

New data on the etymology of the Ainu word *kamuy*

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Abstract

Previously it was shown that Ainu is a relative to the Sino-Tibetan family. The Ainu word *kamuy* is a compound of two roots: *ka* and *muy*. The component *ka* correlates with the Proto-Sino-Tibetan **kǎŋH* – “tie”, and **Kat* – “adhere” (in historical Ainu exists the word *ka* “thread” “string”). The component *muy* correlates with the Proto-Sino-Tibetan **meɬ* – “face” (in historical Ainu exists the word *mau* “state” / “condition”). Thus, *ka* means “tie” / “double”; *muy* means “state” / “figure” / “condition”. The word *ka-muy* literally means “double figure” / “double nature” / “two figures” / two natures”. Two natures mean: masculine and feminine natures, i.e.: *kamuy* is somebody/something that combines masculine and feminine natures. *Kamuy* is an androgyne. In the case of *kamuy* the ability to join two natures is an indicator / a measure of divinity. In other words: a deity is as deity as resembles an androgyne.

Keywords: *kamuy*; etymology; cultural anthropology; Ainu; Ainu language; Ainu religion

1. Introduction

Kamuy is one of the central concepts of Ainu religion. The word *kamuy* denotes beings and things that have much *ramat* (vital energy) and can share *ramat* with other beings or take *ramat* away. The word *ramat* literally means “vital energy exits”; *ramat* is something alike ether or dark matter that fills whole universe (Nonno 2015: 34).

There are several versions about origin of the word *kamuy*, however, none of them is actually sufficiently proved. And that’s why the current paper is aimed to analyze critically the existing versions and offer a new one that explains the etymology of the word *kamuy* better.

2. Critical analysis of the existing versions

According to one version the word *kamuy* could be a cognate with the Japanese word *kami* that denotes almost the same issues as the Ainu word *kamuy*. This version suggests that Ainu and Japanese languages could be distant relatives, which ancestors diverged very long ago. This version is not currently being taken seriously anyhow. Ainu and Japanese languages differ very seriously in their grammar and lexis.

For instance, a very important point is the Prefixation Ability Index (PAI): if values of PAI of two languages differ more than fourfold then there is a serious reason to state that these languages are not genetically related, i.e.: belong to different families/stocks (Akulov 2015a: 16). The value of PAI of Japanese is 0.13, while the value of PAI of Ainu is 0.75, and thus, in the current case the values of PAI differ almost sixfold (Akulov 2015a: 17 – 18). The significant difference in values of PAI also correlates with significant differences in grammatical level in

general, for instance: Japanese verb doesn't use prefixes and prepositions at all to express grammatical meanings, while Ainu verb has a well elaborated system of prefixes expressing grammar.

The values shown by PAI correlates well with the result shown by Verb Grammar Correlation Index (VGCI). VGCI itself can completely resolve whether two languages are related (i.e.: belong to the same stock). VGCI is a method of comparative linguistics that supposes direct comparison of really existing/existed languages and doesn't require reconstructions. The method is based on the idea that any language is determined by the set of grammatical meanings and by their positional distributions. According to VGCI the degree of correlation/resemblance of two languages is a superposition (logical conjunction) of two indexes: the degree of correlation of sets of grammatical meanings, and the degree of correlation of sets of positional distributions of common meanings. The method intentionally deals with pure structures only, i.e.: grammatical meanings and their positional distributions, and doesn't pay attention to material implementations. The more closely related are certain languages, the higher is the corresponding index of correlation: two languages belong to the same family/stock if the value of their VGCI is about 0.4 or higher. If a value of VGCI is 0.3 and lower, then the compared languages definitely are unrelated, i.e.: belong to different families/stocks (for more details about the method see Akulov 2015b).

The value of VGCI received for Ainu and Japanese is 0.26 that clearly means that these languages belong to completely different macrofamilies/stocks.

It has been shown that Ainu is a relative of Great Andamanese and Sino-Tibetan, Sino-Tibetan family in its turn is a relative of Northwest Caucasian, the Northwest Caucasian family is related to the Hattic language, which in its turn is related to Minoan. And thus, Ainu is a member of the Ainu-Minoan stock (Akulov 2018).

Japanese is considered as a member of the Altaic stock. The Altai stock proposed by S. A. Starostin consists of the following language families/branches: Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic, Koreanic, Japonic (Starostin 1991).

It should be noted that this stock/macroeconomy was proposed mainly on the basis of a comparison of vocabulary, and insufficient attention was paid to the structural and grammatical level. However, it is the comparison of grammar that can completely resolve whether certain languages are related. Results received with comparison of lexis can be genial intuitions, but unfortunately can be mistakes as well. That's why, although the data shown by S. A. Starostin are important and valuable, but his conclusions about relatedness of certain languages should be corroborated by VGCI before this material will be possible to use.

