

# The Hero and the Otherness: Understanding the Ainu epic *Kutune Sirka* in the light of the *Cycle of Yamato Takeru*

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## Abstract

In the context of Ainu studies, several scholars advocate for comparatism as a means to address the lack of research that compares Ainu literature with literary works from the rest of the world. Responding to this call, this essay examines the most famous Ainu epic work, the *Kutune Sirka*, through a narratological analysis, which provides systematic and scalable tools that have not been previously employed in the analysis of this work. To achieve this, the Japanese historical tale of Yamato Takeru, recorded in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, has been used as a reference point, because its hero appeared to bear resemblance to Poiyaumpe, the Ainu hero. The comparison has revealed that, despite the apparent similarity in the heroic model, there are profound differences concerning their relationship with the Otherness: the Okhotsk in the Ainu case and various enemies (including the Emishi) outside the Yamato kingdom in the Japanese case. Consequently, the particularities of the Ainu hero shine in light of the peculiarities of the Japanese hero, and this comparison allows us to place this Ainu work within the epic canon. Thus, it is concluded that Poiyaumpe is a frontier hero—and not merely a hero *on* the frontier like Yamato Takeru—because pragmatic motivations drive him more than ideological ones, which allows for a broader range of interactions with the Other. This contributes to the emerging challenge of relating Ainu literature to the rest of world literature. This is significant not only as a way to showcase the quality of Ainu works but also to define Ainu literature in the context of the universal literary canon. This progress towards integrating Ainu literature into the broader context not only adds to our understanding of the diasystem of the epic, whose components hold great importance in modern scriptwriting, but also promotes dialogue and fosters the appreciation of diversity.

**Keywords:** Kutune Sirka, Yamato Takeru, Ainu, Frontier Hero, Comparatism

## 1. Introduction

From the Ainu studies field, scholars such as Okuda (2008) or Obayashi (1990) call for comparatism to solve the lack of research that compare the Ainu literature with the rest of the world's literary works. This is important not only as a way of showing the quality of Ainu works, but also for defining Ainu literature vis-à-vis the canon of world literature. Accordingly, this research aims to contribute to the classification of the heroic model in the *Kutune Sirka* within the scope of world literature. To reach this goal, an analysis will be conducted to determine if a comparison with the hero Yamato Takeru, which

shares initial similarities with the Ainu hero Poiyaumpe, can illustrate this path.

At present, Ainu literary studies are in an early stage of development, despite the potential of the field. This is mainly due to the large number of works that make up the corpus of the preserved Ainu tradition and the fact that comparative approaches are still limited. In comparative studies of epic literature, there are several notable examples of studies that mention the Ainu *yukar*, beginning with *Heroic Poetry* by Bowra (1952), the two volumes of *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry* edited by Hatto (1980), or later, *The Epic Hero* by Miller (2000), which praised Ainu epic compositions in the broader context of their cultural richness, comparing them with other works of world literature. However, they are limited by the scarce number of English language translations of Ainu epics. In fact, there is no complete English translation of the *Kutune Sirka*, except for a partial translation by Arthur Waley (1951). On the other hand, when language is not a barrier, another problem arises: the academic world tends to focus on a highly historicist approach to literature, with limited connections to literature beyond their own borders. Apart from two articles on Ainu and Siberian epic (Ogiwara 2017; Obayashi 1990), and an article in comparison with other shamanic traditions (Ogiwara 1984), it is difficult to find further comparisons beyond the aforementioned non-Ainu scholars who did not have access to complete texts.

Okuda's article (2008) starts with this claim, stating that Chiri M. attempt to explain the formation of Ainu epic poetry failed due to a lack of comparative perspective. This is why Okuda contributes his article on the image of the hero, in order to provide a specific and direct debate on the comparison between the Ainu and other peoples. Now is the time to take up this challenge again: to develop a general theory of the formation of Ainu epics beyond the Ainu themselves, that is, in comparison with epics from other cultures. This is what this paper seeks to contribute to.

## 2. Contextualization

### 2.1. The *Kutune Sirka*

The Ainu did not make clear distinctions among different literary genres. They had the lyrical, epic, and ritual genres, as they did not have a dramatic genre. In terms of content, Philippi (1979) distinguishes epic narratives (in prose, *kamui uwepeker*, or in verse, *kamui yukar*, sometimes focusing on the cultural hero), heroic narratives (called *yukar*, in verse, more extensive, about human heroes), novelistic narratives (in prose or verse, about non-heroic characters), and parodies (epic narratives somewhat dreamlike). The *Kutune Sirka* belongs to the *yukar* and its most widely read version is the one collected in Iwanami's *Ainu jojishi yukara* in 1936 (Kindaichi 1936), which is Nabesawa Wakarpa's version in Ainu and translated into Japanese by Kindaichi Kyōsuke. However, there are a total of five versions, each one recited by a different reciter. This study, due to its limited scope, will focus on Wakarpa's version and will comment on the other versions when deemed necessary.

The particularity of the historical and cultural context or extradiegetic history in which the *Kutune Sirka* is inserted is that it is composed, to a large extent, of hypotheses that are practically impossible to prove. Even so, it is possible to offer a number of more or less well-founded ideas through which it has been possible to reconstruct this context of the Ainu epic. Chiri Mashihō states in *Ainu Bungaku* (1955, 21) that the *yukar* are basically the history of conflict between the Yaunkur (the Satsumon who

were already in Hokkaido) and the Repunkur (the Okhotsk). Chiri states that “through this unity against a common enemy, the Ainu people developed a greater sense of kinship and awareness, and that is where the foundations were laid for the formation of the Ainu people in later generations” (1955, 220), and that the epic of the Ainu hero was the story of that battle. This theory has had a great influence up to the present day. However, Chiri himself did not provide any evidence for this hypothesis and has been questioned on several occasions since its formulation.

