

Status and Ethnicity in the Making of the Nation-State : Looking for the "Middle Ground" in Hokkaido

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In this essay I shall examine the force of political institutions in shaping identity, focusing on the Ainu people of Hokkaido during the Tokugawa period (1600–1867). I have two goals in particular: first, to examine how “ethnic” difference was understood in a context in which “ethnicity” had not yet entered the conceptual vocabulary; and second, to place the Japanese case within a broader comparative framework, centering particularly on Richard White’s notion of the “middle ground” [WHITE 1991]. The two aims are closely related, for in lieu of a concept of ethnicity, difference in early modern Japan was framed within clearly demarcated (if permeable) boundaries of status and civilization, with the result that the sort of intrinsically ambivalent space suggested by the middle ground could not develop—at least not with any political cogency.

1. THE MIDDLE GROUND

Introducing White’s work on the middle ground only to dismiss it as inapplicable to Japan requires explanation, particularly since White himself makes no universalistic claims about his thesis. The urge to compare arises for two reasons. First, as an alternative to conceptual models focused on conquest and assimilation, the middle ground offers a sophisticated and nuanced approach to studying contact between peoples and is thus worth considering on purely methodological grounds. Second, there are broad similarities between the *pays d’en haut* (the region surrounding the Great Lakes that White studies) and Hokkaido in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: in both areas, representatives of expanding empires encountered indigenous peoples with whom they built distinctive worlds of trade and conflict; but in both cases creolization was forestalled and the indigenes were essentialized as Other. In the *pays d’en haut* the middle ground was undermined in part by the sheer force of Anglo-American

demographic and economic expansion. In Hokkaido, in contrast, the possibility of a middle ground had vanished by the late seventeenth century, well before substantial numbers of non-Ainu immigrants had entered the island. Considering why a middle ground did not exist in Hokkaido is a way to approach questions about the nature of boundaries of ethnicity and polity in Japanese history—particularly why “ethnic” difference was not perceived in “ethnic” terms, despite the existence of clear boundaries separating the Ainu and Japanese realms.

White’s middle ground refers to the world created by Indians and Europeans in North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a world that was neither fully Indian nor fully European but rather the joint creation of the two peoples. For White, the key process at work in the middle ground is accommodation, a concept he differentiates from acculturation, which carries too strong a suggestion of asymmetrical power relations and unidirectional cultural change. As he describes it:

On the middle ground diverse peoples adjust their differences through what amounts to a process of creative, and often expedient, misunderstandings. People try to persuade others who are different from themselves by appealing to what they perceive to be the values and practices of those others. They often misinterpret and distort both the values and the practices of those they deal with, but from these misunderstandings arise new meanings and through them new practices—the shared meanings and practices of the middle ground [WHITE 1991: x].

White limits his analysis to colonial North America, but the concept of the middle ground is clearly applicable in other contexts—particularly in areas remote from centers of political and military power, where accommodation is often the only pragmatic response to the fact of mutual dependence. In any case, because it does not take the existence of rigid cultural and ethnic boundaries for granted, the middle ground offers a way to conceptualize contact and interdependence as the source of new identities.

The French and British trappers, missionaries, and officials who made their way into the *pays d’en haut* in the colonial era were agents of expansive imperial powers. The overwhelming economic, technological, and military power of the European empires—and the undeniable fact of the Indians’ eventual subjugation—makes it easy to project outcome on process and see the early European arrivals in the region as bearers of the full and immediate force of the empires they represented. But in reality they were far from home, isolated and vulnerable, and hence in no position to subjugate anyone. At the same time, however, the power of the things they brought to North America—guns, alcohol, and a seemingly insatiable demand for furs—ensured that their impact on Indian society would be profound regardless of their actual numbers. In addition to fostering dependency on imported commodities, the Europeans disrupted relations among Indian nations in the *pays d’en haut* in a way that, ironically, made them a necessary mediating presence. For these and many other reasons, the Europeans and Indians in the

North American middle ground needed each other, and so they sought accommodation. But accommodation, with its suggestion of a relatively equal balance of power, did not make the middle ground into an idyllic world of peace and harmony. On the contrary, the mutual misunderstandings that underlay social relations in the middle ground added an ominous element of uncertainty to life. As White demonstrates in bloodcurdling detail, people all too often responded to that uncertainty with unprecedented violence and brutality.¹⁾

At first glance, early modern Hokkaido appears to have all the makings of a middle ground. The relationship between the Ainu and their Wajin (non-Ainu Japanese) neighbors cannot be described in terms either of acculturation or mutual exclusion: both sides engaged in extensive cultural borrowing while retaining discrete identities, and both participated in creating a common world of trade and ritual relations. Moreover, the Ezochi—the area of Hokkaido nominally reserved for exclusive Ainu habitation—was an ambivalent space, neither fully integrated into the Tokugawa state nor entirely exogenous to it.

