

The Road from Ainu Barbarian to Japanese Primitive: A Brief Summary of Japanese-Ainu Relations in a Historical Perspective

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Edward Saïd, in his ground-breaking work *Orientalism*, underlines that to represent the “Other” is to manipulate him. This has been an instrument of submission towards Asia during the age of European expansion, but the use of such a process is not confined to European domination. For centuries, the relationship between Japan and its northern neighbors, the Ainu, is based on economical domination and dependency. In this regard, the Ainu’s foreignness, impurity and “barbaric appearance”—their qualities as inferior “Others”—are emphasized in descriptive texts or by the regular staging of such diplomatic practices as “barbarian audiences”, thus highlighting the Japanese cultural and territorial superiority. But from 1868, the construction of the Meiji nation-state requires the assimilation and acculturation of the Ainu people. As Japan undergoes what Fukuzawa Yukichi refers to as the “opening to civilization” (文明開化 *bunmei kaika*) by learning from the West, it also plays the role of the civilizer towards the Ainu.

The historical case study of the relationship between Japanese and Ainu from up to Meiji highlights the evolution of Japan’s own self-image and identity, from an emerging state, subduing barbarians, to newly unified state—whose ultramarine relations are inspired by a Chinese-inspired ethnocentrism and rejection of outside influence—during the Edo period, and finally to an aspiring nation-state, seeking to assert itself while avoiding colonization at Meiji. This article aims at discussing the relationship between the Japanese and one of their “Others”—the Ainu people—, and how their image was reinvented and recreated to contrast and complement the Japanese’s own self-image and political construction.

Introduction

The “civilized vs. barbarian world-order” as a theoretical framework

When studying the creation, definition and depiction of the ‘Other’ in Japan in a historical perspective, one must use the antique Chinese scheme of *Weltanschauung* as a theoretical framework. This “civilized vs. barbarian world-order” (*kaichitsujo* 華夷秩序), also referred to as “middle kingdom ideology” (*chûka shisô* 中華思想), can be understood in spatial and cultural terms as an oppositional relationship between an insider and an outsider, or

between a civilized centre and a barbaric periphery.¹

This dichotomous, yet multi-layered and concentric distinction between civilized Self and barbarian Other provided the ideological foundation of the Chinese tribute system, as well as an ethnocentric vision of universal empire, fundamentally similar to the world-view of ancient Rome. Over time, modified, self-referential versions of this political ideology were adopted by various satellite states on the Chinese periphery, most notably in Southeast Asia, the Korean Peninsula and of course Japan.

The concept of boundary and frontier

In order to complete this theoretical framework, one must also reflect on the notion of borders and frontiers inside Japan. Most Japanese history scholars agree that boundaries act as “separating factors” between adjacent political or ethnic units and have a tendency to be “inner-oriented” and “centripetal”.² Frontiers are zones, rather than lines,³ which are rather “outer-oriented” and “centrifugal” in nature and act as “integrating factors”, as is the case during the Japanese territorial expansion.

In this respect, one can see a clear historical progression from the “frontiers” of pre-modern political systems to the “boundaries” of modern states. In the case of Japan, the sea itself acted as a natural boundary for much of its history, but one can see nonetheless that for much of the medieval and the Edo period, present-day Hokkaido was a frontier zone.

This theoretical framework can help define and understand the relationship it had with its northern neighbours, the Ainu people.

1. Japan’s antique period: Subduing the barbaric Other

The Ainu in their aboriginal state relied mostly on hunting, fishing, gathering, limited agriculture and barter economy. They inhabited the islands now known as Hokkaido, the Kuril, Sakhalin, Southern Kamchatka and the Amur River estuary region. Some scholars consider they lived as far south as the Tohoku region, where they were first known as Emishi.

