The Prehistory of the Japanese Nation-State: Status, Ethnicity, and Boundaries

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My contribution to our examination of early modernity and Japaneseness in early-modern Japan will focus on the boundaries of the Tokugawa polity—not only the physical boundaries, although they will figure importantly in my discussion, but the boundaries of ethnicity and status as well. As I shall argue, these superficially disparate markers of separation were in essence diverse expressions of the same phenomenon: political and ethnic boundaries reinforced one another, while the language of status provided the idiom in which difference was expressed and understood. Sketching the outlines of the Tokugawa polity in this manner will illustrate how different the “Japan” of the Tokugawa period was from its modern counterpart, while also suggesting how so differently conceived an entity could translate itself with such apparent ease into a modern nation-state.

The linchpin of my inquiry will be a conceptualization of Tokugawa society in terms of the status system (mibunsei). Because status is rarely mentioned in Western scholarship on early-modern Japan, I should like to begin by explaining what I mean by “status.” I shall then turn to the principal concerns of the paper: first, the nature of boundaries of status and ethnicity; and second, how the drawing of such boundaries affected the formation of the nation-state in Japan.

Status (mibun) in Tokugawa Japan referred both to membership in a group (usually based on the occupation of the head of the household) and to the duties (yaku) that accompanied such membership. Duties included the payment of taxes, the performance of various types of labor, and military service to a lord. Thus a peasant household was part of a village community, with which it shared an obligation to pay taxes and perform corvée labor; similarly, a samurai served in battle and bureaucracy alongside other members of his lord’s retainer band. Self-governing status groups (or their constituent units) mediated relations between their members and higher authorities. The autonomous peasant village is the classic example of this, but samurai retainer bands and indeed the domains themselves similarly served to ensure the daimyo’s ability to fulfill his military duties to the shogun.

As a rule group membership and the performance of duties went together, but exceptions were common. Sometimes group members could not fulfill their assigned duties, while other people performed various duties without belonging unambiguously to an appropriate group. A landless peasant, for example, could not participate directly in the business of paying land taxes and therefore did not merit full membership in the village community, while a masterless samurai who freelanced as a political consultant might serve a lord without being included in his retainer band. Such people occupied a vulnerable position in society, yet they retained a status identity nonetheless: a landless peasant was still a peasant, a masterless samurai still a samurai.

Status as an expression of group membership and duty encompassed all members of society, albeit often incompletely or indirectly. Indeed, the status system even incorporated people who neither belonged to an occupational group nor performed clear duties and were therefore without regular status. Efforts were made to gather such people together and assign them duties to perform on the margins of society and thereby ascribe to them the attributes of a status group. In effect, being without status itself became a type of status.

A brief example will illustrate this paradoxical point. The *hinin*, or “non-persons,” were one of the two major outcaste groups in Tokugawa Japan (the other being the *eta*). A heterogeneous collection of beggars, entertainers, fortune tellers, and other marginal people, the *hinin* existed beyond the boundaries of commoner society, yet they comprised a status group with an internal organization and explicit duties. Among the duties of urban *hinin* was the regulation of homeless transients, called *nobinin* or *mushuku*. The homeless were peasants or townspeople who had fallen on hard times; by dropping out of society they had effectively forfeited their commoner status, at least temporarily. *Hinin* were charged with removing the homeless from urban areas by sending them back to their native communities, or at least running them out of town; failing that, the *hinin* might incorporate the homeless within their own ranks as “official” *hinin* (*kakae hinin*), in which case they would continue to live by begging, but now within a community of beggars obligated to perform a variety of mostly unsavory tasks for the political authorities.

The image of status in Tokugawa society that I have sketched thus far is a political one insofar as it takes for granted the power of political authorities to sort people into social groups on the basis of their utility to the shogun or daimyo, and because it assumes a rough equivalence between utility to political authority and utility to society at large. Not surprisingly, status was much more than a political construct, but it is worthwhile to pause here to consider its political dimensions more fully, as doing so will help clarify the relationship between status and ethnicity and, ultimately, the origins of the modern nation-state in Japan.

