

On Ainu etymology of names Izanagi and Izanami

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Abstract

Names Izanagi and Izanami are recorded by completely meaningless combinations of kanji; existing interpretations of these names are folk etymologies, i.e.: it means that Izanagi and Izanami seem not to be words of Japanese origin. Izanagi and Izanami belong to the little amount of kami who form spouse pairs: there is about 6% of such kami in first scroll of Nihon Shoki, such type of kami is rather widely represented in Ainu folklore. Ending *gi* in Izanagi correlates with ending *kur* used in male names of Ainu kamuy/heroes ending *mi* in Izanami correlates with ending *mat* used in female names of Ainu kamuy/heroes. Component *izana* seems to have originated from ancient Ainu form: **'iso-ne* that means “to be bearful”, “to be lucky in hunting”, “to be rich”; and thus, initial forms of Izanagi was **'Iso-ne-kwr* “Bearful man” and initial form of Izanami was **'Iso-ne-mat* “Bearful woman”.

Key words: Izanagi; Izanami; Shinto; Ainu issues in Shinto; etymology of kami names

1. Problem introduction

1.1. Names Izanagi and Izanami recorded by kanji are ateji

Izanagi/Izanaki and Izanami are among central kami¹ described in Kojiki and Nihon Shoki. According to myths Izanagi and Izanami were those kami who gave birth to Japanese archipelago and to numerous other kami.

In current paper I am not going to pay attention to mythological subject lines, but I am going to pay attention to etymology of names of Izanagi and Izanami.

All ways of recording of name Izanagi by kanji are ateji, i.e.: meaningless combinations of kanji that express only phonetics:

伊弉諾

伊 *i* “this”, 弉 *sana* “large”, “powerful” 諾 “consent”, “ascent”, “agreement”;

伊邪那岐

伊 *i* “this”, 邪 *za* “wicked”, “injustice”, “wrong”, 那 *na* “what”, 岐 *gi* “branch off”, “fork in road”, “scene”, “arena”, “theater”;

伊耶那岐

伊 *i* “this”, 耶 *za* – completely meaningless element that expressed question mark 那 *na* “what”, 岐 *gi* “branch off”, “fork in road”, “scene”, “arena”, “theater”.

Name Izanami also is recorded by different *ateji*:

¹ Kami is one of basic concept of Shintō; it can be interpreted as “item filled by vital energy *tamashii*”; Japanese concept of kami originated from Ainu concept *kamuy* that has almost the same meaning as Japanese concept kami, for more details see Nonno 2015.

伊弉冉

伊 *i* “this”, 弉 *sana* “large”, “powerful”, 冉 *mi* “red”, “tan”;

伊邪那美

伊 *i* “this”, 邪 *za* “wicked”, “injustice”, “wrong”, 那 *na* “what”, 美 *mi* “beautiful”, “beauty”;

伊耶那美

伊 *i* “this”, 耶 *za* – completely meaningless element that expressed question mark, 那 *na* “what”, 美 *mi* “beautiful”, “beauty”;

伊弉弥

伊 *i* “this”, 弉 *sana* “large”, “powerful”, 弥 *mi* “increasingly”.

Actually it's not unique that names of certain kami are written by meaningless combination of kanji: about 37% of names of kami of first scroll/chapter of Nihon Shoki are written by meaningless combination of kanji which express only sounds or by combinations of kanji which express only meaning but don't express sounds.

However, I suppose that recording of names of kami by ateji is evident proof that their meanings of names Izanaki and Izanami were unclear for people who compiled Kojiki/Nihon Shoki.

1.2. Existing interpretations of names Izanagi and Izanami

As far as meanings of these names are unclear from the point of view of speaker of Japanese so have been spoken out some hypotheses about meanings of these names.

Hypotheses about etymology of name Izanami are the following:

Motoori Norinaga supposed that component *izana* originated from Japanese verb 誘う *izanau* “to invite”, “to ask for”, and component *gi* means “man” (Izanagi).

