

# Japan as a Maritime Nation

## – From the Past to the Future –

### Commemorative Speech: The Ocean and Civilization

#### Part I

By **Umesao Tadao**,  
Interviewer - **Akioka Eiko**

This article was written and edited based on the author's commemorative speech at the "International Ocean Symposium '99 – The Ocean, Can She Save Us? –," held by the Nippon Foundation at Tokyo Big Sight on July, 1999.

#### Introduction

**Akioka:** Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Akioka Eiko, and I will be assisting Professor Umesao as we navigate the topic "The Ocean and Civilization."

Professor, you have often said that you are neither a historian nor an archaeologist. I'd like to start by asking what approach you will take toward today's discussion.

**Umesao:** Historians reconstruct the past based on factual documents, while archaeologists speculate about the past using relics that have been excavated from the earth. As an ethnologist, I have focused my studies on the history of a civilization based on ethnological knowledge. The bulk of my work, however, has been concerned with the earth's continents. As a specialist on continents taking part in a discussion on the ocean, I myself am unable to predict what approach I may take.

I have traveled extensively throughout the world. The only continent on which I have yet to set foot is Antarctica. Antarctica is not a subject of much concern to ethnologists like myself since it is not home to human life. I have walked, at least in part, on every other continent, and my personal academic style is to walk the region I will study on my own two feet, see it with my own eyes and consider it up close and firsthand.

Our topic of discussion today, however, is the sea. It is not possible to walk on the sea. I suppose the closest we could get would be to view the ocean from a boat. As I have walked the planet, though, I have formed some ideas on the relationship between the ocean and the continents, and I would like to take this opportunity to speak on the relationship between the ocean and

civilization, specifically Japanese civilization.

#### An Ecological View of History

**Akioka:** I see. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on the subject.

Let me begin by saying that Professor Umesao is most widely known for his book *An Ecological View of History: Japanese Civilization in the World Context*, which has distinguished itself in both the long-selling and best-selling categories. I've heard that the book was based on a thesis you had originally written 42 years ago for *Chuo Koron* in 1957, and I was struck yet again when I reread the book recently to prepare for our discussion today with the fact that you put forth so many new ideas for something written so long ago. I would like to talk here about two in particular. The first is the new perspective you offer on civilizations. As the title *An Ecological View of History* indicates, you propose in your book a new ecological perspective in analyzing civilizations. The second is the extremely novel idea, based on this ecological perspective, of the parallel evolution of Japanese and Western civilizations. These original perspectives do not fail to inspire awe even with a second reading.

May I ask you to begin today's discussion with a brief introduction to *An Ecological View of History*?

**Umesao:** Quite a while ago, I put forth a concept of civilization's ecological history, which is concerned with the history of civilizations on the continents. This was in 1957. While the theory has since been subjected to various criticism, it seems recently to have gained wide acceptance. Until now, there hasn't been a concept of a Japanese civilization at all. We speak

of Japanese culture, but very few people used the term Japanese civilization.

I define civilization as a system comprised of human beings, institutions and devices. Culture is nothing more than a reflection of the psychological aspect of this system. In this sense, the Japanese civilization is an admirable civilization. We are living in the most advanced civilization on earth today. Why, then, do we not speak of a Japanese civilization? Why speak only of culture?

The generally held view is that Japan began to modernize in 1868 with the advent of the Meiji Restoration and that the country was hopelessly underdeveloped up to then. When we delve into this more deeply, however, we begin to doubt the validity of this viewpoint. I believe that the beginning of modern Japan dates from the latter half of the 16th century, rather than from 1868. We find various indications of modernization dating from this period. It seems to me that a reexamination of Japanese history itself is warranted. I do not concur that, in comparison with the rest of the world, Japan was so terribly underdeveloped. In order to objectively examine Japanese and other world civilizations and lifestyles, I set off to walk across the world. During my travels, I have had the opportunity to test my view on the ecological history of civilizations in regions throughout the world, and I remain convinced that this view is valid in Japan and the rest of the world.

