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Food as Contact Zone: Navigating the Ainu–Wajin Encounter in *Golden Kamuy* (2014–)

IN HER 2004 ANALYSIS of the Japanese food comic *Oishinbo* (1988–1992), Lorie Brau grounds her research with a deceptively simple question: "How does food . . . forge and mediate relationships and construct cultural identity?" (34). Brau's analysis of gourmet comics *(gurume manga)* shows that representations of food can serve as powerful conduits of ideology, even having the capacity to "communicate feelings more effectively than can language" (44). With our ability to connect through cuisine, food-related content has only increased in popularity in Japanese manga, televisual media, and light novels since the 1980s. In anime and manga, food serves diverse roles. It has been used as a vehicle to explore the Japanese countryside in series such as *Laid-back Camp* (Yurukyan; manga 2015 to present; anime 2018–21) and even served as a contentious battleground at a culinary institute in *Food Wars!* (Shokugeki no Sōma; manga 2012–19; anime 2015–20). While these and earlier examples of gourmet manga and anime are often grounded in the spaces of everyday, domestic life, food-related narratives have undergone a renaissance that stretches the boundaries of both taste and audience. From action-packed *shōnen* anime to otherworldly, or *isekai,* fantasy narratives, the visuality of cooking now features prominently across all genres.

Food in anime and manga tends to follow a predictable visual aesthetic characterized by naturalism. We see close-ups of the light glistening off the surface of morsels, and we perceive the heat and steam rising from the plate. For the audience, the payoff of the spectacle is when a character tastes the food for the first time as we wait with anticipation to see their face transform into blissful satisfaction or recoil in disgust. Scenes like these are memorable in the award-winning series *Golden Kamuy* (Gōruden

Kamui; manga 2014–22; anime 2018 to present) by Satoru Noda. While not traditionally a gourmet manga, cooking and eating together nevertheless play a critical role in demonstrating the bonds between characters.

Golden Kamuy is set in the Meiji period (1868–1912) after Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5). While ostensibly an adventure story about finding hidden Ainu gold, many parts of the narrative are dedicated to the developing and unlikely friendship between the two protagonists, Sugimoto, a Wajin (ethnic Japanese)[1] veteran of the war, and Asirpa, a young Ainu girl. The Ainu are an Indigenous people native to the northern extents of the Japanese archipelago. Historically, they occupied the island of Hokkaido, the Russian peninsula of Sakhalin, and the Kurile Islands, which stretch northeast toward Kamchatka. In the late nineteenth century, Japan colonized the territory and instituted harsh assimilation policies not unlike what can be seen across the United States in its quest to become a modern, global power. In *Golden Kamuy,* characters are navigating not only their cultural differences on an interpersonal level but also the structural complexities of historical Ainu–Wajin relationships and settler colonialism.

As a work of historical fiction, *Golden Kamuy* has received praise for Wajin author Satoru Noda's careful research of Ainu culture. In the relative absence of positive representations of the Ainu in popular culture in the 1990s and early 2000s (Chupuchisekor 2000; Spiker 2020), Noda's researched representations of Ainu culture, language, clothing, food, and values are notable in the contemporary media landscape. When asked by an interviewer why he chose to focus a manga on the Ainu, Noda explained that even though the Ainu are often associated with dark images of persecution and discrimination, he was convinced that if the Ainu were portrayed in a bright and interesting way, the manga would become popular (Noda 2016). According to Noda, many Ainu whom he interviewed while collecting materials said, "You don't need to draw the pitiful Ainu (可哀想なアイヌ) anymore. Please draw strong Ainu" (Noda 2016). The result was a young, fearless female protagonist in the character of Asirpa. While doing this work, Noda conferred with many individuals, including Mokottunas Kitahara, an Ainu scholar at the Hokkaido University Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies, and Hiroshi Nakagawa, a linguist who specializes in the Ainu language. Noda also consulted the Hokkaido Ainu Association, six different regional museums on Ainu culture, and a nongovernmental organization for media creation in Hokkaido. Many tools, objects, and outfits that appear in the *Golden Kamuy* manga and anime are directly based on historical examples found in these institutions. The anime is also one of the first popularized series to include segments in

the Ainu language with Japanese subtitles (Ito 2022, 39). Noda's approach earned him the Social Impact Award at the twenty-fourth Japan Media Arts Festival for "his contribution to Ainu culture and understanding" (Mesmer 2022). Nevertheless, public Ainu responses to *Golden Kamuy* have been mixed. Ainu artist Toru Kaizawa credits *Golden Kamuy* for increasing commercial interest in his art, as Noda used Kaizawa's carefully carved *makiri* knives as models for some that appear in the series (*47News* 2020). Kaizawa now has a small *Golden Kamuy* corner in his artist's workshop. However, others in the Ainu community have not been as complimentary. Ryoko Tahara, president of the Ainu women's group Menoko Mosmos (Wake Up, Ainu Women) and leader of Ainu Women for the Safeguard of Ainu Food Culture, said of *Golden Kamuy,* "Who is mostly represented in this manga? The Japanese or the Ainu? I can't decide" (Mesmer 2022). Nevertheless, with more than nineteen million copies of the manga sold, *Golden Kamuy* is reaching a broad audience consisting of both domestic and international viewers (Taniguchi 2022; Mesmer 2022).

Golden Kamuy first debuted in *Weekly Young Jump* for the *seinen,* or young adult male, demographic. Although the series is not billed as "gourmet"—its genre is often listed as action/adventure, historical fiction, or even Japanese-style Western—food nevertheless plays a vital role in the series from the very first episode. Japanese and Anglophone fans alike have often described the series as a "cooking manga" or "cooking show" on Twitter or in the comments on official YouTube trailers for the anime. One user on Twitter dubbed the series a "Hokkaido gourmet adventure story" (北海道グルメ珍道中) (Sanbon 2021). Another fan explained in Japanese, "Every time I get a little tired from work I read *Golden Kamuy* and study Hokkaido. Yes, I am studying. I want to eat Ainu food~" (Komatsu 2020). In essence, viewers cannot fully appreciate the series without engaging in the visual spectacle of Ainu and Wajin food. *Golden Kamuy* richly depicts cooking in a way that often covers all aspects of culinary culture, from harvesting plants and hunting game to preparing and consuming each dish. With such detailed culinary scenes, the stark differences between Wajin and Ainu food become apparent to the viewer.

