The Ainu Inao;  
Some Comparative Considerations

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Much has been written about the Inao or "shaved sticks" used in the religious cult of the Ainu of Hokkaido and Sakhalin; and now that the Ainu culture is virtually extinct, it might seem that there is nothing more to be said on this subject. However, until recently, most of the studies about this ritual accessory were strictly ethnographic, that is, to say descriptive in terms of the Ainu culture itself. Comparisons were generally made only with obviously related phenomena of immediately neighboring Siberian peoples. No serious attempt was made to view this phenomenon within the wider framework of general cultural history.

It was not until 1960 that Taryô Ōbayashi, for the first time, attempted to establish the place of the Ainu Inao within such a wider framework, comparing it with similar phenomena in various remote cultures, including, notably, those of several American Indian tribes. As well as I understand Professor Ōbayashi's paper, his comparisons were based mainly upon similarity of function - thus for example he compared the Ainu Inao with the so-called "prayer sticks" of various American Indian tribes, such as the baha of the Pueblos and more or less similar objects among the Cora and Huichol of western Mexico.

My purpose in the present paper is to expand the range of comparisons in a somewhat different way, not so much on the basis of function as rather primarily on that of form, and especially with respect to the shavings, which constitute the most obvious morphological peculiarity of the Inao. For it has been my experience that in material culture (more or less as in language), forms tend to persist even when meanings change. Accordingly I shall attempt to determine the distribution in the world of shaved sticks, rather than of prayer-sticks - in the hope that the contemplation of such analogies may also, like Professor Ōbayashi's observations, contribute to a better understanding of the Inao.

For this purpose I shall consider ethnographic material from three areas: the central United States, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Finally I shall offer for consideration a certain class of apparently symbolic motifs from prehistoric times in the Old World, which I think may provide a clue to the conceptual origin of these various modern phenomena.

The occurrence of Inao-like objects in the central United States has already been mentioned by Professor Ōbayashi. The evidence, though very limited, is nevertheless very interesting. "Shaved sticks" were placed upon the graves of deceased warriors, evidently as memorials, by two Algonkian tribes, the Menominis (Figs. 1 and 3) and the Potawatomis (Fig. 2), in a limited area in Wisconsin, and (so far as I know) nowhere else in the New World. Red bands, said to represent blood, were painted around the sticks in the intervals between the bunches of shavings. According to Indian explanations, these so-called "brave sticks" were placed at the graves in order to help the souls of the deceased warriors to join their ancestors in the Afterworld.1 Like Professor Ōbayashi, I suspect that this tradition must be very old; and that even if it occurs only in a very small area in the New World, it must be ultimately of Asiatic origin, and related somehow to the tradition of the Ainu Inao.

The area of Southeast Asia, on the other hand, is very rich in phenomena comparable to the Ainu Inao; and the relations seem to be not only morphological but often functional and conceptual as well. Here again, I am not the first to observe analogies with the Inao. More than sixty years ago the French Japanologist, Claude Mâitre,2 mentioned the resemblance between the Ainu Inao and certain "shaved sticks" of Borneo. However, it seems that Mâitre did not pursue the matter beyond casual mention of it; and he published no illustrations. Nor, so far as I know, have the Southeast Asian analogies for the Ainu Inao been explored by any one else. And yet they are worthy of much more careful attention.

Actually, "shaved sticks" more or less like the Inao occur not only in Borneo, as mentioned by Mâitre, but also in the Philippines, and quite extensively throughout large parts of continental Southeast Asia, among peoples whose ethnography was perhaps little known in Mâitre's time. I show you here a shaved stick from the Liwu of the upper Salween valley (Fig. 4), together with a specimen from the Tinguian of northern Luzon in the Philippines (Fig. 5). About the Liwu sticks I have been able to learn only that they were set up at the entrances of villages "to ward off evil spirits,"3 and though I have no information about the function of the four prongs split into the top of the stick, it may be inferred, from the function of many similar devices throughout Southeast Asia, that these prongs were destined to receive a sacrificial offering. This is certainly true of the fringed canes of the Tinguian, the split tops of which served to hold leaves dipped in the blood of sacrificed animals. These canes were then placed at the doors of houses in the Tinguian village.