The *Kutune Sirka* does not present a mere struggle between Yaunkur and Repunkur, as its plot is based on alliances between Yaunkur and Repunkur. It tells us the story of Poiyaumpe who, after having lived all his life locked up in a castle, goes to the contest called by Iskar-unmat (Iskar's princess), another mainlander (Yaunkur), to capture a golden otter. Poiyaumpe wins, but refuses to marry the princess, so that a war is again unleashed. Throughout the composition, these battles will follow one after another, mostly against Repunkur allies of the Iskar clan. The hero's side will also have Repunkur allies and, in fact, it will be discovered that Poiyaumpe himself also has Repunkur blood, since his mother was Repunkur. In addition, the hero's main ally will be the Repunkur Umanpeska-unmat (known as Nisap Tasum, the princess of false sickness).

Therefore, the historical and cultural context reconstructed from the *Kutune Sirka* is that of two cultures in contact, the mainlanders (Satsumon) and the outlanders (Okhotsk), who associate or quarrel according to the interests of each clan. The golden otter is one of these interests, making these complex relationships evident. Iskar-unmat observes from a tower the participants of the contest that has been called to obtain the golden otter and marry her. However, Iskar-unmat is described as an ugly and proud princess, so no one would want to marry her for these reasons. Nakagawa (2020) proposes here that the interest of these Repunkur families to become Iskar family would be to monopolize the trade routes with the Japanese, which were probably Iskar possession.

Inspired by the Shakushain War, all this leads Nakagawa (2020b, 45) to propose the following hypothesis. The Shakushain War began as a dispute between two Ainu clans in the western part of Hidaka and eventually developed into a war between these two sides and the Matsumae clan. The Iyochi feared that the war would hinder trade with Matsumae and wanted it to end soon, while the Iskar remained neutral, as they had no need to trade with Matsumae and were not interested in what happened in the war. However, it is strange that, given its geographical location, Iskar did not actively trade with the Matsumae or with the north in that epic. In contrast, Iyochi did have strong trade ties with Sakhalin. Nakagawa proposes that, prior to the Shakushain War, a conflict must have occurred between the Iskar and the Iyochi, in which the latter emerged victorious and took control of trade with the Repunkur and Matsumae. For this victory, the inhabitants of Hamamasu (a locality that it has been identified with the probably fictional Sinutapka, from where the hero is) would have played a key role and the *yukar* would have been the result of this struggle of the Sinutapka —from the Iyochi side— against the Iskar. However, it is possible to speculate that the Sinutapka's closeness to Iskar would have made them fall under their influence, losing all traces of their past and entrusting themselves to the heroes of the heroic epic. Logically, it is possible that this was not the case. In conclusion, there is significant uncertainty surrounding almost everything related to the *Kutune Sirka*

## 2.2. The Cycle of Yamato Takeru

While the Ainu work has only been written down in the past century with the purpose of preservation, the Japanese works were written down between the 6th and 8th centuries for political reasons. The *Cycle of Yamato Takeru* consists of ten chapters documented in both the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, narrating the story of the legendary son of Emperor Keikō (12-130 AD). To fully comprehend the *Kojiki*, it is necessary to read the *Nihon Shoki*, which was completed eight years later and contains supplementary information to the former.

During the two centuries between the acceptance of Buddhism in 587 and the abandonment of the capital of Nara in 784, Japan experienced a significant cultural flourishing, actively participating in the high civilization of East Asia. Yamato rulers, aware of their vulnerability, prompted Japan, as it would do at other points in its history, to embrace external influences in order to acquire foreign techniques and ideas. Two of these ideas were literacy and Buddhism. The Yamato State and each of the clans over which it ruled were cult-focused entities that believed in their lineage originating from ancient nature gods, whose safeguarding was deemed crucial for their existence and welfare. Therefore, the new faith had to be articulated in a way that reinforced the legitimacy of the state as Shinto had hitherto done. It was during this time that the myths, legends, and epic stories of the oral tradition were first recorded in writing (Hall 1988, 453).

In 620, Prince Shotoku and Sima no Opo-omi (Soga no Umako) compiled three historical works of Japan. These compilations were partially lost due to the fire. In the 680s, Emperor Temmu ordered the resumption of the work. In the preface of the *Kojiki*, the compiler Opo no Yasumaro states that Emperor Temmu wanted to correct the corruption found in the historical and genealogical records of the noble families, which held great importance at the time and were often falsified. After a gap of twenty-five years due to Emperor Temmu's death, Empress Gemmei resumed the work initiated by Emperor Temmu, leading to the creation of the *Kojiki* (712) and the *Nihon Shoki* (720), which are the earliest existing Japanese histories.

The *Kojiki* is based on two main sources, as summarized by Philippi (1969): three genealogical sources (in Kambun) and three anecdotal sources (in Japanese style). Most of the *Kojiki* comes from anecdotal sources. Due to the speed with which Yasumaro, the compiler, completed the task, it is inferred that there was a single source already compiled from various oral and written traditions of the imperial family and noble families, but this remains uncertain. Some say that all the texts from oral sources were in the head of Piyeda no Are. The *Nihon Shoki*, on the other hand, was also a compilation of previously existing sources, but its compilation process is less known due to the lack of a preface. The *Nihon Shoki* itself indicates that in the year 682, the tenth year of Emperor Temmu's reign, the emperor ordered an assembly of princes and nobles to write a chronicle of the emperors and other ancient matters. Two individuals, one from the Nakatomi family and the other from the Peguri family, began the compilation process (Philippi 1969).

