

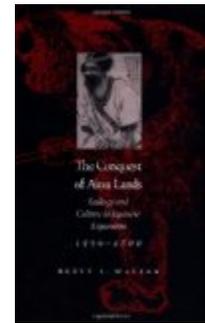
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Brett L. Walker. *The Conquest of Ainu Lands: Ecology and Culture in Japanese Expansion, 1590-1800.* Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2001. xii + 332 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-22736-1.

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Mutually Assisted Destruction: The Cultural Transformation of the Ainu-Japanese Frontier in Tokugawa Japan

Mutually Assisted Destruction: The Cultural Transformation of the Ainu-Japanese Frontier in Tokugawa Japan

Over the past decade, several scholars of Tokugawa Japan began to test common-sense perceptions of what it means to be Japanese by exploring the margins of Japanese society. To name just the better-known examples: on the “domestic” side, Herman Ooms extensively explored village outcastes, David Howell began exploration of the northern frontier through a study of the fishing industry, and Gregory Smits delved into issues of identity (Okinawan or Japanese) of three Ryukyuan statesmen and political thinkers.[1] Yet none of these works challenges our sense of how “Japan” has been defined quite so directly as Brett Walker’s *The Conquest of Ainu Lands*. While Howell touched on environmental issues and Smits on identity in a very elite clutch of individuals, Walker makes both of these a fundamental concern, noting that presumptions of whether pre-Meiji Hokkaido was part of Japan or not shape the questions that scholars ask as they view the history of the region (pp. 6-11). In an effort to avoid taking sides, Walker seeks a middle ground, one bolstered by reference to the New Western History of the United States, which attempts to grapple with similar issues as it deals with the history of the indigenous peoples of North America. As a consequence, while acknowledging the role of the economically and politically aggressive Japanese players (from individual traders and adventurers to Matsumae domain officials and finally all the way up to the level of shogu-

nal advisors), he also notes carefully the ways in which Ainu were attracted by and responsive to the opportunities presented by trade with Japan. Indeed, Walker argues, they were so responsive that they initiated ecological and environmental damage that worsened their own ability to continue the life they knew.

Such concerns are not merely the plaything of modern scholars: through the juxtaposition of two maps of Hokkaido and Sakhalin, one drawn in 1700 (p. 2) and the other in the 1830s (p. 4), Walker dramatically introduces the degree to which contemporary Japanese perceptions of region changed from a status beyond the pale of sustained shogunal awareness, to increasing concern, to clear permanent interest in Hokkaido and its nearby territories as part of Japan’s defense and as a gateway to the world beyond. The long sweep of Walker’s study allows him and his readers to view the transformation of Japan’s relations with the Ainu from one of very substantial local autonomy to one utterly dominated by the Shogunate. What we see here is a central political authority that is sometimes sensitive to the vulnerabilities and opportunities of its borders (notably in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as the Toyotomi and Tokugawa regimes seek a solid footing, or in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the approach of the Russians), but at others is perfectly willing to largely let local authorities have their heads. Walker is at great pains to show that the world of the Ainu was not bounded just by its relationship with its neighbor to the south. Thus in addition to changing Japanese attitudes

towards their northern neighbors, he notes the degree to which other influences from the mainland also shaped Ainu culture. Once again, this approach involves not only the great expanding cultures of China and Russia, but also the numerically and geographically more limited indigenous societies of northeast Asia. Two whole chapters are devoted to relations with Sakhalin and the Kuriles, but other references to this kind of interaction appear in a number of other chapters.

A good part of Walker's story lies in the process of commodification of the Ainu wilds under the impact of increasing contact with the Japanese. Readers are treated to an extended discussion of the ways in which ritual gift exchange, the shifting balance toward consumption of imported grains and the like are transformed within Ainu circles under the influence of Japanese trade at the same time that this trade created tremendous financial and status incentives for Ainu to intensify their exploitation of the woodlands and seas of their territory. We see that just as Japanese came to value deer hides, hawks, and the like for their prestige value, Japanese goods came to have special status beyond their "ordinary" utilitarian value for the Ainu.