Shiratori Kurakichi supposed that component *isa* means “pious act” and component *gi* means “male”, “man” (Shiratori 1954)

In the case of Izanami hypotheses are the following:

Component *iza* is supposed to have originated from verb 誘う *izanau* “to invite”, “to ask for”; component *na* is particle and component *mi* means “woman” (Sonoda, Mogi 1997)

Despite Motoori and Shiratori interpreted component *gi* of Izanagi in a correct way, actually, all these interpretations are nothing else, but folk etymologies.

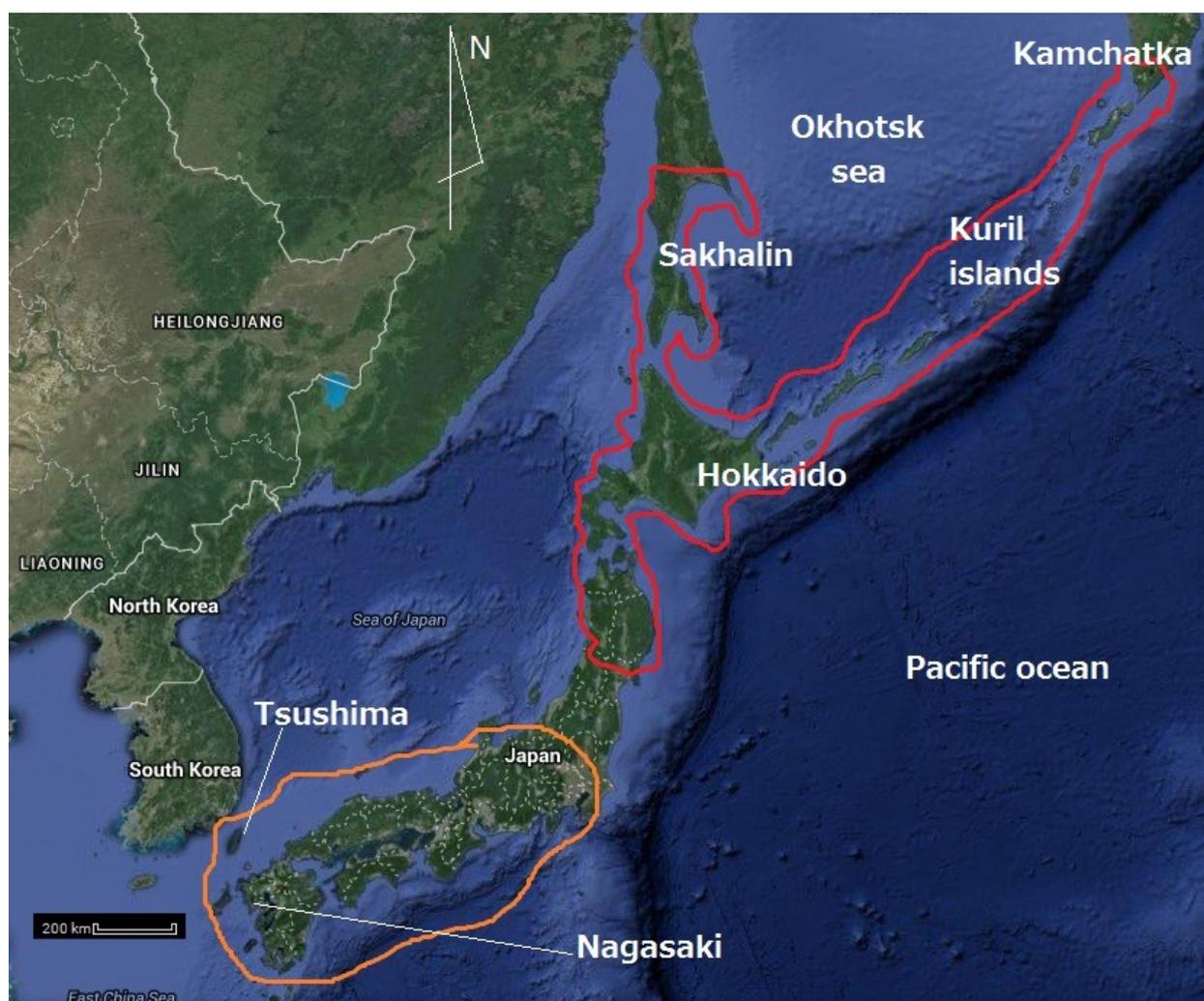
2. Interpretation of names Izanagi and Izanami through Ainu language

2.1. On possibility of such interpretation

The fact that there are many place names of Ainu origin in Western Japan (i.e.: in those areas where so called historical Ainu never lived, see pic. 1) means that people who spoke in Ainu language lived there in the time when corpus of Japanese toponyms was formed, even such toponyms as Nagasaki and Tsushima are supposed to be toponyms of Ainu origin. (Chamberlain 1887).