Even though the Ainu and Wajin were maritime trading partners in their early history, their cultures contain innumerable differences, many of which are reflected in their foodways. While it is impossible to characterize the full diversity of these traditional practices in the space of this article, we can observe some key differences in historical attitudes toward meat and grain. For nearly twelve centuries, Japan officially banned the consumption of cattle, dogs, horses, chickens, and monkeys due to a policy put into place by Emperor Tenmu (r. 673–686), a devout Buddhist (Ishige

2001, 53). The ban was initially enforced only during the height of the farming season, but the practice solidified into a year-round prohibition. The call for compassion in Buddhism due to the teaching of the transmigration of souls intersected with Shintō notions of impurity *(kegare)* (Krämer 2008, 37). Although exceptions existed, especially for wild game, red meat was generally considered corrupt and unclean. Protein instead came from consuming fish, shellfish, rice, and nonrice grains. In 1872, Emperor Meiji reversed the ban on red meat as part of Japan's efforts to westernize. Furthermore, white rice was made more readily available for a greater number of Japanese due to the military draft during this time (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 39). As Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (1993, 106) postulated, the Meiji-period "discourse on the Japanese self vis-à-vis Westerners as other took the form of rice versus meat" (see also Krämer 2008, 35). In essence, rice-based Wajin cuisine *(washoku)* was developing as a part of budding nationalist discourse in contrast to meat-based Western cuisine *(yōshoku)*. The narrative of *Golden Kamuy* takes place after these changes to Wajin foodways were already set in motion in the late nineteenth century. By the time of the Russo-Japanese War, meat was a symbol of modernity and was consumed with increasing regularity in Japan.

In contrast to Wajin, the Ainu had little history of farming and depended heavily on hunting, fishing, and gathering for their food. Regarding the Hokkaido Ainu, anthropologist Hitoshi Watanabe (1999, 199) explains that their foodways can be best understood through five resource-distribution zones that inform the placement of Ainu villages, called *kotan*. These villages were often situated near the spawning ground of dog salmon, with a nearby branch river for fishing cherry salmon (zone 1). Salmon—both fresh and preserved—formed a major staple of the Ainu diet. Zone 2 comprised the riverbanks for the harvesting of edible plants during various seasons, such as lily root *(turep)* in summer. Zone 3, the river terraces at the edge of the *kotan,* and zone 4, the mountainous sides along the river course, were used for Sika deer hunting in autumn and winter/early spring, respectively. Zone 5 was the source of the salmon river in the mountains, where bear was hunted periodically by the most skilled men of the village. Thus Ainu food consumption adapted alongside the natural cycles of their environment—from the growth and disappearance of plants to animal movements and hibernation (Watanabe 1999, 199–200). Whereas fresh food was consumed during the summer and spring, the Ainu depended primarily on preserved salmon and deer to last the harsh winters.

These animals and plants also form a cornerstone of Ainu spiritual practice. The Ainu believe that animals like the salmon or the bear are the disguised bearers of *kamuy*—or deities. Hisakazu Fujimura (1999,

193) describes *kamuy* as "a generic term for both physical and immaterial entities on the earth who possess abilities superior to those of man." If the salmon was a disguised bearer of an animal *kamuy,* then the Ainu welcomed the salmon as an honored guest because they depended on the fish to live (Watanabe 1999, 200). The Ainu sent the *kamuy* home through a ritual to ensure they would visit again in future cycles. As described by Ainu woodcarver Debo Akibe (2022, 1:02:00), *kamuy* and humans live together in mutual dependence. As Watanabe (1999, 200) explains, "[the Ainu] believed that the periodicity of their habitat was not due to scientific principles but was a phenomenon maintained and guaranteed by their ceremonial activities. This belief is clearly expressed in Ainu animal rituals." When the Meiji government seized control of Ainu territory, many restrictions were instituted to assimilate the Ainu to Wajin culture and discourage Indigenous customs. In addition to being dispossessed of ancestral lands, the Ainu were banned from hunting deer and fishing salmon for subsistence in the late nineteenth century. Because these practices were deeply tied to the Ainu spiritual ecosystem, banning them meant that certain rituals meant to return favor to the *kamuy* could no longer be carried out.[2]

Historically, the Meiji period was a time of great transition for both Wajin and Ainu food cultures, often in response to shifting governmental policies and priorities. *Golden Kamuy* is set during this era. Many questions about identity and culture are explored through food preparation and consumption, even if food exists outside the driving quest that fuels the narrative. In watching these characters cook and dine together, we also see them traverse their differences and explore the possibilities of cross-cultural connection in the show—a gesture that mirrors current real-world initiatives to build understanding between the Ainu and Wajin peoples.

This essay explores the role of food culture in creating a "contact zone" between the Ainu and Wajin characters in the diegetic space of the series. In her discussion of travel literature, Mary Louise Pratt (1991, 34) defines contact zones as the "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today." In the fictional narrative, Asirpa and Sugimoto's encounter with one another in the context of Japanese settler colonialism is asymmetrical in many ways. There are also differences in age and gender, which complicate the power balance within their relationship. However, the social spaces of hunting, preparing, and eating serve as a contact zone within the narrative where the two characters clash and grapple with attraction and disgust through their discovery of one

another's foodways. It is within these slower-paced, intimate moments of eating that characters come closer and grow apart, and food plays an outsized role in introducing and experiencing the culture of the Other within the show. The result is ultimately transformative within the narrative.

However, the representation of food in *Golden Kamuy* is rhetorical in the way that it helps the reader/viewer navigate the encounter between Wajin and Indigenous Ainu. In his 1969 essay on rhetorical practice and food, Kenneth Burke (1969, 172–73) explains,

> Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is "meaning," there is "persuasion." Food, eaten and digested, is not rhetorical. But in the meaning of food there is much rhetoric, the meaning being persuasive enough for the idea of food to be used, like the ideas of religion, as a rhetorical device for statesmen.

Food in *Golden Kamuy* is not merely about eating. Instead, food scenes work rhetorically to persuade the viewer about the viability of cross-cultural collaboration in contemporary Japan. I argue that these moments in the manga and anime help the viewer to focus on the characters' shared humanity to idealize a world where authentic relationships between Ainu and Wajin people are not only possible but equitable. However, while the fictional food contact zones within the series are deeply meaningful for the characters, such encounters in the real world do not always lead to the radical transformation of social relations. In fact, they can lead to further reproduction of existing power structures. As such, it is critical to move beyond fiction to consider how representations like those found in *Golden Kamuy* echo contemporary rhetoric around bridging Ainu and Wajin cultures in Japan.