Let me explain this briefly. There is a view of world structure that lumps Africa, Europe and Asia together into the Afro-Eurasian continent and terms it the Old World. There is a vast, dry belt that traverses the center of Africa through southwest and central Asia to northeast Asia with a desert forming the central part of this belt. This desert



is surrounded on both sides by enormous grasslands called steppes. Symmetrical belts of fertile agricultural land lie to the east and west of the dry belt. Nomads, groups of people who make their living raising livestock, inhabit the dry belt. These nomads repeatedly invade the fertile agricultural lands bringing their livestock with them, each time inflicting these agricultural belts with major destruction. Thus, we see numerous cycles of destruction followed by rebuilding in China, India, Eastern Europe and even the Islamic nations.

In contrast, two regions were left untouched by the violence of the desert – either edge of the Eurasian continent. These regions experienced relative comfort, allowing for the cultivation of civilizations. Western Europe lies on the western edge of this continent, while Japan occupies the eastern edge. For this reason, Western Europe and Japan developed under extremely similar ecological conditions, allowing for parallel historical progressions. It is these two regions that cultivated modern civilizations. Due to the repeated destruction they were unfortunately subjected to, steady growth proved impossible in China, India, Russia and the Islamic nations: the situation prevented modern civilizations from developing in these regions. In this sense, the history of civilization developed in a parallel fashion in Japan and Western Europe. I use the term “Zone One” to refer to these two regions – Japan and Western Europe – and the term “Zone Two” to refer to the rest of the Old World. The classic Asian nations – the Chinese Empire as well as the Indian, Russian and Islamic Empires – could also be grouped as the “Zone Two.” I refer to these four blocs as the classic continental empires, in contrast to which Western Europe and Japan alone succeeded in becoming modern nations. Japan did undoubtedly inherit a great deal from Chinese civilization, particularly in ancient times, but this inheritance did not form the basis of its modern civilization. It was its unique ecological environment that laid the foundation for something

entirely different. Western Europe also inherited from ancient Mediterranean civilization, yet created something entirely unique. The result of this was, I believe, that Japan and Western Europe succeeded in creating very similar civilizations.

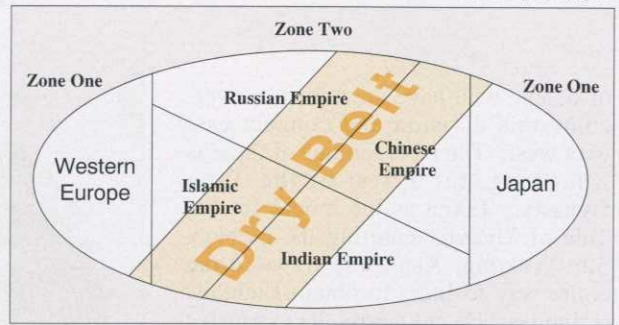
### Soyo: Inland Seas

**Akioka:** Thank you. Now, Professor, could you extend your view on ecological history to the ocean and share your thoughts on that with us?

According to *Kojien*, the leading dictionary on the Japanese language, “The Ocean is the non-landmass area covering the planet containing saltwater. It refers to lakes and other large areas of water or to a single large expanse of water.” Based on your concept of a view on civilization’s ecological history, how would you contrast the ocean with the dry belt you spoke of earlier?

**Umesao:** I mentioned earlier that the main focus of my work is continents, not the ocean. But continents contain oceans as well. In a certain sense, the dry belt is an inland sea containing a desert at its center. Almost no grass at all grows in the desert, but there are vast grassland steppes to either side of it. The most notable of these inland seas of grass in East Asia is the expansive steppe in Mongolia. On the opposite side, in West Asia, there is also a vast steppe that extends from the Ukraine to Russia and Hungary. These are inland seas. The Japanese term *soyo*, meaning sea of grass, refers to these vast expanses of grasslands. To cross these oceans, people would, of course, need some sort of vessel. And thus we have the camel, an animal that serves to ferry people across these seas of grass.

