

Ainu ethnogenesis

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This presentation deals with the question concerning the origins of the ethnic group known as Ainu. Historically the term Ainu has been used to refer to several local populations, inhabiting, most importantly, the island of Hokkaido or Ezo, but also the northern part of Honshu, the southern part of Sakhalin, the entire chain of the Kuriles, and the southern tip of Kamchatka. These local populations were united by a number of ethnospecific features connected with social and cultural traditions, biological heritage, and language. In view of these shared features it is possible to view the Ainu as a single ethnic group, speaking a set of ethnospecific idioms which may be defined as either dialects of a single language or a group of two to three closely related languages. The ethnospecific features of the Ainu are particularly obvious when contrasted with the neighbouring populations in the south (Japanese), northwest (Orok(Uilta, Nivkh), and northeast (Kamchadal). At the same time, all of these features, including the Ainu language, exhibit transitionality towards the neighbours.

When viewed in a chronological perspective, the ethnospecific features defining the Ainu fall apart, with some features, such as bear cult and shamanism, pointing to a relatively recent northern influence, while others are connected with similarly recent Japanese influence from the south. At the bottom of Ainu culture there lies a layer obviously inherited from the Jomon cultural base of prehistorical Japan. This correlates well with the results of recent research in human genetics, which have shown that a considerable part of the Ainu genetic composition derives from Jomon Japan and is shared by the native population of the Ryukyu Islands. The natural conclusion from this is that the Ainu in the genetic and cultural sense are heirs of Jomon Japan, while the ethnic Japanese, as also defined by ethnospecific cultural and linguistic features, represent a more recent intrusion from the Korean peninsula and the Asian continent. The arrival of the Japanese ethnicity on the Japanese Islands can be reliably connected with the Yayoi culture, followed by the phase of state formation during the Kofun period.

The question is how far back in time we can speak of the Ainu, and in what sense. The only feature that offers an unambiguous lineage that can be followed backwards is language. Therefore, when we speak of Ainu in prehistory, we can only refer to the speakers of the Ainu lineage of languages. There is currently no alternative to assuming that the Ainu linguistic lineage has been present on the

Japanese Islands since Jomon times. The geographical and chronological circumstances connected with its arrival on the Japanese Islands remain unknown. However, it cannot have been the only linguistic lineage of Jomon Japan. The geographical complexity of the region cannot possibly have supported a single speech community with an extensive territory in prehistorical times, which means that there must have been a large number of languages and probably several language families in prehistorical Japan. On the other hand, the relative cultural homogeneity of Jomon Japan suggests that these prehistorical languages may have been in contact with each other and may therefore have shared important typological features. It is, consequently, possible that Ainu is typologically representative of the Jomon linguistic diversity.

The formation of the Ainu ethnic complex was also connected with the territorial movements of the Ainu linguistic lineage. Linguistic evidence, including the traces of early lexical contacts with Japanese, suggest that a protohistorical form of Ainu was once spoken in the region immediately north of the first Japanese base in south-central Honshu. From this position, due to the expansion of the Japanese speech community by way of natural population growth and absorption of the original local populations, the Ainu linguistic lineage moved northwards to the northern part of Honshu, from where it expanded to Hokkaido and absorbed, in turn, the earlier languages of the island. This expansion can confidently be connected with the advance of the Satsumon culture. Further expansions in late mediaeval times took the Ainu linguistic lineage northwards to Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands, leading to the formation of the historically observed regional forms of the Ainu ethnic group and language.

We can, consequently, speak of Ainu in the proper ethnospecific sense of the term only after the expansion of the Ainu linguistic lineage to Hokkaido, where the speakers of Ainu absorbed earlier local inhabitants, including, most importantly, the representatives of the Okhotsk cultural complex. The expansions of the Ainu linguistic lineage in time and place allow us to divide the Ainu ethnic history into several stages, including paleoethnic, pre-ethnic, protoethnic, and ethnic. The “Golden Time” of Ainu ethnicity may be dated to the 15th to 18th centuries, when the historical combination of “race”, culture, language and territory reached its high point. Today’s Ainu, who have lost their language and preserve only fragments of their genetic and cultural heritage may in this context be defined as a postethnic group.