

The Moving Frontier: From Emishi to Ezo

The change from the reading *Emishi* to *Ezo* took place in the middle of the Heian period. At this time the central government and its agents had extended the authority of the Yamato *ritsuryo* state into most of the contested lands in the Tohoku that had been held by the Emishi forces during the wars of conquest of the eighth and ninth centuries. This change coincided with the marked change in government from one which was dominated by the centralized "Emishi" states that had evolved after the wars of conquest, and ended with the fall of the state of Hiraizumi, a northern Japanese state that was ostensibly ruled by descendants of the *fushu*.

The name *Ezo* was given to those still independent tribes north of Iwate prefecture, and those who lived in Hokkaido, clearly people who were the ancestors of the Ainu. Did the change in reading coincide with a change in the type of people the word referred to? This is where many scholars have been unable to come to a consensus, and the answer to this question is vital because it links the Emishi with either the Ainu or the contemporary Japanese. I present arguments for and against the link. A theory is proposed that ties the disparate facts together.

As I have written in other essays, the link is compelling because of mainly three strong pieces of evidence which I will summarize here as I believe I have already mentioned them elsewhere. 1) The kanji characters that make up the word that describes these people had not changed even though the reading had changed. Most important, the physical description of the people did not change from the AD 642 description of the Emishi proper to the Ezo ancestors of the Ainu. There is no indication that as the reading changed we are dealing with a different people. The only indication is that the frontier between Japan (defined here as the Yamato state), and the Emishi had changed from the Miyagi prefecture to Aomori prefecture. 2) The geographical names in the Tohoku reflect Ainoid names, and the Emishi did not speak a Japanese language as interpreters were needed between them. 3) The only real difference between the earlier group and the group that inhabited Hokkaido had to do with economics, the former leading a more sedentary life centered on intensive agriculture, and the latter relying more on hunting and gathering with limited dry agriculture.

The points against a link are as follows: 1) The bones of the Emishi rulers of Hiraizumi were studied and had more physical similarities with Japanese than they did with the Ainu. This one point has been raised by numerous scholars to cast doubt on the ancestry of the Emishi as a whole despite its very limited focus on one group of rulers who were arguably Japanese to begin with. 2) The very difference in the economy and society of the Emishi and the Ezo in Hokkaido with very different styles of warfare, one centered on horses, the other on infantry, and one centered on more intensive rice agriculture, the other based more on hunting with limited agriculture. 3) Evidence of skeletons recovered from the Tohoku and Kanto regions, the kofun type, midway between modern Japanese and the Ainu that would seem to cast doubt on a simple either, or scenario in terms of the ancestry of the Emishi.

The main problem with more modern revisionist accounts is that it fails to account for the separate identity of the natives of ancient Tohoku. If they were Japanese colonists (or of the same ethnic group) who sought independence from central authority how can the cultural and linguistic differences from other Japanese be explained? These revisionist accounts also speak of the separation occurring with the reading of *Ezo*, that is, once that reading gained currency as a description of the natives of Aomori northwards, suddenly, it is interpreted to mean a people with a distinct culture and language separate from the Japanese. However, centuries before the eleventh century when the *ezo* reading became current the people of *michinoku* as the Tohoku was called were seen as a separate people and even a separate state outside Japan. Direct evidence is in the stone stele erected at Taga

Castle in 762 that gives distances to what were considered different countries at that time. The Emishi country is mentioned here along with other foreign lands outside of Japan such as *Matsukatsu* country (which probably referred to Bokkai in present day Siberia near Vladivostok).

After further studies have come out in the past few years since I first wrote this page, the linguistic difference is perhaps the strongest argument that ties the earlier Emishi with the later medieval Ezo of Hokkaido. If these Emishi were related to Japanese they would have spoken some dialect of Japanese and they would not have needed translators. The other fact that has emerged since the last revision is that there are traces of a [language called *matagi*](#) left over in the forested hinterlands of Iwate and Aomori prefectures that is being used as a ritualized hunting language, and this language clearly has affinities to Ainu. We go beyond historical place names here to find a trace of a living Ainoid language still used in the Tohoku under circumstances that tie into a hunting gathering lifestyle which was practiced by the Emishi.