As the central imperial power, stationed in the Yamato region, sought to expand its realm from the 8th century, it adopted the Chinese character by which they referred to the “eastern barbarian people” (夷).⁴ It was read *Emishi* or *Ebisu*, and designated a people that were not submitted to the central imperial authority, regardless of any consideration of ethnic distinction or race. Though debates linger among scholars, it is safe to say that, until the 12th century, the Emishi as a group contained both Ainu and Japanese, but this difference had little or no bearing to the Emishi’s relationship to the imperial state, which sought to subjugate them and assimilate them. One can easily see the importance of this “pacification” role in the official title of the future ruler of Japan, the *sêtaishôgun* 征夷大將軍, often translated as “generalissimo pacifier of barbarians”.

Contemporary illustrations of Emishi are nearly non-existent, but one can find written descriptions, which clearly underline their almost animal-like lifestyle and appearance: they live promiscuously, almost in incest; they dwell in holes and nests and wear fur and drink blood. This last element seems to hint at cannibalism, while the consumption of blood is highly associated with impurity.

2. The medieval world-view: Isolating the impure Other

As Japanese rule shifted from the Imperial Court to the shogunate at the beginning of the 12th century, and the centre of power transfers eastwards, Japan adopts a more “closed”, inward-looking worldview, which has a strong association with ideas of pollution and impurity.

During the Kamakura period, criminals are said to be deported to Ezo,⁵ —present-day Hokkaido—, and as crime produced impurity, one can deduce that these criminals were sent to what were considered to be impure lands, outside the realm.⁶ The term Ezo, that designated the inhabitants of this impure island (Ezogashima 蝦夷嶋, later Ezochi 蝦夷地) appears at the beginning of the 12th century,⁷ and will remain in use until the Meiji period. During the 14th century, the term Emishi seems to disappear while the term Ainu makes its first appearance.

The earliest definite pictorial rendering of the Ainu is from the Muromachi period. In the mid-14th century *Suwa Daimyōjin ekotoba* 『諏訪大明神画詞』, a medieval source known for its descriptions of the Emishi,⁸ two populations are said to coexist in the island: “There are those, who, [...] are infinitely strange creatures, they eat human flesh, animals and fish, and do not know of the Five Cereals”, and there are “those who are said to be descendants of Japanese immigrants and who are like the *Wa*, except hairier”. The barbarian quality of the former is once again underlined by the fact that they eat meat, unlike Buddhist Japanese at the time, that they do not practice agriculture, —considered a civilizing factor—, and that they have a rather animal-like physical appearance.

As Japan witnesses increasing internal tensions from the middle of the 15th century, the medieval worldview slowly evolved and inhabitants of outlying regions came to be no longer viewed as devils or carriers of pollution. Instead, they were seen as human beings, interaction with whom could be regulated by practical political, economic and military mechanisms.

3. Edo period: Legitimizing Japanese authority and subduing the Ainu

After the Warring States period, the Tokugawa shogunate was the first regime to draw clear, physical borders for itself.

This is made all the more evident as what are known as the maritime prohibitions sealed

off Japan to most parts of the world, —with the exceptions of four trading “mouths”—, for the next two and a half centuries. This period is often referred to as the Sakoku period, the “locked-down country” period, though this term had often been deemed euro-centric.

When defining this period in terms of the political ideology the historian Arano Yasunori speaks of a “Japanese-style middle kingdom order” (*Nihongata kai chitsujo* 日本型華夷秩序).⁹ Within the context of this hierarchical, ethnocentric worldview, the rulers of Edo-period Japan maintained ties with five separate states and/or ethnic groups, among which the Ainu. In other terms, as David Howell states: “Rather than establish a dichotomy between Japan and the rest of the world, it surrounded itself with peripheral areas that were neither fully part of the polity nor completely independent of it.” He also submits that this “spurred the formation of a Japanese identity even before the emergence of a modern nation-state in the mid-nineteenth century.” In this sense, “the demarcation of an ‘ethnic boundary’ between the Ainu and the Japanese was a critical element in determining the political boundaries of the early modern Japanese state.”¹⁰

Emphasizing foreignness: barbarian audiences

On top of this, the bicephalous *bakuhau* system of double fiefdom and central authority put the Matsumae domain in charge of frontier surveillance and commerce with the Ezo. Hence, in order to legitimize its exceptional role, Matsumae had to visibly establish its authority on the Ainu, all the while maintaining their commercial dependency. In this regard, the Ainu had to be kept in a primal, aboriginal state, and forbidden to assimilate. They were not allowed to speak Japanese, wear certain items of clothing (such as straw raincoats and footwear), build Japanese-style houses or practice agriculture.

