

Japanese Culture and the Ocean People

Minoru Senda

International Research Center for Japanese Studies

I would like to shed light on a topic that wasn't under discussion in this symposium, namely the role of the Ocean People in the formation of ancient Japanese culture.

Until now, the Japanese Ocean People have been mainly studied by historians and ethnologists, but archaeologists and physical anthropologists have yet to undertake research on this topic. Part of the reason for this fact of concern is that available method for studying Ocean People (called *ama* in Japanese. They are the people who earn their living by diving into the sea to fetch seaproducts, such as shells and pearls, which they sell subsequently) has been lacking. Future research by physical archaeologists may find studies of these people worthwhile.

The historical approach for studying the *ama* centers around the assumption that the *ama* were marginal to the farmers. I doubt however if this understanding of the *ama*, based mainly on the study of historical sources, can be correct. Moreover, I consider it much more important to go further back into history, and look at the role that the *ama* play in ancient Japanese culture, focusing on the relation between the *ama* and the anthropological characteristics of the Japanese.

I would like to put forward the hypothesis that there exists a relation between the *ama* and the royal power in ancient Japan. I reached this conclusion, analyzing myths of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, the oldest Japanese chronicles. The first volume of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki* is generally believed to consist of myths, but actually this volume is a compilation of myths that have their origin in other Asian countries. The editors probably chose this first part of the chronicles to write about the ancient history of Japan. Therefore, we can't look at all the myths in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* as being simply a part of the cosmological view of the ancient Japanese. Of course, we can't consider them as historical facts either, but since the historians in postwar Japan were only engaged in the careful investigation of historical evidence, the study of myths and with it the rich imagination regarding Japanese ancient history, was totally neglected. In my opinion though, careful handling of evidence alone is not the only method to reconstruct historical facts, and therefore, I choose to examine an-

cient history, focusing on myths and as a historical geographer, I believe that the study of myths and their rich imaginary power in Japanese historical research hold great promise for the future.

Although the first Emperor Jinmu is discussed at great length in both the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, modern researchers studying ancient history, except for some special events related to his life, never considered Emperor Jinmu a proper study theme. I agree with most historians that this emperor is probably a fictive persona, but I think that, since the content of the *Kojiki* as well as the *Nihon Shoki*, from the volume on myths until the appointment of the first Emperor Jinmu, is told as one continuing story and parts of the myths were interpreted as being history. In the eyes of the editors of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki* myths were history.

Keeping this in mind, I will demonstrate the strong relationship between the birth of Emperor Jinmu as the first emperor and the *ama*. My hypothesis is based on the story that recalls how a daughter of the Ocean People, living along the coast of southern Kyushu in southwestern Japan, gave birth to the prince that later became Emperor Jinmu. I believe that it is of great importance that this theme was described in the oldest Japanese chronicle. Since the fictitious birthplace of the imperial family is situated in heaven, it is not possible to give a detailed geographical reference for the place of origin of the paternal line of Jinmu emperor. It is possible that the story depicting the mother of the first emperor, as a woman of *ama* genealogy, is a way to explain how the birthplace of the imperial family is situated far in the southern sea region.

The prince that was born on the seashore in southern Kyushu, went first north, and from there he traveled further to the east, guided through the Inland Sea by Ocean People. Finally he reached Yamato and built his capital in the south of what today is Nara Prefecture (south of Kyoto). I want to stress once more that this story is not a historical fact, and I would like to address myself in particular to the Japanese researchers participating in this symposium, that might point out this error, explaining that it is not at all my intention to call for a return to the prewar research methods in the study of ancient history. Yet, as I stated before, I think it necessary to interpret this story in its mythological context.

Since I am afraid there isn't enough time on this symposium to illustrate my opinion with detailed historical sources written in ancient Japanese, and moreover since most of the participants are not familiar with research based on historical documents, I will confine myself to the main points of my argument. It is a historical fact that the royal power was established in Yamato (Nara Prefecture) during the 4th century A.D. When we take a closer look at the first royal

authority, the relationship with the culture of the *ama* becomes obvious. The head of the Yamato Province, where the imperial palace was located, was for example of *ama* origin. Furthermore, Kaguyama, the mountain that became the symbol of royal power, is closely related to the shrine where ocean people celebrated their deities.

