Critical notes on “A Reconstruction of Proto-Ainu”

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Abstract

By now “A Reconstruction of Proto-Ainu” written by Alexander Vovin is the only monograph on Ainu language history and so if we are going to make reconstruction of some previous stages of Ainu language we should first pay some attention to this work. Having made a reconstruction of ‘Proto-Ainu’, Vovin compared ‘Proto-Ainu’ with Proto-Austronesian, Proto-Miao-Yao and Proto-Austro-Asiatic and has come to the conclusion that Proto-Ainu is a relative of Proto-Austro-Asiatic. I am to say that there are too many serious blunders in Vovin’s book: methodological ideas are actually very vague, no attention is paid to structural items, wrong interpretations of some Ainu words, no clearly seen regular phonetic correspondence, completely wrong use of anthropological contexts; though, despite these serious critical notes the direction of search of possible relatives of Ainu outlined by Vovin seems to be rather perspective.

Key words: Ainu language, critical review of Vovin’s reconstruction, Ainu language history, Proto-Ainu

General notes on Vovin’s methodology

Having made so called ‘classical reconstruction’ and compare Proto-Ainu with Proto-Austronesian, Proto-Miao-Yao and Proto-Austro-Asiatic Vovin has come to the conclusion that Proto-Ainu (PA) is a relative of Proto-Austro-Asiatic (PAA).

1) Vovin says that he isn’t adept of glottochronology:

If we suppose that the creators of the Jōmon culture were Ainu-speaking, then we should admit that the search for genetic ties of the Ainu language is extremely risky, because we must work on or close to the limit of the possibilities of comparative linguistics. I am not a supporter of any kind of glottochronological games with languages, especially if it is not shown by other methods that the languages in question are related. (Vovin 1993: 156)

But then he actually turns to the very glottochronological procedures:

Time which has elapsed since the beginning of Jōmon culture in Japan (between 6000 and 10000 B. C.) and the present day is long enough for the genetic origin of a language to be obscured by loanwords and internal changes such that it is nearly impossible to state definitely the genetic ties of the Ainu language, given the present stage of our knowledge and our methodology (Vovin 1993: 156)
I am to note here that focusing attention on lexis but not on structures is actually ‘logo’ of modern glottochronology. Adepts of glottochronology have forgotten its original meaning, i.e. that it was originally intended to estimate the time of divergence of languages that are already proven to be relatives, also they don’t pay attention to the fact that by comparison of certain sets of lexis it’s completely impossible to state anything about genetic relationship of certain languages, i.e. to state something about certain languages genetic relationship we first of all should analyze structures but not lexis.

And finally Vovin makes a completely glottochronological procedure: having compared a random set of lexemes of modern Ainu dialects he defines that PA existed in last centuries of first millennium AD (Vovin 1993: 156).

It should be noted that words of Ainu origin that can be understood with use of modern Ainu language were fixed long before last centuries of first millennium. One can probably say: “are there any trustable proves of it?”

Best prove of wide spread of Ainu language in ancient times place names of Ainu origin found everywhere where are remains of Jōmon culture, i.e. we can see that presence of toponyms of Ainu origin correlate well with presence of Jōmon culture:

When, therefore, we find many localities where shellheaps exist bearing names traceable to Ainu roots, we can only assume that persons using the same language as the Ainu were formerly established in such places. (Munro 1911: 669)

One can also say that it’s impossible to state anything about genetic affiliation of the language of toponyms. If no attention is paid to context then, of course, it is impossible to say anything about the language of toponyms, however, if due attention is paid to cultural and natural contexts but not to some a priori presupposition that makes scholars ignore context and reality, then adequate conclusion can’t be difficult:

Imagine a peasant community seriously giving to its village such a name as “Inside Permission”, “Name Flat”, “Rice-field Name Tribe” or “Hares in a Row”! It is impossible to imagine any set of people being so flighty, least of all the prosaic peasantry of the Far East. But that the Ainios should have called those same localities by names signifying respectively “Bad (i.e. dangerous) River”, “the Cliff by the Stream”, “Long River” and “the Stream from the Lake”, is perfectly natural. Such names, taken from the physical features of the place, and especially from the peculiarities of its rivers, are in accordance with the geographical terminology of the Yezo Alo Ainos at the present day. They are, indeed, such as are found among all races who have had to do with the naming of a new country. That the Japanese, during their gradual encroachment on Aino-land, should have appropriated many Aino names together with the soil itself, is equally natural. Indeed, the phenomenon is still taking place in Yezo, where we can go and watch it, where we can see the simple Aino names in the very act of transformation into fantastic shapes, under the double action of Japanese mispronunciation and of the application of the Chinese character. From the very beginning, the Japanese who first used Aino names were no purists. Very few of them even spoke Aino. They pronounced the alien names as best they could, moulding them unconsciously into harmony with the phonetic laws of their own language. Then, at last, came the learned men, the priests. Knowing nothing of Aino, and

1 Yezo is old name of Hokkaido
despising it even if they had known it, these men completed and fixed the work of change, by dressing up the Japanese mispronunciations in the garb of the Chinese character, the universal medium of written intercourse. Sometimes, indeed, they avowed themselves non-pulsed, and transcribed the new names phonetically as best they could. In such cases the foreign origin of the names in question is still less open to doubt. To the modern investigator, the names written phonetically and the names written grotesquely are the two most valuable classes of Japanese place-names; for they are those in which the alien element is most easily detected. (Chamberlain 1887: 66 – 67)

![Map of Tohoku region, Nagasaki and Tsushima island](map)

Pic. 1 Tohoku region, Nagasaki and Tsushima island (map made after Google map screenshot)

Those place names of Ainu origin are not only in ‘traditional Ainu’ area like, for instance, Tohoku but also in Western/Southern Japan also, for instance, even such place names as Tsushima that means “The distant [island]”. Chamberlain states that even such purely Japanese place names as, for instance, Nagasaki, that has clear Japanese meaning “long cape”, also can be of Ainu origin (Pic. 1).

Hence thereupon we can see that Ainu language of quite modern form existed long before the end of first millennium since Jōmon culture obviously existed before the end of first millennium AD.

It’s obvious that Vovin actually reconstructed not Proto-Ainu but something else. Proto-Ainu is language that existed about 18 thousand years ago so it’s hardly possible to reconstruct it with our present science.
2) Vovin specially notes that it’s impossible to state anything about Ainu language of earlier epochs and immediately compares so called Proto-Ainu with Proto-Austro-Asiatic while Proto-Austro-Asiatic about 2000 BC.

I suppose here everyone can clearly see that Vovin contradicts his own presupposition: first he says that it’s impossible to state something of Ainu of epochs earlier than the end of first millennium AD and then he takes an attempt to compare languages that are spaced by at 3 thousand years minimum.

3) The main critical note is that Vovin pays no attention to structural aspects. Ainu language may be a distant relative of a certain language of a certain South-East Asian languages but in such case should be shown more serious proves of it, not only some similarity of randomly chosen lexis but similarities of structures.

Notes on anthropological issues

There is also another problem: if we suppose that Ainu is somehow relative of Mon-Khmer stock then should be some anthropological facts correlating with languages relationship, i.e. if it is stated of certain languages that they are relatives then facts of linguistics should be accompanied by facts of ethnic contacts.

In the case of Ainu and Austro-Asiatic people there could be the following scenarios:

a) Ainu and Austro-Asiatic people contacted in deep ancient times when Ainu lived in South-Eastern Asia yet. Obviously it was before the beginning of Jōmon culture, i.e. about 20 – 18 thousand years ago. It seems to be hardly possible to state something about languages of such deep antiquity.

b) The second scenario is the following: a group of people speaking a language of Proto-Austro-Asiatic stock came to Japanese islands and got contacts with Ainu. Here we have a very strong objection: Alexander Vovin states that rice cultivating terminology of Japanese is Viet-Muong by its origin, i.e. originated from a language of Austro-Asiatic stock (Vovin 1998). And thus we have the following: an ethnic group speaking a Mon-Khmer language brought rice terminology into Japan, i.e. people of that ethnic group taught Japanese people how to cultivate rice and in the same time that ethnic group so seriously influenced on Ainu that Ainu language is a distant relative of Mon-Khmer stock. In this case, a reasonable question arises: how could the same ethnic group be source of agriculture and correspondent terminology and in the same time strongly affected Ainu whose main practice definitely was something else but not rice cultivation.

