Some place names of Ainu origin in the islands of Ryūkyū: toponyms with the component pira/hira

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Abstract

In the islands of Ryūkyū there are some toponyms containing the component pira/hira that originated from the Ainu word pira “cliff” / “rock”- Kabiraiishizaki in the island of Ishigaki, the island of Hirari near Ishigaki, Kotohira in the island of Yoron, Takahira in the island of Takeshima, and Takahira in the island of Yakushima. The component pira/hira can’t originate from any other language except Ainu. Toponyms with the same component pira/hira exist in Hokkaidō. Toponyms with the pira/hira component evidently should be traced back to the Jōmon language. The fact that toponyms of Jōmon origin can be decoded through modern Ainu means that the language of Jōmon and modern Ainu are pretty close. The fact that in the islands of Ryūkyū there are toponyms with the same component as in the island of Hokkaidō means that in ancient times Ainu inhabited the whole Japanese archipelago from Ryūkyū to Hokkaidō.

Keywords: Ryūkyū islands; Ainu toponymy; Ainu language; Jōmon language; substrate toponymy

1. Introduction

When they speak about place names of Ainu origin they usually refer to the examples of the territories of Hokkaidō and Tōhoku only (Kindaichi 2004: 39 – 49, Kagami 2009).

However, place names of Ainu origin exist on all territory of the Japanese archipelago and also even in the islands of Ryūkyū: in the islands of Yaeyama and Miyako-jima (fig. 2) there are place names containing the component pira/hira that correlates with Ainu pira “cliff”, “rock” (Kadota 2020: 55). Ainu word pira is usually translated as “cliff” 嵯峨 (see: Chiri 200: 94; Kayano 2005: 386).

In this paper I want to compile a list of place names of Ainu origin existing in the islands of Ryūkyū, in this paper I pay attention to the most noticeable place names, i.e.: to the place names with pira/hira component which can be easily found if one looks closely at a map.
2. Place names with pira/hira component in the Ryūkyū archipelago

It should be noted that place names of Ainu origin in the islands of Ryūkyū are not numerous at all.
2.1. Southern part of Ryūkyū archipelago

The Islands lying between Taiwan and Okinawa are considered to be the southern part of Ryūkyū.

And I am to note that in the southern part of Ryūkyū islands I have found only two place names with component pira, both are located in the island of Ishigaki (fig. 4). This place names are the following: Kabiraishizaki 川平石崎 and Hirari 平離 (fig. 4).

(The place name of Hirari can be interpreted as “cliff is high”.)
Fig. 3. General map of Ishigaki island; red circle marks the area where toponyms containing the component *pira/hira* are located.

Fig. 4. Area of Kabiraishizaki 川平石崎 and the island of Hirari 平離 in the north-west end of Ishigaki.
2.2. Northern part of Ryūkyū archipelago

The islands lying between Okinawa and Kyūshū belong to the northern part of Ryūkyū archipelago. Place names of Ainu origin are not numerous in the islands belonging to the northern part of Ryūkyū archipelago as well as in the islands of the southern part.

I have found only three places which names contain the component *pira/hira* in the northern part of Ryūkyū islands: Kotohira 琴平 in the island of Yoron (fig. 5, Fig. 6), Takahira 高平 in the island of Takeshima (fig. 7, fig. 9) and Takahira 高平 in the island of Yakushima (fig. 7, fig. 9).

Fig. 5. Yoron island location (map has been made after Google maps screenshot)
Fig. 6. Location of Kotohira 琴平 shrine in the island of Yoron

Fig. 7. General map of Takeshima and Yakushima
Fig. 8. Location of Takahirasan 高平山 (the mount of Takahira) in the island of Takeshima (map has been made after Google maps screenshot)

Fig. 9. Location of Takahira 高平 mount in the island of Yakushima
It is noteworthy the component \textit{pira/hira} in all place names is standardly written by the sign of 平.

Also it is noteworthy that place names with the component \textit{pira/hira} in the islands of Ryūkyū can be found in small and remote islands.

3. Interpretations and conclusions

a) The component \textit{pira/hira} can’t originate from any other language except Ainu. The Japanese word for “cliff” is \textit{gake} (and it had the same form in Old Japanese and in Early Middle Japanese) Japanese word for “rock” is \textit{iwa}, in Old Japanese it was \textit{ipa}, and in Early Middle Japanese \textit{ifa} (for more details see Miyake 2003: 74). However, Chiri Mashihō wrote that Ainu \textit{pira} can probably be connected with Korean \textit{pira} that means “cliff” (Chiri 2000: 94), but it looks like a mistake since in Korean there is no word \textit{pira} meaning “cliff” / “rock”. The Korean word for “cliff” is \textit{jeolbyeog 절벽}, and the Korean word for “rock” is \textit{bawi 바위} none of both these words can be derived from form \textit{pira}. And if in Korean there are some toponyms with the component \textit{pira} it is more correct and logical to explain such place names as ancient borrowings of Ainu forms.

b) Place names with the same component \textit{pira/hira} exist in the island of Hokkaidō where Ainu lived from the very ancient times and where even now exist Ainu population. Such place names are, for instance, the following: Abira, Biratori, Akabira (fig. 10).

c) The component \textit{pira/hira} obeys the phonetic changes that took place in Japanese: Old Japanese p $\rightarrow$ Middle Japanese f $\rightarrow$ Modern Japanese h, and also is subjected to the positional assimilations: in the position between vowels and in the initial position \textit{pira} can become \textit{bira}. Kadota Hidenari states that there is certain regularity in the geographical distribution of changes, for instance: in Miyako and Yaeyama islands \textit{pira} remains \textit{pira} while in Tōhoku \textit{pira} becomes \textit{fira} (Kadota 2020: 55), however, as I can see \textit{pira} can become \textit{hiru} in Ryūkyū (see 2.1.), so the question of a certain geographical distribution of these changes is actually pretty controversial and requires further consideration.

d) Place names with the \textit{pira/hira} component evidently should be traced back to the Jōmon language, to the Jōmon period since in the later periods and in the Modern history in the islands of Ryūkyū there was no population speaking Ainu or a language related to Ainu.

e) The fact that place names of Jōmon origin can be somehow decoded through modern Ainu means that the language of Jōmon was pretty close to modern Ainu.

f) The fact that in the islands of Ryūkyū there are place names with the same component as in the island of Hokkaidō means that in ancient times Ainu inhabited the whole territory of the Japanese archipelago from Ryūkyū to Hokkaidō. This fact correlates well with data of population genetics: about 75% of Ainu males have haplogroup D-M55 (also known as haplogroup D1a2a) and 55.6% of Okinawan males have the same haplogroup (Hammer et al. 2006).
Fig. 10. Some place names with the component pira in the island of Hokkaidō (map has been made after Google maps screenshot)

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