Beginning in the early eighteenth century, a large commercial fishing industry developed in Hokkaido. Fishery operators recruited Ainu laborers to work in exchange for Japanese commodities, such as ironware, lacquer utensils, cloth, tobacco, and sake (Japanese rice wine). The fishers needed Ainu labor to ensure the economic viability of their operations, while the Ainu needed access to commodities that fulfilled important economic and ritual functions within their society. Although the Wajin definitely held the balance of economic and military power, it is also true that their numbers were too small and position too tenuous to allow them simply to absorb or eliminate the Ainu population. For much of the Tokugawa period, relations between the Wajin and Ainu were marked by the sort of accommodation White says characterized relations in the middle ground of the *pays d'en haut*. As we shall see, this is revealed most importantly in the way that ritual served very different purposes for each side.

It is possible as well to find people in early modern Hokkaido who appear to be products of the middle ground. Let us look briefly at two contrasting examples, separated from each other by nearly a century and a half. In 1643 the crew of a Dutch ship sailing off the northeastern coast of Hokkaido encountered

a Japanese [named Ori or Orey], being a young smart man, as a master of d^o bark, had been aboard with 6 men of his crew, and had said that he came here to trade, like the Dutch came to Japan to trade, and that he came from a place called Matsimay [Matsumae], ...and there is a Japanese governor in d^o place, thus that place is governed by the Japanese, but these people come here to trade skins, whale-oil and blubber.... He had also told that he was from a Japanese father, but his mother came from Eso [Ezo]. He spoke the Eso language as well as his Japanese [COEN 1975: 187].

Judging from this brief description, Ori seems very similar to many of the

1) White [1991: 1–10] makes his point about brutality and violence quickly and forcefully.

characters described by White: the child of a Wajin father and Ainu mother, bilingual and perhaps equally at home among Wajin and Ainu, based in Matsumae but trading far to the northeast in the Ezochi, and no doubt carrying Japanese commodities on which the Ainu had become dependent.

We see a different sort of ambivalent identity in Iwanosuke, a “part-time Ainu” whom the explorer Mogami Tokunai encountered during his journey to Hokkaido in 1784. Iwanosuke was of Ainu ancestry but lived in Kennichi, a Wajin village within the Matsumae domain’s home territory in southern Hokkaido. Ordinarily Iwanosuke was indistinguishable from his Wajin neighbors, but every winter he let his hair and beard grow long so that he would appear properly Ainu when he went to pay his respects to the lord of Matsumae on the seventh day of the new year [MOGAMI 1969: 445]. Iwanosuke visited the castle to participate in the *uimam*, a ritual in which Ainu made a show of submission in exchange for gifts of Japanese commodities. The Ainu (perhaps including Iwanosuke, though his situation was atypical) appear to have perceived the *uimam* mostly as an opportunity to trade; and indeed, in Ainu the word means “trade.” Conversely, the Matsumae authorities saw the *uimam* as the symbol of a tributary relationship between the Ainu and themselves; they assumed that the word *uimam* was derived from the Japanese *omemie* (audience). Ordinarily, Ainu participants in the *uimam* came from the Ezochi in the late spring; Iwanosuke may have been called on to assume an Ainu identity at New Year’s because his home village was close enough to the castle town to make the journey even in midwinter. In any case, his “return” to an Ainu identity was an artifice inasmuch as he undertook his annual metamorphosis at the behest of the lord, who used him (as well as Ainu from the Ezochi) in a ritual assertion of the legitimacy of his rule.²⁾

Clearly, there is a significant qualitative difference between these two examples. The key to the difference is that by Iwanosuke’s time, Hokkaido had been integrated into the Tokugawa state in such a way that social identities were clearly defined according to the tenets of the social status order. Accordingly, let us consider the way in which difference was structured in early modern Japan before returning to the question of the middle ground.

