On Japanese recording of some Ainu toponyms in the late 18th century

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Abstract

Some Japanese text of late 18th centuries written by officials who inspected southern Kuril Islands provide us with valuable data of how Ainu toponyms were recorded for the first time. Japanese authors mention Ainu toponyms when describing their trips along the islands and accompany them with explanation of names or description of places to which the toponyms relate. At the same time, collation of etymology of Ainu names and their descriptions by Japanese provide ground for questioning some names to be toponyms and raises some issues concerning the usage of toponyms in Ainu everyday life and the influence of recording toponyms on their being.

Keywords: toponyms; Ainu; Japanese; Kuril Islands; cartography; oral societies

1. Introduction

In this brief article I would like to raise a question: how and to what extent toponyms were used by Ainu in everyday life and how recordings of toponyms could influence their being. I want to focus on two texts written by Japanese government officials of the late 18th century: “Ezo soshi” (“Ainu notes”) written in 1790 by Mogami Tokunai, the first Japanese who deliberately visited the island of Iturup in 1786 (Mogami 1972: 375-378), and a letter by Kondo Juzo written in 1799 on Kunashir to his friend Furukawa Koshoken (Kondo 1935: 1339-1343). Both texts are remarkable for registering the moment of naming some geographical objects or recording toponyms reported by local people.

2. Representation of Ainu toponyms in Japanese texts

“Ezo soshi” by Mogami Tokunai consists of three main and two additional volumes, which contain in a total of 45 short articles about Ainu traditional practices or the author’s trips to distant islands. The article about his trip to the island of Iturup belongs to the first additional volume of the paper. Mogami describes his trip around the island from its southwestern to the northeastern tip along the Okhotsk shore and then the Pacific shore. All toponyms are mentioned in chronological and geographical (according to the author’s moving) order (spelling of all toponyms is according to Mogami’s records in katakana): Itoiya, Herutarube, Moyoro, Atsusanobori, Moshirinoshike, Etorofuwatara, Shanaa, Shochikiya, Sharushamu, Hinnebetsu, Toushiruru, Rebunshiri. Mogami provides most of these toponyms with brief explanations of their meaning.

Unlike Mogami, Kondo Juzo presents Ainu toponyms of Kunashir without any special order. In his letter, Kondo expresses his intention to publish a book entitled “Eight views of the island of Kunashir” upon his return to Japan and describes places of interest that he managed to visit and observe. He mentions Seseki, Kusarichi, Otachippu, Chachanuburi, Shokebe, Onnebetsu,
Ruyobetsu, Bauchi and Atoiya. He provides these names with brief descriptions of characteristics that mark the places out and help to understand their meaning.

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**Fig. 1.** Map of Iturup island with toponyms mentioned by Mogami Tokunai in “Ezo soshi” (drawn by the author)

### 3. Toponyms that seem credible

Some of the toponyms mentioned by Mogami and Kondo later came into use and were fixed on Japanese maps and a few of them are still in use, even today in Russia. They are, for instance, the mountain names Berutarube and Atsonupuri (Herutarube and Atsusunobori in Mogami’s spelling) on Iturup as well as Tyatya volcano (Chachanuburi in Kondo’s spelling) on Kunashir. Berutarube originates from Ainu Pe retar pe “a place (thing) where the water is white”. Atsonupuri is from Atusa nupur “naked mountain”, while Chachanuburi is from Caca “old man” + nupur “mountain” (Batchelor 1889).

Highly credible look also toponyms with the formant betsu, which originates from the Ainu pet “river”. Hinnebetsu seems to derive from Ainu pinne “male” and pet. Onnebetsu is from Ainu onne “old” or here “big” and pet. Kondo says that this river is the biggest among those flowing down the mountain of Chachanuburi (Kondo 1935: 1340). Ruyobetsu is from rui “whetstone”, o “to be in quantity” and pet. Kondo mentions that there are lots of porphyrite near this river (Kondo 1935: 1340).
According to Kondo, two toponyms on the island of Kunashir are related to Ainu legends about Okikurumi, an Ainu cultural hero, whom Kondo links to Minamoto-no Yoshitsune, a legendary Japanese warrior who was told to escape to the Ainu lands. The first is Kusarichi, a place with bizarre columnar basalt formations (now cape Stolbchatiy, lit. “columnar”). Kondo says that they look like Japanese armor waistcloth kusazuri and the Ainu believe that Yoshitsune removed and left his kusazuri in this place and later they had dried under the sun (Kondo 1935: 1340). Kusarichi thus can derive from Ainu kusari “armor”, from Japanese kusari – “chain” (Dobrotvorskii 1875: 156). The second is Otachippu. It is a sand mountain with snow underlying at a depth of about half a meter if dig sand up. The toponym thus derives from Ainu ota “sand” and cip “boat”, “ship”. According to the local legend, Kondo explains, Yoshitsune’s ship was abandoned in this place and turned into a sand mountain (Kondo 1935: 1340).

