

The early Yamato state and the eastern Emishi: the fourth through seventh centuries

The Kanto plain during the formative years of the Yamato state was dominated by the state of Kenu. The Kenu country was centered on what is Gumma prefecture today. It was a strong and independent country that began as a satellite state of Yamato. According to the *Nihongi* (referred to as *Nihon shoki* in Japanese) the king of Kenu was a descendant of the imperial line sent out originally from the Yamato state to quell indigenous tribes of the Tosando (or eastern road). The history presented in the chronicle may be hard to differentiate fact from fiction particularly in the earlier parts, but the overall picture shown is that the region was the center of a powerful state. We know from archeological discoveries that they had created numerous kofun mounds like the Yamato ([see section on kofun culture](#)). This connection with Yamato enabled it to become powerful in the region. It also appears that they never posed a challenge to the Yamato state because they were minimally allied to it and were under its influence. They were culturally and ethnically the same Yayoi people.

This region, as has been noted, had conserved native Jomon groups as witnessed by the *Nihongi* which has at least chronicled the very first attempts by the Yamato to attack the natives of the east and bring them under its political power. It speaks of one of the descendants of Yamato royalty, Mimuro-wake-O, who pressed a war against the local Emishi living in the region (1986:74). It is one of the first entries of its kind in the chronicle. It is not nearly as reliable as the seventh century entries, but it is definitely evidence that the Kanto region was also inhabited by native tribes that were known as Emishi.

What is reflected in this chronicle is that the local tribes lived under the shadow of the Kofun kings who emerged with the rise of the immigrant Yayoi, and were defeated by them. How were these native groups incorporated into the regional power structure? Were they simply absorbed as a lower tier on the village level peacefully as they adopted rice cultivation and Yayoi culture, or was their lifestyle and culture forcibly destroyed as they were absorbed under the new villages brought in by Yayoi immigrant groups? As I have already shown in other web pages these natives survived well into the historical period, and as studies have shown they definitely made up a sizable portion of the population in the Kanto as [skeletal studies of Kofun people show](#). The Kofun states were supported by both Yayoi settlers and native Jomon in the Kanto.

Archeologically, during this time, an older type of pottery known as *taru-shiki doki* that was produced locally by the natives there since the pre-historic period was supplanted by pottery known as *seki-den-gawa* ware in the Kofun period. We know that the latter was produced by Yayoi people from the Tokai prefecture (1986:77). These people moved into the area of the upper Kenu known as *kami tsukenu*, and became the center of the state of Kenu. Nagaoka believes that a very old family, the *Kii*, associated with this state produced its line of kings and dismisses the story in the *Nihongi* about the imperial descent.

The *Nihongi* testifies to the pacification of the native peoples of the Kanto and the east generally (1972:200-14). In fact, a large portion of the legendary exploits of Yamato Takeru, the prince of the Yamato state has to do with his pacification of the "wild" eastern lands. As history goes it is hard to verify his exploits and the chronology is incorrect (claiming to have taken place much earlier), however, it is most likely based on facts of actual campaigns that took place. It is hard to separate fact from myth since much of his exploits are also described in supernatural ways where gods intervene regularly in human affairs. If we take as fact some of the geographical areas where natives resisted the Yamato state such as in areas of *kami tsukenu* as mentioned above as well as in Shinano and Koshi (*koshi no kuni* which was located in present day Koshi prefecture north to Akita prefecture) where it is said that there were many unsubdued Emishi, we can conclude that especially in the mountainous regions northwest of the Kanto plain where the fighting was especially difficult for Takeru there were many natives. It is here where the son of Yamato himself eventually dies from the malicious influence of the local mountain deity who makes him sick.

When modern historians think of the Emishi proper we think of the Tohoku, however, if we are to be consistent with the line of thought that the Yamato expanded earlier towards the east we must correct this view, and see the conflict as having started much earlier in the Kanto and surrounding areas.

The *kimi* and *kabane* system as it is known among historians today was used in a way to incorporate natives into the state. The exchange encouraged native village leaders and other known regional chiefs to submit themselves to Yamato rule in exchange for a *kimi* or court title. In exchange for alliance the regional chief would be recognized as the official of that region. There were incentives for this as ceremonies of incorporation would confer to the regional chiefs goods from the state that they could not manufacture locally. In fact, on a few occasions we see glimpses of this in the banquets held in honor of local chiefs. This practice continued through to the seventh century at least, during the early years of the conquest of the Tohoku region. We see this practice in Abe Hirafu's first northern expedition when he had a banquet in honor of the local chief near what is thought to be Akita (Akuta). Thus the *kimi* system could be seen as both a way for the regional chief to legitimize their own power locally against rivals, and for getting goods from the Yamato. From the Yamato side it was seen as a way of projecting its influence regionally on a much more local scale. This system was largely successful in the Kanto and in the northwest, the Koshi country.

The *kimi-kabane* system was used by the central court reminiscent, but not as rigid as the Tokugawa *sankin-kotai* system of the early modern state, where the Emishi of Koshi, Shinano, Michi-no-oku, and from other regions routinely went to the court and presented gifts to the Emperor and Empress (1972:249,389). In fact, if native tribes did not come to court in show of submission it was seen as a sign of rebellion. The visitors to the court would in turn receive gifts of varying value, and *kabane* ranks were bestowed on some. This system was not only a way for the court to integrate the natives into its hierarchy, but a way to impress neighboring countries such as Silla and T'ang that Japan was an actual empire that incorporated "barbarians" (the propaganda value of different ethnic groups) into its state. Aside from propaganda there was a practical value for integrating native Emishi as subjects of the empire. Arguably, it became a central institution for integrating non-Japanese people into the Yamato state.

References:

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