FOOD AS CONTACT ZONE

"Food is no simple matter," explains Tomoko Aoyama (2008, 2). In her extensive analysis of food representation in Japanese literature, Aoyama explains how the rituals of preparation and consumption serve as a way to develop relationships and come into contact with the unknown. Aoyama's framing of the many ways food connects to life-forms an essential model for the diverse ways I see food operating as a contact zone in *Golden Kamuy.* She writes,

> Food nourishes and poisons, it soothes and tortures, divides as well as unites individuals and groups of people. Food is essential, but it can also be seen as optional, superfluous, or extravagant. Food plays important roles in various types of rituals. It also serves as a means of communicating and acting out our religious, political, philosophical, and cultural views or of expressing

> a range of emotions. Food may be an object of intense desire, admiration, addiction, craving, fear, disgust, and loathing, or it may be ignored or rejected either intentionally or unintentionally. Food involves production, distribution, preparation, and consumption, and in each process there are rules, taboos, structures, order, customs, styles, fashions, and conventions to create, to follow, or to break. Food has been discovered, invented, classified, and scrutinized, as well as enjoyed, consumed, and devoured. It is, to borrow Gaye Poole's words, "a polysemous signifier that articulates in concrete terms what is very often internal, vague, abstract." (2)

While lengthy, this definition is helpful in its breadth as Aoyama builds on the scholarship of Gaye Poole (1999, 2–4) and Maggie Kilgour (1990, 3). She challenges us to see beyond the binary relationships of cooked–raw, host–guest, and familiar–foreign to understand how food often subverts hierarchies through instances of ambiguity (Aoyama 2008, 2). Although ingesting food may seem like a straightforward act, we all know that eating (or refusing to do so) carries a broad range of meanings and implications. Food serves as a means of communication, but not toward any singular narrative. The same meal can show one's belonging to a particular community and make another feel alienated from it. As Aoyama describes, the ambiguity of food contributes to the complexity of our social interactions. When it comes to engaging with other cultures, food production, distribution, preparation, and consumption become sites of *active* negotiation where the terms are slippery and shifting. Even if the relations of power are often uneven, contact zones are nevertheless spaces of transcultural collaboration.

The concept of the contact zone has found broad employment in food studies to describe how we negotiate differences through food. James Farrer (2015a, 8) expands Pratt's original definition when he writes, "As cuisines and the people producing them move across borders, the spaces of food production and consumption become *culinary contact zones,* or spaces of cultural friction and creativity, including physical settings such as kitchens or virtual spaces such as online communities." Farrer (2015b) focuses on the unequal social relations found in Western fine-dining restaurants in Shanghai for both producers and consumers. Though we see the exchange of ideas and information, the culinary contact zone that Farrer describes does not radically transform inequities of power in this instance; it often reinforces them. More recently, Yuk Wah Chan (2021) has written about "food contact zones" where migrant servants live in middle-class households in close quarters in Hong Kong. New foodways emerge from these encounters, but like the work of Farrer, Chan finds

that the experience falls short of leading to more equitable outcomes. Finally, the notion of a contact zone has also been applied in a Japanese context by Daisuke Yasui (2012) to specifically address the food encounters of Okinawan, Korean, and Latin American minorities in Tsurumi Ward in Yokohama. Moving beyond the binary of majority–minority, Yasui (2012) describes how these groups make full use of their ethnic representations to construct social relationships around food. He describes three dimensions of ethnic boundary change that arise from these contacts: strengthening, defecting, and refixing (64–69). Yasui's research shows that the contact zone can bring about a range of different responses. Although the possibility for transformation because of these encounters is ever present in the contact zone, its success is not guaranteed.

Whereas Farrer, Chan, and Yasui are all discussing real-world encounters, culinary contact zones also find representation in literature and visual culture. In some ways, the fictional worlds of manga and anime may allow for a more optimistic reading of how a contact zone could be transformative, at least in theory. The many scenes of procuring, preparing, and consuming food together in *Golden Kamuy* allow us to see these two characters navigate their cultural differences. Though each is ultimately changed by the encounter, the process is represented as nonlinear and filled with leaps of faith and setbacks. Although *Golden Kamuy* is a work of fiction—and might be idealistic when compared to actual studies of real-world culinary contact zones seen in the work of these authors—the concept of the contact zone is, nevertheless, analytically productive.

Examining the role of eating in the first few episodes of the anime's first season helps us see how food is used to define the relationship between Asirpa and Sugimoto. Although *Golden Kamuy* is known for its action scenes' intensity, the cooking moments unfold at a much slower pace. In both the manga and the anime, each step of the process is outlined to teach the viewer about traditional Ainu foodways and how they contrast to those of Wajin. In many ways, the character Sugimoto serves as a stand-in for a domestic Wajin viewer encountering Ainu food and culture for the first time. As we watch Sugimoto and Asirpa eat, we also see a range of different emotions—from fear to excitement—at various moments of the process. Eating in *Golden Kamuy* involves both trust and risk in equal measure. Closely reading these vivid food scenes highlights how the series might be understood as a gourmet manga and anime. It also helps us understand how food is used as a device to frame a contact zone between a Wajin and an Ainu character.[3] Because representation does not occur in a vacuum, we can compare what is seen in the series with the increasing attention on Indigenous issues in contemporary Japan.

Figure 1. Asirpa puts the squirrel *chitatap* into the soup *(ohaw)* and simmers it until complete. Screen capture from *Golden Kamuy,* episode 2.