During the war, I lived in the town of Zhangjiakou in present-day Hebei Province in China. The character for *kou*, meaning mouth, suggests that a hole was made in the Great Wall. The



This model for the structure of the Old World (including Africa, Europe and Asia) shows that Japan and Western Europe developed under similar ecological conditions, allowing for parallel historical progressions

Great Wall is a huge structure built to prevent nomads from invading the steppe – a castle wall made of brick stretching along a mountain range. When you pass through the checkpoint gate, you find yourself on the steppe – an ocean of grass, or the soyo. In Zhangjiakou, I was living just outside that hole, or gate, in the Great Wall. This hole is like a port in the sea of grass. Living there, you truly sense that this gate is the entrance to an ocean of grassland. This is the beginning of the endless steppe of Mongolia, which extends past the Gobi Desert to the far west from the Ukraine to the Russian steppe. At times, a caravan of desert ships would emerge from the grassland, hundreds of camels descending with the bells hung around their necks ringing. These are the cargo ships of the desert. They cross the desert from as far west as Hami or Turfan, carrying melons and raisins. I was there when war was raging. Despite the on-going war inland, the camel caravans somehow managed to pass through the battlefield to reach us. They were, to us, a fleet of ships sailing the desert. Within two or three days after these “ships” reached our “port,” the Zhangjiakou markets would be filled with raisins and dried melons. This is the type of town that I lived in. Since they are homonyms anyway, the character for mouth should perhaps be written instead with the character for port. (The character for “port” is also pronounced “kou.”)

Ancient people thought of the vast grasslands as an ocean, one that separated east from west. Since antiquity, however, there have been any number

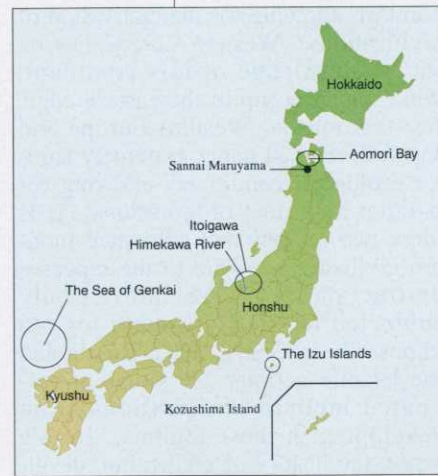
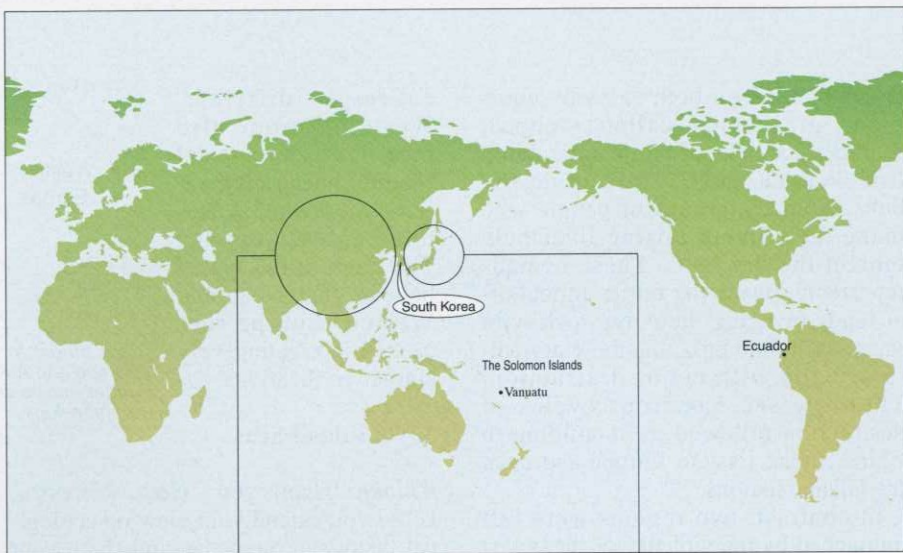


of people who have attempted to overcome this division and connect east with west. The most famous of these is Xuanzang, the Priest of the Tang Dynasty. Taken as the model for the Tale of *Xiyouji*, featuring the monkey Sun Wukong, Xuanzang traveled the entire way to India to obtain Buddhist scriptures. He cut across the expansive grasslands, traveled further south and crossed the Himalayas. Having endured such hardships, he brought a large volume of these scriptures back safely, which is kept today in Chang'an, the capital of Tang, present-day Xi'an. The transmission of orthodox Buddhism to China is attributed to Xuanzang's successful journey, which was indeed a journey over a sea of grass.

