

The Conquest of Ainu Lands

*Ecology and
Culture in Japanese
Expansion*

1590–1800

BRETT L. WALKER

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For Yuka

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Introduction

In the course of Japan's long history, its borders and its ethnic configuration have undergone some surprisingly dramatic changes. Illustrating this point, maps drawn before the mid-nineteenth century identify Mutsu and Dewa provinces, on the main island of Honshu, as the northernmost territories of the Japanese. These maps are missing the island now known as Hokkaido, "Northern Sea Circuit," a resource-rich, spacious piece of land that constitutes about 21 percent of the total land of Japan today.¹ Some seventeenth-century maps, such as the detailed 1644 *Shōhō Nihon sōzu* [Shōhō map of greater Japan], do crudely outline a northern, amoeba-shaped land formation called Ezochi, a term that means something like "barbarian land." However, compared to the rest of the map, the depiction of Ezo is surprisingly off-scale, off-center, and, with some exceptions, geographically inaccurate.



Figure 1. A 1700 map of Ezo, or the present-day islands of Hokkaido and Sakhalin and the Kurils. This provincial map (*kuniezu*) was modeled after an earlier version found in the *Shōhō Nihon sōzu* of 1644, and lacked the shogunal-imposed cartographic standards of other official maps of its day. The original 1700 map, once held at the Tokyo Imperial University Library, was destroyed in the Great Kantō Earthquake and subsequent fires. This map is a copy held at the Hokkaido University Library. *Genroku kuniezu* [Genroku provincial map]. Courtesy of the Resource Collection for Northern Studies, Hokkaido University Library.

Akizuki Toshiyuki, a historian of the North Pacific, speculates that the Ezochi map was the product of some early exploration or the circumnavigation of Hokkaido and that the later 1700 *Genroku kuniezu* [Genroku provincial map], absent some detail, is nearly identical to its earlier cousin (see figure 1). On both maps, the order of many of the place names is accurate, explains Akizuki, and some features, such as a giant swamp about midway down the Ishikari River and several large bays, could have been identified only through some exploration. However, in the depiction of Sakhalin Island and the Kuril Islands, most of the place names are out of order and include bizarre references to Eurasian continental locations in the Amur region, but their very presence suggests that the information was obtained through conversations with Ainu.² Most of the place names are, after all, major Ainu *kotan*, or villages, making this a map of Ainu lands.

The *Shōhō Nihon sōzu* was the product of a realmwide mapping project mandated by the Edo shogunate, the military government (*bakufu*) founded by Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1603, and was crafted from individual provincial maps (*kuniezu*) submitted to the capital by domainal lords (*daimyō*). As part of the formation of a strong regime run by the Tokugawa shoguns, these provincial maps served important political and military purposes and needed to conform to a rigid cartographic standard, with 6 *sun* (7.2 inches) equaling 1 *ri* (2.44 miles), or a ratio of about 21,500 to 1. Once submitted to the capital, the provincial maps were redrawn by Hōjō Ujinaga at a newly calculated ratio, and the composite became known as the *Shōhō Nihon sōzu*.³ When the entire map was finished, the greater realm of Japan, with its rugged coastline and twisting rivers, was positioned under the gaze of the shogun, his councillors, and his military advisors in Edo. The final product is an astonishing map for its day, and it accurately portrays district borders, coastal ports, village names, and other political and geographic information; but the portion of the map depicting the northern section of Ezochi, in particular, is basically a patchwork of Ainu villages and exotic islands. These places remained couched in obscurity; they had been heard of but not yet seen by Japanese officialdom. In the seventeenth century, when Hōjō and his colleagues put the final touches on the *Shōhō Nihon sōzu*, this northern land was inhabited by the Ainu, an indigenous people of the northern part of