Squirrel *Chitatap* and Brain (Season 1, Episode 2)

One of the earliest cooking experiences highlighting *Golden Kamuy*'s use of food to explore intercultural relationships occurs in the second episode, when Asirpa teaches Sugimoto how to prepare squirrel. The scene takes place in the winter, inside a small camp. After scoring the pelt and skinning the squirrel, Asirpa creates two dishes: *chitatap* and raw brain. According to Ainu linguist Hiroshi Nakagawa (2019, 169), *chitatap* means "thing that is finely chopped." *Chitatap* is an Ainu dish that involves chopping the raw meat of fish or small game animals until it becomes a paste. The paste is flavored with spring onion *(pukusa)* or gyōja garlic *(kotobiro)* and seasoned with dried kelp and salt (Slow Food 2021, 3:17). Although *chitatap* is most often eaten raw in warmer seasons, in winter, when meat would be eaten over several days, the mixture would sometimes be simmered in soup, as seen in *Golden Kamuy* (Figure 1), or grilled on skewers (Haginaka et al. 1992, 109; Slow Food 2021, 1:58). While commonly made with salmon head, milt, and other scraps from the fillet, *chitatap* could also be made with other fish, such as Japanese dace or Japanese fluvial sculpin, as well as animals like

Figure 2. Asirpa is making *chitatap* from a squirrel. Screen capture from *Golden Kamuy,* episode 2.

rabbit, bear, deer, and chipmunk. According to Haginaka et al. (1992, 108–14), *chitatap* was often used with the meat of older animals because it made it easier to eat.

In the anime, Asirpa uses squirrel meat, organs, and small bones for the dish. After removing the gallbladder, she chops the mixture with a knife called a *tashiro* (Figure 2). As she rhythmically makes contact with the tree stump she uses as a cutting board, she says, "*Chitatap, chitatap.*"[4] Asirpa teaches Sugimoto how to prepare the dish, and he models the chopping process under her watchful eye. She also teaches him the Ainu expression *hinna* (commonly mistranslated into English and Japanese as a synonym for "tasty") and accompanying hand gestures that show respect to the *kamuy*.[5] When the meat is ready, Asirpa makes the decision to cook the meat, even though *chitatap* is usually eaten raw when the meat is fresh. She says, "But you're a rich and refined *sisam* [neighbor], so I'll put it all into an *ohaw* [soup] for you." For Sugimoto, the process is embodied as he prepares food in an Ainu fashion, eats Ainu food, and speaks Ainu vocabulary for the first time.

Sugimoto is not afraid of eating the cooked *chitatap*; he sees it through the lens of Wajin food, saying it is akin to fish ball soup. This kind of cultural relativism is common in *Golden Kamuy* as the characters navigate different foods and dishes. However, while *chitatap* might look appetizing,

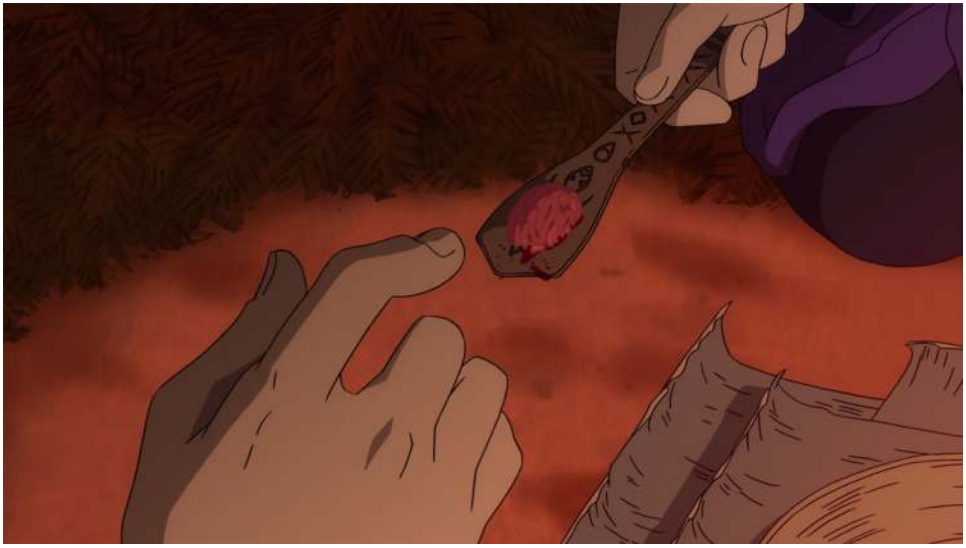

Figure 3. Saichi Sugimoto reaches out to try the raw squirrel brain that Asirpa offers. Screen capture from *Golden Kamuy,* episode 2.

Sugimoto expressed severe reservations about the other dish that Asirpa prepared for him prior to the *chitatap*—the raw brain of a squirrel. When Sugimoto asks with surprise and hesitancy, "Asirpa, do you eat it raw?" she responds by saying, "What does that mean? Do you have a problem with the way we eat?" with a deadpan look on her face. Sugimoto deflects and responds, "I'm just not used to eating stuff like that." Within Ainu culture, food is a gift from the *kamuy,* and nothing is left behind. As Asirpa offers Sugimoto the brain delicately positioned on a wooden spoon, he reaches toward it slowly and hesitantly (Figure 3). In this moment, Sugimoto is a stand-in for the general Wajin audience, confronted with the unknown. What would raw squirrel brain taste like? How would it feel in the mouth? Moreover, if we were confronted with food that triggered our disgust, would we eat it to establish a friendship? Asirpa, with her extensive knowledge of the land, has already proven herself as a competent fighter and as a useful resource to Sugimoto by this point in the series. By eating the brain, Sugimoto shows that he trusts Asirpa and thus enters a relationship with her. In this encounter, food is used to test the waters of trust. In addition to being an excellent early example of how *Golden Kamuy* uses food to create a sustained contact zone between characters, this episode establishes the importance of food, which will become a hallmark of the series.

Miso (Season 1, Episodes 3, 5, and 7)

The next episode becomes Asirpa's turn to eat the unfamiliar. They make rabbit *chitatap* together, using the same preparation method Sugimoto learned in the episode before. However, this time, Sugimoto introduces a twist. He brings out a package of miso paste. Miso, a flavoring agent known for its umami flavor, is created by fermenting soybeans, salt, and a fungus called *kōji*. However, its brown, paste-like appearance causes Asirpa to recoil, thinking it is *osoma,* or poop. She refuses to allow Sugimoto to pollute the Ainu dish. In addition to being a comedic exchange, the miso–*osoma* confusion becomes a running joke throughout the first season. It is perhaps one of the most iconic food scenes in the anime. *Golden Kamuy* is undoubtedly not the first to blur food and excrement to create humor. For instance, in her analysis of food, humor, and gender in Midori Osaki's (1933) *Wandering in the Realm of the Seventh Sense,* Aoyama (2019, 27–28) describes the obvious subversive overlap between the sound of the word *anko* (sweet red bean paste) made by the grandmother and the childish term *unko* (poo). In Osaki's work, food and excrement blur again and again for comic effect (Aoyama 2019, 26). Unlike in Osaki's novel, the miso–*osoma* humor in *Golden Kamuy* is not linguistic but visual. Whereas Sugimoto views miso as a comforting and nostalgic flavor, Asirpa sees nothing but abject excrement when she observes the sticky, muddy texture.