2. STATUS AND CIVILIZATION IN EARLY MODERN JAPAN

During the early modern period, status (*mibun*) ordered social groups within the core polity according to their duties (*yaku*) to political authority, and concepts of civilization (*ka*) and barbarism (*i*) situated Japan and its peripheries in East Asia.³⁾ Customs (*fuzoku*) connected the two, for hairstyle, clothing, and other attributes served both as markers of “civilization” and “barbarism” and as symbols of a specific position within the status order. Customs, in other words, functioned

2) I discuss ritual relations between Matsumae and the Ainu at length in Howell [1994].

3) I examine the relationship between status and civilization in detail in Howell [1998].

much like the ethnic markers discussed by Fredrik Barth in his analysis of ethnic boundaries: essentially arbitrary but nonetheless powerful symbols of self and other [BARTH 1969: 9–38]. The difference between customs as emblems of status and civilization and Barth's ethnic markers is that the boundaries demarcated by customs functioned equally within the core polity and vis-à-vis Japan's peripheries, and thus were not necessarily—or even primarily—ethnic in nature. The interaction between status and civilization in ordering “ethnic” relations on Japan's northern periphery is illustrated by a brief examination of the policies of the Matsumae domain and *bakufu*, or shogunate, toward the Ainu.

By the time the Matsumae domain was founded at the end of the sixteenth century, the Ainu and Wajin in Hokkaido had come to see each another as distinct peoples. Difference was both reified and accentuated by domain policy, for Matsumae's legitimacy within the Tokugawa polity hinged on its ability to mediate trade and other contact between the Ainu and the Japanese state; this naturally required that the two peoples be clearly distinguished. It did so, first, by differentiating between its home territory (the Wajinchi) and the rest of Hokkaido (the Ezochi). The Wajinchi was part of the early modern state's core territory, while the Ezochi was formally exogenous to the state. Nominally autonomous yet clearly subordinated to the Tokugawa state, the Ezochi was, by Western standards, a place of intrinsically ambivalent sovereignty. However, this ambivalence was itself articulated through the early modern regime's delineation of civilized and barbarian realms and therefore required no further clarification until Russia (with its very different notion of territoriality) appeared on the scene at the end of the eighteenth century [cf. THONGCHAI 1994].

The boundary between the Wajinchi and Ezochi in the Oshima peninsula in southern Hokkaido was set more or less arbitrarily after the failure of Shakushain's War of 1669, the Ainu's last significant attempt to escape the political and economic domination of the Japanese state. However arbitrary, the boundary was nonetheless critically important, for policies directed at the Ainu applied only to the Ezochi side of the frontier. The boundary was a physical one—barriers (*sekisho*) established at the eastern and western extremities of the Wajinchi separated the Ainu and Wajin realms. But in fact it transcended the physicality of the spaces it delineated. Whatever an individual's sense of self as Ainu, Wajin, or something in-between, the Matsumae domain's internal status order—which functioned only within the Wajinchi—had no category of social identity marked as “Ainu,” for the Ainu were barbarians who by definition existed (in a socially and politically meaningful manner) only outside of the status system. In that sense, transgressions of the physical border did not immediately imperil the integrity of the boundary between civilization and barbarism that the *sekisho* represented. A special case like Iwanosuke, recruited on occasion to serve the domain's political needs, in fact proves the rule, for the need to create an Ainu Iwanosuke highlights the lack of an Ainu social identity in the quotidian world of the Wajinchi.

The domain did in fact try to limit contact between Ainu and Wajin by

prohibiting Ainu from leaving the Ezochi and by requiring Wajin traders and fishers to obtain travel permits before venturing beyond the Wajinchi's borders. Within the Ezochi, Matsumae pursued a policy of dissimilation toward the Ainu—that is, it tried to prevent them from learning Japanese or adopting Japanese customs (*fuzoku*)—even as it encouraged trade for Japanese commodities and, later, work at fisheries run by Wajin merchants. At the same time, because Matsumae's dissimilation policies did not apply to Ainu in the Wajinchi, that relatively small community soon assimilated almost completely into local Wajin society. As a result, by the end of the eighteenth century only about a dozen people, including Iwanosuke, retained even an ambivalent vestige of Ainu identity.

