

The Treatment of Natives in the *Nihon Shoki*: the case of western Japan

One of the first things that strikes the reader of the ancient compilation known as the *Nihon shoki* is that native peoples were treated with great contempt. The accuracy of the account is of course questionable, and to what extent we can even rely on the earlier sections before the 7th century may have happened. What is recorded cannot have been entirely made up, and even the severest critic of the compilation would not say that it is all fabrication. It is obvious though that the chronology of events depicted by the work could not be accurate. For example, it places Yamato Takeru as the conqueror of the Hitakami region (thought of as present day Miyagi prefecture) way before the Yamato state had pushed into the Kanto. It also depicts the conquest of certain Korean kingdoms such as Shiragi way before it could have been possible. The accuracy of whether naval expeditions of this sort could have taken place at that time has come under suspicion. Whatever the issues regarding its accuracy I want to examine the book from the standpoint of what it says about the native peoples, most definitely the Jomon inhabitants.

The original inhabitants are called *tsuchigumo*, translated as "dirt spiders," and are killed by the Yamato indiscriminately whenever they are encountered. No attempt is made to bring them into alliance. This is straight genocide as we would call it. There is no sugar coating this. In every instance of early contact between Yamato and the natives who are called "dirt spiders", the latter are killed. Is this evidence of the overall conduct of the Yamato state vis-a-vis the native peoples in western Japan?

Then there are groups such as the Kumaso of Kyushu who successfully resist the Yamato armies and seemingly fight them to a standstill. There is no getting around the fact that these people are treated differently from the *tsuchigumo*. They become subjects of the empire. So the pattern emerges where the natives who don't resist are killed and those who resist are grudgingly and most reluctantly recognized. This would seem to flatly contradict the stated conduct of one of the Yamato queens who fights the natives of Kyushu, who purportedly states that those who resist will be destroyed, but those who submit themselves will be spared lest the gods bring judgement against the state. The actual conduct is the exact opposite from the stated policy.

What the reader comes away with, despite all the state propaganda is that the weak isolated communities of Jomon people of western Japan were destroyed indiscriminately. The ones who were able to organize an effective defense like the Kumaso, and one group in the Kinai region, are grudgingly allowed to submit themselves. The latter group was attacked without provocation and the sister of the leader killed by the same Yamato queen as the one who attacked Kyushu, and the account goes on to state that the brother of the murdered sister raised an army to attack the queen but was defeated.

The actual historical events portrayed are shrouded in not just state propaganda, but Shinto myths of the divine nature of the Yamato line aided by the gods. However, the actual events may well have taken place during the period before Yamato's incursion into the Kanto region before the fifth century AD.

The other clear portrait emerging from the legend of Yamato Takeru is the treachery practiced by this supposed figure mirroring the actual treachery the Japanese practiced later in their wars against the Emishi of the Tohoku and the Ainu of Hokkaido. For example, we read of a banquet served up for the leaders of the Jomon community who resisted Yamato authority in central Japan with the supposed intention of alliance, but at the last moment, the assembled guests are killed without mercy by Takeru and his men to destroy their resistance. This duplicity is actually blessed by their enemies! In another account the leader of one group tries to seduce Takeru who pretends to be a woman. When that leader is in a drunken stupor, Takeru takes advantage of the situation and kills him. His tribe then submits to his rule.

This tale of constant duplicity and aggression seems to be central to the way native peoples are treated by the Yamato court in western Japan, and becomes a model to a great extent of how the Ainu of Hokkaido are treated by both the Daimyo states

that took over local authority after the collapse of the state after the Kamakura period, and by the Tokugawa shogunate and the Matsumae in the early modern period. The memories of this duplicity still surround the story of Aterui the commander of the Emishi forces who peacefully surrendered to Sakanoue no Tamuramaro in 802 with the understanding that he would receive safe conduct from the court. He believed that he would receive kind treatment, but instead he was treated as a prisoner and killed at the instigation of the nobles.

This treatment of Aterui was actually an aberration from the way may of the Emishi were treated by the Yamato court during the centuries of warfare that ensued. Strangely, the treatment of the Emishi has parallels with the way the Kumaso of Kyushu are treated. Both are treated with overall respect, and in the case of the Emishi the policy of divide and conquer actually encouraged the Yamato to enlist the leaders of Emishi as allies to fight other Emishi. This in turn made it easier for the Emishi to become willing participants of the state through the rank system of obtaining various grades and levels of office, and made it easier to integrate them after the cessation of hostilities. Very rarely were Emishi leaders called upon to relinquish their local authority and autonomy by the government.

The pendulum swung the other way in the early modern period in the way that the Ainu of Hokkaido were treated by the Daimyo such as the Matsumae clan and their agents in both their treatment of Ainu leaders and their conduct of war during the Shakshain War of the 17th century. It is almost as if they followed the *Nihon shoki* (and *Kojiki*) in their conduct of the war. Though genocide was not practiced against the populace, the conduct of the war was executed with treachery: they won by killing their opponents after a supposed peace parley.

References:

Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from Earliest Times to A.D.697. Trans. W.G. Aston. Terence Barrow, ed.. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1972. Format follows the one volume 1924 edition. Originally published in 1896 in two volumes by the Japan Society.

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