Inside this family Japanese is closely related to Korean (they are as close as English and Afrikaans) and form the so-called Buyeo group (Akulov 2016b). And this Buyeo group is quite close to the Tungusic languages (Akulov 2020).

Also Eskimo and Aleut languages are supposed to belong to the Altaic stock (Kitaev 2023).

The Altaic stock/macroeconomy is supposed to be related to the Uralic languages, which in their turn are supposed to be related to the Dravidian languages, which in their turn are related to the Elamite language, which in its turn is related to the Hurro-Urartian languages, and Hurro-Urartian are related to the Tyrrhenian languages. All these languages have no prefixes at all or demonstrate poorly elaborated prefixation and in this aspect they differ seriously from Chukoto-Kamhctkan, Indo-European, Kartvelian, Afro-Asiatic which have relatively well elaborated prefixations. As far as this new macrofamily has been created of languages that

have been extracted from the classical Nostratic macrofamily, it can be conventionally named Para-Nostratics (see Kitaev 2023: 39). However, we suppose that it is more correct and convenient to name this new macrofamily Eskimo-Tyrrhenian.

Thus, according to the recent data, Ainu and Japanese belong to completely different/unrelated stocks/macrofamilies: to Ainu-Minoan and to Eskimo-Tyrrhenian correspondingly. Any attempts to establish a hypothetical Ainu – Altaic macrofamily/stock are simply nonsense, displaying a complete ignorance of the fundamentals of linguistics. And thus, any statements that the Ainu word *kamuy* and the Japanese word *kami* can be cognates don't stand up to scrutiny, and are outside the field of cultural anthropology and linguistics.

According to another version, the Ainu word *kamuy* originated from Japanese *kami*. Actually, according to this version, the Ainu word *kamuy* has originated from Old Japanese **kamuw*. The same transformation can be seen in the Ainu word for chopsticks that definitely was borrowed from Old Japanese: Old Japanese **pasuw* – Modern Japanese *hashi* – Ainu: *pasuy*.

This version is quite spread among scholars who have ever gotten in touch with the etymology of *kamuy* and *kami* (see, for instance: Vos 1990: 176, 180; Vovin 1993: 99).

At first sight this version looks realistic and probable, but actually, this version is wrong since it doesn't take into account the wider context and the fact of the close connection of the term *kamuy* with other terms of the Ainu religion.

Also, it should be noted that this version is somehow based on the Japanese state 'mythology', on the prejudice that the Ainu have always been 'wild northern barbarians', a 'wild northern tribe' and could not have any significant influence on the Japanese culture. Actually, Ainu contributed significantly to the forming of Japanese ethnicity and Japanese culture.

If our consideration is restricted by the words *kamuy* and *kami* only, it is not possible to say something definite about whether the Ainu word *kamuy* has originated from the Japanese word *kami* or the Japanese word *kami* from the Ainu word *kamuy* (Nonno 2015: 31). In order to clarify this issue, we should apply a wider context and use all information that is related to these concepts.

N. G. Munro writes that the basic concepts of the Ainu religion are *ramat* and *kamuy* (Munro 1962: 7 – 15). Later, it was shown that these two concepts are closely connected, i.e., the meaning of *kamuy* can be understood through the meaning of *ramat*: *kamuy* is a being/thing that has much *ramat* and can share *ramat* or take it away (Akulov 2006: 199, 201; Nonno 2015: 34).

It is noteworthy that among the concepts of Shintō we can see the word that looks much like Ainu *ramat* and has a very close meaning. This word is 魂 *tama/tamashii*. It is noteworthy that in the Ainu-Japanese dictionary compiled by Kayano Shigeru the word *ramat* is translated exactly as 魂 *tamashii* (Kayano 2005: 461).

Thus, there are two pairs: *kamuy* – *ramat* and *kami* – *tamashii/tama*.

The concept of *kamuy* is closely connected with that of *ramat*, and the same situation is in the case of *kami* and *tama/tamashii*, and thus we suppose that there was not a borrowing of a single concept, but it was a borrowing of the whole pair, i.e., both concepts were borrowed as a system.

If we suppose the pair was borrowed from Old Japanese by Ainu, then it contradicts the fact that there were no words beginning with [r] in Old Japanese, and it also contradicts the fact that Japanese [t] can't become [r] in Ainu; for instance, Japanese *tono* "master" in Ainu is just the same *tono*, but not **rono*.

