

By: [Safaan A. 2008](#) Science Editor

## [9 Amazing Things About the Ainu People](#)

### *The oldest inhabitants of Japan*

1. In northern Japan, on the island of Hokkaido and a part of the Russian Sakhalin Island, lives a mysterious ethnic group, called Ainu, whose origins represents a mystery. They are very distinct from the Japanese people and, before the Tungus invasion coming from mainland Asia (Korea and northern China), the whole archipelago was inhabited by Ainu. Ainu are shorter than the Japanese people, with lighter skin, robust body and short limbs. Unlike typical Mongoloids, their hair is wavy and the body hair is abundant; men wear large beards and mustaches, considered a sign of beauty, to the point that married women tattoo their lower face to mimic a beard. Ainu have not such pronounced almond-shaped eyes and lack the Mongoloid fold of the eye; the nose is large and straight. All these point to their origin in Polynesia or southeastern Asia.

2. One of the strangest Ainu habit is the cult of the bear. Bears are considered powerful spirits which can act on the benefit of the people. When Ainu manage to capture a bear cub, a woman is charged to take care of it as if a child: the little bear lives and grows amongst the people of the village, getting accustomed to them. When it is 2-3 years old, the bear is sacrificed. The men drink its blood to get its power, and then they cut the head off and then fly the skin of the bear. Later, during family ceremonies, the bear skin occupies a prominent place, and food and drink is offered to it like to an honored guest. The bear was considered by the Ainu the mythological hero that taught them to fish, hunt, weave and so on.

3. Ainu lived in rectangular huts with walls and roof made of bundles of reed and rush. Ainu live in a clime where snowed winter can last 6-7 months annually, and the summer is extremely rainy; the heat source is the fire burning in a cavity dug into the ground. As these huts lack chimneys, the smoke filled the room and was released just through a small hole made on the roof. Over the fire, there was a kind of grill on which meat and fish were put for drying on time. Next to the door, the water bucket and the home tools were located. The family slept over platforms made of wood covered with rush mats, and as they did not have bed linen, they slept dressed. As the house had just two windows, and one of them was sacred and never opened, the scents of the dry meat and fish and that of the human bodies mixed with the smoke and made those huts not very attractive.

4. The Ainu religion was animist: all the beings and many natural objects (rivers, volcanoes, fire, lightning, trees, etc) were endowed with a spirit. When a living being dies, only the material part is gone; the spirit is freed and this spirit can be good or evil, harming living beings, including people. To avoid the actions of the evil spirits, Ainu used to work on wood coarse representations of the spirits, with a human form, called inaos. Today, inaos are simple sticks made by cuts of a knife. The inaos are thrust into the ground, inside the huts, close to the sea, on the cross of the roads, next to sacred trees and they are like prayers of the Ainu aimed to the superior spirits, asking for their protection.

5. Women were largely independent until marrying. After that, they were under men's will. But women went to war and could manifest their opinions during the councils of the village. Ainu women adorned their hands, forehead, arms and mouth outline with blue tattoos (as said, for mimicking mustaches). Women worked the fields, gathered wood, cooked, span, wove, made clothes, cared and educated the kids. Children were treated severely and even if crying, nobody gave them the least attention. Inside the houses, they were put into a wooden cradle hung on a beam. Outside, they were transported in a type of bag which the mother or a major sister hung at the back, using a fabric strip passing over the head.

[img=2]The Ainu women weave mats, bags, nets and a type of fabric using elm bark. The bark is soaked and left until softening and large, thin threads can be removed. The women wind them in balls, later woven in coarse looms. This yellowish fabric is dyed with bright colors and from it women make large tunics with wide sleeves, adorned with beautiful embroidery motifs. The tunics are secured at the waist with leather girdles and brass appliqués. During the winter, over this tunic, a type of sleeveless jacket made of animal skins is worn. In the past, both women and men wore leather trousers, but now they use cotton pants. Bark leggings and leather moccasins completed the Ainu getup. For walking over the snow, they used skis and snowshoes.

