Four Tungusic Etymologies

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Prof György Kara is internationally renowned specialist in Mongolian. Few people, however, know that he was one of the key persons to keep Tungusic Studies alive in the USA by the simple virtue of offering courses on Ewenki and Nanai at the Indiana University. As the French would say, je lui tire mon chapeau. This modest contribution offered to him on the occasion of his eightieth birthday to celebrate his eminence not only as a Mongolist, but also as of a Tungusologist.

The goal of this article is to shed light on some obscure words in Tungusic languages.

Manchu *nikan* ‘Chinese’

On the first glance, the etymology of this ethnic name appears to be obscure. For many years I thought that it might be a loan from Early Middle Chinese *nín*\(^{A}\) *kean*\(^{A}\) (人間) ‘person, human being’, but I still had great reservations, mostly due to the fact that ‘human being’ is mostly reserved by the ethnic entity for itself, like Ainu *aynu* ‘human being, Ainu’ or Chukchi *luorawetlan* ‘real human being, Chukchi’. From this point of view, it would be very strange if Manchus called their Chinese enemies ‘human beings’. We should expect something much more pejorative. Also, from the phonetic point of view, Early Middle Chinese *nín*\(^{A}\) *kean*\(^{A}\) (人間) ‘person, human being’ would most likely be borrowed into Manchu as *ningiyen* or *ningen*. In addition, Early Middle Chinese initial *ń-* became *ń*-*ź*- in Late Middle Chinese, finally becoming *ř*- in Early (and modern) Chinese. A direct loan from Early Middle Chinese into proto-Manchu also seemed unlikely.

The moment of truth came about five or six years ago, when Pamela Crossby asked a question on the Manchu Studies discussion list about the etymology of Manchu *nikan* ‘Chinese’. Then it suddenly dawned on me that the etymology practically lies on the surface, if one is going to follow what one preaches. And I preached twenty years ago that the contrast between Manchu medial -\(h\)- and -\(k\)- is to be interpreted as reflecting proto-Manchu *-*\(k\)- and *-*\(nk\)- respectively (Vovin 1997).
One can find the following comparative Tungusic data: Neghidal nɨkan ‘robber, brigand’, Nanai nɨqə, Uilta náqa(n-) ‘slave, servant’, Ulchi nɨqə(n-) ‘slave’, Udihe nɨŋka ‘laborer’. Oroch nɨŋka ‘slave’ (SSTM1a 1975: 590). While Neghidal and Southern Tungusic do not have the cluster -ŋk- and, therefore, appear to be late loanwords from Manchu although Uilta-qq- seems to be a trace of it, Northern Tungusic¹ Udihe and Oroch clearly have -ŋk-. Regardless of the phonetic details, the semantic fit seems to be almost perfect: ‘robber, slave, servant’—what could be more offensive to an enemy?

Oroch and Uilta ilau ‘Ritual Whittled Pieces of Wood’

So far, the only etymology connecting Tungusic with Ainu directly (with the exception of obvious Eurasian Wanderwörter) that was proposed is limited to Ulchi nauji ‘ritual whittled pieces of wood’ vs. Ainu inaw ‘id.’ (SSTM1a 1975: 587), but the authors of the SSTM1a overlooked even more obvious and less problematic Oroch and Uilta ilau ‘id.’ (1975: 306). The directionality of borrowing here is not absolutely clear, for example Janhunen thinks that it is a Tungusic loan in Ainu (1996: 176). However, given the fact that the Tungusic attestations are limited to the Tungusic languages of Primor’ie and Priamur’ie, this object of ritual worship cannot be possibly of a pan-Tungusic origin. In addition, Ainu -n- > Tungusic -l- seems much more likely than Tungusic -l- to Ainu -n- (Ainu -r- would be expected), and, more importantly, the final diphthong -au seems to be strange for the Tungusic phonotactics. Therefore, the Ainu provenance is more probable.

Oroch magiri ‘Broad Knife for Cutting Bread’

There is another etymology, where the Ainu origins are quite uncontroversial. Oroch magiri ‘broad knife for cutting bread’ (SSTM1a 1975: 520). This word is not attested in other Tungusic languages. The immediate source of origin seems to be from Ainu: Yakumo makiri ‘butcher knife’, Horobetsu, Obihiro makiri ‘small knife’, Saru, Bihoro, Asahikawa, Nayoro, Sōya makiri ‘small knife, butcher knife’, Raichiska pon-makiri ‘small knife’ (pon ‘small’) (Hattori 1964: 120–121) < PA *makiri, as demonstrated by the phonetic shape of the word in Oroch: magiri, since Ainu makiri is phonetically [magiri] or [maGiri]. However, Ainu

¹ On Udihe and Uilta as Northern Tungusic languages see Georg (2004).