It means that the pair was originally Ainu and was borrowed from Ainu to Old Japanese. In Old Japanese the initial [r] was prohibited, but in Ainu the initial [r] can easily turn into [tr]/[t] (for instance: *reki* – *treki* “moustache”, “beard”; *retar* – *tetar* “be white”), so when the word *ramat* was borrowed by Old Japanese, the initial [r] transformed into [t]; then, since only syllables of CV structure were allowed in Old Japanese, the original Ainu *ramat* became something like **tamati* and later became *tamashii* (Nonno 2015: 31).

The transformation of [t] into [s] during the process of borrowing from Ainu to Old Japanese is quite usual process, for instance, the same process took place during the transformation of Ainu word *emciw* – an old Ainu self-naming meaning “my group”, “ours” into Japanese word *emishi* (see Akulov, Nonno 2021: 12 – 13, 2022).

Also, it should be noted that in Ainu the word *kamuy* is applied to much more different types of beings and things than the Japanese word *kami*, and this fact indirectly suggests that the word *kamuy* was originally Ainu.

Now there are at least three versions of the Ainu etymology of the word *kamuy*.

Jh. Batchelor singled out the component *ka* in the word *kamuy*, and he suggested that this *ka* meant “top”, “over”, “upon”. The rest part of the word – *muy* was unclear for Batchelor, he noted that he heard this word only once, but he suggested that this *muy* could be applied to the very topmost point of a high conical mountain (Batchelor 1889: 31). Thus, it is possible to summarize that according to Batchelor the Ainu word *kamuy* means “somebody/something that is high” or “somebody/something supernatural/superhuman”.

The interpretation of the word *kamuy* proposed by A. Akulov is very close to that of Batchelor. According to Akulov, the word *kamuy* consists of three components: *ka* “over”/ “above” + *mu* “spread”, *i* “issue”, “item”, and means “a thing that spread/exist above [people]”, “a superhuman being/thing” (Akulov 2006: 198, 200).

According to the interpretation proposed by T. Nonno, the word *kamuy* also consists of three components: *ka* “over”/ “above” + *mu* “to be clogged” or “to be plugged up”, *i* “issue”, “item”, and thus, *kamuy* means “item filled by [*ramat*]” (Nonno 2015).

Batchelor's interpretation of the word *kamuy* is essentially a projection of the Christian understanding of God onto Ainu material.

And actually, all these three versions of etymologies are too abstract/metaphysical, and do not take into account the fact that the thinking of ancient people was concrete and figurative, and thus they should be considered inconclusive.

3. *Kamuy* – “double nature” / “two natures”

The form *kamuy* is represented in all Ainu dialects: Hokkaido Ainu – *kamuy* (Kayano 2005: 198), Sakhalin Ainu – *kamuy* (Ainugo kyōzai tekisuto), Kuril-Kamchatka Ainu – *kamuy* (Krasheninnikov 1994: 185), And thus, it is possible to reconstruct the form **kamuy* for the Late Jōmon Ainu language that existed around 1500 – 500 BCE. The Ainu dialects diverged approximately in the time of the so-called Late Jōmon (1500 BCE – 500 BCE) or even earlier (see Akulov, Nonno 2024: 17).

Previously it was shown that the VGCI of Ainu and Qiang is 0.41 – it means that the Ainu language is a relative to Sino-Tibetan languages (Akulov 2016a). And also, have been shown some evident lexical correlations between Ainu and Sino-Tibetan languages (Akulov, Nonno 2024).

And the Ainu word *kamuy* has a Sino-Tibetan correspondence: in the Tangkhul language¹ there is the word *khəməw* – “evil spirit”².

We suppose that the Late Jōmon Ainu word **kamuy* consists of two components: *ka* and *muy* (and the Tangkhul word *khəməw* also consists of two components: *khə* and *maw*).

The component *ka* of **kamuy* can be correlated with the Ainu word *ka* – “thread”, “cotton”, “string”³, “to knit”⁴, this word is represented in all Ainu dialects: in Sakhalin Ainu – *ka* – “thread”, “bowstring”⁵, in Kuril-Kamchatka Ainu *ka* means “yarn”, “distaff”⁶.

And thus, it is possible to reconstruct for the Late Jōmon Ainu the form **ka* “thread”, “string”. And this form can also be connected with the Ainu word *ka* meaning “and”, “also”⁷.

We suppose that it is possible to state that modern Ainu words *ka* “thread” / “to knit” and *ka* “and” / “also” are cognates and derivatives of the same root.