However, a couple of episodes later (episode 5), Asirpa finally comes around. Joined by another Wajin character named Shiraishi, the group sacrifices a horse they cannot take with them. When Shiraishi goes to local farmers to find ingredients for dinner, the mood becomes awkward. Asirpa says of the journey, "I know it's dangerous. I made my own decision that if I went with you, I might achieve my goal. The one who treated me like a child, didn't trust me as a partner, acted alone, made stupid choices, and was caught. . . . That was you!" When they return to their winter camp with the horse meat in tow, Shiraishi returns with the ingredients—burdock, cabbage, eggs, sugar, soy sauce, and sake. The mood remains sour until Shiraishi exclaims, "Let's eat some yummy stew and make up!" Despite the quarrel, they all work together to create a Wajin dish called *sakura nabe,* a horse meat hot pot. The dish is named as such because the meat is finished when it turns the color of *sakura* (cherry blossoms). Miso is an essential ingredient in the dish, causing Asirpa much consternation. Shiraishi replies, "The Japanese and the Ainu have culture gaps in unexpected places . . ." Although Sugimoto offers to remake the *sakura nabe* without miso, Asirpa reluctantly tries it, only to discover that miso does, indeed, taste good. The anime plays up her hesi-

Figure 4. Asirpa tries Japanese *sakura nabe* with miso paste. Screen capture from *Golden Kamuy,* episode 5.

Figure 5. Asirpa's dazzling reaction to the deliciousness of miso. Screen capture from *Golden Kamuy,* episode 5.

tancy as she shakily lifts the meat to her mouth with Sugimoto eagerly watching (Figure 4). Her face of initial disgust transforms into pure bliss, backgrounded by sparkles as she exclaims, "*Osoma* [poop] is delicious!" (Figure 5). This moment is a critical juncture early in the series in terms of their developing friendship. Not only were they wary of strange and unfamiliar foods but they were wary of each other. After a pivotal point in the first season when their budding friendship risked falling apart due

Figure 6. Asirpa secretly covets Sugimoto's miso while they make *yuk ohaw.* Screen capture from *Golden Kamuy,* episode 7.

to a lack of trust, creating this dish together allows Asirpa and Sugimoto to come together again. Asirpa's acceptance of miso as delicious might be seen as a metaphor for her acceptance of Sugimoto.

These initial scenes of Sugimoto and Asirpa trying one another's food set the stage for a more profoundly transformative contact zone in later episodes. The characters (and, by extension, the viewers) move beyond simply trying to understand the core differences between Ainu food and Wajin food. Instead, we see the characters begin experimenting with one another's foodways, resulting in hybrid culinary creations. This shift is best exemplified by episode 7, when Asirpa and Sugimoto make *ohaw,* a central dish for the Ainu during this period (Nakagawa 2019, 163). No specific ingredients are necessary to make *ohaw,* as it is a stock made from boiling fish or meat with vegetables. Still, different varieties are named according to their main ingredients, such as *kamuy ohaw* (bear soup), *cep ohaw* (fish soup), or *kina ohaw* (vegetable soup) (Haginaka et al. 1992, 35–37). Asirpa and Sugimoto make *yuk ohaw,* a savory hot pot flavored with deer meat. Asirpa begins the scene, which takes place inside the Ainu village, by maintaining her cultural boundaries. But she secretly covets Sugimoto's miso. In an exaggerated tone, she says, "I hope Sugimoto doesn't put *osoma* [poop] in the stew!" However, her actions belie her words: she cannot help but salivate at the idea (Figure 6). We see her

sneakily checking whether Sugimoto has taken out the miso throughout the scene. The contact zone has created a desire for food that fuses Ainu and Wajin flavors, a metaphor for their deepening friendship. While we witness the fusion of these two foods, we see Asirpa's and Sugimoto's attitudes toward one another shifting as well.

Woodcock *Chitatap* and Brain versus *Nanko Nabe* (Season 2, Episodes 14 and 15)

The importance of food as a rhetorical device to explore transcultural collaboration continues into the second season of the animation. With the relationship between Asirpa and Sugimoto established through eating together, later food scenes are used to help us explore connections with other Wajin and Ainu side characters. While food is often used to bridge gaps across cultures in the series, as seen with Sugimoto and Asirpa, it also foreshadows danger and betrayal.

One example of a positive encounter occurs in episode 15 and plays off the earlier scene involving squirrel *chitatap*. Asirpa and Sugimoto join with several companions to procure woodcock birds called *tureptacir*. They set up camp, and during the food preparation, Asirpa offers a raw woodcock brain to another Wajin character, Ushiyama. Ushiyama's facial expressions show both hesitancy and skepticism, mirroring Sugimoto's response earlier in the series. But at this point, Sugimoto's relationship with Asirpa has deepened to the extent that he will try and accept anything that she makes. Sugimoto encourages Ushiyama to eat the brain and helps instruct the rest of the team on making *chitatap* with the flesh. When the other Wajin characters do not take it seriously or do not chop it precisely as Asirpa instructed, Sugimoto reports back to her with a hint of frustration with his traveling party. But there is also pride in his voice. In this scene, not only are we seeing new Wajin characters engage with Ainu food culture for the first time but we are also witnessing Sugimoto's personal transformation. He enjoys Ainu food and feels proud of his ability to cook it as the Ainu character instructs.

However, not all scenes involving food are framed as positive. Food can also presage moments of danger for characters. In episode 14, a diverse cast sits together at a long table inside, enjoying *nanko nabe,* a Wajin dish from the Sorachi area in Hokkaido (Figure 7). The dish is prepared by the Wajin character Kano Ienaga, a serial killer and one of the escaped convicts from Abashiri Prison. The food encounter around *nanko nabe* occurs several episodes after Ienaga attempts to murder Asirpa, Sugimoto, and their crew. Ienaga is presumed dead, but she surprises the group when she appears in response to Asirpa's loud stomach rumbling, offering to make food.