About 35% of Japanese have Y DNA D2 (Hammer et al. 2006); this Y DNA also has been found among about 80% of Ainu (Tajima et al. 2004). It means that Ainu people were an important component of forming Japanese ethnicity.

Cultures and languages are usually considered separately from the data of genetics, and often can be seen the opinion that cultural anthropology should not use data of genetics. However, I have to note that since languages and cultures are spread not by themselves, but by people so influence of certain culture has to correlate with corresponding genetic traces. Of course, any data should be interpreted in due context, i.e.: if people of two intercommunicating cultures demonstrate similar genetics then these data hardly can be helpful, but if people of one culture have unique genetics and this genetics also is represented among some people of another culture then such data evidently are strong proves of contacts and influences.



Pic. 1. Map representing area where ‘historical Ainu’ lived (red line) and area where toponyms of Ainu origin were initially found near Jōmon sites (orange line); (map drawn by A. Akulov after google map screenshot, see: Akulov 2015).

As far as key concepts of Shintō: tamashii and kami are words of Ainu origin (Nonno 2015) means so it’s completely natural to suppose that names of certain kami also can be words of Ainu origin.

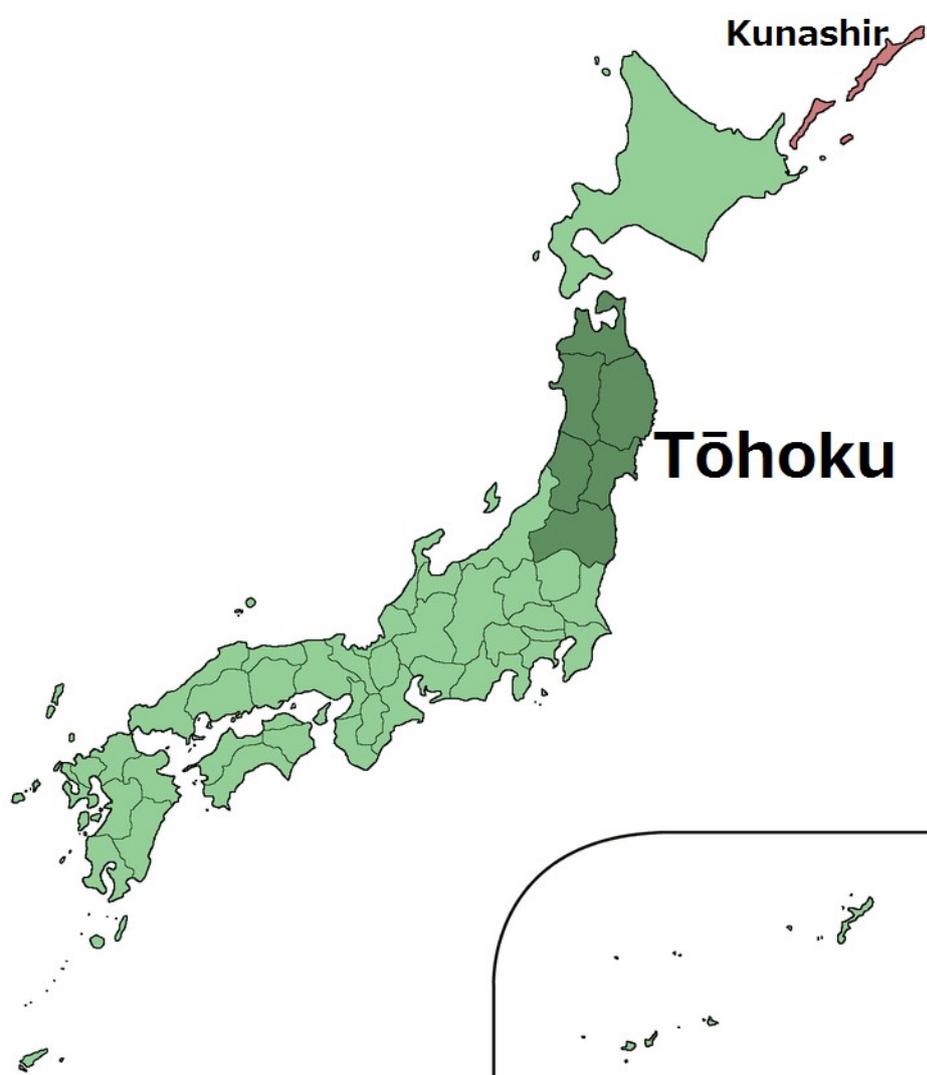
Also interesting fact is the following matter: Izanagi and Izanami belong to that little amount of kami who shape spouse pairs. Only about 6% of kami mentioned in the first scroll of Nihon Shoki shape spouse pairs. This fact is rather interesting since kamuy who form spouse pairs in Ainu folklore narratives are rather numerous.

