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Ethnology and Linguistics : Hunter-Gatherer and Farmer Symbiosis from a Linguist's Point of View

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Hunter-Gatherer and Farmer Symbiosis from a Linguist's Point of View

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper¹⁾ I consider the various other contributions to this volume from the point of view of a linguist. I am not an archeologist, but for nearly 50 years have specialised in Philippine languages; not just the languages of the Negritos, who are the traditional hunter-gatherers in the Philippines, but also various languages spoken by farming groups. My main concern is to compare some of the issues related to hunter-gatherer and farmer symbiosis in Japan with what we find in the Philippines. I begin with the first interactions between the incoming Yayoi and the resident Jomon population.

THE JOMON POPULATION

We must assume that when we talk about the Jomon we are talking about a period (at least 12,000 years long) in prehistory when Japan was occupied neither by a single culture, nor by a unified group of people speaking a single language. Their defining characteristic appears primarily to have been the fact that they were hunter-gatherers, who at least in some areas had developed cord-marked pottery and were relatively sedentary. But within these parameters there must have been a wide range of variation, depending on the ecological niches in which they found themselves, their relative success at exploiting the resources available to them, the extent that horticulture had become part of their activities, and other such factors. Under these conditions and over that great period of time one can only assume that not only were there distinct Jomon cultures, but that there were multiple languages, maybe hundreds of languages, spoken throughout the Japanese archipelago.

We can compare the Jomon situation with that found in New Guinea, a country that had been occupied by humans for more than 40,000 years before Europeans first arrived, and for whom hunting and gathering combined with horticulture (domestication of taro) was a way of life for around 10,000 years. The different geographical landscapes in which they lived, combined with the huge variety of cultural differences that developed, resulted in a linguistic diversity that was unparalleled elsewhere in the world. Over a thousand languages, belonging to scores

of apparently completely unrelated phyla were being spoken, many by small, isolated groups in high mountain valleys, others by neighbours living almost adjacent to one another on coastal shores and along river valleys. It was probably the same in Japan, in that many of the same conditions that existed there existed also in Japan.

The interaction we find between the Jomon groups and the incoming progenitors of the Yayoi people must therefore have taken place at different times, in different places and in quite different ways. But what we know is that apart from the Ainu, who have maintained their identity, the other Jomon peoples were completely assimilated into the incoming Yayoi population, and their languages lost in favour of what is now spoken in Japan, although one might claim that at least some of the dialectal diversity of modern Japanese might be attributable to substrata from contact with the languages spoken by the assimilated Jomon population.

HUNTER-GATHERER GROUPS IN THE PHILIPPINES

Now let us compare this with what we find in the Philippines. First, we notice that the Jomon peoples, at the time of first contact with in-migrating Yayoi people, were far more technologically advanced than the situation that we find among the hunter-gatherer groups in the Philippines. The Jomon peoples had adapted themselves to a wide range of climatic conditions, from the deep winters of northern Japan to the semi-tropical conditions of the Ryukyu Islands. They had settlements. They had elaborately constructed houses. They had highly developed rituals and so on. This was not the case in the Philippines when the first Austronesian migrants arrived.

The earliest Austronesian migrants arrived in the Philippines around 4,000 years ago, at least 2,000 years before the first Yayoi contact with Jomon. They were, like the Yayoi, a neolithic people, familiar with the techniques of grain agriculture, not only rice but also millet, and they brought these techniques with them when they arrived. The Austronesians came from the north, probably from the southeast coastal area of Taiwan, sailing south to the Batanes Islands in the Bashi Channel, and eventually entering Cagayan Province in northern Luzon. They also brought with them knowledge of pottery, weaving, and metalworking. Before their arrival, the Philippines were occupied by a large number of Negrito hunter-gatherer groups. They were apparently “pure” hunter-gatherers at that time, without knowledge of pottery or weaving, and without horticulture of any sort; at least there have been no archaeological discoveries that might suggest that they were horticulturists.

In the Philippines today there are probably only about 25 such groups left. Most are located in northern Luzon (some of them discussed by Minter in this volume), with a few groups (the Ata and Ati) in the central Visayan Islands, one group (the Batak) in Palawan, and one more group (the Mamanwa) remaining in Mindanao, the large southern island of the Philippines. There were probably a considerable number of other groups in Mindanao, but all have been assimilated into the Manobo farming

groups, many of whose members appear to be physically similar to Negritos, having darker skin and curlier hair than their non-Negrito neighbours. At least one such group maintains the name Ata, associated elsewhere in the Philippines with Negritos; however, they no longer identify themselves as Negrito. The evidence is suggestive that they were probably once a Negrito group that intermarried with Manobo farmers and became assimilated into their population. In Indonesia all of the Negrito groups that must have once lived there have now also been completely assimilated.

Generally, the people we have been talking about are called Agta (Photo 1), but there are a number of different groups with similar names. There are five or six groups called Ayta (hence the common designation in Filipino/Tagalog as Ita); there are two Alta (Photo 2, Photo 3) groups; there are a couple of groups called Atta; and then there are the Arta, a highly endangered Negrito group. I undertook research on this group about 15 years ago, and at that time could only find 12 people left who spoke the language; several of these had already intermarried with Ilokano-speaking farmers, and the children of these unions spoke Ilokano and not the language of their Negrito parent. Recent (2007) attempts to contact these people again were unsuccessful. Similarly, there are only a few elderly members left of an Agta group in Abra Province, none of whom are able to speak any other language now than Ilokano. Their children have all intermarried with Ilokans and no longer consider themselves to be Negrito.