Furthermore, their foreignness and barbaric appearance were emphasized and even put on show during “barbarian audiences”. These audiences were designated by the Ainu words *uimam* 御目見 (ウイマム), which originally referred to commerce, and *umsa* (オムシヤ), a word designating a form of greeting. During these audiences, they were made to wear their most exotic attire, were paraded around the city and given small tokens by the Matsumae clan, according to their loyalty and rank. These ceremonies were designed to reaffirm Matsumae authority, to prove its legitimacy in the region to the shogun, to remind the Ainu of their submission to the fief.¹¹

As Tessa Morris-Suzuki writes, these “barbarian audiences” were the visual aspect of the subordination of a foreign people to Japanese dominion. Everything about the relationship, therefore, had to be structured in such a way as to magnify the exotic character of the peripheral societies.¹²

Edo-period descriptions of the Ainu

Japanese culture became quite radically more visual in the aftermath of the age of encounter, but not as a consequence of it. The explosion of literacy, print culture and commercial publishing that swept throughout the country in the last third of the 17th century brought visual representation within reach, and hence into the cognitive realm, of a growing mass audience. The imaged Other became part of the everyday cognitive world.¹³

These imagined Others, when perceived as savage, are some combination of partially or wholly naked, shod or barefoot, darker skinned, curly haired or dishevelled, they tattoo themselves, or eat animal—or even human—flesh. They wear unprocessed “natural” things (salmon skin shoes and bark clothing in the case of the Ainu).¹⁴

The Ezo’s hair is red, their beards are two *shaku* long¹⁵ [...]. The women [...] have no beard and inject ink with a hook to tattoo around their mouths. They also tattoo their hands.¹⁶

This description underlines the colour of their hair, similar to that of the Dutch, presented in their time as « Southern Barbarians » (*namban* 南蛮), their impressive beards, and the women’s tattoos.¹⁷ The latter practice must have been all the more shocking, as, according to the Japanese cultural system, tattoos were associated with crime and punishment whereas the practice itself was regarded as a form of bodily mutilation, which, when voluntarily inflicted, was completely averse to the prevalent notions of Confucian filial conduct.

They are not endowed with any humanity. They have dishevelled hair, they do not shave their beards. They were clothing made of bark, called *attush*, [...] and fold the left side of their clothes over the right. The women also have dishevelled hair, to the point that their skull is visible in certain places [...]. The married women have tattoos around their mouths and on their hands and also wear the left folded over the right. Men and women alike use rope as belts and many children go naked. They sometimes wear dog skins, or that of other animals.¹⁸

In this description, on top of the dishevelled hair, the barbaric quality of their clothing underlined. Another fact states that they fold the left side over their right to close their overdress. This fact seems to be recurrent in many descriptions of that time. In fact, according to the Japanese version of the Japanese-Portuguese dictionary (*Hōyaku nippon jisho* 『邦訳日葡辞書』), Japanese have folded the right side over since the 7th century, that implemented this Chinese style of clothing. As it is a known fact that funeral rites fold the

left side over the right, this must have been regarded as a shocking custom.

At the beginning of the 19th century, foreign pressure in the region increased and Ezo fell under direct shogunal rule. The political measures concerning the Ainu changed drastically and they were ordered to cut their hair, conform to Japanese customary norms, use the Japanese language, or to abandon the practice of polygamy. These first assimilation measures presage those that will be reinforced during the Meiji period.

4. The Meiji period: Civilizing and assimilating the primitive

In 1869, Hokkaido is officially annexed by Meiji Japan. It offers a buffer-zone against Russia as well as new resources to exploit, as well as providing a significant expansion to the Japanese territory.