**Akioka:** You seem to be saying that in terms of ecological history there are two types of oceans – the ocean that we normally refer to and the sea of grass, which suggests that what we typically call an ocean is not the only ocean. Various conflicts between the vast dry belt on the continent and the so-called civilized regions, and the ensuing attack and retreat, would explain why items would have found their way across these “seas” or why they would have been blocked. One example of blocking transmission would be the Great Wall of China you mentioned earlier. Are there any remains that indicate conflicts between civilization and the ocean in this respect?

**Umesao:** From the perspective of the Han civilization, the grasslands are the outside world, because they thought of the world beyond the Great Wall as inhabited by barbarians. During the Han Dynasty, the Han or Chinese civilization began to put out feelers in the grasslands. Colonies were scattered throughout the inland region. They could, however, only be built on oases in the deserts and the steppe. There was a string of oases from Lanzhou westward ending with Shazhou, or Dunhuang. These colonies were entirely surrounded by desert.

How did these oases come into



being? Immediately to the south stood the Qilian Mountains, a huge mountain range at the edge of the Tibetan High Plateau. Here, snow would accumulate, then melt to form water. This water would stream down into the desert, forming oases. In this way, a large number of oasis states, which served as havens for east-west traffic, developed throughout inland Asia. Before long, these oasis states served to connect East Asia with the West. When we look at ancient history, Rome in ancient Europe was the counterpart to Han in ancient China. A tenuous thread traversing the central Asian deserts and steppes therefore linked Han and Rome. For a long period of

time, East Asia and the West remained separated by the sea of grass extending through inland Asia. This grassland, however, not only separated the civilizations, but also served to connect them. Thus, East Asia and the West were linked by a number of fine threads that crossed the continental sea of grass.

The real sea routes were first established in the Middle Ages. With these routes, a dynamic world of a connected East Asia and the West appeared.

### Jomon Era Sailors

**Akioka:** I would like to go into that in more detail in a minute, but before we



do, there is something I'd like to ask you to comment on. You mentioned earlier that it is not possible to walk on the sea. This is certainly true in the case of the bodies of water we normally refer to as the ocean, but it is possible to walk across the seas of grass we are discussing. The footprints left behind give testimony to this. Of course, we do not leave footprints on the ocean, so the ocean in a certain sense erases any clues we may have had about ancient history. If we were, however, to conjure up dynamic images of the past, I suppose an entire world would open up to us.

For example, I've heard that you have recently visited Sannai Maruyama in Aomori Prefecture several times. Could you speak about the clues the ocean has provided about Japanese history?

**Umesao:** When asked, as I often am, where the Japanese people originated, I reply with my question, "What makes you assume that the Japanese came from somewhere else?" Most people seem to believe that the Japanese came from somewhere other than Japan. Why don't we assume that we have always been in Japan? Of course, there were undoubtedly those who came to Japan from other places over the course of time, but there must have been people living on this group of islands from ancient times. The large amount of remains from the Paleolithic Era unearthed in Japan provide unmistakable proof that human beings have lived on these islands for tens of thousands of years. Why do we not assume that these humans were the ancestors of the modern Japanese? I do not necessarily believe that the Japanese people came to these islands from somewhere else. Rather, I believe at least some of our ancestors had lived here since the Paleolithic Era.