In contrast, when the *bakufu*, fearful of Russian encroachment, stepped in to take direct control over the Ezochi from 1799 to 1821 and again from 1855 to 1868, it encouraged the assimilation of the Ainu there. It did so by targeting the same cultural elements Matsumae had emphasized as emblems of the Ainu's alien identity. Thus, Ainu were offered material incentives to shave their beards and pates, take Japanese names, and learn to speak Japanese. However, when *bakufu* officials set forth to assimilate the Ainu, they could not make them into generic "Japanese," for a generic Japanese identity did not yet exist. Instead, they had to categorize the Ainu in terms of the status system. As barbarians, the Ainu had lacked status, which suggested to many Japanese observers a link to the outcastes.⁴⁾ However, once given a place within the status system and hence imbued with a putative identity as civilized Japanese, the Ainu were made into commoners. Thus the Ainu community on the island of Etorofu in the southern Kurils, which lay at the northern extreme of territory claimed by the Tokugawa state, was designated a "village" (*mura*) with an appropriate roster of officials with Japanese-style names [ANONYM n.d.]. For the *bakufu*, marking the Ainu as "civilized" placed them, and by extension the Ezochi, inside the Tokugawa state. Given the equation of the realm of civilization with the core polity of the early modern regime, this was the only way the *bakufu* could assert Japanese sovereignty over the Ezochi in the face of the Russian threat.

Needless to say, there was nothing intrinsically barbaric about the cultural attributes that Matsumae had focused on when marking the Ainu as barbarians. Nor, for that matter, was there anything intrinsically civilized about the customs the *bakufu* imposed on them in its attempt at assimilation. What may be less obvious, however, is that there was nothing intrinsically *Ainu* about them, either. That is, Wajin observers inclined to see the Ainu as barbarians could focus on those cultural attributes—such as the men's long, unbound hair—that happened to resonate with a preexisting roster of barbarian practices that applied equally within the core polity and outside of it. As a result, the process of marking the Ainu as barbarians exogenous to the core polity simultaneously (and paradoxically) linked their

4) On the purported connections between the outcastes and Ainu, see Ooms [1996: 296–298].

identity to the status order of the core polity—which, like civilization, was articulated through the medium of customs. In short, the Ainu's putative barbarity was linked to a handful of specific cultural practices, rather than a broader or more essential sense of difference (such as race). This in turn brought the Ainu latently within the Tokugawa order, liable to be "assimilated" through the simple expedient of changing those customs that had marked them in Wajin eyes as barbarians.

The contrast between the examples of Ori and Iwanosuke thus reflects the profound transformation of the Ainu-Wajin relationship after the failure of Shakushain's War. After the conflict, the ambivalence that had marked territorial and personal identities in medieval Japan was erased: northern Tōhoku and Matsumae and the people living there were placed within the status order and hence marked as Japanese, while Hokkaido beyond the Wajinchi and its inhabitants—deemed Ainu regardless of their parentage—were excluded from the core polity [HOWELL 1998]. Similarly, the Ainu remained both exogenous to the state and subject to its authority according to early modern Japanese notions of boundaries. In contrast to White's middle ground, there were no people in Hokkaido after Shakushain's War whose identities were *essentially* ambivalent—no people, in other words, who were never fully "Ainu" or fully "Wajin." Even Iwanosuke—who took on situationally defined identities as Wajin at home and Ainu when venturing to Matsumae for his New Year's audience—was marked unambiguously as one or the other at any given time. Similarly, people of mixed ancestry—of whom there were many by the nineteenth century—were accepted unproblematically by both sides as Ainu; mixed ancestry was neither accompanied by a presumption of insight into Wajin thinking by the Ainu nor did it serve as an entrée into Wajin society.⁵⁾ The closest anyone came to an ambivalent identity were the so-called assimilated Ainu (*kizoku Ezo*) of the 1850s and '60s, but even their ambivalence was seen as a stepping-stone to full assimilation into Wajin society. By the same token, commentators from the center—but not local Wajin authorities—often saw Matsumae and the Tōhoku domains as an imperfectly civilized border zone between Japan and the Ezochi, but this ambivalence too was portrayed as a trace of the pre-Tokugawa past and not as a distinct category of identity [NAMIKAWA 1992: 171–175, 260, 290–292].

