In 1922, at the age of nineteen, a remarkable young woman died. Chiri Yukie was a member of the Ainu people of northern Japan and had been working with a Japanese linguist named Kinda’ichi Kyosuke to transcribe and publish Ainu folklore. Subsequent scholars have determined that Ainu oral literature consisted of more than two dozen genres, “from lighthearted and playful uparpakte (speech competitions) and urekreku (riddles) to yukar, long narratives of heroic exploits whose metered delivery can take an entire night” (Strong 2011: 6).

Not all Ainu stories were sacred; for instance, uepeker or “stories that recount interesting events concerning either humans or nonhumans” were mundane and “delivered in a normal voice without cadence” (6). Yukar tales were spoken in a different, metered style, even when their characters were human. Kamui yukar in particular were tales of nonhuman beings, the term often translated as “chants of the gods.” However, Sarah Strong insists that kamui should not be understood as “gods” in the familiar Western sense. Rather, kamui “are, with very few exceptions, natural phenomena. They are most often animals but can also be plants, striking atmospheric phenomena such as thunder, or important resources such as fire and water” (6-7). Since the stories are told in the first person, from the kamui’s point of view, Strong concludes that the fundamental reality for the Ainu was “that nonhumans such as animals and plants have a subjectivity that is in every way similar to that of humans and that, as conscious subjects, these nonhumans can have things to say” (7). Further blurring the boundary between human and nonhuman persons were stories known as oina, which featured culture heroes who were “half human and half kamui” (9).
Yukie’s tales were collected into a volume titled *Ainu Shin’yoshu*, which portrays a living world with personified animals, plants, and physical features. Indeed, the very landscape “is aware and responsive in the same way that humans are aware and responsive” (67). We can think of the Ainu world as a “carpet of spirits” (68), these spirits being the kamui. Yet, as Strong urges, kamui are not exactly or exclusively “spiritual,” since they “show up in the human world as physical presences. In other words, the spiritual beings dress in a physical aspect as an animal, plant, or other natural phenomenon in order to appear in the human range of experience” (68). The Ainu called this material manifestation of spirits their hayokpe or “armor.” Kamui of course also exist without their armor or physical bodies, but Strong insists that the fact “that the spirit is detachable from the body in the hayokpe concept should not mislead us into thinking that the physical guise of an animal kamui is superficial or something other than its ‘true’ nature. This physical aspect is, rather, central and intrinsic” (71).

Although all of the world is alive and carpeted with spirits, not all spirits are created equal. The most powerful ones were regarded as “weighty” (*pase*), and some examples are

- Nupuri-kor-kamui (Spiritual Being Who Governs the Peaks), the most revered of bears;
- Atui-kor-kamui (Spiritual Being Who Governs the Ocean), the most revered of orcas;
- Kotan-kor-kamui (Spiritual Being Who Governs the Village), the Blakiston’s fish owl;
- Chise-kor-kamui (Spiritual Being Who Governs the House), a kamui embodied in a ritually carved stick of Japanese tree lilac; and
- Nusa-kor-kamui (Spiritual Being Who Governs the Ceremonial Offering Stand), a snake

Notice that the names of these great spirit beings include the word *kor*, which means “to look out for, possess, manage, rule, or govern” (72).

Some kamui, though, are “light-weight” (*koshne*), possessing less power and worthy of less respect. In fact, not all *koshne kamui* are benevolent: many “mock the humans by performing nasty tricks or slights” (107). All the same, “heavy” and “light” do not equate directly into “good” and “bad.” *Pirka* and *wen* can be translated as “good” and “bad,” respectively, but Strong argues that *parka* more accurately
means “gentle” as well as “orderly,” while wen is “frightening or distasteful” and “is often transgressive: it breaks the codes that maintain balance and survival and threatens the state of order” (108).

Yukie’s Aini Shin’yoshu ultimately contains thirteen stories or yukar, including the tale of the orca, “The Ocean Spiritual Being Sings About Itself.” In part, this story/song goes:

My long older brothers, six older brothers, my long older sisters, six older sisters, my short older brothers, six older brothers, my short older sisters, six older sisters had raised me, and I arranged a platform beside the treasure stand, and on that platform I would sit chiseling scabbards, and with that as my sole task in life I spent my days. Every day, when morning came, my older brothers would sling their quivers on their backs and leave with my older sisters. When it was evening, they would return empty-handed with weary faces, and, although they were tired, my older sisters would cook a meal and offer it to me.

[In the story, Orca hosted a drinking party]

The spiritual beings in unison voiced their praise and approval again and again. After that, I continued to host the drinking party like none other. The spiritual beings, from one side of the feasting area to the other, made the beautiful ringing tones of the men’s step dance and circle dance, and some of my older sisters, with wine flasks in hand, moved through the feasters pouring wine, and some, together with the women spiritual beings, sang beautiful songs. When two or three days had passed we ended the feast. I gave each one of the spiritual beings two or three inau [ceremonial sticks], beautiful inau, and the spiritual beings bowed deeply from the waist expressing thanks again and again, and they all returned to their homes. Since then I have always lived with my long older brothers, my six older brothers, my long older sisters, six older sisters, my short older sisters, my six older sisters, my short older brothers, my six older brothers, and when the human beings make wine, each time they offer some to me with prayers and send inau to my place. And now, since the humans are living in peace without any hunger and without any troubles, my heart is at ease (231-6).
Reference


Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.