

On *The Debate Between Pounpe and the Salmon*

Yorifumi Yaguchi

Uenishi Haruji was born in a village in Tokachi in 1925. He writes about racial problems between the Ainu and the Japanese. He has written a number of fictions and has won the "Hokkaido Newspaper Prize" and the "Itoh Sei Prize" .

This book was published in 1986 for children, and the pictures were drawn by Hiroshi Kaibara. According to the postscript of the editor, there is a legend in Ainu about salmon. Salmon were believed to be a present which the gods gave to human being. People were to eat every part of a salmon which was eaten. Then the soul of the fish could return to the world of the gods, where it would be given flesh and would therefore be ready once again to visit the world of human beings. When the editor heard this legend, he was very much impressed by it and asked Uenish to write a story about it.

The context for this story is, as the title suggests, a debate between Pounpe, an Ainu boy, and a salmon who is a representative for all salmon. Pounpe, who is angered by the decrease of salmon coming upstream, makes a protest against the gods of all fish. The protest is called "kamuiko charanke" in the Ainu language. "Charanke" means a "debate" or a "discussion". Uenishi translates it as a "mouth-fight" or a "fight with words".

In the Ainu society, when there was a conflict between people, they met together at the chief's house and discussed the problem. The one who beat his/her opponent by using words was the winner (Nefski, pp.33-34). This method of "charanke" was also used to resolve conflicts which occurred between the different clans. There

was once a dispute over a hunting place between Tokachi Ainu and Hidaka Ainu. This territorial dispute is described in his fiction *Gods' Children of Tokapuchi*.

Now in this book, Pounpe protests to the representative of salmon, but the object of his protest is the gods, or “kamuis” of all fish, as mentioned earlier. Kamui is translated as kami in Japanese and “god” in English. A kamui is one with whom people cannot wrestle with their hands (Fujimura, p.15). According to the Ainu belief, the only spiritual being who cannot be regarded as kamui is the soul of a person just deceased (Matsui and Oda, p.111). These kamuis live in the world above the human world (Yamada, p.29).

One of the duties of the kamuis is to protect people. At the same time, people have a right to be protected. The kamuis have a right to receive rewards from the people for the service of protecting them. In other words, the people are obligated to show their thanks to the kamuis (Fujimura, p.24). Through this arrangement the kamuis make visits to the human world to help people and protect them.

“Shin-yo” (yukara or a divine song) describes one story in which the kamuis visit a human village. When a mountain kamui makes a visit, he/she takes on the form of a bear. He/she brings the bear flesh to the people. The people welcome him/her with great thanks, treat him/her hospitably, and let him/her return to the world of the kamuis with lots of gifts. When he/she returns home, he/she invites the other kamuis to a big party, where he/she shares his/her pleasant experiences with them. When they hear such stories, they too want to go down to visit a human village (Chiri, pp.11-12).

In this story of Uenishi Haruji, the one who receives a challenge from Pounpe is not a bear but a salmon. There are some Ainu who believe that salmon are divine (Matsui and Oda, pp.220-222), but more commonly the salmon are believed to be sent by the kamuis of fish to the human world (Chiri, p.73 and Yamada, p.113). Therefore, when

the salmon arrive in the human world, the people must receive them respectfully through a solemn ritual and must be thankful to the kamuis who sent them. The people must not catch salmon in excess so that animals who live in the upper stream can also eat them. And the people must not waste any part of the fish when eating it.

If the people continue to demonstrate their thankfulness to the kamuis by showing this kind of respect for the salmon, the kamuis must keep on protecting and helping them. But if they do not demonstrate their due respect, the kamuis can make an act of retaliation on the people. At the same time, however, if the people continue to act respectfully towards the kamuis but if the kamuis do not protect them, then the people can make a retaliatory act on the kamuis. The people can make critical remarks about the kamuis and appeal to a court, which is made up of other kamuis. These kamuis then make a judgment regarding the conflict (Fujimura, pp. 24-25). The goddess of hunting sometimes plays the part of mediator between the kamuis and the people (Yamada, p.110). If a particular kamui who is indicted by the people is found guilty, he/she loses respect and confidence among other kamuis and may even be accused and sent to hell (Asahi, p.241)

Pounpe, urged by an owl kamui who protects an Ainu village, went to have "charanke" with the representative of the salmon. The owl kamui played the part of mediator as well as the part of judge. There was a human mediator, too: an old female shaman. She spoke to Pounpe and taught him how to get to the rock of "charanke". She recited the yukara and attracted the attention of the kamuis.