For the first time, Japan is faced with the delicate, yet crucial task, of integrating a foreign population amid its own. In order to do so, the Meiji government chooses assimilation and the dismantling of any pre-existing Ainu identity and culture. Many reasons motivate this choice, among which the recognition from foreign powers, which, along with introduction of social Darwinism in Japan,¹⁹ required subjugated and civilized primitives. Therein, Ainu subjugation helped Japan petition Western powers for recognition as a “civilized state”. While the Japanese had already adopted Chinese Confucian ideas of the barbarian and the civilized, the racialization of the Ainu people cemented justifications for their continued physical and psychological exploitation, being used as yardsticks for Japanese progress into Western ideas of civilization. Furthermore assimilation was vital to the construction of the Meiji nation-state is based on the concept of “Nation as a family state” (*kazoku kokka* 家族国家) with the emperor at its head as both ruler and father-figure. This requires an ethnically homogenous people.²⁰

Cultural assimilation—Civilizing the Other and making the Ainu less Ainu

Japanese-Ainu relations shifted from a spatial insider vs. outsider to a temporal modern vs. primitive relationship, with the Ainu presented as “primitive hunter-gatherers”. The cultural assimilation measures (*Ainu dôka seisaku* アイヌ同化政策) prohibit the Ainu from performing traditional and distinctive activities. Some of these measures aim is to suppress Ainu culture and identity, such as the outlawing of earrings for the men, ritual face and hand tattoos for the women.²¹ They officially become “former aborigines” (*kyûdojin* 旧土人).

Displaying the Other: the Ainu as “living exhibits”

The Meiji state’s attempts to assimilate and suppress Ainu identity within Japan occurred alongside contradictory and degrading displays of Ainu abroad, as groups of Ainu are

shown as “living exhibits” during domestic and international fairs.²² The participation of a group of nine Ainu at the 1904 Saint Louis World Fair’s Anthropology Days was supported by Japanese officials as a way to separate and distinguish indigenous natives from the culturally and racially superior Japanese delegation sent to the Fair. This is a way of marking Japan’s own racial and cultural superiority, and, by contrast, its own modernity and power.²³

In this same sense, photographs of the Ainu taken during the early Meiji period empathize their “primitive features”, such as their hairiness, isolated and distant living environment and simple lifestyles, customs viewed as cruel (such as the *iyomante* arctolatric bear ritual, which was not outlawed from the beginning), clothes, in certain cases even filth.

Lauding oneself through the Other

On the other hand, Ainu participation in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 is used to promote patriotism and a significant number of “former aborigines” receive military decorations.²⁴ A few “brave former aborigines” (*yūkan naru kyūdojin* 勇敢なる旧土人) and their heroic acts are even praised by the media.²⁵ Nothing is said, however, of the discrimination they suffer within their respective battalions.

Finding oneself through the Other: The Ainu language and the search for Japanese identity

Interestingly enough, it is also during the Meiji era that investigation and research focusing on peripheral languages, such as the Ainu language, by linguists such as Kindaichi Kyōsuke, was born from the desire to explain and clarify the cultural origins of the Japanese *ethnos*, a desire shared on the general level by Meiji statesmen and intellectuals. Hence, ironically, one can say that while actively encouraging the eradication of the Ainu language and identity, the Meiji government encouraged its study to delve deeper into the Japanese identity.

Denying the Other

After Meiji, the state was more concerned with negating Ainu ethnicity than in promoting assimilation *per se*. Furthermore, as the Ainu’s demographic profile within Hokkaido becomes increasingly low due to growing Japanese settlement, intermarriage, poverty, alcoholism and disease, they are more and more widely perceived as “a vanishing people” (*horobiyuku minzoku* 滅び行く民族), doomed to extinction. Hence, it is as a unified state that Japan faces the other world powers on the eve of the Second World War.

