



Fig. 1: Ainu woman nursing a bear (MacRitchie 1892: Pl. II)

Eventually, usually after one to three years, the bear was taken from its cage and ritually killed at a communal feast, a bear festival (called *Iomante*, "to send away") at which the bear's spirit was sent back to its "master" (Hallowell 1926: 121, 122). The feast, usually held in the fall, was sponsored by the bear's owner, who gained prestige and status thereby. The killing was often quite brutal, and the woman who had nursed the bear would, before and during the procedures, pull her hair in consternation, cry, wail, and after the animal finally died she might beat each of its killers with a tree limb (Bird 1881/2: 100; Schrenck 1881-1895: 735-736; MacRitchie 1892: 19; Czaplicka 1914: 297). Such acts presumably removed guilt for her part in the affair, and after they were carried out, she might willingly lead dances at the festival and even dance herself (Schrenck 1881-1895: 735-736).

After the bear was killed, its head was removed, offerings were made, and the remaining flesh prepared and distributed to the guests (Batchelor 1901: 491-494). The skull of the bear was finally mounted on a post near the keeper's house, a new post apparently being erected for each bear sacrificed. Several such skulls mounted on posts were found in each Ainu village, particularly near a chief's house (Bird 1881/2: 99). It was said (Reclus 1898/7: 398) that such skulls protected the household. In any case, as long as the skull survived, the Ainu believed that the spirit of the animal somehow remained associated with it (Batchelor 1901: 495, 496); offerings were thus