There was no middle ground in early modern Japan because all social identities were situationally defined according to the rules of the status system. Iwanosuke could switch from being Wajin to Ainu and back to Wajin as necessary, but this switching was "ethnic" only in the sense that the boundary separating the civilized from the barbarian in Hokkaido was an "ethnic" one. The essence of Iwanosuke's demeanor was no different from that of Shōsuke, a peasant scribe from the Nanbu

5) See, for example, *Kinsei Ezo jinbutsushi* [MATSUURA 1969], and its translation into contemporary Japanese [MATSUURA 1981].

domain who comported himself as a samurai while on official business, or of the *gōmune*, urban street entertainers who were marked as outcastes while performing but could return to commoner status when they changed their occupation [HOWELL 1998]. Insofar as the status system provided a framework to articulate identities, there could not be a social space defined by in-betweenness.

3. IDENTITY AND TERRITORIALITY IN THE FORMATION OF THE MODERN NATION-STATE

How does this help us to understand the nature of the modern nation-state in Japan? At the very least, it reminds us that contemporary notions of territoriality—in which nations are separated by clearly defined physical boundaries—did not apply in early modern Japan. Rather than a single line separating Japan from the outside world, the “civilized” core polity was surrounded by “barbarian” peripheries such as the Ezochi; areas with no connection to the Japanese state lay only beyond those peripheries. Moreover, within the core polity the realm of civilization was coterminous with the area incorporated into the status order. That is, a key mark of civilization was integration into the status system through the fulfillment of appropriate duties to the shogun or his proxies. As a result, new territory could be incorporated into the state only after the realm of civilization had been extended there.

Although status and civilization were essentially political constructs, political identity took on the attributes of ethnicity through the deployment of cultural symbols (customs). Everyone living within the territory encompassed by the early modern status system was “Japanese,” both in a political sense (because status organized obligations to political authority) and in a cultural sense (because customs were the cultural expression of incorporation within the status order); conversely, only territory inhabited by “Japanese” could be part of “Japan.” That is why the Ainu had to be nominally assimilated—that is, brought within the status order—for the Tokugawa state to assert sovereignty over all of Hokkaido; and, by extension, that is why Japanese territorial claims extended to southern Sakhalin and the southern Kurils, but not beyond, for these were areas inhabited by Ainu but not significant numbers of other northeast Asian peoples.

This linking of identity with territoriality is all the more significant when we consider that it was not shared by the states with which nineteenth-century Japan competed, particularly Russia and China. In seventeenth-century Russia, for example, Siberian indigenes who adopted Christianity thereby became “Russian” in much the same manner as Ainu who took on “civilized” customs became “Japanese” in early modern Japan. However, by the time Russia and Japan came into contact at the end of the eighteenth century the Russians had essentialized the Siberian natives’ otherness: Russia was clearly a multiethnic empire [SLEZKINE 1994]. Likewise, despite a similar concern with customs—such as the insistence that men wear the queue—the Qing empire’s expansion was not constrained by

them; indeed, the dichotomy between “civilized” and “barbarian” realms in China was thrown into disarray when the Qing dynasty was established by erstwhile barbarians from Manchuria. Despite an abundance of examples around them, it seems never to have occurred to *bakufu* policy makers that Japan could be a multiethnic empire in which non-Japanese (that is, un-“civilized”) peoples would be subject to the sovereignty of the Japanese state in the same manner as the core population.

The elimination of the status system made the Meiji Restoration a social revolution. Within a decade of 1868, the Meiji regime had dismantled the institutional structure of the Tokugawa status system: commoners could use surnames, samurai lost their stipends and the right to carry swords in public, outcasts found themselves nominally liberated as “new commoners” (*shinheimin*), and the Ainu became known in official parlance as “former aborigines” (*kyūdojin*). With the elimination of the status system, the construction of civilized and barbarian realms in the Japanese archipelago lost its principal institutional support. Nevertheless, vestiges of the early modern linking of civilization and territoriality via customs survived into the modern period and informed the Japanese response to the encounter with Western-style modernity. The rush to adopt new, Western emblems of civilization—top hats for topknots—and hence fend off colonialism during the Meiji “enlightenment” is emblematic. Ultimately, however, customs could not remain the key markers of identity, for in Meiji Japan—as in any modern state—outward appearance alone could not determine civilization or nationality. Modernity had to be internalized to function properly: hence the rush to create a “sense of nation” among the Japanese by mobilizing the monarchy, military, and media to teach the people that they were modern subjects of a modern nation-state [FUJITANI 1996; GLUCK 1985]. Still, the modern Japanese preoccupation with the idea of cultural and ethnic homogeneity, as seen for example in the *Nihonjinron* (studies of the Japanese people) literature, does reflect the early subsumption of social identity into political authority.

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