

## People of converted gender in Ainu culture

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### Abstract

Neighbor ethnicities of Ainu (Japanese; Itelmen) had traditions of converted gender and that allows us to suppose that Ainu also had alike traditions. Krasheninnikov wrote that there were people of converted gender among Ainu of Northern Kuril and Southern Kamchatka as well as among Koryak and Itelmen. Also we have found a folklore narrative of Sakhalin Ainu where it seems to be described a person of converted gender. The narrative can be considered as a relic of converted gender tradition. It can be stated that in Ainu culture were people of converted gender and they could be shamans. It seems that initially Ainu spiritual tradition demonstrated more spontaneity and was more about shamanism while later with increase of Japanese influence and especially with cargo Confucianism influence was established a tradition of male elders' rigorism and shamanism was marginalized and ancient traditions were abandoned.

**Key words:** Ainu shamanism; transgender shamans; gender in religions, Ainu history, Ainu folklore

### Problem introduction

Travelers, who met with different indigenous people of Pacific Rim, wrote that in certain indigenous cultures there was such phenomenon as people of converted gender: men who performed female gender roles and women who correspondently performed male roles.

For example, S.P. Krasheninnikov in his "Description of the Land of Kamchatka" noted the presence among Kamchadals (Itelmens) special category of people named *koekchuches* (singular form: *koekchuch*) who were males by their origin but performed female gender roles:

The Kamchadal have one, two, or three wives and beside some of them have *koekchuches* who wear women's clothes, do women's work, and hold themselves aloof of male affairs as if they disdain those items (Krasheninnikov 1994: 24).

Word *koekchuch* seems to be a word of Itelmen origin; however its initial meaning is unclear for us right now. *Koekchuches* were treated with honor, and some of them "played the role of concubines" (Ibid: 125). Same phenomenon exists in Chukchi (Bogoraz 1939). Also same phenomenon is known in other cultures of the basin of Pacific ocean: so called Two Spirit of Native American (Lang 1998), *fa'afafine* of Samoa (Schmidt 2001), *onnagata* actors of kabuki theater who often lived as women in their daily life (Mezur 2005) and that's why also can be considered as a form of converted gender.

Hence we can see that traditions of converted gender existed and still exist in regions that are neighbor to the region of Ainu, and so the aim of this paper is to clear: whether there was such tradition in Ainu culture.

### Evidences of existence of people of converted gender in Ainu culture

“People of the Kuril islands also have *koekchuhes* like Koryaks and Kamchadals” (Krasheninnikov 1994: 183)

Actually, the evidence of Krasheninnikov is indirect evidence. We do not know for sure: whether he got direct contact with Northern Kuril Ainu or received this information from someone else. However, taking into consideration the fact that brief list of Northern Kuril Ainu language words, that is placed in the end of the chapter devoted to Northern Kuril Ainu, looks surprisingly professional for 18<sup>th</sup> century material, we can conclude that Krasheninnikov directly communicated with Ainu of Northern Kuril.



Pic. 1. Map representing locations mentioned in the text (made after Google maps screenshot)

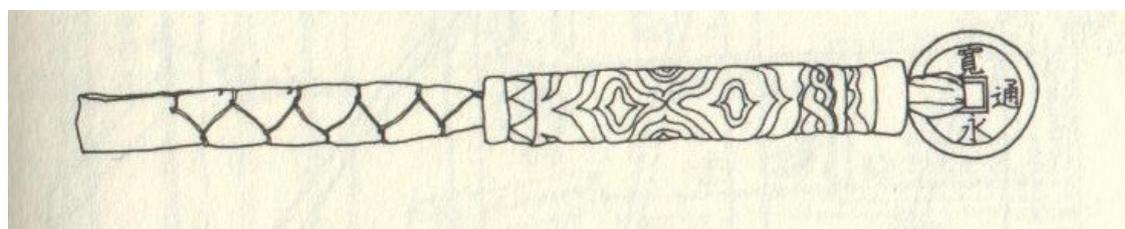
However, the best evidence of existence of people of converted gender in Ainu culture is evidence produced by the culture itself, i.e.: some narratives in which people of converted gender are described somehow as far as evidenced of travelers/anthropologists are actually second hand evidences and sometimes too much depends on personal preference and tastes of anthropologist. That's why the most trustworthy evidence is narrative produced by culture for its own purposes.

Among Ainu folklore narratives recorded by B. Pilsudski in the island of Sakhalin in 1902 – 1905 there is a text of *tuytah*<sup>1</sup> in which a being that can be identified as person of converted gender is described.

