Japan as a Maritime Nation

– From the Past to the Future –

Commemorative Speech: The Ocean and Civilization Part III

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(Continued from Part II)

Arabs as Sea-Faring People

Akioka: So, the Han Chinese in eastern Asia were more of a sea-faring people than they are presumed to be. Isn't this true of the Arabs in western Asia, who are also generally thought of as confined to the mainland and desert? Weren't the Arabs already sailing by the time Vasco da Gama reached the western Indian Ocean after sailing around the Cape of Good Hope at the end of the 15th century?

Umesao: Yes, Arabs were already there when Vasco da Gama sailed around the Cape of Good Hope into the western Indian Ocean. In fact, he sailed into the Indian Ocean with an Arab hired as a navigator and ultimately reached a Calcutta port in northwestern India.

There is no doubt that the Arabs are inhabitants of the mainland and the desert; at the same time, however, they are also a people of the sea. Having lived in Tanzania for some time, I am quite familiar with this aspect of their history. Not far from Tanzania, there is an island called Zanzibar, an isolated island in the western Indian Ocean. Until recently, this island was a kingdom headed by an Arabian king. While I was in Tanzania in 1964, a revolution occurred in Zanzibar, and the Tanzanian king fled to England.

The dominance of the Arab people throughout the western Indian Ocean explains the presence of an Arabian kingdom on the island of Zanzibar. The situation is similar to that in the South China Sea. Arabian dhows plied the western Indian Ocean in the same way that the Chinese junks plied the South China Sea. "Dhows," grand ships that were well equipped with keels and fairly large, sailed the western Indian Ocean and were based along the southern coast from Oman to Yemen on the southern Arabian Peninsula. This is where we see the Arabs as a sea-faring people coming forward to dominate the entire western Indian Ocean. Blown by the seasonal winds, the dhows, with their triangular sails and extremely tall masts sailed southward from the Arabian Peninsula. I've seen the way all the masts tilt uniformly in a scene from a movie. It really is a beautiful sight. The dhows would form great fleets carrying Arabian merchants wearing the loose-fitting clothing of the Arab, their heads wrapped in turbans. Curved swords stashed in their belts, they carried themselves with the elegant bearing of the cultured man. In the 18th century, they would have been purchasing all of the ivory in Africa and carrying it back home. The Arabian merchants left their local wives at ports scattered along the eastern shore of Africa, visiting them once a year. When the seasonal winds shifted, the dhow fleets would be carried home. This cycle was repeated year upon year.

Japanese Towns in Southeast Asia

Akioka: The world's oceans seem to have been the stage for dynamic dramas. If we could turn back to Japan for a moment, it seems to me that, while Japan might not exactly be a sea-faring nation, quite a few people did venture into the Asian sea, and Japanese towns were even being constructed during the period that only *shuinsen*, trading ships authorized by the Tokugawa Shogunate, were permitted to sail.

Umesao: The Japanese became involved in the drama on the seas from the latter half of the 16th century. Extremely large numbers of Japanese merchant fleets set sail overseas at this time. Although these were merchant fleets, I suspect they carried armed crewmembers in the tradition followed since the *Wako* pirates. The number of trading ships setting sail climbed significantly, and the Shogunate dealt with this by issuing licenses to tighten its control. Called *goshuin*, these licenses served as overseas travel permits and bore large, red official seals. The licenses, however, did not provide permanent permission to travel, but were granted only for single voyages. Authorized trading ships embarked with heavy loads of goods for trade. Where did the capital for trading come from? Kyoto. A large number of extremely wealthy families – Suminokura Ryoi, Chaya Shiro Jiro and others – lived in Kyoto, and these families financed the building of ships in places like Sakai from where they were sent southward. Rumor has it that the decorative halberds on Gion Festival floats were originally shuinsen mast poles that were no longer useful under the government's isolation policy, but this story has not been verified.

A continuous stream of shuinsen ships set sail for foreign countries. Those heading south reached the island of Luzon in what are the Philippines today, while ships heading west from Quanzhou in China and passing Hainan Island reached Vietnam and the Indochinese Peninsula. Hitting a town we now know as Da Nang, but was then called Tourane, Japanese merchant ships would dock at the Faifo, or Hoian today. These merchant ships did not bring goods such as silk that would promote peace, as was the case during the Bohai trading that came before. Instead, the main merchandise they carried seems to have been arms. Japanese merchants fleets at that time could be called "merchants of death."

Photo : Nagasaki Municipal Museum

A continuous stream of shuinsen, authorized trading ships, set sail for foreign countries in the latter half of the 16th century

Photo : Sonkei-kaku Library

The official license for overseas travel, known as goshuin, issued by Tokugawa Ieyasu

At this point, Vietnam was divided between north and south and was in a state of repeated civil war. Docking precisely between the two, Japanese merchants would sell arms to either side. Japanese armor, swords and weapons had gained a reputation for their power and reportedly sold for a high price. I have visited this town and have seen the graves of Japanese buried in Faifo. There are people there even today who claim to be descended from these Japanese.