You asked about Sannai Maruyama. The Sannai Maruyama site, which archaeologists have begun excavating recently, is thought to date to the middle of the Jomon Era, approximately 4,500 years ago. I have had the opportunity to visit this area three times. It

appears that a significant number of people lived in this area, and I believe that the civilization developed by these people is linked directly to the Japanese civilization that developed later. What problem is there with assuming that these people were the ancestors of the modern Japanese?

Naturally, I don't believe we can say that Homo sapiens originated on the Japanese islands. In all likelihood, humans originated in Africa. From there, however, they probably spent a million years, or perhaps hundreds of thousands of years, crossing the continent. They may have crossed the ocean at some point. Then again, it is possible that they did not, because there is a significant possibility that at some point in antiquity Japan was a continuous part of the mainland. If this were the case, human beings would have walked overland to reach Japan.

The Sannai Maruyama site lies at the furthest point inland on Aomori Bay. We must ask how these people made a livelihood here. Among the remains, archaeologists have found considerable vestiges of marine products, which suggest that these people lived mainly on fish and other types of seafood. Moreover, there are signs that chestnuts were cultivated and that other types of plants were grown, as well. These findings may indeed contradict scholars' staunch belief that plant cultivation in Japan began after the Yayoi Period (about 3B.C.-A.D.3). Farming in some form may have been practiced from around the middle of the Jomon Era. I believe we should reestablish our theories of ancient Japan to include a farming culture that is linked with subsequent Japanese ways of life.

**Akioka:** Have archaeologists discovered anything that suggests that the Jomon people inhabiting Sannai Maruyama were venturing into the outside world?

**Umesao:** No relics from ships have been found at Sannai Maruyama. There is little doubt, however, that these people did possess some type of navigational technique. A considerable

amount of jade has been discovered at this site.

**Akioka:** Where is jade produced?

**Umesao:** The only area in Japan that produces jade is the region lying along the Himekawa River in Itoigawa, Niigata Prefecture. Since jade has not been discovered anywhere else, we can assume that the jade produced along the Himekawa River was in some fashion brought to Sannai Maruyama. Although we cannot say whether it was transported in several short legs of the journey or made the entire trip all at once, it is not unreasonable to assume that there already existed some method of maritime navigation at this point in history. Obsidian, which is produced only on Kozushima Island in the Izu Islands, for example, has been discovered on Honshu (the Mainland of Japan). We can say with certainty that the Jomon people traveled over quite significant distances by ship. Several pieces of evidence have been discovered and prove that people came and went between Hokkaido and Honshu. The ocean does more to connect human beings than it does to separate them. People cross the ocean to connect with one another, and in this way, we trade knowledge and objects.

The island of Vanuatu lies in the South Pacific near the Solomon Islands.

**Akioka:** The South Pacific significantly expands the scope of our discussion. Vanuatu lies somewhere northeast of Australia.

**Umesao:** I bring Vanuatu up because pottery that is identical to Jomon earthenware has recently been unearthed there. What should we make of this discovery? Can we assume that the Jomon people's activities extended this far?

Even further away, pottery unearthed in the South American country of Ecuador is also identical to Jomon earthenware. What should we make of this? As far as I am aware, archaeologists have not yet offered any definite theories on the matter, but it is not



impossible that the Jomon people sailed all over the Pacific Ocean.

### Theory on Horse Nomads

**Umesao:** I said earlier that the Japanese have always lived on these islands. Some of them were here originally, while a great many others came to Japan from the surrounding area. In this sense, we could say that the Japanese are of mixed ethnicity. People came to Japan from the south, from the west and from the north. I believe we can say that a great number of people marched onto these islands.

**Akioka:** The phrase they "marched onto these islands" sounds rather like an invasion. I have read one theory that speculated that it was nomads riding horses who came to Japan. Could you comment on this idea?