It seems that Vovin just like Mon-Khmer stock very much and tries to attach it everywhere.

While no attention is paid to serious contradictions discussed above, a set of traditional naïve statements of diffusionism moving from one diffusionistic work to another is shown as proof of Ainu relationship with South-East Asia.

Vovin states that in Ainu culture are ‘Siberian features’ as well as ‘Southeast Asia features’. For instance, bear cult is considered as item of Siberian origin while use of plant poison is considered as “Southern feature”. When people speak that bear cult is Siberian feature it’s nothing a diffusionism ‘logo’.
Last time there is a real anthropological craze to state that certain rather elementary features of Ainu culture were borrowed from some other cultures; one of the most notable obsession is to trace bear rites to Siberian cultures.

Ainu had seen bears almost every day during a period over 10000 years before they saw any Siberian and sure it hardly can be imagined that Ainu could not elaborate bear rite by themselves and waited till coming of Siberian.

Bear rite is one of the most elementary and fundamental practices and it was invented many times in many places independently by all tribes who practiced hunting as one of their main activity so it's just a highest degree of perfunctory diffusionism to think that some tribe borrowed it from another. Wide spread of bear rites among very different ethnicities covering a huge territory and great diversity of bear rites clearly shows us that it obviously was invented many times independently.

It should be always taken in mind that similar natural conditions usually form similar practices and also always should be paid a due attention to contexts first of all to the context of nature. I suppose if all anthropologists pay due attention to context diffusionism can be immediately given up. Just due attention to natural context can be very powerful medicine against diffusionism.

Of course, right now the discourse is mostly about extremities of diffusionism which states that all stuff of culture was invented only once. And, of course, there are many examples of diffusion of ideas, things and technologies but we are to note that in all such cases spread items usually are pretty complicated/unique (Chinese writing system, guns, Buddhism and so on) and there are many items which are elementary enough for to be invented many times in many places independently (boats, pottery, bows, bear rite, stilt houses and so on).

Moreover here appear aspects of ideology and geopolitics: Japanese officials and right wing always try to represent Ainu as a ‘wild northern tribe’ that’s why they always speak of archaeological cultures of Japanese archipelago not as of technical complexes but as of real cultures. That allows them to discuss endlessly of issues like “are Jōmon and Epi-Jōmon cultures connected?” and finally it gives them good opportunity to try to separate Ainu from their roots, i.e. from Jōmon, and ignore role that Ainu component played in formation of Japanese ethnicity. They seize any opportunity to prove Ainu and Jōmon are not connected, first of all they try to prove that Ainu came from the North but not from South; if we accept the fact that Ainu came from the South then they have to accept Ainu origin of Jōmon and so on; and it would be completely logical since the earliest Jōmon sites are placed in South-Western Japan; but many facts proving Ainu origin of Jōmon mean nothing since they contradict official mythology and thus appear weird theories of relationship of Ainu and Nivkh and of Siberian origin of Ainu. That’s why radical diffusionist delusion about borrowing of bear rites from Siberia are widely spread and that’s why they try to prove Ainu genetic affiliation to Nivkh or some other northern ethnicity. If we take a look at genetic landscape of Ainu population we can see some DNA of Nivkh origin, of course, but frequency of such DNA would not allow an adequate anthropologist to state that Ainu came from the North. However, as far as Southern origin of Ainu is against official mythology so high frequency of Y DNA D2 (about 87% of Ainu male have Y DNA D2) that traced to South-East and South Asia is fact of less importance than low frequency of Y DNA C-M217 (only about 13% of Ainu male have it).
All these issues are intended to separate Ainu from their roots and to ignore the role of Ainu component in Japanese history. And finally impose the idea that Ainu are actually ‘Northern barbarian’ that didn’t make any contribution into Japanese culture and ethnicity and that Ainu can create something only with Japanese help and should obey to Japanese due to that issue. Those who think that discussion of Jōmon origin has been ended by the end of 20th century and that it has been successfully won by the followers of doctor Munro have actually quite dim image of the issue since above described weirdness is actually nothing but an attempt to reanimate ideas of Tsuboi who thought that Jōmon was created by ancient Eskimo people (Hanihara 1990). The fact that Ainu are not already physically oppressed by Japanese doesn’t mean anything actually. Ainu are thrown out of official Japanese history. Ainu haven’t yet received their rightful place in the history of Japan, as an important component which took participation in the formation of Japanese ethnicity. But Ainu become useful for Japanese officials when arises a question of so called ‘Northern territories’: Japanese right wing people think so: “if Ainu ethnicity is ‘northern wild tribe’ and if Ainu were subdued by Japanese then all ‘Ainu lands’ should be Japanese”. That idea is seldom pronounced publicly but it is widely thought.