The commentary made by Mogami about the name of Etorofuwatara looks quite controversial, according to him, this is the rock that gave a name to the whole island of Iturup Etorofu. Mogami explains that etorofu means “nose” in Ainu while watara is “rock” in Japanese. He says that the form of Etorofuwatara resembles agemaki, a Japanese knot with three decorative loops, and, according to one legend, Ainu gave this name to the rock because it looked like a knot agemaki on the swords of two Ainu gods, Okikurumi and Samaikuru (who, adds Mogami, were possibly Yoshitsune and his companion Benkei), who moved to Ainu lands in the ancient times (Mogami 1972: 376). Nevertheless, what “nose” in the name of the rock and a knot agemaki have in common remains unclear. Actually, Etorofu can be etymologized as Etu-oro-o-
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4. Toponyms that do not look like toponyms

At the same time, some toponyms mentioned by Mogami and Kondo do not seem to be toponyms at all. For instance, Mogami says that the rock Etorofuwatara is located in the place named Moshirinoshike “almost in the middle of the island” (Mogami 1972: 376). Moshirinoshike obviously derives from Moshi “land”, “island” and noshike “middle”, which is literally “the middle of the island”. Thus, Moshirinoshike could be used by Mogami’s Ainu guides just as an indication of distance, but not as a regular toponym.

In much the same way, Kondo writes that “in a place named Seseki (on Kunashir) there is a hot spring that bubbles right in the sea” (Kondo 1935: 1340). Seseki originates from Ainu sesek “to be hot” and i “a nominalizer”, thus seseki means “hotness”. This word was often used for hot springs. In later maps there are at least three places on Kunashir indicated as Seseki, while today Seseki hot spring on Shiretoko peninsula is one of the most famous and popular resorts in Hokkaido. It seems reasonable enough that Seseki was just an apppellative in Ainu that was mistakenly understood as a toponym by Kondo.

Another example of a possible apppellative taken as a toponym is the word Atoiya. Kondo mentions it as a place on Kunashir that serves as a departure point further to the island of Iturup (Kondo 1935: 1341). Mogami writes: “when they travel from Kunashir to Iturup people land in whether Itoiya or Herutarube (Beretarbe)”. Itoiya may be a mistaken Atoiya (Mogami uses both spellings in different places), which derives from Atui (sea) and ya (shore). This word appears on later maps as a toponym in the corner points of several Kuril Islands: Kunashir, Iturup, Urup, and others. Thus, Atuiya seems to mark the points where local Ainu waited for the weather good enough to travel to another island of the archipelago and back. If this suggestion is correct, then Atuiya too was an apppellative adopted as a toponym by the Japanese.

The last example of a doubtful toponym is Rebunshiri, mentioned by Mogami as a name of a mountain on the island of Iturup. He writes that the mountain Rebunshiri can be observed from the northern part of Iturup’s Pacific coast when one looks in the southwest direction. He describes this mountain as a volcano full of sulfur fumaroles and hot springs on its surface. It is clear that “Rebunshiri” refers to one of the volcanos in the central part of Iturup (now their names are Baranskogo, Tebenkova, and Ivan Grozny, formerly Sashiusu, Odamoi, and Yakeyama respectively). The problem is that Rebunshiri derives from Ainu Rep-un-sir and means “land/piece of land that lies over the sea” or simply an island. It is a regular name for small islands separated from the bigger ones by the sea (a well-known example is the island of Rebun northwest of Hokkaido). It seems that Mogami used an Ainu phrase “[the mountain that appears] on the land over the sea” as a name for the mountain itself, since Ainu names for mountains regularly contain the formant -nupur or at least some nominalizer (-p “thing” or -us “place”) but not -sir “land”, “island”. Wasn’t it one more example of registering a situational, spontaneous description of the place as a toponym?
5. Conclusions

This brief study of some Ainu toponyms on the islands of Iturup and Kunashir mentioned in Japanese sources in the late 18th century shed light on the process of how toponyms were recorded for the first time by the representatives of a literate society. We managed to see that among the toponyms there were both credible ones and those that could not be toponyms at all at the time of their registration. This raises some questions for further consideration. Were Ainu toponyms proper or common nouns (appellatives) in Ainu’s everyday conversation? Or both existed simultaneously? And if so, what was their proportion? Were there cases of fabrication of toponyms in response to inquiries from Japanese officials, or registering situational, spontaneous descriptions of places as toponyms? I hope that further study of Ainu toponyms in comparison with later maps and descriptions, as well as with special reference to the usage of toponyms in Ainu folklore texts, could clear at least some of these questions.

References