The main purpose for the writing of these two texts was to justify the Yamato government. It has been suggested that the motivation for their compilation was primarily an internal matter, an attempt to straighten out the tangled and conflicting claims of divine ancestry or prestigious lineages from various noble clans, while the *Nihon Shoki* aimed to be an official history of Nihon (a eulogistic expression for

Yamato) to showcase and proudly present to foreigners.

The *Cycle of Yamato Takeru* is surrounded by legend and it is difficult to ascertain it with certainty. Although the *Nihon Shoki* states that Yamato Takeru was born in the 2nd year of Emperor Keiko's reign (72 C.E.), the mysterious period in which the story is set is the 4th century, known as the “riddle century”. Morris (2013) describes this period as “a time of strife and disorder, marked by bitter fighting in the provinces and a concerted effort by the ruling clan, which had established itself in the Yamato region, to consolidate the population of the main islands of Japan under its control”. It was during this vague period that the figure of the “Brave of Japan” emerged through a combination of narratives and traditions from various sources, including myths, poems, legends, and Chinese literary influences.

### 2.3. Presentation of the heroes

The *Kutune Sirka* is the longest and most complex *yukar*, whose title can be translated as “ryumaki sword”, given that the shape of the hero's sword was probably similar to a *hirumaki* sword (Nakagawa, 2020c, 51). It sings the story of an orphan hero named Poiyaumpe, also known as Yaunkur nispa or Sinutapka-unkur. Poiyaumpe's real name is unknown, and this nickname is simply “a careless way of referring to him” (Kindaichi 1931, 194). The only epithet accompanying him is “person like a god” or “like a god descended from the sky,” although this is also used for other characters. Despite the inclusion of the word “kamui” sometimes, nobody doubts that he is human. In fact, Yamato Takeru is also referred in very similar terms.

The physical description of the character is quite limited in the Ainu epic: we only know that he is a young boy. In the Iskar chapter (Kindaichi 1943, 248–79), when he couldn't sleep, he gets ready to go search for the golden otter by dressing in some of his treasures. Specifically, his appearance is described as a brocade tunic, a golden belt in the “kōtai” style, a small golden helmet tied around his head, and the divine sword tucked beneath his belt. As for the internal characterization of the hero, in general, the protagonist of Wakarpa's *Kutune Sirka* is an immature and violent hero, although he is capable of admitting fear on four occasions. This immaturity and self-centeredness are common in some Ainu heroes like those in *Kutune Sirka* and *Nitaipakaye*, but it is also possible to find other Ainu heroes who are more mature and calm, such as the one in *Ponotashut-unkur* (Okuda 2008).

On the other hand, the external characterization of Yamato Takeru is very similar to that of Poiyaumpe. Yamato Takeru is given other names such as Wo-usu-no-mikoto, Yamato-woguna-no-mikoto, Yamato-takeru-no-miko, or Yamato-dake, and in both the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, Yamato Takeru is the son of Emperor Keikō and Empress Inabi-no-opo-iratume in the year 72 AD (Aston 1896, 189). In both narratives, Yamato Takeru has an older brother, but the *Kojiki* does not explicitly state that they were twins. However, while in the *Nihon Shoki* the older brother is portrayed as a coward for not wanting to go into battle, the *Kojiki* presents the older brother as a disrespectful prince who is killed by Yamato Takeru.

Like Poiyaumpe, Yamato Takeru is described as a man with supernatural powers to the point of being mistaken for a deity, although Yamato Takeru is more explicit about this issue as the hero himself states on the Emishi border: “I am the son of a Deity of visible men” (Aston 1896, 206). This may be due to the strong ideological character of the work, as will be discussed later on. As for his accessories,

the sword stands out, which he does not possess from the beginning of the story, unlike Poiyaumpe. It is called Kusanagi, the ‘grass-cutting sword,’ because with it, he cut the grass that later allowed him to set the ground on fire to escape another fire, a trap set for him. Additionally, Emperor Keikō, his father, presents his son with a symbol of military command: a Chinese-style axe.

As for Yamato Takeru’s internal characterization, the narrative in *Kojiki* begins with the emperor’s fearful reaction to the savagery of his son, who has just killed his brother. This resembles the Ainu hero, who is also immature and driven by violent instincts. However, *Nihon Shoki* omits this murder and the emperor sends him on conquest solely based on his merit and not due to a desire to keep him away. In any case, in both versions, there is an evolution from a quarrelsome Yamato Takeru who uses deceit to win without honor to a kind-hearted Yamato Takeru with great poetic sensitivity, capable of being deeply moved by a woman’s sacrifice. As Morris (2013) states, “the figure of Yamato Takeru assumes a different cast: the callous, unprincipled bully gives way to a solitary, ill-starred wanderer who, for all his ardent loyalism and achievements in battle, is destined for defeat and early death”.