6. The most important person in the Ainu village was the shaman, the person treating with the spirits. The shaman had, in his service, other animal spirits, which, at his will, helped him in his spells, and with whose help the shaman discovered the causes of the malfunctions of the villagers and took remedy against them.

His main function was to cure the diseases. When asked for help, the shaman wait for the sunset; in that moment, he approached the ill person, played a bass drum to call the evil spirits that produced the ailment, agitated his wand, with sound yells invoked the spirits of the animals that help him, danced in an uncontrolled way and, in the end, he fell in trance; at his 'return', before the amazed eyes of the assistance, he extracted, out of the body of the patient (using a skilled trick), the cause of the disease: a stick, a stone, a small toad or an insect. Once this operation was executed, the healing was immediate. However, if the patient died (fact that often occurred), this was due to the subsequent intervention of an evil spirit. 7. When an Ainu dies, his family ignite a large bonfire inside his hut and sends messengers for informing his friends and remote relatives. When they have arrived, the burial is done. The corpse is exposed with its best clothes, but torn and cut in various places; at its side, his goods are disposed, all crumbled or broken. Sacrifices and libations are offered to the spirits, so that they will welcome the spirit of the dead; the family celebrate a great funerary banquet and, next day, the body wrapped in a mat is buried. The tomb is marked by a small mound and a wood and bamboo post crowned with a kind of an arrow, if the dead was a man, and with a rounded point, if the dead was a woman. Of which post, a frayed strip hangs. The strip was previously used by the defunct to hold his/her hair. 8. The base of the Ainu economy was represented by fishing, both in the sea and freshwater. On the beaches, they collected crabs, lobsters, scallops, mussels, oysters and even turtles. During the winter, fishing was made through holes in the frozen rivers. During the summer, fishing was made using nets, rods, hooks and harpoons, especially in the case of the salmons which ascended the rivers in large number for spawning. One fisherman thrust the fish with the harpoon, and another finished it up at the bank of the river, with a mace. The harpoon's detachable tip was anointed with poison. Ainu used monoxylon (made of one trunk) canoes, 8 m (26 ft) long and 0.5 m (1.5 ft) wide. The most peculiar Ainu fishing was with dogs. A great number of dogs were trained for this; they brought the captured fish to the shore. Usually, the Ainu employed two dog teams made of 20-30 individuals. At a signal, the dogs, found at a 200 m (660 ft) distance one from the other, swam in columns into the sea and, at another signal, the two groups approached each other, heading the shore. The fish caught in the middle were headed to the shore, frightened with the noise made by the dogs. In shallow waters, the dogs captured them easily with their mouth. The dogs were recompensed with fish heads. Ainu used to hunt seals, walruses and whales. They always cooked their food on embers. Traditional food consisted of chestnuts mixed with fish eggs. Dishes were made of tree bark and food was kept in wooden recipients. For hunting, men use bow and envenomed arrows and a type of crossbow similar to the Medieval one used in Europe. The arrows are envenomed using a special substance kept in a bamboo quiver worn over the shoulder. These weapons and dogs are used for hunting deer and bears. Traps are used for catching birds and hares. Traps using venomous arrows are also used for killing bears and dears. Bear was the most appreciated game. Specially trained dogs approached the den where the animal spent the winter. The dogs forced the bear out, the moment when the hunters shot their arrows. The greatest trophy was a living cub, brought as described to the Ainu village, to be raised and sacrificed. 9. These people are kind and friendly; foreign visitors are welcomed as long as they follow their complex etiquette. When entering into an Ainu house, the visitor must emit a strong throat clearing and if invited to enter, he/she must leave the footwear before the door and, bare footed, he/she will go to seat next to the fire. The owner of the house will offer him/her a pipe tobacco and a cup of sake (a type of rice wine, similar to that processed by the Japanese). Sake drinking is a veritable ceremony, employing large painted wooden cups or bowls and, on a tray, they offer the guest finely cut sticks. The sticks are used by the Ainu for lifting their mustaches while drinking, because they are so large and dense that they enter into the dishes, fact considered to be bad manners.