**Umesao:** You're referring to the theory of an "invasion by nomads on horseback." We most often call this the "Horse Nomad Theory."<sup>2</sup> This is an original idea and an intriguing concept. This doctrine, put forth after World War II by prominent archaeologist Egami Namio, states that nomads on horseback rode onto these islands and built the nation of Japan. These riders on horseback were nomads from the north. He proposes that a group of nomads on horseback rode down the Korean peninsula, crossed the Sea of Genkai from present-day South Korea and came onto what is now Kyushu. Egami goes into quite a bit of detail, going so far as to calculate the time period of their arrival. He places this during the period of Emperor Sujin, the 10th Emperor, around the fourth century of the western calendar. Egami proposes that Emperor Sujin, leading an army on horseback, landed on Kyushu.

**Akioka:** Have you formed any personal theory on this concept?

**Umesao:** Egami's theory is indeed an attractive hypothesis. It's an extremely intriguing idea that attempts to unravel the historical details of how the nation

was built by proposing that Japan was invaded and conquered by a band of nomads on horseback. I find this hard to believe, however. I began my academic career with research into nomads, and my findings do not confirm this theory.

Let's look at the cultural elements needed to develop the nomadic lifestyle. First, one must be able to milk livestock. One must possess dairy techniques. Milking techniques entail separating the calf from its mother in order to extract its milk. Simply put, men steal the milk intended for the cattle's young for their own consumption. Castration techniques are also necessary. As wild beasts, bulls are quite violent and must be broken through castration. Without castration, a herd of cattle cannot be controlled. A system for raising livestock comprised of these two techniques must be established in order to develop a nomadic way of life. Had nomads on horseback invaded Japan, we would naturally find these techniques here. Unfortunately, however, Japan has no milking tradition. Neither does it have a tradition of castration. In terms of livestock, Japan has long had both horses and cows, but they were never castrated.

Much later, at the end of the 19th century, we come to the Boxer Revolt.

**Akioka:** You're referring to the Boxer Rebellion...

**Umesao:** Yes. During the Boxer Rebellion, a group of diplomats in Beijing were besieged by their enemies. To liberate them, troops culled from a number of countries moved into Beijing from Tianjin. Soldiers from Japan were, of course, included among these troops. The soldiers from other countries were astonished by the ferocity of the Japanese army's horses, declaring them nothing more than wild beasts. Even then, Japanese soldier's horses were not castrated. It is truly astonishing that an army would use horses that had not been castrated. A few records on milking in Japan have been discovered. But, there is nothing to indicate that milking techniques

were at all common. We find no milking, nor castration in this country. What kind of nomads would lack these techniques? In light of this evidence, it is difficult to believe that a large group of nomads on horseback invaded Japan. This is why Sahara Makoto, the Director-General of the National Museum of Japanese History, wrote the book *Kiba-Minzoku wa Konakatta (There Was No Coming of the Horse Nomads)*,<sup>3</sup> refuting this theory. **UJI**

(Continued in Part 2)

### Notes

1 Umesao Tadao, "Introduction to An Ecological View of History," in *Chuo Koron, February issue, 72 (2) No.822* (Chuo Koronsha, February 1957) pp.32-49.

This thesis is contained in the following book: Umesao Tadao, *An Ecological View of History: Japanese Civilization in the World Context*, Chuko Bunko, Chuo Koron Shinsha, January 1998.

2 Oka Masao, Yahata Ichiro, Egami Namio, Ishida Eiichiro. "The Japanese Race: The Origin of Culture and the Foundation of the Japanese Nation," in Japan Ethnology Association (ed.), *Ethnology Study*, 13 (2) (Shokushoin February 1949)

Professor Egami later compiled his theory in the following book: Egami Namio, *Horse Nomad Nation*, Chuko Shinsho, Chuo Koronsha, November 1967.

3 Sahara Makoto. *Kiba-Minzoku wa Konakatta (There Was No Coming of the Horse Nomads)*, NHK Books, Nihon Hoso Shuppan Kyokai, September 1993.

*Umesao Tadao is a Special Advisor at the National Museum of Ethnology. He has a Doctorate in Science, specializing in ethnology and comparative studies of civilization.*

*Akioka Eiko is the Executive of E&C Bridges Co. Ltd. In addition to her journalistic activities, she organizes various forums and symposiums.*