Both the Ainu and Japanese heroes face this difficulty in the social aspect due to their “asocial, individualized, untamed, combative, and destructive” nature (Miller 2003, 85), and indeed, they both fulfill the pursuit of death: “death itself and the final termination (though not annihilation) of the hero’s life is pushed forward in human time, and typically that death is self-sought or self-directed by the hero” (Miller 2003, 85). But there are clear differences. First, the perspective of the Ainu hero presents a notable contrast when considering healing or resurrection (which will be further explored in the discussion of the antagonist sphere) following their demise. Secondly, death holds a more profound and ideological significance within Japanese epic. In fact, it is customary within the Japanese tradition for the hero to neither actively pursue meaning in life nor maintain an unwavering belief in their own worth. Instead, they often resort to ritualistic suicide, thus attributing a positive value to death. As a result, the majority of heroic figures within the Japanese corpus are characterized by their experience of defeat. In other words, this culturally encoded epistemological difference affects the constitution of different heroic models: “In the West, emphasis is placed on *logos*, the Aristotelian will that seeks to construct life in a meaningful system by analytically conceiving the world. However, in the traditional Japanese perception of the world, due to strong Buddhist influence, people accept life as it is and do not strive to find a coherent affirmation of existence” (Mori 1996, 86). Note, however, the exception of the Ainu tradition, with a triumphal heroic model that has been scarcely studied to date.

### 3. Comparative Analysis

#### 3.1. The Hero and the Otherness

##### 3.1.1. The Sphere of the Protagonist

The relationship of each hero with the Otherness can be synthesized through their incardination in the plot structure, that is, through the definition of the sphere of the protagonist and that of the antagonist. First, the sphere of the protagonist will be analyzed.

Kindaichi Kyōsuke states that “According to Wakarupa, *Itadorimaru no kyoku* is called *Iwan tumi oma yukar* (lit. ‘Song of six battles’) and is a six-stage piece, but I only heard four of the battles. The

four battles are: the first battle in the village of Omanpeska, the second battle in the village of Kanesanta, the third battle with the villagers of Chiwaspeta, and the fourth battle in the village of Menassam” (Kindaichi 1931, 212). There is debate about the possibility of a missing ending for Wakarpa’s version, since this reciter said that the story should have six battles but, looking at the research done and reading all the existing versions, it seems that, at most, one more battle would be missing before the more or less happy return to Sinutapka. In any case, the structure of Wakarpa’s narrative is as follows:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. Introduction  | 7. Rescue of Nisap Tasum at Kanesanta  |
| 2. Competition for the golden otter in Iskar.            | 8. Attempted abduction of Nisap Tasum at Sinutapka by Chiwaspeta-unkur (younger brother) |
| 3. Theft of the golden otter in Sinutapka                | 9. Battle at Chiwaspeta  |
| 4. Battle at Omanpeska and recovery of the golden otter. | 10. First battle at Menassam   |
| 5. Banquet at Sinutapka                                  | 11. Second battle at Menassam  |
| 6. Battle against Sirarapeta-unkur and Kanepeta-unkur    |  |

It is possible to understand the story as a great trial of the hero for the golden otter. Kanesanta believed that he would die and they would get the otter back, but this does not happen. Following the laws of cause-effect or action-reaction (Propp 2010), the plot can be understood as follows:

Villainy	Reaction	Reward/Reparation
Triggering of the war with competition in Iskar	Interdiction-Violation Deception-complicity	Getting the otter
Attempted theft of the otter	Combat Expansion of the hero’s sphere	Otter recovery and feast
Attack of Sirarapeta-unkur and Kanepeta-unkur	Combat	They keep the otter
Torture of Nisap Tasum	Combat Expansion of the hero’s sphere	Wedding
Attempted kidnapping of Nisap Tasum	Combat x 4 Trickery (unrecognizable arrival)	Victory

From this structure, it is possible to understand the different functions of the hero and the relationships he establishes with various characters. Firstly, there is a victim hero who suffers villainies, and a seeker hero who fights for reparation. Initially, within the hero’s sphere, there is only his family, the inhabitants of Sinutapka: his adoptive siblings and his biological brother Kamui Otopus. In fact, it is his sister who senses the prohibition that will lead to the breaking of the taboo and the hero’s complicity, thus initiating the plot, as in so many other stories. From there, allies expand (Omanpeska, Iyochi, and other Repunkur) until they reach Nisap Tasum or Umanpeska-unmat, who becomes his wife and the main assistant to the hero, as is customary for characters rescued by the hero. The sword is a magical object that is not received from any explicit giver, unlike in the case of Yamato Takeru. It would also be possible to understand the *turen-kamui* (spirit companion) as an ally of the hero. All of this is summarized in the following diagram, where text shows the origin of each character: Yaunkur (nothing),

Repunkur (R), or mixed individuals (1/2).

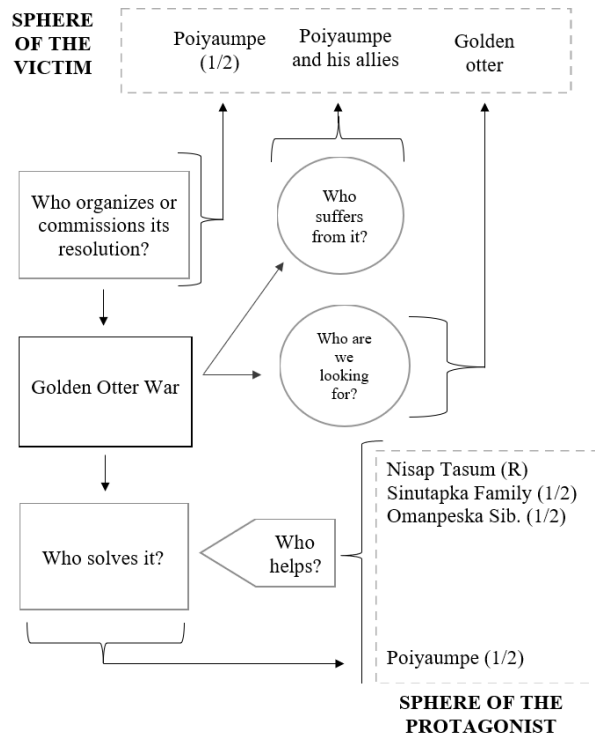


Image 1. The Sphere of the Protagonist in the *Kutune Sirka*.