When he reached the rock, Pounpe spoke aloud to the representative of the salmon: "The gods of the fish country are too stubborn. They do not think of our hungry people at all. Can't they open the bag of fish just a little? Instead, they only tighten its strings..." (p.20).

Here Pounpe was referring not only to the difficulties of trying

to catch fish with his friends in the river, but also to the widespread suffering of all the village people because of the decrease of salmon coming upstream.

The salmon representative answered him, "It is a matter of course that the fish kamuis got angry. During the long period of a large catch, the people always forgot the value of food. Wherever you go, you will find their leftovers on the mound of a dump" (pp.2-21). Behind that answer is the belief that people should not waste any part of the salmon when eating it.

After hearing the calm answer of the salmon, Pounpe got excited and shouted wildly, "When we have an abundance of salmon, we can eat whatever parts we want to! Heads and intestines are nice to eat! We can throw away any of the other parts! You cannot criticize us for doing that!" Thus Pounpe tried to justify the human desire to indulge eating without caring about waste.

The salmon replied, "The kamuis of the fish country have to see food being eaten in a wasterful manner. If we, the fish, return to the country of the kamuis with the remains of flesh on us, we will be thrusted down from heaven and will not be able to return to the fish country ever again. The kamuis tighten the string of the fish bag, saying, 'The people's sin of wasting food is serious. May they starve forever!'"

The debate continued, and after that the shaman woman recited the yukara song which had first been recited by the Ainu in the ritual for receiving the salmon and returning them to heaven: "The salmon are precious fish sent to us by the kamuis from the kamui country. / They give us strength and courage. /At the time of the first catch/ all the village people gather at the shore of the river/and dedicate divine paper strips and festival dish/and return them to the fish country." After this song, she continued, "Then the kamuis of the fish country opened the bag of fish in response and sent a large number of salmon to the offing of a cape. The salmon came to the

entrance of a pleasant-sounding river in a cloud of sprays. Then they were caught by the people, eaten cleanly, and returned to the fish country in the form of beautiful silver souls. There they were given flesh again and became glad to return to the human world" (pp.25-26). The shaman woman's voice resounded loudly through the air as she recited the song.

Her recital suggests that Hokkaido was a rich land where human beings and nature once existed in peace and harmony. Along these lines Yukie Chiri wrote in the preface to *Ainu Yaeyukara (Ainu Divine Songs)*: "This huge Hokkaido was a free land for our ancestors. They lived pleasantly and leisurely like innocent babes embraced by beautiful nature. They were indeed nature's beloved children. How happy they must have been!" Then she describes the beauty and enjoyment of nature in Hokkaido: snow on the forests in winter, bear hunts, fishing in the summers, birds and flowers in the spring, autumn leaves...

After this, she described how nature in Hokkaido was being transformed because of modernization. The Japanese had begun to develop the land and nature was being destroyed. One feels a sense of fear and sadness in her writing.

The salmon representative in this story similarly lamented and said, "That happy period is over" (p.28). The salmon will not come back to the human village in large numbers any more.

"It is because the people wasted the salmon flesh!" shouted the small animals unanimously (p.28). Then the owl, guardian for the village, pointed out the scene below the rock to Pounpe, who was too stubborn to admit the people's fault. On the cobalt river a scene from the fish country in heaven was vividly mirrored: the bones of some salmon whose flesh had been left on them came upsteam. "Look! So many are coming up like crawling worms!" said a squirrel, which stopped breathing at the sight. The guards of heaven checked each of these salmon at the entrance and kicked them down

into hell. One, two, three...They fall down headlong” (p.33).