And this Late Jōmon Ainu **ka* correlates with Proto-Sino-Tibetan forms: **kǎŋH* – “tie”, “string”⁸, and with **Kat* – “stick”, “adhere”⁹. Also the Late Jōmon Ainu **ka* is probably connected with Proto-Sino-Tibetan **č[ɣ]* – “double”¹⁰.

Thus, the component *ka* means “tie” / “join” / “double”.

The component *muy* can be correlated with Proto-Sino-Tibetan **met* – “face”¹¹. And it is interesting that for Proto-Kuki-Chin is reconstructed the form **muy* – “figure”, “look” which is connected with the Proto-Tibeto-Burman form *s-ma:y*¹².

In modern Ainu dialects there is no word *muy* that would mean “figure”, “face”, in modern Ainu *muy* means “bundle” and “winnow”¹³, but in Hokkaido dialects there are words *mau* – “state”, “condition”¹⁴, and *mawe* – “taste”, “favour”, “essence”, “state”, “condition”¹⁵.

It is possible to suppose that in ancient Ainu existed a form **muy* meaning “figure”, “face” that was probably a variant of the form *mau*, but unlike *mau* it has become unproductive and is not used anymore in modern Ainu dialects and in modern/historical Ainu is represented in the word *kamuy* only.

¹ Tangkhul is one of the Tangkhulic languages, a group within Kuki-Chin-Naga, a branch of central Tibeto-Burman languages.

² Starostin 2005d.

³ Batchelor 1905: 202.

⁴ Kayano 2005: 190.

⁵ Dobrotvorskii 1875: 110.

⁶ Radlinski 1891: 90.

⁷ Kayano 2005: 190; Ainugo kyōzai tekisuto.

⁸ Starostin 2005eю

⁹ Starostin 2005a.

¹⁰ Starostin 2005b.

¹¹ Starostin 2005c.

¹² Matisoff 2015bю

¹³ Batchelor 1905: 272.

¹⁴ Batchelor 1905: 261.

¹⁵ Batchelor 1905: 262.

Thus, the component *muy* means “state” / “figure” / “condition” / “nature”.

It turns out that the Ainu word *kamuy* is *ka-muy* – *ka-maw* literally “double figure” / “double nature” / “two natures” / “two figures” / “two faces”. Why two faces/natures, but not three, five, or ten? It is because *kamuy* is somebody/something that joins / combines masculine and feminine nature. *Kamuy* is an androgyne.

And it is not just a metaphysical reasoning. Ancient people speaking the languages of the Sino-Tibetan family as well as ancient Ainu consider woman as an illustrative implementation of negation. It is clearly expressed in languages.

The Late Jōmon Ainu word for negation – **somo* corresponds well with the Proto-Sino-Tibetan form **se ma ta* / **se ma*¹⁶. Also, the corresponding forms are represented in the Jingpho language¹⁷: *sha mat*¹⁸, and *šə mat*¹⁹ – both forms mean “to lose”. And also, a much alike form can be seen in the Guiqiong language²⁰: *šo mu ta*²¹ – “forget” (Sun 1991).

All these word forms are causatives, the initial components *se/sha/šə/šo* are markers of causative, they can be correlated with the form **ser* – “forge”, “make”²² reconstructed for Proto-Kuki-Chin, and also with the form **sa* – “do” / “make”²³ reconstructed for the Proto-Tangkhuic language.

And the root morpheme in these forms is *mat/mu* – it looks exactly the same as the root meaning “woman”. For Proto-Tibeto-Burman the form **ma* is reconstructed. And for Late Jōmon Ainu the form **mat* is reconstructed for “woman”. Also, it is interesting and noteworthy that for the Proto-Language of the Angami-Pochuri group²⁴ was reconstructed the form **mo* for “vagina”²⁵.

And thus, the form for expressing negation in Ainu and Proto-Sino-Tibetan is initially the causative “to make like a woman,” “to make a woman.”

Ancient people conceptualized the idea of the absence of something not abstractly, but with the help of visual images, and the simplest, the most common example of the absence of something that ancient people could observe is female anatomy, namely female genitalia. And this is also reflected in ancient ideas/mythologies, in particular in the concept of yin – yang: woman – absence, man – presence, woman – no, man – yes (for more details see Akulov, Nonno 2024: 26).

Thus, it is possible to resume that in this conception the divine is androgynous.

It is important to note that this conception is fundamentally different from the understanding of androgyny of Classical Antiquity or Western metaphysics/philosophy. In the philosophy of Classical Antiquity certain deities can sometimes sanctify androgyny, but androgyny itself isn't yet an attribute of the divinity. According to medieval Christian metaphysics, God can sometimes sanctify androgyny, but androgyny itself isn't an attribute of the divinity or a marker of divine grace.