In the case of Yamato Takeru, a completely opposite relationship with the Other is produced. The narrative structure is quite simple compared to the Ainu composition, and both versions, both the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, coincide for the most part. Thus, the events can be listed as follows:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. Introduction (only in NS)              | 11. Promise to Miyazu-hime (only in K)    |
| 2. Death of the elder brother (only in K) | 12. Attack in Sagamu / Suruga             |
| 3. Sent to Kumaso                         | 13. Sacrifice of Oto-tachibana-hime       |
| 4. Visit to Ise Shrine                    | 14. Subjugation of the Emishi and deities |
| 5. Death of Kumaso-takeru / Torishi-kaya  | 15. Death of the deer god of Mt. Oho-yama |
| 6. Pacification of deities                | 16. Marries Miyazu-hime                   |
| 7. Death of Izumo-takeru (only in K)      | 17. Confusion with the deity of Mt. Ibuki |
| 8. Return to court                        | 18. Encounter with the sword              |
| 9. Sent to the East (brother only in NS)  | 19. Death of Yamato Takeru on Nobo moor   |
| 10. Visit to Ise Shrine                   | 20. Transformation into a white bird      |

It is possible to understand the story as the typical trials of the hero (road of trials) to satisfy the emperor, his father. The academic Yoshida Atsuhiko (1962, 33) proposes that in this structure there are four remarkable facts, following his connection between the story of Yamato Takeru and Indo-European tradition. Thus, he points out a notable correspondence between a trait of the legend of Yamato Takeru and the theme that M. Dumézil proposed to call, in relation to the Hindu hero Indra, Heracles, and Stareatherus of Saxo: the three sins of the warrior. However, it seems unlikely that these have great narrative importance, because not even these episodes occur in both versions of the story: murder and sexual relations only occur in the *Kojiki*. Instead, for Morris (2013), the crucial episode is when Yamato Takeru confuses the deity of Mt. Ibuki because “by addressing himself directly to this supernatural



creature, Yamato Takeru had violated a taboo”; while for Philippi (1969, 242), the killing of the deer god of Mt. Oho-yama. Following again the laws of cause-effect or action-reaction (Propp 2010), the plot can be understood as follows:

Villainy	Reaction	Reward/Reparation
Kumaso Brothers Deities Izumo-takeru (NS)	Departure Donor: Priestess of Ise (upper garment and skirt) Trickery	Branding: title Return
Sagamu Ruler Emishi Deities	Departure Donor: Priestess of Ise (kusanagi and (K) magic bag)	Wedding
Deity of Mount Ibuki	Delivery of the sword	Death

From this structure, it is possible to understand the different functions of the hero and the relationships he establishes with various characters. First, it can be seen that there is also a victim hero who suffers villainy and a seeker hero who fights for reparation. The nuance is that, in this case, the hero doesn’t directly suffer the villainy but rather experiences it through the emperor whom he faithfully serves. The quest for reparation, therefore, is not carried out willingly by the hero but rather by the emperor’s command.

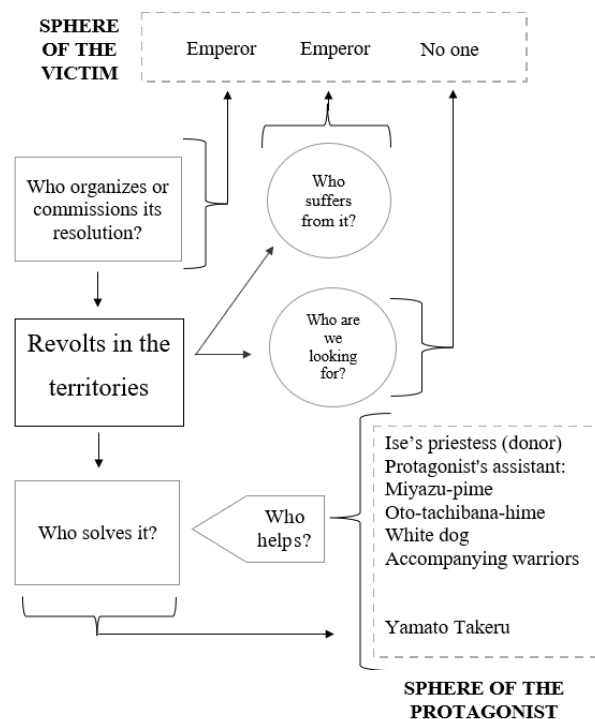


Image 2. The Sphere of the Protagonist in the *Cycle of Yamato Takeru*.

Alongside Yamato Takeru, within the hero’s sphere, only other people from the Yamato court are found, such as his aunt, the priestess of Ise, soldiers, and his wives Oto-hiko-gimi and Oto-tachibana-hime. A white dog also appears as his guide, following the symbolism of reverence for white animals. None of the characters in the protagonist’s sphere are outsiders to Yamato, except for some Emishi who are made his “personal attendants” according to the *Nihon Shoki* but are later handed over as slaves at

the shrine of the moor of Nobo.