Another amazing example of diffusionism is case of plant poison; Vovin supposes that plant poison is a southern feature but I am to note that some ethnicity that live much northward than Ainu used to use poisoned arrows, for instance we have trustable information that people of Kodiak island (Pic. 2) used poisoned arrows (Heizer 1938)

Obviously such issues like ‘bear ritual’ and poisoned arrows can’t be proves of any contacts.

Then Vovin states that Ainu also had ‘cult of snake’, that definitely is not of Siberian origin, but it is widespread in Southeast Asia.

It isn’t already just naïve and perfunctory diffusionism, right now it’s simple fake. I have never met any ‘cult of snake’ in Ainu culture. According to widely spread Ainu conception snakes are evil being so there couldn’t be any cult of snake. I think that it’s just a mistake of an early explorer of Ainu culture (probably Leo Sternberg), but as far as any tradition has big influence on people’s mind so this mistake migrates from one text to another of those ‘anthropologists’ who have rather dim imagination of Ainu culture.

The same is the in case with the cult of the swords, which also has a definite Southern origin according to Vovin.

If ‘cult of swords’ really existed in Ainu culture it was developed in a quite late epoch ~ in the second half/in the end of the first millennium AD when metal industries got wide spread in Japan; so it is absolutely not clear how that ‘swords cult’ can be connected with a hypothetical Ainu urheimat in South-East Asia which they have left many thousand years ago when it was not known not only manufacture of swords, but also manufacture of metals.

I pointed on some notable facts of diffusionism delusions used by Vovin instead of real proves of Southern origin of Ainu. Actually all those items founded by Vovin are neither Southern nor Siberian features since they are not unique techniques and can be elaborated everywhere where natural context supposes correspondent activities.
Pic. 2 Location of Kodiak island (map made after Google map screenshot)

Real proves of South-East Asia origin of Ainu are the following:
1) Main Ainu Y-haplogroup is D2 which is spread in South Asia and is not known in North Asia. Though in the time when Vovin wrote his book that information yet was not as widely spread as in nowadays, however, there was already written paper by Hanihara Kazurō where proves of Southern origin of Ainu are shown (Hanihara 1990).
2) The fact that most ancient Jōmon sites are in southern islands of Japanese archipelago so that Ainu moved from the South to North but not vice versa.

Notes on particular reconstructions

Some reconstructions made by Vovin seem to be really doubtful, for instance, Vovin states the following:
1) In all dialects [w] corresponds to [w] and only in Krasheninnikov and Klaproth materials [w] of other dialects corresponds to [g]/[gu];

2) Then having noted that [w] quite rare occurs in initial position Vovin makes a conclusion that in Ancient Ainu sound [w] didn't exist;

3) Then after data of Krasheninnikov and Klaproth he comes to a conclusion that in Ancient Ainu existed a cluster [hw] or [gu] and that sound [w] has developed from this cluster, but as far as he made a presupposition that in ancient Ainu [w] didn't exist then there should be another sound in that cluster.

4) And finally this sound has been found: analyzing the opposition of [w] – [s] in the following examples: i-wan “six” (common Ainu word for “six”, lit.: “[without] four ten”), ihguoen “six” (of Klaproth record) – tu-p-e-san “eight” (lit.: “ten without two things without”), sine-p-e-san “nine” (lit.: “ten without one things”) Vovin states the absence of [w] in Proto-Ainu and states the existence of [hd] cluster and then has come to the conclusion that [d] has become [s] after [h] while in intervocalic position [d] has become [s]. (Vovin 1993: 32 – 33)

My objections here are the following:

1) Can we completely rely on materials of Krasheninnikov and Klaproth? Are they reliable enough base for reconstruction of phonology system? I don’t think so.