But it is in Borneo that we find probably the most elaborate development and widespread use of "shaved sticks," in a variety of sizes, forms and functions - some of which are of special interest for comparison with the Inao of the Ainu. To begin with, I show you an example (Fig. 6) of the type of shaved stick most commonly encountered in Borneo - one with its top split into four prongs holding an egg as an offering. This specimen was made by th Penan, a partially nomadic tribe of the Sarawak interior; but the type is widespread among various ethnic groups throughout the island. Figure 7 shows a pole of much larger dimensions, with exceptionally elaborate shavings. It was one of many shaved poles and sticks of various types set up before the house of a sick man on the Tinjar River in Sarawak in order to cure him of fever.4

In Figs. 8 and 9 you see how these shaved sticks with split tops holding eggs were often combined in arrangements more or
The two carvings shown in Figs. 20 and 21 were made by the Senoi-Semai of Pahang in Malaya, as representations of the spirits or demons of certain sicknesses. They are of special interest to us because the shavings here clearly represent the upper limbs of the figures — for limbs which were originally represented by the shavings on the Ainu inao. These Malayam images might, then, be regarded as archaic or prototypic in relation to the inao.

There is much more to be said about Southeast Asiatic analogues for the Ainu inao; but as time is limited, I turn now to a brief consideration of shaved sticks in Australia. Here again, the striking resemblance between the Ainu inao and such sticks used ritually by the Australian aborigines has already been noticed by others, especially by Sternberg, and most recently by Leonard Adam.12 The picture here is quite different from that in Southeast Asia and Indonesia. In Australia there are no split tops for the insertion of sacrifices, and there is no anthropomorphism. Moreover, so far as I have been able to learn, the Australian shaved sticks are not stuck into the ground, as in the New World and in Northeast and Southeast Asia, but rather into the headbands of dancers, more especially upon the occasion of certain rituals of vengeance, for a death presumably caused by the sorcery of a member of another tribe (Figs. 22, 23). As for possible parallels in Northeast Asia, though there is no direct evidence, so far as I know, that these Ainu ever wore inao in the hair, like the Australians, they do of course have the custom of wearing loose shavings in their headbands upon certain ceremonial occasions; and there is an early report of one Ainu image, a kind of doll made of bundled shavings, as shown in Fig. 25, which had six small inao stuck into the head as a kind of headdress.12 From this evidence it is perhaps permissible to conclude that, at least in former times, inao were sometimes also worn in the hair by the Ainu, as is now done by the Australians (though of course not for the same purpose). An elaborate Australian "warleader's" head-wear composed entirely of shaved sticks is shown in Fig. 26; and in Fig. 27 is reproduced a pair of illustrations showing an ancestor effigy evidently made of bundled sticks or grasses from northwestern Australia, with inao-like shavings around the head.

As a matter of fact, it is more difficult to envisage a relation between the "shaved sticks" of Australia and the Ainu inao than between the Ainu inao and similar objects in Southeast Asia, where the relation is more obvious and apparently more direct. At any rate, the use of shaved sticks in Australia is quite different from their use in Southeast or Northeast Asia. (Is it closer, conceptually and functionally, to the "broad-sticks" of the Murngin and Potawatomi?) These objects may eventually be explained, shaved sticks do have a wide distribution in Australia, and this suggests that their tradition is probably very old on the continent. In the absence of more detailed ethnographic and comparative studies, or perhaps more specifically tentative, the Australian phenomena represent an early stratum, or at least the remnant of an early stratum, of the same tradition of which we recognize a later phase in the usages common to Southeast and Northeast Asia.

This would bring us, logically, to the problem of prehistoric origins of the shaved stick; since it is generally believed that the Australian aborigines preserve, in many respects, a prehistoric way of life. Nevertheless, the fact remains that it is the Asiatic phenomena, rather than the Australian, for which we seem to find the most plausible antecedents in prehistory. Accordingly I shall attempt to arrive at a better understanding of the conceptual implications of the modern Asiatic objects before approaching the problem of the prehistoric origin of the type. The most important clue to the prehistoric origin of these objects is, in my opinion, to be seen in their anthropomorphism. And this can, I believe, be best understood in the sense that the inao represents an anthropomorphic tree, which is in fact (or at least in my own theory) really a family tree, that is to say the representation or symbolization of a genealogy. In terms of this image, the shaving of the inao would represent the multiple link of a succession of ancestors on the family tree. The shaved stick is thus, or would have been originally, the symbol of an invocation to the ancestral spirits: the more shavings, the more ancestors; and the more ancestors, the more help.

