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Whaling at the Margins: Drift Whales, Ainu Laborers, and the Japanese State on the Nineteenth-Century Okhotsk Coast

When a drift whale beached near Sawagi on the Okhotsk Sea coast of Ezo (modern-day Hokkaido) in December of 1856, Shunoashi, an Indigenous Ainu man who was an official liason with the Japanese, reported the carcass to the local Tokugawa officials. With wounds 60 square centimeters in size on both the head and tail—in the report's assessment due to an orca attack, as was common—the dead animal had drifted into the mouth of the Onishi river, some 20 kilometers north of the nearest Japanese, stationed at Saroro.[1] The whale was over eight meters long, larger than most drift whales in the area, so the resident Ainu population and Japanese alike must have been thrilled with the arrival of extra protein for the winter season, even though the three or four days of processing—work dependent on Ainu labor—would occur in temperatures below freezing. Over the next two years, when drift-whale reports traveled from the Okhotsk coast to the Tokugawa Ezochi (the broader maritime area including portions of the Kuril Islands and Sakhalin) capital at Hakodate, Shunoashi's name appeared multiple times. His visibility, and that of other Ainu laborers, revealed the bureaucratic practice of idenitifying and quantifying the Ainu as individuals, as the Tokugawa state attempted to repopulate a critical border zone ravaged by disease and overwork in state managed fisheries. During the 1850s and 1860s, recently-instituted Japanese drift-whale policy would accelerate Ainu integration into the Tokugawa political and economic sphere as it tied remote territories to the center.

This new regional perspective from the north side of the island of Hokkaido explores how whaling embedded both Ezochi, and through it, Japan, in the history of the Okhotsk sea region. Several important studies have analyzed early modern whaling practice in the core Tokugawa islands, home to a variety of shore-whaling operations, but the whaling history of the Ezochi area has received much less attention. The few existing studies of Indigenous and Western whaling around Ezo focus on the island's southern coast, the location of the treaty port at Hakodate, which hosted hundreds of Western whaling vessels over the course of the nineteenth century.

1 Ogawa Shōichirō, "Monbetsu basho shoken kakitsuke I: Ansei 4 nen goyōsho nikki no kiji ochūshin ni" [Monbetsu administrative documents in the late Tokugawa period] *Dōtōdaigaku kiyō shakai fukushi gakubu* 23 (1995): 42–43.

Whaling practices of the Indigenous Ainu, the majority population of Ezochi until the late 1800s, remain a relatively undeveloped field of study, not just because the Ainu left no written records, but also because the Japanese government only officially recognized them as an Indigenous group in 2008. This lead to a much needed increase in research funding to analyze their past. But even with this new support, examination of their whaling culture is a politically fraught topic since Kushiro, an eastern Hokkaido port—historically home to a sizable Ainu population—serves as a core base for the government's "scientific" whaling fleet even today. Highlighting the Indigenous experience of whaling in Hokkaido, before Japanese colonization, futher dismantles the dominant cultural narrative that twenty-first-century Hokkaido whaling continues a longstanding tradition of "Japanese" whaling. Ainu, not Japanese, were the primary actors in nineteenth-century Ezo whaling. Research that excavates this agency undermines the Japanese Government's current position that Hokkaido whaling preserves a distinctly "Japanese" maritime culture.

Politicizing Natural Resource Extraction

Japanese control of Ezo drift-whale processing and distribution politicized a natural resource traded since the 1600s. In the early seventeenth century, as the Tokugawa began to assert control over Ezochi, coastal inhabitants were only required to report drift whales that beached in "Wajin-chi" (Japanese land), the small territory at the southern tip of Ezochi managed by the Matsumae clan. From the nineteenth century, the Tokugawa began to require drift-whale reports for all of Ezo; the rules for drift whales were not formalized, however, until the 1854 era of direct administration in Tokugawa. This standardization included the explicit application of drift-whale policy from the core Tokugawa islands and the execution of these rules not only in Ezo proper, but also on the island of Sakhalin. In the 1850s, drift-whale discovery, processing, and distribution generally worked as follows: coastal Ainu residents sighted a beached whale, reported them to Japanese authorities for inspection by local officials, processed the carcasses, and then loaded oil and salted meat on coastal trading ships for transport to Hakodate. In return, the Japanese officials granted the Ainu one third of the carcass, and in most cases an allotment of rice for the days spent cleaning the whale and boiling the flesh. But beyond detailing the exchange of labor for compensation in kind—adding yet another chapter to the standard narrative of Ainu economic

exploitation—these interactions reveal the important ways that geography and climate shaped political relations where the Okhotsk Sea and Japanese archipelago intersect.