Photo 1 Manide Agta Negritos. Photo by Jason Lobel.



Photo 2 Northern Alta Negritos. Photo by Lawrence A. Reid.



Photo 3 Southern Alta Negritos with author. Photo by Lawrence. A. Reid.

All the remaining Negrito groups in the Philippines have lost their original languages and now speak an Austronesian language, related more or less closely to the language of the farming group in their vicinity. Negrito languages typically retain very old, conservative features of Austronesian languages, so we must assume that contact with in-migrating Austronesians must have taken place relatively soon after their first arrival in the north of the Philippines and that language shift took place as the result of a close symbiotic relationship that developed between them, a relationship that extended into historic times, with Negrito groups supplying forest products to Austronesians in exchange for labour and a share in the rice harvest.

My own studies of the relationships between the languages of these Negrito groups and the languages of their neighbours show that there is a wide range of differentiation. Some languages are very different from those of their neighbours, while others are very similar. These differences reflect, I believe, different types of interaction between the groups in question in prehistoric times. The language of the Arta, for example, the group I mentioned that is almost extinct, is more different from the language of its farmer neighbours than is found elsewhere in the Philippines. The sound changes that characterise the development of many of their words are unique in the Philippines, and Arta does not share any of the sound changes that characterise the language of its neighbours. The only explanation for this is that their original contact with in-migrating Austronesian farmers must have been very early. In the beginning they developed a very close relationship with the farmers, with both groups living together in the same or adjacent communities and with the children of both communities growing up together, so that perhaps within a generation or two the Negritos abandoned their own language and spoke only the language of their Austronesian friends. But today their language is very different from that of their neighbours. How did this come about?

In order for the language that they learned to become so different from that of their neighbours, we must assume that at some early point they separated themselves from their former farming friends, perhaps as a result of conflict, and reasserted their own identity. Only with geographical and/or social distance can language splits take place. Although they may have spent a long period completely independent from their neighbours, I believe that a cyclical interaction developed, swinging between complete independence on the one hand, and interdependence on the other, bringing them back into contact with their former Austronesian neighbours.

A different pattern of interaction between Negritos and farmers explains the language of another group of Negritos. These are the Atta in the far northern part of Luzon, who speak a dialect of the Ibanag language. The languages of the Negritos and their farming neighbours are mutually intelligible. From this fact, we can assume that even though the original contact with farmers may have been in the distant past, they have been interacting on a continual basis with their neighbours, so that as the language of the farmers changed over time, the language of the Negritos was continuously being modified in favour of the current language of the Ibanag people. A point to note here is that despite the ongoing close, symbiotic relationship

between the Atta and the Negritos, continuing for perhaps thousands of years since first contact, the Negritos have maintained their own identity as hunter-gatherers.

This identity is most clearly manifest in the names that they call themselves. The names Agta, Atta, Alta, Ayta, and Arta, differing only by the particular reflex of the proto-sound in the middle of the original word, mean “Negrito person” in each of the languages. In turn, many of these languages have a name for “non-Negrito person”.

Today, however, there are no longer any “pure” hunter-gatherers in the Philippines. All practise some kind of horticulture and in some places have acquired title to lands, acquired water buffalo for preparing fields, and have taken up agriculture. Typically, this has been in response to the loss of forest cover, their inability to continue their traditional hunting and gathering lifestyle, education, and the efforts of governmental and non-governmental bodies to draw the Negritos into the body politic. While in many areas the Negritos continue to maintain their identity and still speak a distinct language from their neighbours, in other areas, often as a result of intermarriage with non-Negritos, their former Austronesian language has been lost, and they are becoming fully assimilated into the nearest community of non-Negrito farmers.

CONCLUSION

What can this situation tell us about the prehistoric contact between the Jomon peoples and the Yayoi? While in the Philippines there are still Negrito groups who continue to maintain their own identity and speak distinct languages from their neighbours, in Japan it is only the Ainu who fit this description. While the genetic affiliation of the Ainu language is still controversial, it is clear that it has been heavily influenced by Japanese. Other Jomon groups, however, regardless of whether they maintained their own identity for hundreds of years or not, were all completely assimilated into the farming culture of the Yayoi. One may wonder what it was about the Yayoi that resulted in this assimilation. Agriculture is a strong motivator, and one must therefore assume that extensive periods of relatively peaceful interaction brought about a symbiotic relationship that ultimately led to intermarriage between the groups, loss of the old hunter-gatherer/horticulturalist lifestyle, and adoption of farming as the preferred way of life, with consequent loss of linguistic identity and the full adoption of the language of their neighbours.

NOTE

- 1) This paper was originally presented as a comment following the presentation of papers in the session (Interactions between Hunter-Gatherers and Farmers in Prehistory and History) at the WAC Inter-Congress in Osaka, 13 January 2006. I wish to thank Professor Ikeya for inviting me to join the panel of discussants, and for the opportunity to meet and interact with the participants in the session.

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