Subject line of the narrative is the following: a man (actually in original text it is said about wolf) lived with his wife and son. One day he went to the river to check his fish trap and saw a *cispo* in the trap. The hero pulled *cispo* by penis and took to his house where he hid *cispo* and waited till his wife come back from forest, fed him wild berries, then they had sexual intercourse. Then the hero picked up the *cispo* and cuddled with it, though, having recollected about his child stopped. Next day the hero beaten his wife and made her go and stayed with his son and *cispo*. *Cispo* could not cook and manage housing, though the hero tried to make it to cook and so on. The house became dirt and the hero regretted about what he did with his wife. One day son of the hero went to the shore to draw on sand and when he came home the hero noticed that that his son hair was well arranged “there is trace of female hand” and he told to his son that he was going to go with him to the shore next day in order to see what happened there. Next day the hero turned into a dog and went with his son to the shore where he saw that from a small seal came from the sea and approached his son and turned into his wife and she told him that she could come back if *cispo* leave the house and if the hero clean the house and clean himself. The hero made everything what his wife asked for and his wife came back.

Pilsudski interpreted word *cispo* as “repulsive and stinky man, not the Ainu, but of another race” (Materials: 37). We can say that it's rather naïve and perfunctory ‘puritanical’ attempt to camouflage real subject of the *tuytah*. First, people of non-Ainu tribes were called *rep-un-kur* “people from overseas”, or *si-sam/sam-or* “from side”, or just *sam* “side”. Second, why a person of non-Ainu race has obvious relation to sexual desire?

Really *cispo* means “pincushion”, it was made of wood, or of bones of small animals: crane, fox, raccoon dog and so on (Pic 2).



Pic. 2. Traditional Ainu pincushion (source: Kayano 2005: 305)

Pincushion definitely is a female item, therefore, in our opinion, when someone is called *cispo* it means a metaphorical reference to the affiliation of the person with female gender roles. Also we can see that according to the subject of the *tuytah*, *cispo* actually is a concurrent of hero's

<sup>1</sup> *Tuytah* is a type of Sakhalin Ainu folklore narratives; the closest equivalent of concept *tuytah* in English is fairy tale.

wife: first the hero preferred *cispo* as sexual partner but then made *cispo* go and returned to his wife.

The tale can be considered as representation of some relics of converted gender subjects.

## Conclusion

Bogoraz wrote that people of converted gender in Chukchi/Koryak/Itelmen culture sometimes were powerful shamans. (Bogoraz 1939: 130 – 136)

We think that it is possible to suppose the same about people of converted gender in Ainu culture. However, all scholars who wrote about Ainu religion didn't mention anything about converted gender shamans or even any relics of such traditions. Some works on Ainu religion even don't consider shamanism as a relevant feature of Ainu religion, for instance, "Ainu creed and cult" by N.G. Munro has no chapter "Shamanism" at all.

There is an opinion that originally there were more shamanism and more spontaneity in Ainu religion and decline of shamanic traditions was inspired by the influence of cargo<sup>2</sup> Confucianism introduced by Japanese in Edo period (1603 – 1867). That influence led to establishing a rigor system of male elders 'theocracy' and all shamans were marginalized (and especially shamans of converted gender) and female were separated from performing of cult (Tanaka: 2003). And obviously no converted gender shamans were welcomed.

Though Confucianism has much more liberal attitude toward LGBT items than, for instance, Abrahamic religions<sup>3</sup>, our interpretation seems to be reasonable, as far as Ainu shamanic traditions remained better in those areas which were less subdued to Japanese influence. That's why we have evidences of such traditions in the islands or Kuril, have some relics of these traditions in the island of Sakhalin and have no evidences in the island of Hokkaido.

We also suppose that Japanese influence in Edo period was just final stage of Ainu shamanism decay and really the decay began in the epoch of Kofun (250 – 538 AD) or even earlier, in the epoch of Yayoi (300BC – 250AD); we suppose that decay of highly elaborated forms of Jōmon pottery correlates with decay of more liberal culture, with decay of ancient shamanic traditions and with establishing of more rigor culture of Yamato.

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<sup>2</sup> In this text cargo means "cargo cult"; cargo cult isn't just a practice of some 'wild aborigines' who wait for Western goods having made aircraft of bamboo and palm leaves. Much more often cargo cult is copying of something without due understanding of inner logic of copied items and with later dogmatization of borrowed ideas.

<sup>3</sup> Abrahamic attitude toward LGBT issues can be described as prohibition while Confucian attitude toward LGBT issues can be described as segregation.

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