At this sight, Pounpe finally admitted his defeat and said, “Never will we waste anymore salmon! I’ll promise!” And the owl officially declared the victory of the salmon.

But the story does not end with Pounpe’s despair. As the shaman woman flew away with the owl, she said, “May the silver drops fall around/May the golden drops fall around” and thus gave her wish for the resuscitation of nature. Pounpe told his friends, “If we eat salmon respectfully, regarding a precious gift from the kamuis, I’m sure the salmon will come back in abundance” (p.37). In other words, if the people change their minds and attitudes, eat the fish gratefully, and stop wasting it, then human beings and nature can once again coexist.

This story suggests that now people are suffering with a poor catch of salmon because they wasted the fish in the past. But it was the Japanese who did it, particularly when many of them came to Hokkaido in the 19th century. At that time they persecuted the Ainu and exploited nature. They took away the land from the Ainu.

They seized the fishery rights and forbade the Ainu to catch salmon. Moreover, the Japanese caught fish recklessly. They did not eat the fish as the Ainu did, but rather ate them in a wasteful manner. Because of that, a period of a poor catch followed. Thus, in this story, Pounpe made up his mind to change his attitude, on behalf of the reckless Japanese.

Because of the decrease of salmon, the Japanese started to do artificial insemination, so now we have an abundance of salmon. We do not eat the salmon like the Ainu people, but waste them as we did before. The story would therefore suggest that if we continue to eat the salmon in this way, they will soon decrease and a food crisis will certainly come.

Besides that, according to the Ainu way of thinking, doing artificial insemination disturbs the processes of nature. When the

salmon come to the river, they are caught before they can reach the place of laying eggs. Their eggs are taken out by human hands in a mill, and through the unnatural process of artificial insemination the number of salmon become multiplied.

Interfering with the spawning of the salmon also creates another problem. Because the living salmon cannot go upstream into the woods, the animals who feed on salmon are brought to starvation. The balance of nature is therefore destroyed. And in turn, a great ecological destruction becomes near at hand.

Besides causing this ecological crisis, the Japanese way of handling the salmon has also created an economic crisis. The Ainu who have been denied the right to catch fish have become poorer, while the Japanese have become richer. There will always be poor people in countries of the world where wealth is unfairly distributed; Japan is no exception. The resources are limited, so they must be shared between the Ainu and the Japanese.

Finally, we should also consider Pounpe's figure. When he left for "charanke", he put on "a neat mustache" and wore the superior Ainu dress and hat like a cockcomb", even though he was a young boy. He looked like the chief of a village.

Here we should note that the chief of the village was also a shaman who was in charge of the peace and happiness of his people (Chirii, pp.8-9). Thus in the chief's figure Pounpe reminds us of a shaman who goes before the kamuis to try to intercede for the salvation of humanity and nature, as well as for the peace of the Ainu and the Japanese. Only when the spirit of thankfulness to the kamuis is born again among the people, can their coexistence with nature become possible once again.

[References]

Asahi Ainu Minzoku Shuzaihan. *Kotan to tomoni Ikiru*. Iwanami, 1994

- Chiri, Mashio. *Chiri Mashio Chosakushū*. Heibonsha, 1973
- Chiri, Yukie. *Ainu Shinyoshū*. Kohnando, 1974
- Fujimura, Hisakazu. *Ainu, Kamigami to tomoni ikiru*. Fukutake, 1985
- Matsui, Tomo and Oda, Ito. *Hinokami no Futokoro nite*. JICC, 1993
- Невский, Николай. (translated into Japanese by Kazuyoshi Uoi). *Ainu Folklore*. Hokkaido Shuppan Kikaku Center, 1991
- Uenishi, Haruji. *Pounpe to Sake no Kuchigassen*. Futosha, 1986
- Uenishi, Haruji. *Tokachi no Mikotachi (Gods' Children of Tokachi)*. Ushio, 1982
- Yamada, Takako. *Ainu no Sekaikan*. Kodansha, 1994