Androgynous deities/beings in mythologies and art of the Ainu-Minoan people as a sign of positive attitude toward variations of gender

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Abstract

If certain languages are related, i.e.: belong to the same family/stock, then the corresponding cultures share certain similar/look-alike conceptions/ideas/patterns. The more closely are certain cultures related, the larger is the set of their similar conceptions. In the case of such language unities as Ainu-Minoan only very basic ideas can be common. One of the common ideas of the people of the Ainu-Minoan stock is a pretty positive attitude toward variations of gender. This idea/tendency is expressed by the presence of androgynous deities/beings in the corresponding mythologies and art. In the most obvious form this tendency is expressed in Sumerian culture in the cult of Inanna. In Chinese culture this tendency is expressed by the figure of Lan Caihe. In Jōmon culture this tendency is expressed by clay figurines dogū depicting androgynous beings. In Minoan Crete this tendency is expressed by frescoes depicting people of ambiguous gender.

Keywords: androgyny; Inanna; Sumerian culture; Chinese culture; Jōmon; Minoan Crete

1. Introduction

Languages and cultures are congruent structures.
Any language can be represented as an ordered pair of the following view <A; Ω> where A is a set of phonemes/morphemes/words, and Ω is a set of distributions determined upon A.
Any culture also can be described as an ordered pair <A; Ω> where A is a set of concepts/ideas, and Ω is a set of distributions determined upon A.
Also can be said that any culture is actually nothing else, but the concept/pragmatic level of the corresponding language.
And thus, it is possible to state that if certain languages are related, i.e.: belong to the same family/stock, then the corresponding cultures share certain similar/look-alike conceptions/ideas/patterns. The more closely are certain cultures related, the larger is the set of their similar conceptions. In the case of such language unities as Indo-European and Ainu-Minoan, that consist of many languages, that diverged in a very distant past, the set of alike/similar ideas evidently can't be very numerous. In the case of such unities as Indo-European and Ainu-Minoan only very basic ideas can be common.
It is possible to say that the situation with common/similar ideas is much alike to the situation with cognates: the set of cognates of languages that diverged in a distant past definitely can't be numerous, and the same situation is with the basic ideas.

One of these common ideas of ethnicities of the Ainu-Minoan stock\(^1\) is anarchism (see Nonno 2019).

\(^1\) The existence of the Ainu-Minoan stock consisting of Ainu, Great Andamanese, Sino-Tibetan, Northwest Caucasian, Hattic, and Minoan is proved in Akulov 2018.
And another common idea of the people of the Ainu-Minoan stock is a pretty positive attitude toward variations of gender. This idea/tendency is expressed by the presence of androgynous deities/beings in the corresponding mythologies and art.

Here I follow the point of view that any mythology always somehow reflects the practices existing in the corresponding societies, e.g.: there can be no blacksmith deities in the mythology/pantheon of a society that doesn’t practice metal industry or there can be no hierarchy of deities in the mythology of a society that has no formal hierarchy, has no chiefs.

Notions and myths about androgynous beings are represented not in all, but only in some mythologies of the people of the Ainu-Minoan stock. This is because of the fact that certain traditions left no traces in any available sources; some traditions were distorted and disappeared under the influence of other cultures (mainly under the influence of Abrahamic religions).

That’s why the main object of the current consideration is mighty cultures that created their own writing systems and had well-elaborated traditions of literature and recording different aspects of their own life. And thus, especially important are Sumerian and Chinese materials. It is possible to say Sumerian material is more valuable, more important than Chinese in the current context since the Sumerian culture in the period of its flourishing wasn’t undergone any outer influences but influenced other cultures (Nonno 2022). Chinese culture, although also mighty enough, wasn’t free of outer influences. Sumerian material is a matter of key importance when the discourse is about the reconstruction of basic ideas/values of Ainu-Minoan cultures.

2. Sumerian material

The main implementation of the androgynous theme in Sumerian culture is Inanna – the goddess of love/sex and war. Unlike the other Sumerian deities Inanna is a very vivid figure, she is much alike a real human being, while the other Sumerian deities are more like paper-cut personified functions. Inanna is described as a multi-faceted character that coincidences oppositions and tries to get more power/domination (Harris 1991). And also Inanna is often described as an androgynous/bigender character, combining both masculine and feminine features (Groneberg 1986; Asher-Greve, Westenholz 2013: 17; Harris 1991: 268 – 269).

Groneberg writes that the androgyny of Inanna should be understood rather as a mythological aspect than a concrete one. However, there is no smoke without fire, i.e.: there is no ‘just mythology’ since any mythology is not just fantasy, is not just fairy tales, but always reflects the practices and ideas that exist in a certain culture.

It is important to note that in the cult of Inanna a pretty significant role was played by the gala priests. These gala priests are considered as transgender priests/priests of converted gender (Leick 2013).

