchanged, which Irimoto interprets as expressing the fundamental egalitarianism of Ainu society. This paradox is explained by a fusion of two conflicting principals—the principle of egalitarianism stemming from the hunting and gathering roots of Ainu culture, and that of social differentiation and ranking deriving from the Ainus’ involvement in trade with outside communities (in the feudal Japanese shogunate).

Irimoto also shows how the Ainu bear festival was a part of the
trading system with the Japanese—bear furs and gallbladders were important exports and the production of millet cakes and sake depended on imported goods. Thus, from the Ainu perspective, the festival meant exchanges of goods between not only the deities and the Ainu, but also between the Ainu and the human environment surrounding them. The wealth and prestige—expressed in concrete terms in imported goods such as swords, costly garments and vessels for brewing sake—accumulated by the chieftains were displayed during the festival, and the ritual therefore functioned as a way of both manifesting and generating the prestige of the Ainu elite. However, the event also meant that wealth was distributed among the people, which, according to Irimoto, reveals the underlying egalitarianism of Ainu society. The manifestation of egalitarianism seems less striking and convincing to me than the display of the hierarchical system in the rites described in the book.

In Irimoto’s analysis the bear festival as a whole, as well as its various constituent elements, is a manifestation of what he calls the “original oneness” that the Ainu supposed existed among humans, animals and deities. Just as bears were only temporary incarnations of deities, humans were also temporary forms. Originally humans were of the same essence as kamui. The dual opposition between these different forms was not everlasting, and during the festival the boundaries between nature and supernature were removed so that humans and the deity enjoyed the feast together. As Irimoto contends in his concluding chapter (Ch. 8), in hunting, where humans kill animals, a dualism is inevitable, but the “concept of original oneness integrates the two conflicting views of the oneness and dualism seen to exist between man and nature” (p. 257). Actually, Ainu views on humans and kamui, as well as on the relation between them, are somewhat underdeveloped in Irimoto’s book. As a reader unfamiliar with Ainu culture I therefore found it very useful to consult Takako Yamada’s study The World View of the Ainu (2001), which is equally concise and systematic, and an excellent companion to The Ainu Bear Festival.

From the late nineteenth century Ainu society underwent considerable changes when modernization and a shift in livelihood away from hunting and gathering began. It was also at that time that the Ainu ethno-political movement took its first steps. This movement intensified in the 1960s, resulting among other things in the New Ainu Law—passed in Japan in 1997—which stipulates an annual budget for the restoration, dissemination and teaching of Ainu culture. In 1955 the bear festival was banned by the governor of Hokkaido in response to pressure from animal rights organizations. Nevertheless occasional performances of the
festival have continued, mostly as tourist attractions and to record traditional culture. In Chapter 5 Irimoto recounts an attempt in 2005 to revive the festival. Just as when he describes the historical and traditional festival, he meticulously notes all the details of the present day festival and the complex social and cultural system in which it was enacted. He concludes that the incentives for enacting the festival today are primarily political, with reference to both ethno-/identity politics and the internal power struggles among various Ainu descent groups. But Irimoto also traces what seem to be sincere beliefs in the *kimun kamui* and in the necessity of “sending off” the spirit of the bear. The in-depth description of the many aspects of the present day ritual also shows how all these incentives are contested among the Ainu and give rise to internal debates and conflicts.

The main strength of *The Ainu Bear Festival* is Irimoto’s detailed and multifaceted approach to the subject—behind the book lies an enormous amount of thorough research work. His conclusion (Ch. 8) about the ideas of “original oneness” and “reciprocity” are most interesting and deserve to be elaborated on further with additional materials. He considers that these ideas are not only to be found in traditional Ainu culture, but constitute part of the original nature of human mentality, and that humans have moved away from these ideas through evolution, to the detriment of human societies’ relations with the natural environment (hence the global environmental crisis). Admittedly, Irimoto presents some comparative examples to support this claim, but in my opinion the conclusion does not appear to be compellingly derived from the empirical material presented in *The Ainu Bear Festival*.

REFERENCES


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