On the other hand, other studies have pointed out the inescapable conclusion that the [population](#) in these areas changed much earlier than anticipated. Change from the Jomon population to a more Yayoi population proceeded earlier than once thought. It maybe that there were Emishi groups whose ethnic make-up was similar in many respects to other frontier Japanese groups. Here physical anthropology has shown this to be the case. This means that Japanese migration into the Tohoku was much more widespread and started earlier than the formal conquest of the area by the central government. The line between contemporary ethnic Japanese and ethnic Emishi may have been blurred in areas of central Tohoku where the Tohoku Wars began. However, what must be kept in mind is that contemporary Japanese of the area were different from modern Japanese and were somewhat closer to the Jomon ancestral population than they are today. In one sense this verifies a part of the revisionist scholarship that the distance between contemporary Japanese and Emishi on an *ethnic* level in the central Tohoku region was not great. In the northern areas of the Tohoku the difference was greater, but as yet poorly understood.

Hiraizumi and the Northern Fujiwara

Many western scholars have fallen into the same trap as revisionist scholars because they fail to see changes that have occurred through time which I believe can resolve a number of these issues. It is impossible to refute the skeletal evidence of the kofun type, and shows that a gray area exists that defies easy separation, and may represent the Emishi as consisting of this group as well as those who were more distinctly Ainoid. By the Twelfth century when the Hiraizumi state reached its apex much of the distinctiveness of the Emishi had lost its meaning in central Tohoku. By that time the population had changed to become closer to other Japanese both physically and culturally due in large part to Japanese settlements, particularly in areas that had fallen under the rule of the *ritsuryo* state. Hiraizumi's independence notwithstanding, it was still governed along the lines of a Kyoto-type aristocracy that had imported many artists from central Japan.

The biggest problem with the Hiraizumi rulers is that they may have been [descendants of Japanese not Emishi](#). The Abe and Kiyowara families dominant in the region in the 11th century may have been either proto-Japanese (old kofun based *gozoku*) or Japanese Yamato families that had settled in the Tohoku and not native Emishi (Murdoch 1925:269). Both families traditionally trace their lineage to the Yamato imperial line just as other northern families did such as the Fujiwara and Taira (this may have been simply propaganda to gain legitimacy, but not something most Emishi would do as they did not identify themselves with the Japanese). The Abe family was originally appointed as Superintendant over the Aborigines in the six inner districts of Mutsu (*roku oku gun*). To get an imperial appointment from the central government meant having some sort of noble connection, so that it is doubtful that the Abe were local Emishi. The Kiyowara were also not local Emishi but were a high ranking frontier Japanese family as well. This is important because it is from the Abe and Kiyowara families that the Hiraizumi rulers known as the Northern Fujiwara descended.

So the reason why the Northern Fujiwara mummies did not have any Ainoid characteristics is self-explanatory. They were not Emishi to begin with, though their supporters and those they ruled over were by and large of Emishi descent, and so they probably saw themselves as the successors of the Emishi confederacies that used to exist in the area. They probably saw themselves as the head of the *fushu* which may open the door for evidence of proto-Japanese families as well as more recent immigrants who *saw themselves as Emishi*. I say proto-Japanese strictly referring to those who had immigrated to the area as colonists before the advent of the Yamato state.

Immigration

Where the lines intersect and tie together is historical change, as each frontier faced a transformation in both its people and culture as it first entered the orbit of the Japanese state and then is absorbed into its polity. We can say that Ainoid groups at one point dominated the area of northeast Japan as they did the Kanto further back in time, but as each area was absorbed by the Japanese state the population dynamics did not stay the same, but were also transformed by Japanese immigrants. There are records of landless peasants (a serious problem in Japan where up to a couple thousand would band together and create local disturbances) who moved to the Tohoku during the Eighth century (in 753, 761, 762 and 769) before the Yamato state had effective control of the region as they tried to escape the burden of living under the regulations of the Yamato *ritsuryo* state (Murdoch 1925:212). Often these Japanese sided with the Emishi as they desired liberty from the burdens of the state service--such as military service, taxation and corvee labor (Sansom 1931:198).

Both during and after the conquest absconding peasants as well as other elements of society such as criminals and soldiers were forced to settle near the forts established in Mutsu and Dewa to control the Emishi. This policy of forced migration transformed the population in the frontier areas (Sansom 1931:198-99).