Making the Other disappear

In 1937, the “former aborigine schools” are closed. The denomination “former aborigine” tends to disappear. As tensions rise between Japan and foreign powers, it is important, on the patriotic level, for all Japanese to be united as one behind the Emperor. Furthermore, this terminological disappearance mirrors an effective one. For the Japanese government, the Ainu have been completely assimilated. In that sense, they are not only considered “a vanishing people”, but have, in fact, vanished as a people in the eye of the government. This line of thought will be perpetrated by the successive governments for the next six decades.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the depiction of the Ainu by the Japanese has greatly evolved over time, from an impure barbarian, to a subjugated, exotic Other, to a civilized primitive, to oblivion. This mirrors Japan’s necessity for legitimizing state and power on its frontier, its claim to join the civilizing Western powers during Meiji, and its unity when faced with adversity from the 1930s. It also mirrors Japan’s evolution from an emerging state, to a unified state, to an aspiring nation-state, and finally to an aspiring world power.

Notes

- 1 BATTEN Bruce. 1999. “Frontiers and Boundaries of Pre-modern Japan”, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 25 (2), pp. 166-182.
- 2 KRISTOF L. K. D. 1959. “The nature of frontiers and boundaries”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 49, pp. 269-274.
- 3 BATTEN Bruce. 1996. “Kyôkai kara no nihonshi” (Japanese history seen from the frontier), *Gendai shisô*, 24, pp. 236-252.
- 4 One can find the first mention of the Emsihi in the *Kojiki*, in the chapter entitled *Kusanagi no tsurugi* (草薙の剣) about Yamato Takeru no mikoto 倭建命, from Emperor Jinmu’s eastern expeditions (*Jinmu tennô tôsei* 神武天皇東征): 「悉に荒ふる蝦夷共を言向け、また山河の荒ふる神等を平和して」, “We have subdued the savage Emishi and pacified the savage gods of the mountains and streams”. 「東の方十二道の荒ふる神、また伏はぬ人等を言向け和平せ」, “We have imposed peace upon the gods of the 12 eastern provinces and pacified the un-subdued people.”
- 5 ENDÔ Iwao. 1976. “Chûsei kokka no tôi seibaiken ni tsuite” (Justice and rights of the Medieval State in Eastern barbaric lands), *Matsumae han to Matsumae*, 9, pp. 8-10.
- 6 AMINO Yoshihiko, ISHII Susumu, KASAMATSU Hiroshi and KATSUMATA Shizuo. 1983. *Chûsei no tsumi to batsu* (Crime and Punishment during the Middle-Ages), Tokyo, Tôkyô daigaku shuppankai, pp. 21 and 202.
- 7 The first mention of the word « Ezo » can be found in an anthology of Heian poetry, the *Sakyô Daibu Akisuke kyô shû* 『左京大夫顕輔郷集』 from 1116: 「浅ましや千嶋のえぞのつくるなる どくきのや社ひまはしるなれ」 “I have been pierced through by the poison arrow of the wretched Ezo

