



The Man Who Morphed into a Fox

Ainu People – Japan and Russia

A moneylender and trader in furs and feathers was travelling along a lonely road towards a cluster of villages, where he intended to stock up on goods for sale in the trading fortresses of the southern part of the island. He was an unscrupulous man, who lied incessantly for maximum profit and advantage, and extorted money from vulnerable folk. His intention was to spend a week in the villages and then go to another part of the region to lie and extort money from others in order to feed his greed.

But it so happened that, as he was walking along the road, thinking aloud about the lies he was going to tell and how best to extort money from people who borrowed from him, he heard a chilling, pitiful scream.

But... wait a minute! The pawnbroker thought – it was he who was uttering the inhuman wail!

‘What's going on here?’ he asked himself, terrified as he lowered his eyes to stare at his own body, which now felt strange.

‘Horror, I’ve been turned into a fox!’ he tried to scream, but he could not even articulate words, while another pitiful fox cry came from him.

Terrified by what he was experiencing, he hid in the bushes for fear that a dog might come along the road and attack him. He thought of returning home, but how could he walk through the city looking like that without being attacked by hunters or dogs? They would kill him!

He could not go anywhere where humans lived so, finally and in tears, he chose to take refuge in the mountains.

Following the rabbit trails through the undergrowth, he suddenly came upon a huge oak tree and, having no other more secluded place to calm his troubled mind, he lay down next to the trunk of the tree and eventually fell asleep.

He dreamt that he was standing at the door of a huge house and that a kind of goddess came out of it and said to him:

‘You’re an evil being, a scoundrel! That’s why you’ve become a demon, in divine punishment for your misdeeds! How dare you come to my house?’

But it turned out that the goddess of the dream was none other than the spirit of the oak tree at whose feet he had fallen asleep.

‘You’re lucky that heaven entrusted me with the role of chief of the trees,’ continued the spirit of the oak, ‘and that it is not convenient that you pollute my soil if you die next to my house. So I’ll make a man of you again. But straighten your way and stop doing misdeeds to others from now on!’

Then a dry branch from the highest part of the tree broke and fell on the merchant’s head. He woke up and was relieved to see that the dream had been real and that he was human again.

After kneeling before the oak tree and shedding tears of gratitude the man returned home and never cheated anyone again, nor did he extort money from anyone for the rest of his life. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2022).

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Comments

The Ainu People belong to a distinct ethnic group that has inhabited the northernmost regions of Japan, as well as the Kuril Islands and southern Sakhalin Island in Russia, for at least 5,000 years.

Unlike the Yamato, the majority ethnic group in Japan, the Ainu have genetic traits and characteristics that would link them to the present-day Siberian peoples. One of their most notable distinguishing characteristics is the abundance of facial and body hair on their men. This fact led the Yamato people, who have scant facial and body hair, to regard the Ainu as a primitive and barbaric race.

In fact, racial discrimination against the Ainu in Japan has a long history and is largely focused on their hairiness. Following the dependence on Japanese trade, established by the Matsumae Clan during the 17th century in the regions populated by the Ainu (as was the case with the Choctaws, Pawnees and Navajos in North America as a result of trade with Europeans) the Ainu eventually over-exploited the deer and salmon stocks, on which their basic survival depended. They did this in order to gain political power and personal prestige within their community by means of engaging with export to Japan (Walker, 2006). This dependence on Japanese trade, and the progressive destruction of their environment and livelihood, brought the Ainu into a state of social subordination to the Yamato.

Over time and as Muñoz González (2008) points out,

Faced with the bombardment of negative images of their own ethnicity, many Ainu men and women chose to adopt Japanese customs and renounce the cultural heritage of their ancestors. Parents learned to speak Japanese and no longer spoke Ainu in front of their children, and gradually adopted Wadyin dress and customs. The idea of civilisation promoted by the Wadyin encouraged Ainu men to cut their hair and beards and, sadly, to be ashamed of their body hair. (p. 111)

Eventually, the hairiness of the Ainu became a stigma that made them socially ‘barbarians’, an ‘inferior race’, leading to the progressive acculturation characteristic of many colonised peoples, whether by military or economic-commercial colonisation.

Another noteworthy fact about the Ainu lies in their animistic beliefs. According to their worldview, everything in nature has a divine spirit, a *kamui* – as seen in the spirit of the oak tree featured in this story. However, unlike other animist cultures, they do not consider the shaman as an intermediary with spiritual forces.

More information on the concept of kamui and the animistic ideas of the Ainu people can be found in another Ainu story in this Collection, entitled 'The Kind Man and the Stingy Man'.

Sources

- Chamberlain, B. H. (1888). The man who was changed into a fox. In *Aino Folk-Tales*, pp. 25-26. London: The Folk-lore Society.
- Muñoz González, Y. (2008). *La literatura de resistencia de las mujeres ainu (Ainu women's resistance literatura)*. Mexico D. F.: El Colegio de México.
- Walker, B. L. (2006). The ecology of Ainu autonomy and dependence. In R. Maaka & C. Andersen (eds.), *The Indigenous Experience: Global Perspectives*, pp. 45-71. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 10d: Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good, and hold them accountable for the consequences of their activities.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: The Challenges Ahead.- Fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions, and ways of living. We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities.

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 16f: Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.

The Way Forward: Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals.

