

# 'Expendable Animals' in Ainu Folktales: An Ecocritical Analysis of Chiri Yukie's *The Song the Owl God Sang*

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## Presentation Description:

Settler scholarship has defined Ainu relationships with the environment using such terms as 'hunter-gatherer' and 'sustainable,' which fail to capture cultural complexity and can perpetuate such harmful tropes as 'the noble savage'. My ecocritical analysis of Ainu folktales, focusing specifically on tales regarding 'expendable' animals, seeks to better explicate these relationships.

## Abstract:

Settler scholarship has defined Ainu relationships with the environment using such terms as 'hunter-gatherer' and 'sustainable,' which fail to capture cultural complexity and can perpetuate such harmful tropes as 'the noble savage'. My ecocritical analysis of Ainu folktales, focusing specifically on tales regarding 'expendable' animals, seeks to better explicate these relationships.

The Ainu have resided in the modern-day islands of Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and surrounding regions for centuries. Much like Indigenous Nations across North America, settler scholarship has historically projected colonial expectations on Ainu life and culture, particularly in the context of their relationships with the natural environment. These expectations are both negative as well as positive. Describing the Ainu as "hunter-gatherer[s]," says scholar Mark J. Hudson, "has been used to bolster views of Ainu primitiveness in both academic and public perspectives" (177). At the same time, "[e]nvironmental discourse tends to include indigenous people in an idealized way," though this can in turn "[serve] as a canvas for the projection of industrialized societies' longing" (Schmidt 423). In my research, I examine the portrayal of wild animals in Ainu folktales – an important but neglected resource for understanding how Ainu peoples have expressed their own relationships to the natural world. I will be focusing on stories from Chiri Yukie's collection, *The Song the Owl God Sang*, which depart from the colonial expectations mentioned above by being told from the perspective of 'expendable' creatures in Ainu Moshir. As a Japanese-Canadian settler, I am aware of the often harmful nature of settler research, and am continuing to educate myself on best practices to ensure that I keep folktales at the center of my work and am not speaking on behalf of Ainu peoples. I am conducting this research to understand what oral traditions can reveal about Ainu relationships with the environment, while working to highlight the power and importance of Indigenous literature and literary studies.