Figure 7. *Nanko nabe* is a dish made from horse intestines. Screen capture from *Golden Kamuy,* episode 14.

Nanko nabe is similar to *sakura nabe* but is made with a different main ingredient. The word *nanko* means "horse intestine" in the local Japanese dialect, and the dish consists of a boiled offal stew from long intestines simmered in miso. Asirpa's party treats the food with trepidation. Shiraishi questions whether the meat Ienaga prepared is safe to eat, while the Tatar-Ainu character Kiroranke spits out the meat because he has a personal policy against consuming horses. Unlike the joyful, communal preparation and consumption of the *chitatap,* this scene contains a feeling of foreboding and caution. We do not see the meal being prepared, and it is not done so in community. When friends and enemies dine at the same table, everyone is ill at ease. Noda visually frames this scene in an unusual way that supports this interpretation (Figure 8). The characters all appear on one side of the table, facing the audience. This strange seating arrangement is recognizable as the composition of Leonardo da Vinci's fifteenth-century painting *The Last Supper.* In the anime, the action is temporarily stilled at this moment as the camera pans around the painting-like tableau and the viewer ponders the intertextual relationship between the *Golden Kamuy* cast and the biblical figures. Many deep readings can emerge from interpreting this scene's significance and the characters' positioning. Asirpa sits in the position of Jesus. To the left of Asirpa, Sugimoto stands in place of Peter, one of

Figure 8. The cast is composed as in Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper.* Screen capture from *Golden Kamuy,* episode 14.

the first disciples Jesus called to himself. Furthermore, Kiroranke—the only character not eating—sits in the position of Judas Iscariot, whose name is often synonymous with betrayal or treason. As the group eats the *nanko nabe* together, the at-home viewer looks for the traitor in their midst. This moment is a reminder that eating scenes tell the viewer important information about character and motivation. Although eating *nanko nabe* is not inherently dangerous, the refusal of the Ainu character to engage in the meal is symbolic within the series. At this moment, Kiroranke has something to hide. Moments like this serve as an excellent contrast to moments, such as the preparation of *chitatap,* that focus on transcultural collaboration in making food.

■ *GOLDEN KAMUY* AND INDIGENOUS FOOD: CONTACT ZONE AND IDEOLOGY

Food preparation and communal eating form a vital narrative device in *Golden Kamuy.* In the case of Asirpa and Sugimoto, the intimate scenes of preparing, cooking, and dining together are not perfunctory. They demonstrate each character's willingness to be vulnerable by getting outside what

they consider safe and familiar. In essence, the personal growth of each character is represented through their engagement with food culture and their exchange of cultural information. Not only do the characters become different as individuals but their cultural dishes show evidence of fusion. In many ways, the ability of the food contact zone to serve as a space of transformation between Ainu and Wajin characters is idealized in *Golden Kamuy*.

While these characters may achieve such ideals as the story progresses, we must question the role that *Golden Kamuy* plays in depicting the relationship between the Ainu and the Wajin for a domestic audience. As a popular media representation, it embeds ideology. Robert Ferguson (1998, 43) writes, "'Ideology' is not directly visible, but can only be experienced and/or comprehended. What is visible is a range of social and representational manifestations which are rooted in relationships of power and subordination." This idea is echoed by Stuart Hall (1981, 32), who explains how ideology becomes invisible through the naturalization of power relations so that we do not see—and rarely question—its historical construction (see also Kellner and Share 2019, 21). Ideology is most effective when it goes unnoticed. For many decades, predominantly negative images of the Ainu as an ethnic Other dominated televisual media, reinforcing and normalizing the hegemony of Wajin superiority (Chupuchisekor 2000). With the release of *Golden Kamuy,* many supporters of the series were relieved to see the strength of Asirpa and the attention to accuracy Satoru Noda brings. Although it is true that *Golden Kamuy* does not replicate the same ideologies around race seen in media of the 1990s and 2000s, it is nevertheless conversant with contemporary discussions around the concept of "ethnic harmony" *(minzoku kyōsei)* in modern Japan, even if this is never named.

The phrase *ethnic harmony* has a history in Japan, even if the historical relationship between the Wajin and the Ainu has been anything but "harmonious." In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Japan's colonization of Hokkaido brought suffering to the Ainu community that can be felt generations later. The Former Hokkaido Aborigines Protection Act of 1899 was designed to promote rapid assimilation of the Ainu into Wajin society by imposing harsh restrictions on expressions of Ainu life and culture. According to Richard Siddle (1999, 73), this also promoted the image of the Ainu as a "dying race" in both government policy and public opinion. These ideas were exacerbated as many young Ainu abandoned village life to move to the growing urban centers, searching for jobs and education (Fitzhugh 1999, 24). The long-term effects of these policies are felt in the present moment as the Ainu seek to maintain and promote their contemporary culture while fighting off years of embedded and racialized stereotypes.

Nevertheless, the concept of ethnic harmony between Ainu and Wajin was invoked in the Japanese Diet as recently as 2019 in the Act on Promoting Measures to Realize a Society in Which the Pride of the Ainu People Is Respected (Ainu Promotion Act), intended as an update to the 1899 Former Hokkaido Aborigines Protection Act. Although the new act officially recognizes the Ainu as an Indigenous people of Japan, it falls short of apologizing for colonial aggression. One of the things that the Ainu Promotion Act facilitated was the creation of the first National Ainu Museum, in Hokkaido, Japan. While the space is officially named Upopoy, or "singing together" in the Ainu language, the park was tentatively called the Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony (Minzoku Kyōsei Shōchō Kūkan) when the legislation was first proposed. Historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki problematized this concept and the institution's naming in a 2018 article:

> Is the "ethnic harmony" that the Space symbolizes a noble aspiration or a comforting illusion? In other words, will the displays of Ainu culture and history within the Space not only celebrate the beauty and richness of Ainu tradition, but also face up to painful legacies of colonization, dispossession and discrimination, thereby inaugurating a serious commitment to overcoming those legacies in order to achieve future ethnic harmony? Or will the Space present a "cosmetic multicultural" image, conveying to viewers the message that ethnic harmony has been achieved, or perhaps even that it has existed from time immemorial? (8)

