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Japanese Language

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A team of researchers at the University of Tokyo, **Sean Lee** and **Toshikazu Hasegawa** (1) claim that two waves of migrants arrived to Japan, a hunter-gatherer people who created the **Joomon** culture and a group of rice farmers known as the **Yayoi** culture. The decedents of the hunter-gatherers are the Ainu people who are still living in small groups on the northern Hokkaido Island of the Japanese archipelago (see article **11-The Eastern Expansion**).

The Joomon arrived in Japan before the end of the last ice age around 26,000 years ago, via land bridges that joined Japan to Asia's mainland. They spread all over the Japanese islands and remained isolated until about 2,400 years ago, until the advent of the Yayoi. The new wave of migrants included a group of well armed aggressive soldiers as well as a group of rice cultivators who needed land for cultivation. In order to provide land for the rice cultivation the newcomer soldiers did not hesitate to dislocate and decimate the hunter-gatherer Ainu (Joomon) people.

Recent research on the Japanese dialects compared the Japanese language with the existing **Ainu** language and the language called **Ryukyuan**, spoken on the Okinawa Island and the chain of islands to the south of Japan. The findings confirm that Japanese was the language spoken by the Yayoi people who came to Japan through the Korean Peninsula.

Direct comparisons between Joomon and Yayoi skeletons show that the two people are noticeably distinguishable. By the **Kofun** period (250-538 AD) almost all skeletons excavated in Japan, except of the Ainu and the Okinawans, resemble those of the modern day Japanese.

Regarding the origin of Japanese, I would like to quote **Roy Andrew Miller**, an expert on Altaic languages, who says (2):

"The correspondences in different items of detail exhibited by these linguistic forms alone would probably be sufficient to demonstrate the genetic relationship of Japanese to Old Turkish, and by extension to the Altaic languages in general, even if no other evidence were forthcoming on this entire problem, so striking are their correlations on the several independent levels of phonology, morphology and semantics."

The question of the Japanese origin is still a matter of debate. To acknowledge a relationship of the Japanese language to any other language seems to constitute a surrender of cultural identity for the average Japanese person. This is because the Japanese have long celebrated themselves as ethnically unique. But Japanese linguists did not hesitate to demonstrate several relationships between the Altaic languages and Japanese. Hashimoto Shinkichi (1882 - 1945), as an example, discovered in 1908 that Old Japanese had eight vowels, while modern Japanese has only five. This discovery is a major breakthrough for the demonstration of the close relationship between Turkish and Japanese, since Turkish is the only language within the Altaic languages which still retains eight vowels.

Below are few words showing sound and meaning similarities between Turkish and Japanese:

Japanese (Turkish) /English/	
Yaku (Yak)	/Burn/
Teppen (Tepe)	/Hill/
Sui (Su)	/Water/
Kuro (Kara)	/Black/
Katai (Kati)	/Hard/
Tabe (Tat)	/Taste/
Kaku (Kak)	/Engrave/
Chizu (Çiz)	/Map/
Kiro (Kır)	/Yellow/
Yasai (Yaş, Yaşıl)	/Fresh, Green Vegetable/
Yama (Yamaç)	/Mountain/
Yaban (Yabancı)	/Foreigner/
Yaraşi (Yaraştı)	/Agreeable/
Hanaşi (Hanaş, Konuş)	/Speak/
Nani (Ne)	/What/
Wa (Var)	/Is/
Ka (Kande)	/When/
(Kangi)	/Who/

These 17 words may be a small sample, but let me quote again **R. A. Miller** (3):

If we discover linguistic evidence that appears to indicate significant similarities between Japanese and the inner Altaic languages [Turkic, Mongolian and Tungus], it either means nothing, or it indicates a generic relationship of very long standing, a generic relationship in the sense that the Japanese is a later changed form of the same original linguistic unity that must be responsible for the similarities among the inner languages. The importance that Japanese necessarily assumes in future discussions of the Altaic hypothesis is inescapable.

References

- (1) **The New York Times**, Nicholas Wade, 4-May-2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/04/world/asia/04language.html>
- (2) **Japanese and Other Altaic Languages**, R. Andrew Miller, University of Chicago Press, 1971, Page 135. USA
- (3) **Sprung From Some Common Source, Genetic Connections Among Altaic Languages**, R. Andrew Miller, Stanford University Press, 1991, page 320. USA