As this process of immigration moved further north the frontier between the Japanese state and the Emishi also moved north. In AD 642 the people who existed in Miyagi prefecture were Ainoid in language and culture, and physically were a mix of Ainoid and kofun types who made up the Emishi population. In AD 900 these people were found by and large north of Iwate prefecture. Miyagi was now inhabited by Japanese immigrants, and the character of the area had changed markedly from 642. By the Medieval period, AD 1200, the Tsugaru peninsula defined the frontier between Japan and the Emishi, now called the Ezo.

What occurred is that as time went by the Japanese population became more typically East Asian physically so that as the frontier moved further north the contrast between the Japanese and the Ezo also increased. So there were two things going on at the same time. Not just the frontier movement north, but the change in the Japanese population also created a greater contrast between them and the Ezo. The proto-Japanese who were of the so-called kofun type who first moved into the region did not contrast as much from the Emishi/Ezo, but as the frontier areas were incorporated into the state the population of Yayoi Japanese increased at the expense of both the kofun and Jomon physical types.

The change in economy from the Emishi of the Tohoku to the Ezo of Tsugaru and Hokkaido can be attributed to climate. The northern reaches of the frontier were not accessible to intensive rice cultivation, whereas rice could be grown in most areas of the Tohoku except for the Tsugaru, the northern tip of the main island. The change in battle tactics is less a function of climate, and more about preference and tradition (see [Hitakami and the Emishi Horse Archers](#)). The Emishi had bred horses both as a valuable trade commodity with the Japanese and for war.

By the Kamakura period, Tsugaru Bay was seen as a frontier, outside Japan, and called appropriately the "outside port" *soto-no-hama* where in a real physical and cultural sense lay outside of civilized society. To the Japanese this passing beyond the frontier was a shocking thing. Beyond this frontier the Ezo held Hokkaido, and were themselves a trading power who still maintained a presence in the Tsugaru area. Beyond that the trade route inched its way up the western coast of Hokkaido

up along the coast of Sakhalin and into the Amur river valley where the various groups of Nanai (Olchagolds, Golds) and Gilyak settlements existed. These peoples of the Amur River valley had trade contacts with the Yuan Empire controlled by the Mongols, and from them they received manufactured goods, such as porcelain and silk, that were then passed onto the Ezo of Hokkaido. The Ezo also received iron, rice, swords and other manufactured goods from Japan in return for mainly furs and natural resources. This so-called *san-tan* trade dominated the northeast Asian region, and was the cause of serious wars between the powerful Yuan and their allies on the one side and the Ezo on the other.



A nineteenth century engraving of Hokkaido Ainu showing the fur clothing that was typical for the northeast Asian cultural area common to the Ainu in Hokkaido, the peoples of Sakhalin and the Amur river valley. The two men to the right are wearing Japanese-style clothing. The young man behind the seated figure betrays features that are more Austronesian than the others, two of whom look strikingly northern European.

Much earlier, during the Nara and early Heian period, the Tohoku (northeast Japan) as a whole was seen as the frontier in the same sense. That is, the area was described as *michi-no-oku* or "deep road" meaning an area that lay beyond Japanese culture, ethnicity and norms: an area that lay outside the known world. It was considered to be foreign territory when Taga fort was constructed close to what is now Sendai in 724 as a frontier outpost of Japan in its attempt to take the territory from the Emishi. This region looked to its cultural and trade ties with northeast Asia, to the Matsukatsu, a sinified Tungus power, that controlled the Amur river trade, and to the Okhotsk of Sakhalin and Hokkaido. The fur trade flourished in this region at the time, but its culture contrasted from the Japanese who were more influenced by the Korean and Chinese states to the south.

By the Early Modern period the Ezo in Hokkaido had become sharply contrasted to the Japanese on the main island, but this was not always the case. This of course has led to the reification or static view of both societies that does not seriously take historical change into account. Truth be told, there were two cultural directions that met, struggled and contested what became Japan, one influenced by a northern cultural tradition that was influenced by native peoples of Siberia, Sakhalin and the Amur river valley. The other, Yamato, was influenced by the centralized states of Korea and China. The winning side eventually became the Japanese state. However, we cannot forget the shadow of the past when a competing people and culture held sway in northeast Japan, one that was as different from what came after as can be imagined.

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"Emishi to Ezo" from the Aomori Prefectural site. [This link will download a pdf file in Japanese](#). This is especially good for a description of the Tsugaru area during the Medieval period.

[The Emishi: What Anthropology Tells Us](#)

[The Northern Frontier: Old photos from a Czech collection](#)

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