Morris-Suzuki is forward looking in her essay and leaves space for the institution to do the right thing. However, with the grand opening of this park and museum initially timed to start alongside the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the risk of cosmetic multiculturalism, especially as represented to international visitors, was quite real. Telling the story of discrimination against the Ainu is not a major theme of the museum; it focuses instead on celebrating the richness of Ainu culture. While the museum has a proviso that experiences of discrimination should not be hidden, according to curator Masato Tamura (2020), if the museum overemphasizes discrimination against the Ainu, the Ainu may be perceived by visitors as a "people who can be bullied" (いじめてもいい人たち). Tamura explains that the museum made these decisions on the premise that the biggest audience was people without prior knowledge of the Ainu, including elementary school students who would tour the museum with their classes. As such, images that show evidence of discrimination (such as Edo-period Wajin-produced paintings called Ainu-e, which distort Ainu features) would be shown only in a special exhibition. While well meaning, this approach nevertheless presents a sanitized version of Ainu history that

allows Wajin visitors to leave the museum feeling good without considering their implications in this narrative. It makes the historical processes of discrimination against the Ainu invisible and privileges and serves a Wajin audience.

Unlike the National Ainu Museum, *Golden Kamuy* deliberately represents some moments of discrimination against the Ainu. This occurs as early as the second episode, when Asirpa is called Sugimoto's Ainu "pet dog" *(kaiinu)* by the character Shiraishi. While she says she is used to this treatment and brushes it off, the scene frames Asirpa's Otherness for the viewer. Nevertheless, despite these occasional moments, the show's primary focus is on Asirpa and Sugimoto's budding friendship, especially in the space of the food contact zone. The model of ethnic cooperation between the Wajin and the Ainu seen in *Golden Kamuy* occurs at the microlevel of social relations. In their essay titled "Urespa ('Growing Together'): The Remaking of Ainu–Wajin Relations in Japan through an Innovative Social Venture," Ainu scholar, activist, and artist Kanako Uzawa and anthropologist Mark K. Watson (2020) explore how college students at Sapporo University could foster meaningful social change through person-to-person interactions between Ainu and Wajin students. As a movement, it intends to create a bicultural environment in which Ainu and anyone interested in Ainu culture could collaborate. *Urespa* in the Ainu language means "growing together." They write, "Urespa [has] as much to do with what happens *within* individuals as between them" (56). The authors refer to this as "self-creation." They explain, "By intervening at the micro-level of social relations Urespa seeks to achieve change by allowing individuals to engage each other as friends and peers. This is a form of transcultural exchange that goes beyond passive respect and tolerance of difference to effect a new kind of vocabulary mobilized around concepts of solidarity, togetherness and social hope" (65). At the same time, they recognize that by focusing primarily on encounters between individuals, there is a risk of eliding the profound impact of structural discrimination and social marginalization (64). Although the Urespa model may work in the small-group setting, Uzawa and Watson discuss the difficulty of scaling up this model to a societal level (66).

Though quite different from the contemporary social venture that Uzawa and Watson (2020) describe, within the fictional world of *Golden Kamuy,* we see person-to-person social interactions that seem to facilitate this model in the way that characters learn and grow together toward a feeling of mutual "solidarity, togetherness and social hope" (65). The contact zone in which they engage is transformative; each character emerges differently from how they started. From the first

episode, *Golden Kamuy* sets up a narrative of growing together, especially between Sugimoto and Asirpa. As seen through the various exchanges over miso/*osoma*/poop, each character learns to trust the other and overcome their cultural differences to facilitate fruitful and meaningful collaboration and support mutual growth. In many ways, the success of their friendship also serves as a comparative example to understand other character relationships in the universe of the comic and animation. While Urespa and *Golden Kamuy* are unrelated, there is something similar in the focus on close person-to-person interaction, such as cooking and eating together in community.

While "ethnic harmony" or "growing together" might be what we witness in the fictional narrative of *Golden Kamuy,* the focus on interpersonal connection in the series can occasionally elide larger structural inequities between Wajin and Ainu communities, just as Uzawa and Watson (2020, 64) caution in their paper. What we gain in terms of intimacy and optimism in fiction, we lose in terms of scale and skepticism in reality. By closely focusing on the possibilities of friendship within a closed network, it is easy to gloss over the many difficulties Ainu communities faced in the early twentieth century. Ferguson (1998) suggests that this is a crucial feature of how ideology is rendered invisible. He suggests that the "systematic processes of historical racism are softened" (218) when programs dealing with ideological constructs, such as race, concentrate more on individual figures than on social relations. Critical moments of hunting, food preparation, and eating—which are iconic within *Golden Kamuy*—allow the viewer to focus on a narrative of individual characters at the expense of understanding the broader structural inequities that would make it difficult for them to engage in equal footing in the real world. While there is some recognition of discrimination within the series—something already quite remarkable within Japanese televisual media—there are also many instances in which Ainu lifeways and foodways are romanticized without attending to the violence of forced assimilation during the Meiji period that would have challenged these practices. The history of discrimination is "softened" by focusing on individual stories. To once again invoke Aoyama's (2008, 2) ideas about the ambivalence of food and its ability to concretize internal, abstract, and vague notions, *Golden Kamuy*'s invocation of food culture makes concrete for the viewer the viability of ethnic harmony and equal cooperation between the Indigenous Ainu and the Wajin. But food is rhetorical, and it persuades potential viewers that if Asirpa and Sugimoto can develop strong bonds in the food contact zone, then perhaps it is possible outside the series as well.