Status as a legal institution originated in the national unification of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Well-known policies like the separation of the samurai from the peasantry (*heinō bunri*), sword hunts (*katanagarī*), land surveys, the founding of large castle towns with their merchant and artisan populations, and the compilation of registers of religious affiliation (*shūmon aratamecho*) all contributed to the formal delineation of the samurai and commoner populations as status groups. Furthermore, over the course of the seventeenth century the bakufu and domains institutionalized various other extant social groups, including the court nobility, the Buddhist clergy, and the outcastes as legal statuses. Incidentally, for almost all legal and practical purposes, peasants, artisans, and merchants comprised a single status group of commoners; as Asao Naohiro has demonstrated, the familiar *shi-nō-kō-shō* hierarchy of textbook accounts was a prescriptive rather than a descriptive taxonomy that had no real basis in Tokugawa law.

The formalization of legal status, even of groups that had long existed organically, fixed internal social and political boundaries within the early-modern polity. An examination of the position of *eta* in agricultural districts reveals the complex nature of such boundaries. Although the *eta*, as outcastes, are stereotypically associated with professions entailing contact with defilement and death, in fact many if not most Tokugawa-period *eta* lived mainly by farming and engaged in outcaste activities primarily as by-employments or to fulfill their obligations to the authorities. *Eta* farming communities were subject to the same obligations as commoner peasant villages, particularly the payment of land taxes (*nengu*), but they were not considered to be independent, self-governing

2. The term “outcaste” is problematic, as Tokugawa Japan was not a caste society, but I will follow conventional usage here.
4. Asao, “Kinsei no mibun to sono hen’yō,” p. 22. For example, unlike priests and nuns, outcastes, and other members of distinct status groups, merchants and artisans in peasant villages were not listed separately from cultivators in population registers. Similarly, peasants who went to the city to work as shop apprentices did not move down the status ladder, legally or socially.
entities. Rather, they were subordinated as branches (edamura) of neighboring villages, and as such were subject to the authority of the parent village leadership—without, however, being accorded the privileges of membership in the peasant community. In addition to their land-tax obligations as farmers, rural eta were also responsible for the performance of duties as outcasts. Some of these duties—such as the disposal of animal carcasses, from which valuable leather and other products could be obtained—were lucrative, but others—such as guarding prisoners and executing criminals—were not. In either case, because these outcaste duties were unconnected to the eta's identity as farmers, the commoner parent villages had no control over them. Instead, they were overseen by regional eta leaders, such as the elders of Amabe and Rokujō villages for residents of the vicinity of Kyoto.⁶

This example is particularly interesting because it reveals the overlapping geographies of status in the early-modern period. Rural eta communities were part of the familiar scenery of peasant villages, daimyo domains, and bakufu territory that comprised the political landscape of Tokugawa Japan; but at the same time they were also situated on a very different map—largely invisible except to outcasts—that allocated rights to animal carcasses and distributed obligations to perform prison duty without regard to boundaries of village or domain. Other marginal status groups subscribed to their own geographies, such as the calendar makers, fortune tellers and manzai performers tied to the noble (kuge) Tsuchimikado house, or the house-boat people (ebune) of the Inland Sea region, whose movements and social relations were unconstrained by political borders.⁷

The religious dimensions of status further complicated the drawing of boundaries in early-modern Japan and helped to shape the construction of Japanese ethnicity as well. The institutionalization of outcaste status in the seventeenth century formalized an earlier distinction between the "base" people (senmin) and the "good" or "common" people (ryōmin or heimin). Although the exact nature of the connection between the medieval base people and the early-modern outcasts is still a topic of spirited debate, without question medieval attitudes about the pollution of death and the nature of people not bound to the land (Amino Yoshihiko's so-called free people [jiyūmin]) affected early-modern attitudes toward status in general and the outcasts in particular.⁸ At the very least, status as an expression of religious understandings of social relations helps to account for the caste element in outcaste status: the pollution that devolved upon outcasts by virtue of their status transcended the putative cleanliness or defilement of their actual livelihoods, which is why eta farmers were not treated as commoners even when they fulfilled the nominal criteria for inclusion in the peasantry.

Moreover, the institutionalization of outcaste status by the early-modern regime politicized the religious bifurcation of Tokugawa society, and rendered the base realm of the outcasts autonomous yet clearly and in multiple ways subordinated to the quotidian world of samurai and commoners. The autonomy of the outcasts represented the drawing of a significant political boundary, for it rendered their largely invisible map of carrion and condemned prisoners exogenous to the visible map of bakufu.