Vovin follows here quite formal approach that considers particular local features of some peripheral dialect as an ancient relic while certain items existing in all dialects are considered as innovations.

However, actually we cannot vouch for the quality of materials of Krasheninnikov and Klaproth as far as they were in high degree impressionistic, i.e. those material were collected in the epoch when there was no academic tradition of aboriginal text recording yet; in the case of the Ainu language it would be more methodologically correct to check materials Krasheninnikov and Klaproth by contemporary data but not vice versa.

2) [w] is pretty often in initial position, but there it is often written as “u” and in Ainu texts often can be seen that certain word is written with “w” and sometimes with “u”, for instance: wepeker – upeker “to inform”, “to tell story”, “story”, “news”; wonnere – uonnere “to learn”, “to listen”. Really [w] should be bound with [u]; they are variants of one phoneme, i.e. they shape mutually complimentary distribution: [w] usually appears before [a], [o] and [e] while [u] appears before [i]/[j] and before consonants: wakka “water”, wosikkote “to fall in love”, wen “to be bad”, uyna “to take (pl.)”, uni “dwell”, utur “between” and so on.

3) [hd] cluster is much more unnatural and difficult than [w]. I hardly can imagine that Ancient Ainu had it instead of [w].

4) I don’t think that roots san and wan are derivations of the same root. I suppose words i-wan, tu-p-e-san, have different main roots, i.e.: in i-wan the root is wan that can be derived from u-an lit.: “[two hands] together” while in tu-p-e-san there seems to be no root meaning “ten” at all as far as main root is san lit.: “to descend” that originated from sa-an – “to descend to sea”, “to go down” and so tu-p-e-san means “without two things”.
Notes on vocabulary of reconstructed Proto-Ainu

It would be interesting to know how could be in vocabulary of Proto-Ainu the following items: noko – “saw” and ita – “board”. It seems that Proto-Ainu manufactured lumber. Then it’s interesting to learn how could word kaani “metal”, which was borrowed from Japanese in a pretty late stage of Ainu language, be an item of Proto-Ainu vocabulary. Also how could be word kamuy “super human being” in Proto-Ainu vocabulary if Vovin thinks that it was derived from Old Japanese kamiy.

Notes on comparison of Proto-Ainu (PA) and Proto-Austroasiatic (PAA) lexis

Left items are of PA and right are those of PAA:

*paar=aC=sE – *par “to fly”
*prAA – *pāŋ “mouth”
*ra “down” – *k=ram “under”, “beneath”, “below”
*rAm “soul”, “heart”, “mind” – *k=ɬm “heart”
*rayonti – *rayōŋ “rainbow” (Vovin 1993: 169)

Followers of megalocomparison approach always say that they compare lexis, find regular phonetic correlations, and those correlations prove languages relationship. Probably I am very special but I don’t see any regularity in these examples: in one example *p of PA correlates with PAA *p in another example PA *pr correlates with PAA *p; in one example *r of PA correlates with PAA *r, in other examples with PAA *kr and *kl. If these are so called ‘regular correlations’ then we can prove relationship of any two randomly chosen languages.

Conclusion

There are too many serious blunders in Vovin’s book: methodological ideas are very vague, no attention is paid to structural items, wrong interpretations of some Ainu words, no clearly seen regular phonetic correspondence, completely wrong use of anthropological contexts; though, despite these serious critical notes the direction of search of possible relatives of Ainu outlined by Vovin seems to be rather perspective.

Any hypothesis about relationship of certain languages should be correlated with correspondent contexts and with data of other related sciences: physical anthropology, population genetics, cultural anthropology and archaeology: if a certain date has been set as an approximate time of existence of a Proto-Ainu then how words of contemporary Ainu can be found in preceding epochs? Also if certain ethnic group is thought to have influenced Ainu language then this group hardly could influence rice cultivating terminology.

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