CONCLUSION

Revitalizing Ainu traditional foodways is critical in the years ahead to strengthen Ainu ethnic identity. In the region of the Saru River in Biratori, Hokkaido, nine local Ainu began a project called Aep in 1998 to collect traditional knowledge. Over the course of twenty-five interviews and field trips with Ainu elders, they learned about the elders' experience with Ainu foodways (Iwasaki-Goodman 2017, 1). These efforts have only intensified to include interventions to reintroduce Ainu food into this local community since 2004 (Iwasaki-Goodman 2017, 2). Anthropologist Masami Iwasaki-Goodman (2017) studied the impact of these revitalization activities after ten years had passed through a series of interviews. Because Ainu food preparation is carried out primarily by women, both past and present, the research team focused on mother–daughter transmission (2). Iwasaki-Goodman explains that the reintroduction of food is a site of dynamic social negation, not only between Ainu participants but also between Ainu and non-Ainu members of the local community (4–5). Through the interview process, it became apparent that many contemporary Ainu women commonly prepared traditional food but that it was "suppressed and disguised as Japanese food when the Ainu way of life was assimilated into Japanese society under the government's policy" (5). She writes, "Reintroduction of the once stigmatized food culture into the existing community has apparently contributed to changing the balance of social power that has existed for years. The informants expressed their feelings that they no longer feel inferior or shamed to identify themselves with the Ainu food and to publically enjoy their traditional food" (5). Iwasaki-Goodman's results show how food can serve as a symbol to reestablish the foundation for Ainu ethnicity as culturally distinct within local communities.

Other groups, such as the Ainu women's group Menoko Mosmos and Slow Food Nippon, argue that food can effectively build bridges between Ainu and Wajin cultures. Remi Ie, former president of Slow Food Nippon, suggests that "the celebration of Ainu food can be more powerful than 'fighting for indigenous rights.' People will see how important Ainu culture is by smelling and testing it first hand, and appreciating its connection to nature, spirituality, and a traditional knowledge of plants" (Prieto 2017). There is a tangible link between the preparation and consumption of food and understanding Ainu culture and traditions that informs Ie's response. Ainu foodways, spirituality, and culture are all indelibly linked to the land. However, simply ingesting food does not go far enough toward encouraging transcultural collaboration. In the slow food movement,

Ie recommends a real and physical engagement with food together in a community. Like what Uzawa and Watson (2020) advocate in their writing on Urespa and the lessons learned through food revitalization in Biratori, Hokkaido, the kind of education that Ie proposes works best in microcommunities and among peers.

For viewers and readers who are uninformed about the Ainu, *Golden Kamuy* has done much to expose people to new ideas about Ainu spirituality, language, and traditions, including the richness of Indigenous food culture. This kind of education through popular media is essential in a country where Ainu stories are not taught in most schools and narratives about the Ainu as a vanishing race continue to circulate. For these reasons, Noda's choice to make Asirpa a strong protagonist and use her character to explain these cultural dimensions is significant. She holds her own against Saichi Sugimoto and often comes across as the more informed of the two because of her knowledge of the environment and survival. In the slow moments of teaching each other how to prepare and enjoy food together, Asirpa and Sugimoto also teach us about Ainu traditional foods from the comfort of our own homes. The viewer navigates the unfamiliar as we watch each character venture outside their respective comfort zone to try something new. And we wait for the payoff of visualized satisfaction or disgust as both characters taste new foods and make new combinations of Ainu and Wajin dishes. *Golden Kamuy* is valuable for how it educates while it entertains (Ito 2022, 31). However, as shown by those who have researched real-world food and culinary contact zones in Asia (Farrer 2015; Chan 2021; Yasui 2012), these spaces of uneven exchange do not always guarantee a change in social or power relations.

Even mediatized food is not neutral. It embeds ideology in a variety of ways. As we watch the cooking scenes for which the show is known, the focus on personal growth and change between characters makes it easy to walk away from *Golden Kamuy* with a positive outlook on the possibility of equitable Ainu–Wajin relations. It lays bare the fact that Japan is not racially homogenous through its exploration of divergent food cultures. But with its strong focus on individual characters, the series downplays some of the more structural issues around race in Japan that would have not only impacted a woman like Asirpa in the early twentieth century but also continue to affect Ainu communities today. The ideology of ethnic harmony invoked by lawmakers and national institutions like Upopoy feels viable when we follow the compelling stories and relationships in *Golden Kamuy*. As sites like the National Ainu Museum downplay imagery of discrimination to focus only on the beauty, richness, and complexity

of Ainu cultural heritage, we must wonder about the long-term impacts of this approach that celebrates multiculturalism in Japan without either apology for colonial aggressions or infrastructural change.

Because there is an absence of education (and representation) of Ainu culture in Japan, viewers often accept the information presented in *Golden Kamuy* as unadulterated fact, even though the series is ultimately a well-researched work of fiction. Though beyond the scope of this essay, we need to question how the ideology buried within the show will influence Wajin and international tourists interested in engaging with Ainu cultural material, especially as fans begin to visit sites in Hokkaido grounded in what they see in *Golden Kamuy*. On one hand, this might present a significant opportunity for people to connect deeply through education about and preparation of food, following the hopes and goals of Slow Food Nippon and Ainu women's group Menoko Mosmos. However, it can just as quickly be used to shallowly capitalize on Ainu culture for commercial gain without facilitating a connection between Ainu and Wajin, thus reinforcing social inequities. Fans and scholars alike should pay attention to how food is used to convey messages about cultural differences and connections in a multiethnic Japan.

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■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my colleague Dr. Rika Ito for our many formative discussions about *Golden Kamuy*. I am also grateful to the Department of Asian Studies at St. Olaf College and to my anonymous peer reviewers for their generous and constructive feedback on earlier versions of this essay.

■ NOTES

1. Following precedent within Ainu studies (Uzawa and Watson 2020), I use the word *Wajin* in this article to refer to those who are ethnic Japanese to reinforce the idea that having Japanese citizenship does not define a person's ethnicity.

2. The echoes of these policies are still felt today, as a group from the Raporo Ainu Nation in the eastern Hokkaido town of Urahoro filed a lawsuit to restore rights to commercial fishing for salmon in a local river as recently as 2020 (Kayaba and Yoshigaki 2020).

3. Although many more scenes involve food than those described in this article, these episodes were chosen because they show a clear progression of the characters' relationship over time.

4. Although *Golden Kamuy* is often praised for its accuracy, Noda Satoru takes creative liberties as he constructs scenes like this. For example, while *chitatap* is an actual Ainu dish, the act of saying "*chitatap, chitatap*" as a requisite part of the process is something the author devised (Nakagawa 2019, 169).

5. *Golden Kamuy* uses the expression *hinna* as a substitute for *tasty* in the manga and anime. Ainu linguist Hiroshi Nakagawa, who consulted on the project, suggested that the use of this as a synonym for *tasty* was devised by Noda. It was Nakagawa who suggested the addition of hand gestures to show gratitude for the *kamuy* (Nakagawa 2019, 187–88).

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