6. See Kinsei no minshū to geinō, pp. 196-97. In this example the power of political authorities to dictate status disadvantaged the eta doubly, first by denying their communities the autonomy enjoyed by peasants of commoner status and second by perpetuating discrimination against them by forcing them to maintain ties to activities considered to be unclean. On the other hand, their status-based monopoly over outcaste occupations (particularly leather-working) appears in at least some cases to have fostered a measure of economic prosperity, reflected in part in an eta population that rose steadily throughout the Tokugawa period. See Hatanaka, "Kinsei 'senmin' mibunron no kadai," p. 176-83. However, the village examined by Morris and Smith, "Fertility and Mortality in an Outcaste Village," was marked by extreme poverty despite a heavy reliance on outcaste occupations.

7. On groups bound to the Tsuchimikado house, see Yamamoto Naotomo, "Innai: Koyomi o uri, uranai ya kitō o suru," and Yamaji Közō, "Manzai: Danna o tayori, teritorii o kakuritsu," in Kinsei no minshū to geinō, pp. 30-34, 65-71; on the ebune, see Kagaoka Takeharu, Umi no tami (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1987).

domains, and peasant villages, and explains the regime's readiness to defer to the outcaste authorities' judgment on matters pertaining to the status of outcastes. 

The duality engendered by the institutionalization of outcaste status resonated with yet another sort of boundary, that separating the "civilized" (ka) and "barbarian" (i) realms of the Confucian world view. As Arano Yasunori, Ronald Toby, and others have argued, the Tokugawa regime created for itself a naturalized version of the sinocentric world order of a civilized core surrounded by barbarian or at best imperfectly civilized peripheries. It largely supplanted—and partially subsumed within itself—an earlier bifurcation of the world into "human" and "demon" realms, replacing it with a tripartite division, in which previously demonized aliens on Japan's peripheries were humanized as barbarians and the realm of demons was displaced farther afield.

The Tokugawa world order not only situated Japan within the greater East Asian region, it delineated civilized and barbarian realms within the Japanese archipelago itself. This gave rise to a paradox, for according to the logic of this world view, if Japan was to be the civilized core of the world order, it followed that civilization was the essence of Japaneseeness. Civilization thus became a political question and an ethnic one: the boundary that separated the civilized from the barbarian was the boundary that separated the Japanese state from its subordinated peripheries and the Japanese people from their non-Japanese neighbors.

This paradox was resolved only over time and in response to political and diplomatic exigencies. "Civilization," as it was first conceived was, as Bob Wakabayashi has put it, "where Confucian ritual obtain[ed]"—the exclusive realm of a mere handful of men, well-versed in the classics. According to Tsukamoto Manabu, intellectuals looked upon the countryside as a particularly benighted repository of barbarian elements. But however gratifying this intellectual construct may have been to neo-Confucian thinkers as individuals, as a geopolitical strategy it made no sense to equate Japanese identity with an impossibly high standard of civilization. As a result, the nature of civilization itself changed once Japanese identity became a pressing geopolitical as well as an ideological issue in the latter part of the Tokugawa period. Far from requiring ordinary folk to immerse themselves in the neo-Confucian canon, the new standards of civilization focused on a cluster of culturally significant elements of outward appearance and demeanor, such as clothing, hairstyle, names, and language. For example, Kikuchi Isao has described the efforts of Nanbu authorities in the early nineteenth century to eradicate barbarian customs in their domain, particularly the failure of local women to shave their eyebrows as Edo women did. At one point, officials took their civilizing mission door-to-door with razor and whetstone, but peasant women resisted their tonsorial overtures because naked brows offered no protection for the eyes against sweat during farm work.

The ethnic and geopolitical dimensions of the identification of civilization with Japan were particularly evident on the dependent peripheries of the Tokugawa state, such as in dealings with the Ainu people of Hokkaido. As I have argued at length

9. See, for example, the case of the eta doctor who was denied elevation to commoner status by the head of the Kantō eta, Danzaemon, cited in Asao, “Kinsei no mibun to sono hen’yō,” pp. 7-10.
elsewhere, officials of both the Matsumae domain (which oversaw relations with the Ainu) and the bakufu itself focused on the same criteria of civilization *qua* Japaneseness in their respective policies of dissimilation and assimilation toward the Ainu. An important aspect of asserting Japanese sovereignty over Hokkaido and adjacent territories was the imposition upon the Ainu of Japanese hairstyles, names, and other ethnic markers of civilization and hence Japaneseness.\(^{15}\)