Moreover, it is rather notable that endings of names Izanagi and Izanami look much alike endings of names Ainu kamuy/heroes: *ki* ~ *kur*² “man”, “person”; *mi* ~ *mat* “female”.

2.2. Interpretation

Component *gi* in name Izanagi evidently originated from above mentioned Ainu word *kur* that means “man”, “person”, “being”.

It is notable fact that the same transformation can be seen in the case of *matagi*: *matagi* is special word that is used to name traditional winter hunters in Tōhoku region (pic. 2); word



Pic. 2. Scheme representing location of Tōhoku region and Kunashir island; Tōhoku is marked by dark green (source: Tōhoku region)

² In current text practical Ainu orthography is used for Ainu words.

matagi also is recorded by meaningless combination of kanji: 又鬼 where 又 means “again”, “from other hand” and 鬼 means “ghost”, “devil”. It seems that *matagi* initially was: *mata kur*; *mata* “winter” and *kur* “people”.

Thus, in the case of Izanagi can be picked out component *gi* that initially was *kur*.

Then, in the case of Izanami it is possible to pick out component *mi* that seems to be *mat* “woman” initially.

Component *izana* seems to be connected with Ainu words *ison/iso-an* which mean “lucky in hunting”, “rich” (Kayano 2005: 56); literally *ison/iso-an* mean “bearful”. *Iso* is ancient Ainu word for “bear”, in modern Ainu this root is mainly replaced by word *kamuy* because of hunting taboo, however, root *iso* still can be seen in certain words connected with bear, for instance, in word *isonoreay* – arrow that was used to kill bear during bear ritual (Kayano 2005: 56).

I suppose that took place the following processes:

Ancient Ainu: **Iso ne kwr* → Early Old Japanese: **Iso na ku* → **Isa na ki* → Contemporary Japanese: *Izanaki/Izanagi*

Transformation of Ainu *ne* into Japanese *na* can also be seen in, for instance in word *Kunashiri*³: initially *Kunashiri* was Ainu word *Kur-ne-sir* “Black island” that is pronounced as *Kunnesir* due to positional assimilation; and Ainu form *Kunnesir* became *Kunashiri* in Japanese.

In the case of Izanami process of transformation is less evident, but probably took place the following:

Ancient Ainu: **Iso ne mat* → Early Old Japanese: **Iso na ma* → **Isa na mə* → Contemporary Japanese: *Izanami*

3. Some preliminary conclusions

Name Izanagi initially was **Iso ne kwr* “Bearful man”/ “Man lucky in hunting” / “Rich man” and Izanami initially was **Iso ne mat* “Bearful woman”/ “Woman lucky in hunting”/ “Rich woman”.

It seems that Izanagi (**Iso ne kwr*) and Izanami (**Iso ne mat*) initially were kami/kamuy connected with hunting.

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³ Kunashiri is Japanese name of island Kunashir (see pic. 2).

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