### 3.1.2. The Sphere of the Antagonist

In the Ainu case, the core of the antagonist's sphere is not very clear. Before getting to the Omanpeska chapter, everything seems to point to the antagonist of this story being Iskar-unmat. However, the story gains more depth when Omanpeska-unkur gives the following speech to his people:

What happened in the past is happening again in the present. It is said that a long time ago, Kanesanta-unmat, a woman possessed by a pair of golden otters, made the male otters dive for food at the mouth of the Iskar River, which caused a war that occurred here, in Omampeska. Our father didn't like fighting on their side in a battle where there is no reason to fight. That's why he stood on the side of the Sinutapka people and shared the pain of this battle with them, and that is the source of our relationship. That's why the previous Sinutapka-unmat married the previous Omampeska-unkur here. That's why my sister and I are here. (...).

It has long been said that the golden otters, which Iskar-unmat used to attract with bait, are the cause of wars, so it seems that what happened in the past is happening again in the present world. My villagers, Poiyaumpe, the leader of the continentals, is the leader of my people, even if he is a continental. If they attack us like this, we will stand together on their side and share the hardships of this battle.

Based on this, it is possible to determine that the antagonist is Kanesanta-unmat, who has allies. There are also two scenes in Yayashi's version that reinforce both Kanesanta-unmat's antagonism and her close relationship with Iskar-unmat.

In the past there was a similar war, where the antagonist was Kanesanta-unmat's mother, who confronted Poiyaumpe's parents. But why did mother and daughter want to provoke these wars? Faced with this question, Nakagawa (2020d, 50) states that there would be a special bond between the Iskar and the Kanesanta and that Iskar-unmat's competition to choose a son-in-law means that this son-in-law can be part of this otter trade. However, this barely connects the Sinutapka with the Kanesanta. This scholar states that the fact that Kanesanta-unmat calls Iskar-unmat "sister" means that the previous Kanesanta-unmat was married to a previous generation of Iskar-unkur. They would have had at least four children, a pair of siblings in Kanesanta and a pair raised in Iskar.

If this bold but plausible interpretation is followed—which is based on the premise that this same war already occurred in the past—it is likely that the ancient Kanesanta-unmat, who was not yet married to Iskar-unkur, released a sea otter to choose her husband. Poiyaumpe's father, by refusing to marry her, would have triggered the previous war. During the battle, he married Omampeska-unmat and they had Kamui Otopus and Poiyaumpe (the Wakarpa version does not explicitly say it, but the Yayashi version clearly states that the previous Omampeska-unmat married Sinutapka-unkur), although both lost their lives in the battle. The reason why Kanesanta-unmat obsessively pursues Poiyaumpe's life is that he was the son of an enemy who rejected her mother's marriage proposal. She sought revenge alongside her blood sister, Iskar-unmat.

To this, it can be added the folkloric component derived from the fact that Kanesanta-unmat is possessed by a deity otter, bearing the epithet “rakko-turen-mat” (lit. ‘woman possessed by the sea otter’). As the usual subtitle of *Kutune Sirka* indicates, “Henkai no hyōi kyōfu no hyōi” (lit. ‘strange possession, terrifying possession’), this is a story in which possessions hold importance.

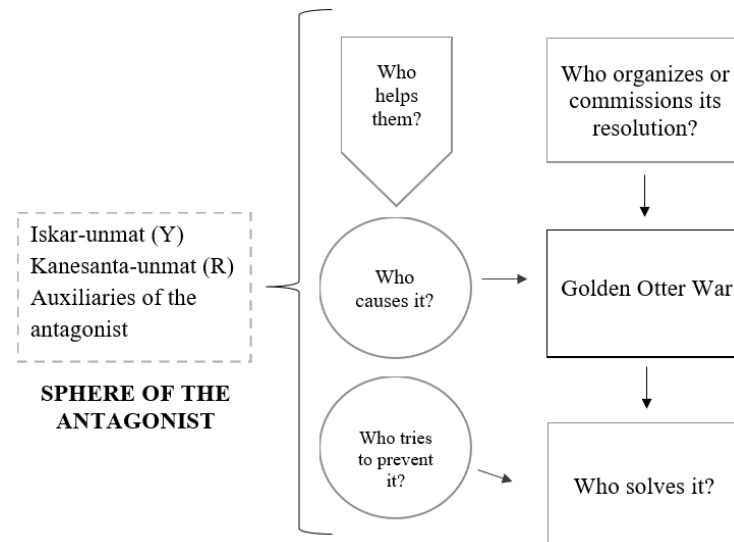


Image 3. The Sphere of the Antagonist in the *Kutune Sirka*.

Thus, as the previous diagram shows, it is possible to observe that the sphere of the antagonist is also diverse, the main antagonists being a Repunkur and a Yaunkur. In fact, considering the role of the Iskar, it is even possible to consider that the origin of the conflict is internal. Regarding the auxiliaries of the antagonists, they are numerous and not very significant, but it is worth noting the following point highlighted by scholar Endo Shiho (2014). Depending on the Ainu narrative tradition that is being analyzed, there is a style that prefers large-scale battles (requiring the resurrection of enemies) and another style that favors individual battles (without resurrection). In summary, the auxiliaries of the antagonists are resurrected when the tradition follows the pattern of large-scale battles, where many enemies are needed. But only strong adversaries are resurrected.