Marine resource extraction, particularly Japanese-managed harvesting of herring with Ainu wage labor, was the core activity at the heart of the Japanese-Ainu economic and political relationship in the nineteenth century. In addition to this species, gathered under an increasingly brutal and coerced labor system from the late 1700s, ocean mammals caught through independent hunting were an important source of subsistence and trade items, including seals, sea otters, sea lions, fur seals, and whales. Among marine mammals, whales—including species today differentiated as porpoises and dolphins—occupied a unique position because of their immense size, which required a group effort to land, if caught at sea, and then to process on shore. Their colossal scale meant that it was not only multiple Ainu settlements (often home to populations in the single digits) that could benefit from the extra protein, oil, and trade products derived from a single carcass. Tokugawa officials, dispatched to the Ezochi hinterland nearly one thousand kilometers from the capital region of Edo, could also easily appropriate a portion to create local sources of whale products for their own use—as they were accustomed to in central Japan—or commerical sale. Whale oil and meat commanded premium prices in Ezochi since the area was roughly a two-week journey from the nearest Japanese shore-whaling operation.

Towards an Ezochi Okhotsk Whale Culture

This essay situates drift-whale policy in the 1850s and 1860s as a specific product of the political climate in Ezochi as the Tokugawa reclaimed control after decades of delegating the region's management to the Matsumae domain. The Tokugawa reassertion of direct administration in 1854 was a reaction to the temporary Russian occupation of Aniwa Bay in southern Sakhalin. The following year, the 1855 Shimoda Treaty established the Kuril boundary with Russia between the islands of Etorofu and Uruppu. By 1856, the Tokugawa controlled southern Sakhalin. Across two years of negotiations, the Japanese secured their Okhotsk arc (the geographical crescent stretching eastward from Sakhalin along the Ezo Okhotsk coast to the Kurils) territorial boundary through diplomacy; what remained was entrenching political and cultural authority on the ground, particularly through Ainu policy. Japanese control of drift-whale process-

ing was part of projecting newly claimed leadership over both Indigenous populations and maritime products on their fragile northern border.

Tokugawa reassertion of control did not hinge exclusively on security concerns with Russia but also on dissatisfaction with Matsumae management of Ezochi between 1821 and 1854, particularly the precipitous decrease in the Ainu population during their tenure. In 1807, the Tokugawa had estimated the Ainu population in Hokkaido at 26,256, but by 1854 that number had fallen 43 percent to 15,171, the result of a smallpox epidemic but also mistreatment of Ainu workers in the Japanese-run fisheries.[2] During the post-1854 era of renewed Tokugawa administration, two concepts undergirded what the Hakodate Magistrates framed as a new, gentler, constructive policy towards the Ainu population: *buiku* (nurturing) and *hōgō* (protection/guardianship). This philosophy of "benevolent" Japanese superiority was not motivated primarily by altruism, but rather by a practical, urgent need to increase the Ainu population as labor for Japanese fisheries and farming, and to cultivate Ainu cooperation in the face of a possible Russian attack. Seen in this context, Japanese control of drift-whale processing introduced both Japanese law and technology to the Ainu. Implementing this policy along the Okhotsk shoreline more firmly integrated the Ezochi areas most distant from Hakodate into the administrative center.

Drift Whales as Tools of Empire

In 1858, as the Hakodate Magistrates accelerated plans for developing pelagic whaling in Hokkaido, a magistrate's assistant accompanied Matsuura Takeshiro, long-time Japanese intermediary with the Ainu, to interview Ainu residents about traditional whaling techniques. An Ainu elder recalled that 50 or 60 years before he had hunted whales with poisoned spears, impaling them at sea and then waiting for the dead animals to wash up on shore, which invariably happened the next morning. However, with new Tokugawa policies appropriating two thirds of each drift whale, including those with harpoons protruding from their backs, this tactic must have now seemed only marginally attractive. This shift in the Ainu benefit from drift whales, however, was one small indication of how Japanese appropriation of a seemingly minor task

2 Brett Walker, "The Early Modern Japanese State and Ainu Vaccinations: Redefining the Body Politic 1799–1868," *Past and Present* 163 (May 1999): 141–42.

such as drift-whale management gradually aligned Ezochi political and economic practice with mainstream Tokugawa culture. Multiple scholars have identified a dominant centripetal force in global whaling, one that integrated gene pools, economic networks, and even biomes, certainly throughout the Pacific basin. The story of drift whales in the late nineteenth-century southern Okhotsk reveals integration, but on a smaller localized scale. The Tokugawa state used drift-whale landings to incorporate both a hinterland and its Indigenous inhabitants more firmly into the Japanese political sphere. In doing so, it further entrenched sovereign authority not only over an expanding terrestrial realm, but also over the surrounding waters and their resources.

Further Reading

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