If, as I think, the inao does indeed ultimately represent a kind of "family tree," then it becomes of interest to observe that there are in fact many indications of the conceptual equivalence of the inao with trees. One of the clearest of these is provided by a practice of the Orokts, as reported by Wada. These
neighbors of the Ainu, who make their inao, as you have just seen, in the form of a human figure with a clearly represented face, also have the custom of carving exactly the same kind of face, in larger scale, on a living "holy tree," at such a height that the lowest branch of the tree appears as the limbs of a human body under the head carved on the trunk. From this circumstance it is obvious that the shavings of the Orok inao are equivalent to the limbs of such a tree; and I think that the same inference must be extended to the inao of the Ainu, in the sense that the shavings on the branch-ends (as I have already proposed) are artificially multiplied limbs, not only of a tree but at the same time of a human figure. In other words, the Ainu inao are in fact miniature anthropomorphic trees, which can only be understood, in the final analysis, as personified family trees, symbolic of the ramifications of a social group.

It would then, be quite natural, and even automatic, that the genealogical symbol of the tree or its branching should serve also as a symbol of the social group itself: the tribe, clan, or family. It is this semantic sequence which would, in my opinion, explain the preoccupation of the Ainu with branches, as we see them incorporated, for example, in some of their ikku-batak or ornamental ribbons, and in many of their inao (Figs. 28-31). In fact this Ainu preoccupation with branching leads me to suspect that the characteristic bifurcation of many of the Ainu ancestral emblems (ekashi-tokpa or ekashi-shoshën) really represents the branching of a "family tree," and that it is by virtue of this meaning that they have become clan or family emblems. It is not surprising, then, that such branching emblems occur (among other types of family emblems) on the ceremonial libation-sticks (hkebusub-hatn) of the Ainu (Fig. 32), in close association with bunches of shavings; for the shavings and the branching emblems are then simply two different manifestations of the same fundamental symbolism. This would, I think, also explain why the branch-like family emblems of the Ainu (Fig. 33) so closely resemble many of the similarly branching marks of ownership used by certain Alaskan Eskimos (Fig. 34); for clan or family marks are, ipso facto, at least potentially, also marks of ownership - the characteristic branching of these emblems being in itself a reference to the clan or family, as owners of the objects so marked. Small variations may of course be introduced to make finer distinctions; but in both regions the basic symbol remains the branching tree.

If all this is so, then the usual Ainu explanation of the branching types of family crests (ekashi-shoshën or ekashi tokpa) as symbolizing the killer-whale god (rep-un-kamur) is nothing more than a "popular etymology" invented by the Ainu to explain a symbol whose real origin had long been forgotten; and the sequence of derivation in Figs. 35 and 36 would run in the opposite direction from that implied by the numbers assigned to the emblems in the published illustrations: in other words, it was the symbol of a branch which was interpreted by the Ainu as a representation of the killer whale, and not at all the killer whale which gave rise to these branching emblems.

Now, if the shaved stick is a symbol of the family tree, with the shavings representing its branches, it would hardly be surprising that such a "tree" should be given the appearance of a person, with indications of the bodily parts, and especially of the face. Basically and originally this can only be the face of the clan or tribal ancestor; and in so far as the symbolism of genealogy requires a multiplication of branches, we arrive at the image of a human figure with many limbs. It is this image which, in my opinion, is represented by the anthropomorphic inao.

But it is important to realize that the image of a human figure with many limbs is by no means restricted to the shaved sticks of the Ainu and other peoples. In fact, this image as a type can be found in many different cultures, both ancient and modern. Indeed, the type is so widespread, in its various manifestations, that I am convinced of its deeply fundamental importance, even though its identity and significance have not been heretofore recognized. It is obviously impossible to offer a survey of such images here; but it may be useful to show at least a few typical examples.

First, as you see here, some modern images of the multiple-bodied human figure from the Batak of Sumatra, from the Solomons, and from the Navaho Indians of Arizona (Figs. 37, 38, 39); and then some prehistoric antecedents from neolithic painted pottery of Eastern Europe and Western Asia (Figs. 40, 41, 42). These are, of course, all two-dimensional representations; but there is no lack of three-dimensional images of the same type, which might be more plausibly compared with the shaved sticks. I show you only one example, a group of ancestor images of the Garo of Assam (Fig. 43), in which the multiple bodies appear as a succession of ridges, and the limbs are apparently neglected. What appear to be "horns" on the heads of these Garo effigies I suspect to be rudiments of an original branching. (Similar "horns" otherwise inexplicable, occur on wooden images in the Indonesian island of Nias.) As a matter of fact, three-dimensional (i.e. sculptural) human figures with multiple bodies occur throughout the Western and even the Central Pacific islands, as well as in Africa, and in certain variations also in Siberia and the New World. The type is thus clearly of fundamental importance, and not only in itself; I do think, for a proper understanding of the Ainu inao, which I would regard as one of its manifestations.