In the Japanese case, it is not as complicated to establish the origin of the conflict, as it is clearly situated in the external realm: the revolts in the surrounding areas of Yamato caused by men and gods. The clear enemies of Yamato Takeru are, therefore, the Kumaso-takeru brothers (or Torishi-kaya), Izumo-takeru, Sagamu’s ruler (or Suruga’s bandits), Emishi chiefs, and the deities, depicting the hero’s journey from the south to the north of the Japanese archipelago. There has been speculation about a more historically accurate characterization of these enemies, but it is not necessary to delve into that now to develop the hero’s relationships with them, as they all suffer from the same Manichaeic perspective.

There is barely any communication with these enemies. The gods have no voice, and humans are instruments to emphasize the attributes of the hero. For example, the hero receives his title “the brave of Yamato” from the gods, Kusanagi gets its name from Sagamu’s ruler, and the hero receives praise as a man in the image of the gods from the Emishi. Overall, throughout the trials, the identity of this hero is constructed, becoming increasingly melancholic but never showing any humanity towards the uncivilized enemy. It is necessary to mention the description the emperor gives of the Emishi, with

whom there is speculation about a certain connection to what would later become the Ainu people.

Amongst these Eastern savages, the Yemishi are the most powerful. (...). Brothers are suspicious of one another. When ascending mountains, they move like flying birds; when traversing through the grass, they are like fleet quadrupeds. When they receive a favor, they forget it, but if an injury is done to them, they never fail to revenge it. Therefore, they keep arrows in their top-knots and carry swords within their clothing. (...). (Aston 1896, 203)

This description is striking because it bears some similarities to the description of the hero of the *Kutune Sirka* and other Ainu heroes such as the one in Nitaipakaye, that is, to the Satsumon and Ainu description of themselves: powerful people who fight brothers without knowing it, who fly powered by their turen-kamui, who transform themselves into four-footed animals like the fox, who are thirsty for revenge and carry swords like the *Kutune Sirka*.

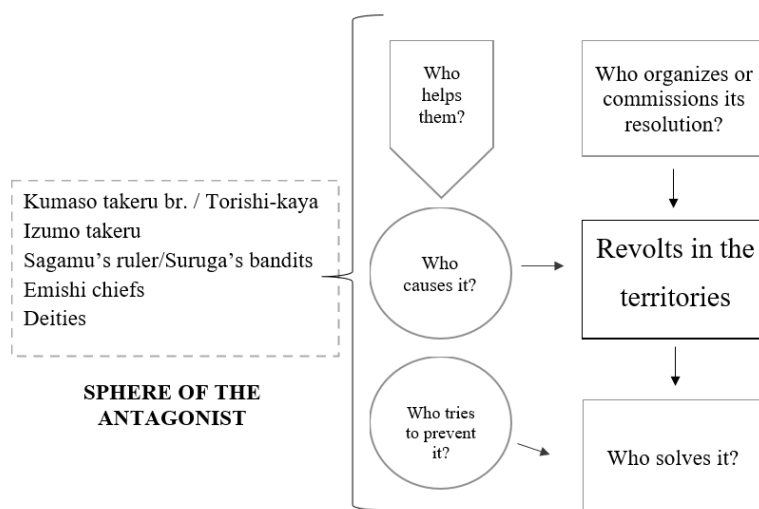


Image 4. The Sphere of the Antagonist in the *Cycle of Yamato Takeru*.

What ultimately emphasizes the imperial discourse of the Japanese hero is that, in addition, he subjugates the gods—who are seen as enemies as much as humans—in order to tranquilize nature and, implicitly, legitimize Yamato’s royal family as a religious or ideological power over the natural world. The hero’s final death only emphasizes the extremity of his devotion to the emperor.

### 3.2. The Spirit of the Frontier

In short, the Ainu protagonist's sphere consists of Repunkur allies, while the Japanese protagonist's sphere consists only of actants from the Yamato Kingdom. On the other hand, the sphere of the antagonist Ainu also features Yaunkur characters, while the sphere of the Japanese antagonist only features enemies from outside the Yamato Kingdom. This analysis and the background that could explain it seem to be able to help us to ascribe the Ainu epic to one of the taxonomic categories offered by comparative epic: the frontier epic.

The concept of “frontier epic” or “border epic” has been mentioned by authors such as Lynn T. Ramey (2006), Dean A. Miller (2003), and Robert I. Burns (1999). The latter, in “The Significance of

the Frontier”, proposes the definition of a frontier as “people of different cultures struggle with each other for control of resources and political power,” which can be inclusive or exclusive depending on the moment. To place frontier epic within the broader panorama of the epic genre, Montaner (Montaner Frutos 2018, 109) suggests the following classification: Interior Epic and Exterior Epic, which has two subtypes called Holy War Epic <sup>(1)</sup> and Frontier Epic

The frontier entails many implications, not only at the geopolitical or physical level but also cultural, identity-based, and, therefore, narrative implications. Barth (1998) comments that while it is recognized that it is no longer valid to think that each tribe or people have preserved their culture thanks to warlike ignorance towards their neighbors, there is still a simplistic idea that geographic and social isolation have been the fundamental elements in preserving cultural diversity. However, empirical research leads to the conclusion that contact between two different ethnic groups does not prevent the persistence of boundaries. In fact, it is precisely these boundaries that allow for significant relationships between the two sides of the frontier through dichotomized ethnic statuses. In other words, in such a social system, interaction between cultures does not necessarily lead to their disappearance through change and acculturation. Cultural differences can be maintained despite interaction and mutual dependence between ethnic groups.