¹⁶ Akulov, Nonno 2024: 26.

¹⁷ Jingpho is a member of the Sal branch of the Tibeto-Burman languages.

¹⁸ Marrison 1967.

¹⁹ Weidert 1987.

²⁰ Guiqiong belong to the Qiangic branch of the Tibeto-Burman languages.

²¹ Sun 1991.

²² Matisoff 2015c.

²³ Matisoff 2015d.

²⁴ Angami-Pochuri group is a group within Kuki-Naga-Chin languages.

²⁵ Matisoff 2015a.

In the case of *kamuy*, everything is exactly the opposite: androgyny, the ability to combine / to join two natures, is an indicator / a measure of divinity. In other words: a deity is as deity as resembles an androgyne.

Before the emergence and widespread dissemination of the Abrahamic religions and Buddhism, the body was not considered sinful or dirty and was used as the main source for understanding the surrounding world and the universe in general.

It is noteworthy that some echoes of such view can be seen in Taoism. For instance, in Zhuangzi, in the chapter "Carefree Wandering" (逍遙遊) can be seen the following passage:

藐姑射之有神人居焉，肌膚若冰雪，淖約若處子 (Wikisource 2024).

[In] the mountain of Miaoguye there are divine men, [their] skin is like ice [and] snow, [their] charm / beauty [is] the same as that of [a] virgin / maiden.

The word 神人 *shén rén* "divine man" / "divine person" is a synonym to the word 仙 *xian* "immortal". We suppose that the key point here is that divine people are similar in beauty to young maidens. Divine people / immortals can be both men and women, but when men become similar in beauty to women, then there is a certain moment of androgyny in this.



Fig. 1. A fragmented *dogū* from Fukuda shell heap, Ibaraki prefecture, height 16.4 cm, Late Jōmon (image source – Doseihin gazō dētabēsu 2024)

And also a very important material is provided by the ancient Ainu (Jōmon people). People of the Jōmon people were the direct ancestors of the historical / modern Ainu.

Jōmon *dogū* (土偶 literally “clay figurine”) are anthropomorphic and zoomorphic clay figurines which are found in Japan in layers of Jōmon period.

The meanings and functions of *dogū* are generally unclear. However, if, for instance, there are *dogū* depicting wild boars, it is logical to conclude that wild boars were significant animals for the Jōmon people.

And there are some anthropomorphic *dogū* which have breasts and erected penis (see Fig. 1, 3, 5). These *dogū* with breasts and penises evidently depict certain androgynous beings. It isn't possible to say whether these figurines depict deities, but it seems that androgynous beings were an important part of the worldview of the Jōmon people (Nonno 2018).

If these figurines depict deities, then it correlates well with the fact that the word *kamuy* initially meant “double nature” / “two natures”, that *kamuy* is initially an androgyne.



Fig. 2. The Location of the Fukuda shell heap (the map has been made after a Google Maps screenshot)



Fig. 3. A *dogū* from Yoyama shell heap, Chiba Prefecture, height 13.2 cm, about 1300 BCE (image source – Miho Museum 2024)



Fig. 4. The Location of the Yoyama shell heap (the map has been made after a Google Maps screenshot)



Fig. 5. *Dogū* from Shinpukuji shell heap, Saitama prefecture, height 20.5 cm, 2000 – 1000 BCE (image source – Wikipedia 2024)



Fig. 6. The Location of the Shinpukuji shell heap (the map has been made after a Google Maps screenshot)

4. Conclusion

Thus, it is possible to resume the following: the Ainu word *kamuy* initially consisted of two components *ka-muy* and meant “double figure” / “double nature” / “two natures” / “two figures” / “two faces”. *Kamuy* initially was somebody/something that combines masculine and feminine nature, *kamuy* was an androgyne. And the ability to combine two natures is an indicator of divinity: according to this ancient understanding, a deity is as deity as resembles an androgyne.

The word *kamuy* is closely connected with man, with the human body, since it was the human body that was the first measure/tool for understanding the surrounding world. Applying the word *kamuy* to animals and natural phenomena was the next step. It can be assumed that, as in the case of man, in the case of natural phenomena and animals, the word *kamuy* originally was used mainly to denote not just big or amazing beings and things, but those animals and phenomena that united two natures and/or could exist in two loci. For instance: bears basically live in wilderness/forests, but can also live with people and can imitate some actions of people; volcanoes join underworld and the ordinary world of people. And later the original meaning of the word *kamuy* “two natures” was forgotten and the word *kamuy* began to be used as a respectful designation of almost any being or phenomenon.

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