The anthropomorphism of the images which I have just shown you is of course self-evident. Now let us consider some other such designs which, while apparently of the same conceptual class, can be more readily compared to the inao. In the designs of Fig. 44 you see some highly conventionalized human figures with multiple limbs from New Caledonia. Those at the top of the illustration retain vestiges of a human head, which is lost in the many-limbed figure at the left. Luquet, who assembled and studied these motifs, recognized their basic anthropomorphism, as well as their "phytomorphic appearance" - in other words, the appearance of a tree with many branches. He did not, however, attempt to explain this peculiarity: he merely identified the type of the multi-limbed human figure as such.

In prehistoric Europe, similar human figures with recessive heads and multiple limbs were recognized by the famous French prehistorian, the Abbé Breuil, in the schematic rock-paintings of the Iberian peninsula. Some typical examples of these "pine-tree men," as Breuil calls them, are here assembled in Figs. 45, 46 and 47. Again, Breuil made no attempt to explain these forms: he merely identified them and noted the fact of their occurrence in this art. For me, such "pine-tree men," as well as the similar designs from New Caledonia - fact manifestations of the same basic symbolism which underlies the Ainu inao and other "shaved sticks" - namely that of the family tree.

Another creditable prehistorian, Hugo Obermaier, recognized the kinship of these Iberian forms to those occurring on the famous painted pebbles of Mas d'Azil in France, dating from mesolithic times, as shown in Fig. 48. But again, Obermaier merely recognized the type as such, without asking about its meaning.

Actually, I think there can be little doubt that the same symbolism of the anthropomorphic "family tree" accounts for similar designs also in another mesolithic manifestation, that of the Maglemose Culture of the Baltic area in Northern Europe, as you see in the drill-point decoration of an amber pendant (Fig. 49) and the engraving on an implement of aurochs bone (Fig. 50). So far as I know, the analogy of these designs with the Azilian and Spanish schematic paintings are here noted for the first time; and needless to say, the question of their symbolic significance has never been asked. Yet the design engraved on the aurochs bone is very similar to that painted on a dolmen in Portugal, as you see in Fig. 52 - in which the Abbé Breuil recognized three of his "pine-tree men." The fact that the dolmen dates from the incipient age of metal, thus long after mesolithic times, does not matter; for as Breuil pointed out, mesolithic traditions lingered in parts of Iberia into much later periods. In Fig. 51 you see the painted design of another Iberian dolmen, in which Breuil again recognized the representation of human figures with multiple torsos - very much like those which you saw a moment ago in the painted decoration of Near Eastern neolithic pottery, and in the similar modern designs of Figs. 37-39.4

It seems to me very probable that these neolithic and mesolithic manifestations had their antecedents in still more ancient times. For "ramiform" designs occur occasionally in the art of the Upper Palaeolithic, at least in Western Europe. The problem here is more complex, because, in the first place, there are no obvious traces of anthropomorphism in these designs, as there are in neolithic Spain; and because surviving examples of such designs in palaeolithic art are in fact extremely rare. However, the fact that the artists of the Upper Palaeolithic, at least in Western Europe, showed practically no evidence of an interest in plant forms or trees encourages me to regard these
designs as symbolic of abstract conceptions rather than as attempts at representation. That I think it quite possible that the paleolithic designs which you see in Figs. 53-55 represent the earliest known forms of the schematic representation of a genealogy in the form of a "family tree," which ultimately underlies the Ainu inro and related modern phenomena.

In attempting to account for the extreme rarity of such "saintiform" paleolithic art, two observations should perhaps be made in the first place. There is, however, not only evidence for continuity of artistic traditions from the late Upper Paleolithic (Magdalenian) into the Mesolithic, where, as we have just seen, there is good reason to regard such "saintiforms" as anthropomorphic; and, secondly, that paleolithic art can only be a fraction of what must have existed. For example, all the artifacts of impenetrable matter which have survived to us were presumably made by men who no doubt also did the cave-paintings of paleolithic times. We have almost no way of knowing what decorative arts may have been practiced by paleolithic women; and I suspect that in the decoration of their skin garments, and perhaps of their own bodies, genealogical symbolism most probably played an important role, and that "saintiforms" may very well have been a significant element in such traditions — which would have been preserved by the clans.

