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” 諱 “consent”, “ascent”, “agreement”;

伊邪那岐

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.
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: $ki \sim kur^2$ “man”, “person”; $mi \sim mat^2$ “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 $matagi$...
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 \(\rightarrow\) Early Old Japanese: *Iso na kɯ \(\rightarrow\) *Isa na ki \(\rightarrow\) 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 Kunesir due to positional assimilation; and Ainu form Kunesir 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 \(\rightarrow\) Early Old Japanese: *Iso na ma \(\rightarrow\) *Isa na mə \(\rightarrow\) 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.

References


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