Akioka: Wasn't there also a Japanese town in Cambodia?

Umesao: Yes, there was. The town of Udong to the west of Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia today, was also a Japanese town.

The well-known ruins of Angkor Wat are in Cambodia. On an inner wall of this magnificent stone temple, a Japanese person has written his name with a calligraphy brush. The name is Morimoto Ukondayu Kazufusa, a resident of Hishu (now covers the western part of Kyushu), and it is dated the ninth year of the Kan-ei era, which is 1632. He may also have lived in the Japanese town of Udong. Coming across this magnificent temple, Morimoto Ukondayu apparently thought he had reached *Gion Shoja* (Jeta's temple). It seems that a considerable number of printed illustrations of Angkor Wat were in circulation in Japan at that time. Since these prints were clearly stamped Gion Shoja, we can see how Morimoto Ukondayu would have made this mistake. We can assume that many other Japanese also visited Angkor Wat at the beginning of the 17th century.

Moving further west, the next major settlement of Japanese was in Ayutthaya, Thailand. Ayutthaya lies on the shores of the Menam River, a bit north of present-day Bangkok. As the capital of Thailand, it was host at that time to the king's castle. Burmese forces leading an army of elephants later attacked and destroyed Ayutthaya, laying waste in the process to the Japanese town of which nothing remains today.

Akioka: Wasn't Ayutthaya the town in which Yamada Nagamasa is said to have become a hero?

Umesao: The legend of Yamada Nagamasa has it that Japanese people played heroic roles during the Ayutthaya period, but there seem to be a number of doubts cast upon this legendary figure. Several years ago, Thailand requested that the Japanese government build a museum in Ayutthaya, and the Japanese government agreed. Japanese people living in Bangkok at the time wanted the museum to serve as a memorial to Yamada Nagamasa, but Thai officials maintained that his existence is not backed by historical facts. The grand museum that stands today gives no mention of Yamada Nagamasa, and his true identity remains a mystery. He is said to have been from Shimizu in Shizuoka Prefecture, but he seems to have been a fictitious legend. One theory posits that he was a complete fabrication by the famous hero Shimizu no Jirocho.

The independent nation of the Arakan Kingdom was located in the western part of Burma, or present-day Myanmar. We know that a mercenary troop of Japanese samurai was stationed in the town of Akyab, the town in which King Arakan resided. We find in the various records that have been uncovered testimony that the samurai were truly brave and skillful, though quite arrogant, fighters. These records indicate just how far the Japanese had traveled.

Bay of Bengal: The Battle that Never Was

Akioka: Japanese settlements extended quite far to the west, didn't they?

Umesao: Yes. As we've seen, the Japanese established a succession of settlements one after the other. Their sphere of influence extended throughout Southeast Asia and already reached as far as the Bay of Bengal. Around this time, armed fleets from Western Europe arrived on the other side of the bay, reaching such port towns as Calcutta and the French settlement of Chandernagore.

What would have happened if expansion had continued in this direction? History doesn't leave much room for hypothetical questions, but I enjoy speculating on these topics. A group of Japanese samurai had reached as far as Akyab. Ayutthaya, with its significant Japanese settlement and continuing influx of Japanese, lay immediately behind them. Later, however, Japan gradually closed off its southern route.

Akioka: The national isolation policy is said to have been finalized in 1639 when the Fifth National Isolation Order

was issued.

Umesao: What would have happened, though, if there had been no national isolation policy and the Japanese had continued their expansion? I imagine they would have clashed with the British forces already stationed on the opposite side of the Bay of Bengal. I call this theory the "Battle of Bengal Bay that Never Was."[1] But, of course, this never actually occurred. Oddly enough, Japan isolated itself, and all of its forces withdrew. There must have been a large number of people who ended their lives wherever they were when they were unable to return home and shut out of the country. The Battle of Bengal Bay did not take place; it was postponed until the 1940s.

By the beginning of the 17th century, both Japan and Western Europe were already undertaking major maritime expeditions. Therefore, if isolation had not been enforced and Japanese naval forces had been allowed to continue their activities, expansion may not have been checked at Southeast Asia. Japan may have moved further east to occupy California. Since British and French forces were penetrating the American continent from the east, we can be certain that they would at some point have clashed with Japanese forces – perhaps at the upper reaches of the Mississippi River. If that had been the case, Japan may have captured all the land west of the Rockies. Of course, this is merely historical fantasy.

League of Western Pacific Nations of the Same Longitude

Akioka: Thank you very much. Your discussion has covered quite a lot of ground – the fact that the sea includes not only the oceans we normally think of, but also the sea of grass on the steppe; whether the Jomon people crossed the Pacific Ocean; theories on the origin of the Japanese and the Tungus naval forces; and your bold theory of the Battle of Bengal Bay that Never Was. Unfortunately, we've nearly reached the end of our time together. May I ask you to conclude today by touching on the course on which Japan as a sea-faring nation should set sail in the 21st century?