- from the Thousand Isles". Perhaps is the author here referring to suffering caused by love.
- 8 SASAKI Toshikazu. 1976. "Chûsei no Emishi shiryô: Suwa Daimyôjin ekotoba", *Dorumen*, 11.
- 9 ARANO Yasunori. 1988. *Kinsei Nihon to Higashi Ajia*, Tokyo, Tôkyô daigaku shuppankai, pp. 3-65.
- 10 HOWELL David. 1994. "Ainu ethnicity and the boundaries of the early modern Japanese state", *Past and Present*, 142, p. 69.
- 11 See KAKIZAKI Orindo's *Matsumae jônai nenjû gyôji* (松前城内年中行事 The annual events of Matsumae Castle), which includes a section on the *uimamu* or INAGAKI Reiko. 1985. "Ainu minzoku ni taisuru girei shihai: 'Uimamu' 'Omusha' ni tsuite (Ceremonial domination of the Ainu people: Uimam and Omusha), *Kita kara mita Nihonshi* (Japanese history seen from the North), Tokyo, Sanseidô, Hokkaidô Tôhoku kenkyûkai, pp. 315-321.
- 12 David Howell mentions an Ainu called Iwanosuke, who lived in the Japanese section of southernmost Hokkaido (和人地 *Wajinchi*) and who was thoroughly assimilated to the everyday customs of the Japanese. Every year, he had to grow out his hair and his beard, and wear traditional Ainu clothing to attend the New Year Ceremonies at Fukuyama Castle with the Mastumae lord.
- 13 TOBY Ronald P. 1998. "Imagining and Imaging 'Athropos' in Early-Modern Japan", *Visual Anthropology Review*, 14 (1), Spring-summer, p. 37.
- 14 TOBY, *op.cit.*
- 15 One *shaku* is equivalent to 30.3 cm.
- 16 MATSUMIYA Kanzan. 1710. "Ezodanhikki", *Nihon shomin seikatsu shiryô shûsei*. 1968. Tokyo, San.ichi shobô.
- 17 The Ainu women were tattooed around their forearms and hands. The tattoo around their mouth is initiated at age three and completed by the time they get married. This tradition is believed to have been brought to Earth by the ancestral Mother, and younger sister of the Creator God. For the Ainu, the tattoo completed at betrothal, was a symbol that any word coming out of a woman's mouth would now belong to her husband, while preventing evil spirits to speak, or to enter through a woman's mouth. Similarly, the Ainu swirling motifs (*morew*) on their clothing were also believed to keep the evil spirits and misfortune out of their body.
- 18 HABUTO Masayasu. 1807. "Kyûmei kôki". *Shinsen Hokkaidô shi*. 1937. Hokkaidô chô shuppansha.
- 19 "There are no 'races' and therefore no 'race relations'. There is only a belief that there are such things, a belief that is used by some social groups to construct an Other (and therefore the Self) in thought as a prelude to exclusion and domination, and by other social groups to define self (and so to construct an Other) as a means of resisting exclusion." (MILES Robert. 1993. *Race after "Race relations"*, London, Routledge, 1993, p.42). Furthermore, it was Japan's "duty". The first history of Hokkaido, printed in 1918, states that the "responsibility of colonization of Hokkaido" was placed upon the Japanese because "no other superior race was in contact with Ezo" (WEINER Michael. 1997. "The Invention of Identity; Race and Nation in Pre-war Japan", London, Dikötter, p. 113).

- 20 HOWELL David L. 2004. "Making "useful citizens" of the Ainu", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 63 (1), February, pp. 6 and 18.
- 21 Curiously, nothing is said of the beard, maybe because during Meiji, adorning a beard was quite fashionable among Japanese themselves.
- 22 An official fair publication illustrated the racialized nature of such an imagined "evolutionary ladder" by depicting the Japanese as seven levels above the "hairy Ainu." This event is symbolic of the discrimination the Ainu suffered at that time, but also shows concretely the limits set by the Japanese themselves into assimilating the Ainu in their midst. Anthropology professor from the University of Chicago Frederick Starr, who helped to bring the exhibition Ainu to Saint Louis, wrote on the "physical characteristic of race" and acquiesced that "here we find a white race that had struggled and lost" In this sense, Starr proposed that the Ainu were living proof that the "Caucasian race" was not biologically predestined to superiority. In fact, many Western scholars who travelled Japan were quick to collude with Japanese academics in caricaturing the Ainu as drunk, hairy, aggressive and almost non-human. The Ainu were also exhibited at the 1910 British-Japan Exhibition in London.
- 23 Takakura Shinichirô notes that according to the criteria laid out in Lewis Henry Morgan's then-influential *Ancient Society* (1877), the Ainu belong to on a very low rung of the ladder of human development—the Lower Status of Barbarism, perhaps, or even a step down, on the Upper Status of Savagery. (*Ancient Society; or, Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization*, New York H. Holt and Company, 1877).
- 24 63 Ainu soldiers were sent to war. 54 of them received a military decoration, 3 of them the Order of the Golden Kite, including Chiri Takakichi 知里高吉.
- 25 Kitakaze Isokichi 北風磯吉 participated on the Battle of Mukden (the "Sekigahara of the Russo-Japanese War") from February 20th to March 10th of 1905, which totalled more than 250,000 casualties on each side, and during which he volunteered to be a liaison officer, facing certain death.

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