It is in this “osmotic and inclusive” condition of the frontier where its specific mentality lies. The “spirit of the frontier” has been defined by Montaner (2018) as the spirit of those who become self-made people on the frontier in contrast to those settled in the interior. In other words, the frontier spirit is that of acquiring wealth. Economic considerations emphasize the practical dimension rather than the theoretical or ideological dimension of the confrontation with the external other. For example, in the case of the Ainu, we have discussed the economic motivation surrounding the trade in sea otters, since it is likely that the underlying issue was a fur trade dispute between Sakhalin and Hokkaido. The narrative describes the conflict between the Satsumon culture and the Ohotsk culture over the rights to trade “rakko” pelts. The Ohotsk culture, which existed between the 5th and 13th centuries, lost these rights to the Ainu, who emerged from the Satsumon culture. Japanese historical records confirm that the Ainu were the ones who held the rights to trade “rakko” pelts (Sekiguchi 2013). According to Barth’s terminology (Barth 1998, 19–20), this would indicate a “partial competition within the same niche”, where “one would expect one such group to displace the other”, while with the Japanese, there was initially a relationship of “monopolizing separate territories” and “providing important goods and services for each other”.

In fact, in frontier epic, the consideration of the external Other tends to be neutral, depending largely on the circumstances. It is an “attitude of vigilant good neighborliness”. Therefore, one can expect certain similarities in the literary productions of frontier societies. Ultimately, Montaner (2018) proposes the term “frontier epic” for epic productions that are elaborated according to the system of representations and values specific to frontier areas: the frontier spirit, which highlights the non-exclusive consideration of the Other. On the other hand, based on the epic of the Byzantine-Islamic frontier, Pertusi (1971) identified eight characteristics of the frontier hero (excellence, horseman, combative, chivalrous, abduction of women, conversion of religion, religious mysticism, individualism), but they are too culturally specific.

In any case, to characterize a work within the subgenres of frontier epic, it is more about identifying predominant features rather than exclusive characteristics. However, it is not enough to discover the presence of various elements or narrative motifs related to the frontier epic in order to identify a work as part of the subgenre. What needs to be done is to distinguish analogy (formal similarity) from homology (functional similarity) (Montaner 2020), like it has been shown in the analysis. If an element does not fulfill a similar function, it does not constitute a generic marker of the frontier modalities. This implies that the spirit or mentality of the frontier is translated into the characterization of the actants and the relationships among them. This spirit is key to determining whether a work formally linked to the frontier truly belongs to the frontier epic functionally.

#### 4. Conclusion

Formally, from the point of view of analogy, it seemed that the relationship with the Otherness in both heroes was similar, since in appearance they are two heroes with magic swords and they fight against a foreign enemy on the frontier. However, this analysis has shown that the relationships between the protagonist and the actants on the other side of the frontier are functionally very different in each work.

Firstly, the Ainu hero reveals himself as an archetype of the frontier hero. His frontier spirit—in contrast with Yamato Takeru's imperial spirit, that he himself mentions (Aston 1896, 204)—makes this clear, as there is an evident desire to forge his own destiny with an osmotic and inclusive relation with the Other. This has been shown in the analysis and it might be a consequence of his main motivations: pride (his immature and selfish personality), self-improvement (always looking for the strongest rival), and personal gain (he is not son of gods, even if he has their intervention to fight to maintain the family status), setting aside religious or ideological considerations that lead to Manichean perspectives of the Other. This pragmatic and individualistic approach distinguishes him and makes him a frontier hero, rather than just a hero *on* the frontier.

The frontier character of the Ainu hero shines in the light of the Japanese hero, who is clearly different. In comparison to Poiyaumpe and other heroes who faithfully serve their kings, such as the Spanish hero El Cid of Castile, Yamato Takeru lacks a special autonomy that distances him from the spirit of the frontier and conditions his relationship with the Other. His Manichean nature is manifested in his adherence to an ideology and obedience to the emperor. His struggle not only serves a personal purpose but is imbued with a sense of duty towards a broader ideal that is not his own but emanates from unwavering loyalty to his leader. The heroism of the character is based on being a willing victim of a superior destiny dictated by the emperor, in his commitment to the divine mission of defending and expanding the Yamato kingdom according with the political order influenced by China. In dealing with the Other, this implies a very simple characterization of the enemy. These descriptions highlight the dehumanized and Manichean caricature of the enemy (not only of the Emishi, but of all those living outside Yamato), more similar to that of the holy war epic.

This relationship with the Otherness distinguishes two different heroic models. Fundamentally, all peoples struggle for matters of survival and conquest, with varying degrees of ambition. However,

Japanese epic reflects a highly distinct social context in which written epic has predominantly assumed an ideological function for both internal (*Kojiki*) and external (*Nihon Shoki*) purposes. In contrast, the Ainu *yukar* appears to be a reflection of a frontier society where, although there may be an implicit message regarding commercial matters, it does not present an ideology surrounding the heroic figure. Thus, as opposed to the "imperial spirit" of Yamato Takeru, which represents a political narrative of service and legitimization of a dynastic state, we find the "frontier spirit" of the Ainu hero Poiyaumpe, placing this heroic model in a broader panorama of comparative epics.

### Notes

- (1) The concept of "holy war" epic was also developed in a very specific cultural environment, primarily applied to French, Spanish, Arabic, and Byzantine epics. Because of this, it is necessary to clarify that this concept is used here only in its essence, in its minimal characteristic, which is the predominance of superior ideology over economic pragmatism and individual sentiments such as honor or fame. In the frontier epic, on the other hand, economic pragmatism and these individual sentiments prevail as the hero's main motivations. In conclusion, although the term "holy war" is used, it does not imply that there must be an explicitly religious war like the epic of holy war between Muslims and Christians.

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