The realm of civilization did not exist independently of the realm of status. When bakufu officials set forth to assimilate the Ainu, they could not make them into generic “Japanese,” for a generic Japanese identity did not yet exist. Instead, they had to categorize the Ainu in terms of the status system. As barbarians, the Ainu had lacked status, which suggested to many Japanese observers a link to the outcastes—a link reinforced by many of the attributes that had marked the Ainu as barbarians in the first place, such as their unbound hair and dietary predilections.\(^{16}\) As civilized Japanese, however, the Ainu were made into commoners; for example, the Ainu community on the island of Etorofu in the southern Kurils, which lay at the northern extreme of territory claimed by the Tokugawa state, was designated a “village” (*mura*) with an appropriate roster of officials with Japanese-style names.\(^{17}\)

To summarize my argument thus far, early-modern Japan can be conceived in terms of a series of three overlapping geographies. The first was a geography of power, which defined the physical limits of the Japanese state. It was this geography that gave form and meaning to the other two, for the Tokugawa regime was the first in Japanese history to draw and maintain clear physical boundaries for itself. The second was a geography of civilization, which separated the civilized from the barbarian, both within the Japanese archipelago and within East Asia. Linked to the geography of power, notions of civilization assumed the properties of ethnicity. The third was a geography of death, which distinguished the quotidian world of samurai and commoners from the base world of outcastes. The subordinated autonomy of the outcastes’ realm was analogous to that of the barbarian peripheries of the Tokugawa state.

Yet it was out of this tangled mass of overlapping geographies that the modern Japanese nation-state emerged. Earlier understandings of society and polity were translated into a new idiom, in which feudal duty (*yaku*) was reconceived as a subject’s loyalty to the emperor, and ethnicity became indistinguishable from national identity. The intermediate autonomies—of village community, of status group, of alien ethnicity—that had ordered relations between the early-modern state and individual Japanese disappeared, replaced by a single geography that directly tied subjects to the state without the encumbrance of mediating groups and identities.

How can we explain this transformation—what makes my story “the prehistory of the Japanese nation-state”? I would like to suggest that because none of these overlapping geographies was ever static or unambiguous, a variety of factors—including the crises, economic change, and intellectual foment usually credited with causing the Meiji Restoration—disrupted their boundaries, so that rather than merely overlapping, the geographies intermingled and eventually became undifferentiated.

Thus, in response to threats to its sovereignty, the Japanese state expanded its borders to incorporate Hokkaido and (in the early Meiji period) the Ryukyu kingdom. The civilized overcame the barbarian within the confines of the expanded state—thanks in part to a reconception of civilization so thorough that a trip to the barber shop could now turn a previously barbarian Ainu into a


\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) “Bunsei roku hitsujidoshi irai Ezojin omemien kenjōhin narabi ni kudasaremomo shirabegaki” [c. 1833], Hakodate Municipal Library
civilized Japanese peasant. Identification with the state transformed a contextual notion of civilization into an essential concept of Japanese ethnicity: the geographies of power and civilization fused into one.

The boundaries of status likewise came under pressure and served through their transformation as a catalyst for the ideological justification of a unitary nation-state. Evidence of this pressure can be found at a number of levels, from the social and political tension fostered by the relative weakening of the samurai's economic position, to concerns that the distinction between outcastes and commoners was breaking down.¹⁸ The author of the Seji kenmonroku, for example, focused his denunciation of the outcastes upon their supposed distaste for labor, love of wasteful luxury, and flagrant disregard for status-based rules of propriety.¹⁹ Similarly, the widespread sale of samurai status in the late Tokugawa period, usually dismissed as a desperate fiscal maneuver, may be seen as an attempt to redress imbalances in the status system, in a manner analogous to the way that civilization was made more easily attained or imposed. Finally, and perhaps most suggestively, the valorization of the quotidian by thinkers from Hirata Atsutane to Ninomiya Sontoku made work a devotional act,²⁰ thus simultaneously denying the validity of the outcastes' base realm and suggesting a unity between power and status as the quotidian was identified with loyalty and duty to the emperor.

¹⁸. Many restrictive policies toward the outcastes were imposed only late in the Tokugawa period, such as rules requiring outcastes to tie their hair with straw or wear leather patches on their kimono. Hatanaka, “Kinsei ‘senmin’ mibunron no kadai,” pp. 181-83.