Next, it is necessary to explain where I situate the place of origin of the *ama*. Until recently it was generally accepted by historians that it was somewhere in northern Kyushu, but studying historical materials related to the genealogy of the *ama*, I have concluded that the place of origin must be in southern Kyushu. This hypothesis is supported by the story of the first emperor being born on the seashore of southern Kyushu. I think that due to social and political changes these sea people left their place of origin and moved to the northern Kyushu.

The question remains though, where these ocean people came from before they landed in Kyushu? It is however not certain if the *ama* had the custom of wandering around for a long period of time before they settled down for good in one place. In order to be able to perform their fishing activities they had to stay temporarily at certain places but it was not necessary for them as it was for the farmers to search for cultivable land before settling down. So if we assume as I explained earlier—that the ocean people were moving around, they were probably navigating rather freely in the seas of East Asia, but it is also possible that different groups of *ama* were operating in the same region. To say it in modern words, the *ama* were very internationally minded. Therefore, I think that it is impossible to trace back the origin of the Japanese without taking into consideration the relation with the ocean people.

When we study the ocean people using anthropological and archaeological research methods, a difficult problem surfaces. Since the *ama* were travelling around freely, they not only mixed easily with other people, but they also left, contrary to the farmers, no abundance of material culture behind. It is possible that there exists already a research method appropriate for studying the *ama*, but being neither an anthropologist nor an archaeologist, I am not aware of it.

I would like to discuss the movement of the *ama* as demonstrated in bibliographical sources, taking their activities in 9th century East Asia as an example. In this century the *ama* traveled to Silla in the Korean peninsula where they were actively engaged in trade activities. They were able to travel great distances because they possessed very advanced ship building techniques, and therefore, we can assume that the *ama* sailed the seas of the entire East Asian region. A general from Silla, who was a trader at the same time, was engaged in trade with China as well as with Japan, but the troops under his command were from the

Shandong Peninsula in China. The trade activities of this General from Silla are another example of the movements of the *ama*. During this period the Shandong Peninsula was under the rule of Tang China and it is nowhere recorded that there was a war between the Tang rulers and the inhabitants of the Shandong Peninsula. Moreover, around the same time the Kan people in this region mixed with people from the Korean peninsula. Human bones found on the Shandong Peninsula in a stratum from the Tang period, 9th century, cannot be classified neither as typical Korean nor as Chinese. I am aware that my argument is mainly grounded on the hypotheses, but I would like to ask the physical anthropologists, how one can explain the special anthropological characteristics of the *ama* considering the vast range of their movements.

Next, I would like to turn to an ethnological example that illustrates the movements of the *ama* in East Asia. I believe many people know that until recently groups of people in East Asia were diving for shells and seaweed. Chinese historical documents show that this fishing method existed in prehistoric times. It is also well known that in the Mie Prefecture, east of Kyoto, along the shores of the Pacific Ocean, this fishing method still exists, but today I would like to show you, watching the following video tape, how exactly this is done. In this region women, called also *ama*, dive for shells and seaweed. Their fishing method is probably one of the methods the ocean people used, that was transmitted until today. We can see the same fishing method in many coastal areas of East Asia, and therefore I consider this as an other example demonstrating the vast range of the movements of the *ama*.

Now, I would like to return to the discussion surrounding the establishment of the royal authority in ancient Japan. Previously, I showed that there exists a relationship between the ancient royal power and the ocean people. We can also approach this problem from the religious point of view. The ancestors of the royal family are celebrated at the Ise shrine, which is also located in Mie prefecture. The most important deity worshipped at this shrine is Amaterasu, who was originally a god of the ocean people. Here we demonstrate once more how Japanese culture is deeply intermingled with the culture of the sea. It is necessary however to verify the repeated movements of the *ama* and consequently the interracial mixing that occurred. I believe that in the end it is this point that makes the research of Japanese culture, and in particular the origin of the Japanese language, extremely complicated. Still, I am convinced that if we study Japanese culture in relation to the *ama*—as I showed above—, we will be able to discover new findings concerning the relationship between the Jomon culture of hunters and gatherers, and the culture of the Yayoi, that was based on rice cultivation.