Gala priests originally were specialists in singing lamentations; gala appear in the temple records dating back from the middle of the 3rd millennium BCE (Gelb 1975, Henshaw 1994). Lamentation and wailing may have originally been female professions, so it is possible to state that the men who entered the role adopted its forms. Their hymns were sung in a Sumerian dialect known as eme-sal, normally used to express the speech of women and goddesses (Hartman 1960: 138), and some gala took female names (Bottéro, Petschow 1975: 465)

2 Proves that Sumerian language belongs to the Ainu-Minoan stock are shown in Akulov 2022.
The homosexual proclivities of *gala* are implied by the following Sumerian proverb: "When the *gala* wiped off his anus [he said], “I must not arouse that which belongs to my mistress (i.e., Inanna)” (Gordon 1960).

Also it is noteworthy the word *gala* was written using the sign sequence $\text{UŠ.KU}$, the first sign also has the reading *giš₃* "penis", and the second sign also has the reading *dur₂* ("anus"), it might be a pun (Steinkeller 1992: 37). Moreover, *gala* is homophonous with *gal₄-la* "vulva". In spite of all the references of their effeminate character some *gala* priests had children, wives, and large families, and in addition, some *gala* priests were women. Nevertheless, at least some of the *gala* priests evidently were transgender priests (priests of converted gender), and I suppose it is possible to say the cult of Inanna and the role of *gala* priest could be a social niche for LGBT people in Sumerian society. And I suppose it is quite remarkable that the Sumerians made the deity that patronizes LGBT people be one of the central deities of their pantheon.

3. Chinese material

Fig. 1. A woodblock print of Lan Caihe; originally printed in the Huan Chu version of the Liexian Zhuan, about 1206 – 1368 CE; reproduced in 1916 CE (image source – Lan Caihe)
Although Chinese culture originally demonstrated a pretty tolerant attitude toward variations of gender and different sexual practices, in Chinese mythology there are no figures that could be compared with Inanna. Some interest, however, may be the figure of Lan Caihe. Lan Caihe (traditional signs: 藍采和 simplified signs 蓝采和 pinyin: Lán Cǎihé) is a Chinese mythological figure, one of the Eight Immortals in the Taoist pantheon. Lan Caihe is the only one of the Eight Immortals whose gender is ambiguous. Lan Caihe is usually depicted as a young, feminine-looking man dressed in a woman’s outfit with a bamboo basket of flowers (see Fig. 1). Sometimes, however, Lan Caihe can be depicted as undoubtedly masculine figure with mustaches and beard, but it is less widely spread. Lan Caihe is described as an intersex person, a person who does not fit into contemporary male or female gender roles (Werner 1922: 293), or as a man who looks like a woman (Storm 1999: 181).

4. Ainu/Jōmon material

Although Ainu/Jōmon people had no writing system and left no written sources, their material is illustrative and important in the context of the current paper. Jōmon dogū are anthropomorphic and zoomorphic clay figurines found in layers of Jōmon period (13000 – 300 BCE). Their meanings and functions are unclear. However, if, for instance, a dogū depicts wild boar it is logical to conclude that wild boars were important for Jōmon people. There are some anthropomorphic dogū which have breasts and a vertical line running upward from the genital area to breast (see Fig. 2). This line looks like an erected penis.

Fig. 2. A fragmented dogū with breast and penis; height 16.4 cm, Late Jōmon (image source – Jōmon jidai dogū)

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3 About Ainu connections with Jōmon see Akulov 2015.
It is possible to state that dogū with breasts and penises are depictions of androgynous beings. Although it isn’t possible to say whether these figurines depict deities, but it seems that androgynous beings were an important part of worldview of Jōmon people (for more details see Nonno 2018).

The fact that androgynous beings seemed to be an important issue in the mythology of Jōmon people correlates well with the presence of people of converted gender in the culture of modern/historical Ainu (see Akulov, Nonno 2015).

5. Minoan material

Although Minoan writings have not yet been deciphered yet, and we have very little trustworthy information about Minoan mythology, Minoan material also is important for the current paper because Minoan culture also was a mighty one since it created its own writing system.

Louise Hitchcock suggests that the famous Minoan fresco that is usually considered as ‘Priest-King’ (Fig. 3) probably could be ‘Priestess-Queen’ depicted as male or could be a male appropriating female symbols (Hitchcock 2000: 81) since “the crown of lily are worn only by sphinxes and priestess and never by men” (Hitchcock 2000: 71).

Fig. 3. Reconstruction with the original pieces, Heraklion Archaeological Museum (image source – Prince of the Lilies)
6. Conclusion

In this short article, I paid attention only to the most striking and notorious examples of androgynous beings in mythologies and in the art of the Ainu-Minoan people. And one can potentially find more implementations of this cultural tendency. And also it is pretty interesting that the presence of androgynous beings in mythologies/art of the Ainu-Minoan people correlates well with the absence of the category of grammatical gender in their languages: Ainu has no grammatical gender, Chinese has no gender, and Sumerian has no gender. And it seems to be highly possible that Minoan language also had no grammatical gender.

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