Whether objects like the modern Ainu inro are also extant is a different question. It is not necessary to suppose that they did exist. But I think that the concept of a genealogy in terms of the branching of a tree must have taken form in the human image already in a very early period, namely because it is such a natural and appropriate image of the important concept. The motif could have become traditional long before it was embodied in the corsets which have especially interested us. But the development of the "shaved stick" must have taken place early enough so that it has been carried on in all probability by prehistoric migrations, from one part of Asia to another — presumably from the southeast to the northeast, where the problems of diffusion may ultimately be resolved, because I am given to the fact that the idea of the "shaved stick" is in any event, closely related to the ritual use of "shaved sticks" of continental and insular Southeast Asia.

1 See the statements about size and meaning of the "shaved sticks" in Hoffmann and in Kittelhahn, as cited under Fig. 2.

2 and 3. About the "shaved stick" in Oakoth. Fig. 3, according to the museum records, it was supposed to indicate that the deceased had taken his captives, but I do not know how much credence to give to this statement.


4. Information on wood at the Musée de l'Homme, Paris, where the specimen itself is preserved.

5. Perhaps of special interest for comparison with the Ainu pipe is the precise and complicated use of sharings to decorate the so-called "dagger" of Pirah and the platform, which is covered by various groups of decorative elements on the occasion of an annual festival, for the performance of rituals.

6. See illustrations and accompanying descriptions in A. W. Ogilvie, In Central Borneo (London, 1903), vol. 1, facing p. 190; the same author, Quatre dorés (Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, vol. 1, 1904), plate 15; and Carl Lumholtz, Through Central Borneo (New York, 1920), vol. 1, facing p. 223. It is of course impossible to get here into a detailed consideration of these constructions, their use, and possible analogies with the ritual use of sharings by the Ainu. There are many analogies also between the decoration of these daggers by Pirah and the ritual-decorative use of sharings in mainland Southeast Asia, especially in East Pakistan. (See, for example, illustrations by Bernett, as cited under Fig. 12.)
Note: For missing numbers see p. 96.
Motifs del Pico. Évolutions diverses du peinture existe vers une complication phytomorphique.

Fig. 5. Les Motivos, aux 1 à 13, le no 14 et le 15 de N. 5 de la Caperana (Portugal), les noms sont de diverses bandes filiformes de l'ervoir. On y voit les détails minuscules, en noir, qui en le même ordre, suivant de si ligne ou jumeaux, dessiné par la ligne précédente, se superposer avec des représentations à uniramiformes élevées au niveau. Dans des cas plus gendres des individus de liste, et l'on voit des lignes à plusieurs ou deux tresses montant les crêtes en bleu ou de hauts habitants aux représentations écrasées, les doubles tresses montant aux aux sortes d'interlines qui sont avec le temps dans ce groupe. Au centre, la suppression de l'eau, dans 14, plus étroite, avec l'observation de caractère s'accompagne, il s'agit en 1, au début de par excellence 15, cette de 14.

Fig. 45 Designs painted in a rock-shelter at Maroon del Pino (Province of Ciudad Real), southerncentral Spain, selected to illustrate the "development of the seated figure toward a phytomorphic complication." After H. Bregel, Les peintures rupestres schématiques de la préhistoire ibérique, vol. 3 (Lagny, 1933), fig. 50 (with some omissions).

Fig. 46 Designs painted in rock-shelters of south-western Spain, illustrating the tendency of the human figure to develop the "false phytomorphic appearance" of so-called "pine-tree men." After H. Bregel, Les peintures rupestres schématiques d'Helecho (Badajoz), Estremadure, in: Publication à l'occasion de la présence de F. W. Schmidt (Vienna, 1928), p. 5 on p. 786.

Fig. 47 Painted "ramiform" design from a rock-shelter in Acampa Province, southeastern Spain, said to represent a seated human figure in multiple stages. After H. Bregel, Les peintures rupestres schématiques de la préhistoire ibérique, vol. 4 (Lagny, 1933), pl. xxvii, i, and text, p. 21.

Fig. 48 A comparison of painted human figures on mesolithic pebbles from Mas d'Azil (right) with human figures in Spanish rock-paintings (left). After H. Übermaier, Fossil Man in Spain (New Haven, 1925), pl. xxvii (detail).

Fig. 48b Two additional painted pebbles from Mas d'Azil with "ramiform" (i.e. presumably anthropomorphic) designs, after L. Prieur, Les grottes colorées de Mas d'Azil, l'Anthropologie, vol. 7, 1994, figs. 26 and 36 on pp. 397 and 410.

Fig. 49 Amber pendant with spiral-point ornament, from an unknown find-site presumably in Denmark. After Sophus Müller, Ny...