Umesao: To date, Japan has concentrated solely on building relationships with the west, in other words, the mainland. The results of this focused interest, however, have been truly pathetic.

Japan is essentially a sea-faring nation. Everyone, most notably the Tungus navy I mentioned earlier, has boarded ships to carry out their activities. Japan differs from landlocked nations and therefore cannot expect a positive outcome when it attempts to form close relationships with regions that are landlocked.

Historically, the Battle of Hakusukinoe was our first blunder in reaching out to the mainland.

Akioka: This was in 663.

Umesao: The allied forces of Japan and Paekche battled fiercely with the allied forces of the Silla and Tang on the Hakusukinoe River, and the Japanese forces were crushed. We can presume that very few survivors were able to flee to Japan. This was Japan's first major failure on the mainland.

The second failure, Toyotomi Hideyoshi's Korean expeditions (1592 and 1597), also took place on the Korean Peninsula. What exactly was the point of these expeditions? I believe you'd be hard pressed to find other foreign wars this meaningless throughout world history. Nagoya Castle in Saga Prefecture served as the base for Hideyoshi's expeditions at that time. From the top of the mountain, the expanse of the Korean Peninsula should have been visible toward the north. It was here that Hideyoshi watched the succession of *daimyo* feudal lords' ships with sails depicting their family crests depart. I cannot help but wonder what was going through Hideyoshi's mind as he watched these ships. This was such a clear-cut invasion with no just reason whatsoever. Essentially, he was saying, "Go get Korea." And what was accomplished? The daimyo and soldiers undertook this expeditions and terrorized the Korean Peninsula, leaving behind only a deep feeling of resentment. Nothing at all was gaining by this.

Japan's third attempt at mainland expeditions, namely the Sino-Japanese (1894-95), Russo-Japanese (1904-05) and Japan-China (1931-45) wars in the 20th century, also brought miserable results. Nothing whatsoever was gained in these wars, either. Nothing good has ever come from Japan becoming deeply involved with the mainland. Although it is important that Japan maintain amicable relations with the western continent, I believe it is better than we do not become deeply involved. The mainland, or Asia, is not all that easy to deal with. The classic mainland nations in Asia are chock-full of human ills – although I suppose I shouldn't use that word – in the sense of the complicated karma of human beings. Naturally, the results cannot be positive when a naïve ethnic group like the Japanese get involved. I have felt this keenly since I have traveled quite extensively in Asia on foot.

We should turn our attention away from the mainland and toward the ocean, our original homeland. We should return to the sea. Which one? Turn toward the south. There are quite a few islands in the Pacific. We should consider the solidarity between the Pacific islands and Japan. We have in the past pursued a path westward toward the mainland along the same latitude. We should consider changing our focus by joining with other nations along the same north-south longitude. Isn't a league of Pacific nations that links the Pacific islands together a possibility? We must seriously consider the formation of a league of island nations that includes Japan, Indonesia, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Australia and New Zealand.

Of these nations, Australia is particularly significant. Modern Japanese civilization cannot possibly be sustained without a stable supply of steel, aluminum, natural gas and other resources from Australia. Neither can Australia survive without steady demand for these resources from Japan. Australia and Japan are bound by a mutually beneficial relationship of coexistence, a relationship I believe will continue in the future. So, I would say stop focusing on becoming involved in the west. It is better that we turn our consideration to a league of Western Pacific nations lying along the same longitude between Japan and Australia. This, I believe, is the course the Japanese people should pursue – a vision for the 21st century and beyond.

Akioka: From our discussion, I realize that it is the ocean that binds civilizations together. You have given us all a valuable lesson in the idea that the ocean does not separate, but rather connects. As an island nation, Japan may at times feel isolated and closed off, but I have realized that, completely surrounded as it is by the ocean, Japan is in fact open to the world. I would like to thank Professor Umesao again for spending his time with us and express my appreciation to everyone in the audience. JJTI

Note

1 The theory of the "Battle of Bengal Bay that Never Was" was originally set forth in the following book:

Hayashiya Tatsusaburo, Umesao Tadao, Yamazaki Masakazu, *Henkaku to Joho – Nihonshi no Shikumi (Innovations and Information: The Structure of Japanese History),* Chuo Koronsha; Dec. 1971.

This book was later re-titled and published as a Chuko Bunko:

Hayashiya Tatsusaburo, Umesao Tadao, Yamazaki Masakazu, *Nihon-shi no Shikumi – Henkaku to Joho no Shikan (The Structure of Japanese History: A View of Innovations and Information),* Chuko Bunko, Chuo Koronsha; Jan. 1976.

(This is the last article of the series.)

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