Much of this transformation is painted as having deleterious impact on the Ainu and their territories. Ainu self-sufficiency is described as "breaking down" and intensified competition among Ainu groups for deer and other natural resources is offered as a significant stimulus for increased warfare among the Ainu. Mining and other activities damaged the environment. Ainu become more and more dependent on foodstuffs like rice that they could not grow themselves. While not heavy-handed (to my way of thinking), a picture of declining Ainu culture emerges as the result of residents' efforts to meet the desires of both Japanese and Ainu. Despite my own sense of Walker's treatment as even-handed, I should note that some of my graduate students felt *The Conquest of Ainu Lands* was motivated by a clear anti-Japanese political agenda.

The negative impact of contact with Japan is given special reinforcement in Walker's discussion of the spread of epidemic disease such as smallpox, measles and syphilis throughout Hokkaido. Such disease came not only with Japanese trade, but also through trade and contact from the mainland, transmitted not only through direct human contact, but also through germs borne by trade goods such as furs themselves. As the Japanese watched the methods Ainu employed to battle disease, they "discovered" natural medicines that they could suc-

cessfully export to Honshu and points south, thus expanding trade. By the nineteenth century, however, the Japanese were engaged in pursuing Jennerian vaccinations for Ainu under the umbrella of "benevolent rule" exercised by a civilized Shogun on behalf of an inferior people—policies that Japanese rulers were loath to pursue with equal vigor in their home territories.

Readers will appreciate the detailed descriptions of anecdotal evidence and ceremonial practice. Such verbal descriptions come from diaries by travelers (European and Japanese) as well as Ainu folklore and poetry. They are supplemented by a large number of illustrations of ceremonies, trapping gear, and Ainu homes drawn largely from the Resource Collection for Northern Studies at Hokkaido University. In many sections of the book it is these descriptions that carry the burden of proof where detailed data, clearly associated with particular dates and places, is absent. As a result, some material is used in such a way as to provide only a "pre-Japanese contact, post-Japanese contact" bifurcated analysis which, in most contexts, is adequate to Walker's purpose (e.g., the intrusion of Japanese goods into prominent ceremonial roles or as status symbols). In other instances, such as the demographic impact of disease and famine, missing data might be more troublesome but for Walker's refreshing willingness to discuss problems in data rather than to pretend that they do not exist.

Walker's sensitive, multi-factored and low-key approach to the transformation of Ainu relationships with their neighbors and to the transformation of Ainu society provides readers with a vivid, dynamic picture and a number of very stimulating perspectives. At the local level of Hokkaido history, it is an ethnographic study of social transformation of societies positioned between and weaving their way through contacts with larger cultures; at a somewhat broader regional level, we see a Japanese domain trying to carve out its own spheres of political and economic interest with decreasing success; and, at the level of a "national" history of Japan, focused on Shogunal authority, we see long-term shifts in Bakufu interests, policies toward the hunting-oriented territories of the north, and attitudes towards the people who inhabited them. Most of all, we have a vivid picture of dynamic social boundaries that remind Japanese historians and others that the Japan of today was not the Japan of yesteryear, and that Japan and the Ainu territories, too, once had a real frontier.

Notes

- [1]. Herman Ooms, *Tokugawa Village Practice: Class,*

Status, Power, Law (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); David Howell, *Capitalism from within: Economy, Society, and the State in a Japanese Fishery* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995); Gregory Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Ideology in Early-Modern Thought and Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

[2]. This image of "civilization" damaging society and

health receives reinforcement from a recently published collection of essays: Richard H. Steckel and Jerome C. Rose, eds., *The Backbone of History: Health and Nutrition in the Western Hemisphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). See especially the "Introduction" and "Conclusion" by the editors. The authors develop evidence that shows clear weakening of health with the stabilization of society and its movement toward settled agriculture.

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