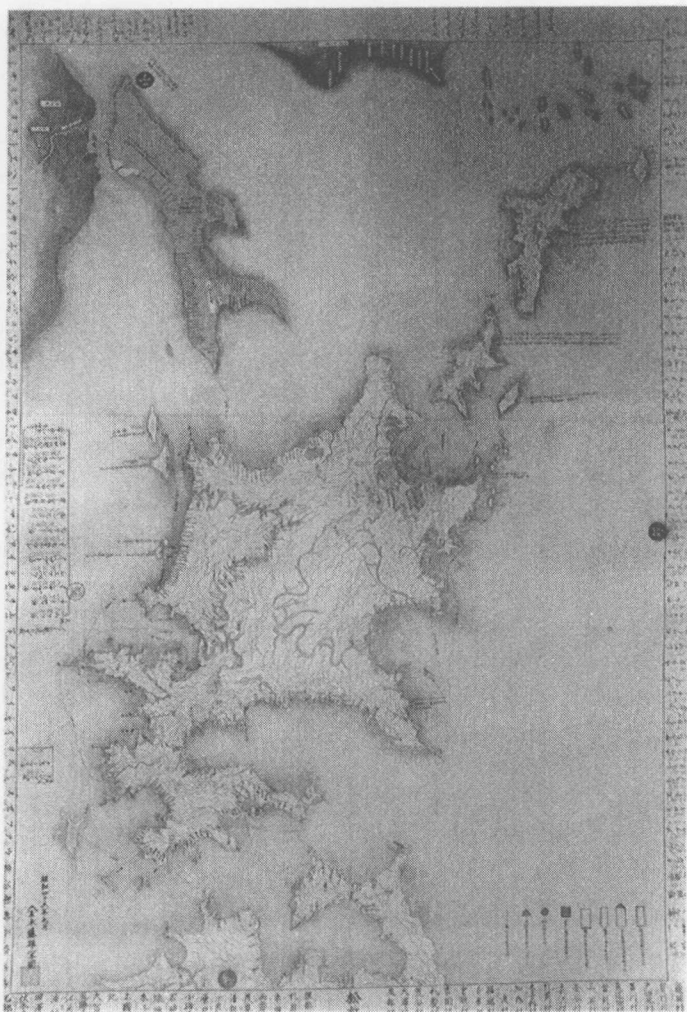


Figure 2. A map of Ezo from the 1830s. Drawn almost a century and a half after the *Genroku kuniezu*, it demonstrates a more sophisticated knowledge of the region documented in the final years of the Edo period (1600–1868). In particular, the Kuril Islands and Sakhalin Island had been explored by this time, and permanent Japanese fishery settlements had been constructed. *Ezochi zenzu* [Complete map of Ezochi]. Courtesy of the Resource Collection for Northern Studies, Hokkaido University Library.

the present-day Japanese Archipelago, and although Ezo's presence on the map may have foreshadowed later Japanese claims to the island, it was still seen as a foreign place beyond the cultural pale.⁴

By the 1830s, however, cartographic portrayals of Ezo had changed considerably. Two centuries of increasing interaction and exploration had led to a more accurate geographic knowledge of this northern territory. No longer an amoeba-shaped landmass, as in the 1644 or 1700 maps, Ezo had a recognizable shape in such maps as the 1830s *Ezochi zenzu* [Complete map of Ezochi], and there were detailed references to village names, coastal inlets and ports, rivers and watersheds, prominent offshore islands, and even specific mountain ranges (see figure 2). In provincial maps from the 1830s, moreover, such as the *Tenpō okuniezu* [1838 provincial map], a product of the last official mapping project of the Edo shogunate, Ezo was basically scaled to fit within the domestic space of the rest of Japan, suggesting that this once foreign place—this place that was once “off the map,” so to speak—had been absorbed within the fluid boundaries of Japan.⁵

This cartographic shift in the official portrayal of Ezo coincides with a political shift in Ezo's status in relation to Japan: over a period of nearly two hundred years, the region had been transformed from a foreign place to a northern administrative district of sorts. To trace Japan's absorption of Ezo and its Ainu inhabitants, historians must analyze the layers of this two-century core sample extracted from the terrain of a longer historical process by which Hokkaido became part of the Japanese Archipelago and the Ainu, once a semi-independent people, became ethnic minorities in the Japanese state. That absorption process is the topic of this book, and excavating the roots of Ainu absorption and narrating how it occurred require us to sift through the ecological and cultural strata deposited on the northern landscape of Ezo. In this book, I treat Ezo as a historical site, as a good geologist would, centering it and its inhabitants, whether Ainu or Japanese, in the narrative. I purposefully do not refer to Ezo as the Japanese frontier, as is common practice, because as a conceptual tool, the notion of the frontier peripheralizes Ezo in relation to the process of state formation and economic development in Japan. When Ezo is positioned as a frontier, widespread trade, cultural interaction,

economic growth, and state expansion in Ezo are often cast as part of the pageantry of Japanese national progress, rather than as the subjugation of the Ainu homeland, that place Ainu considered to be their hunting and fishing grounds and the core of their sacred order.

My analysis, for this reason, extends laterally to explore diverse facets of Ezo during the early Tokugawa years, rather than linearly to investigate a longer historical trajectory and process in the Japanese conquest and settlement of Hokkaido. In the chapters to come, I highlight the distinct peoples that understood this region and its animal life to be at the core of their respective epistemological universes, because preserved in these universes, like fossilized images of prehistoric monsters embedded in stone, lie early traces of the weakening of Ainu society in the face of Japanese advances. Centering Ezo as a site downplays—but does not entirely dismiss, as chapter 1 illustrates—the role of the state in shaping Japanese national destiny or serving as the vanguard in the eventual settlement of Hokkaido. In this respect, I attempt a balanced approach, one that weaves together a story of human-animal relations, disease, medicine, inter-Ainu conflict, market growth, subsistence practices, shared ritual experiences, and environmental degradation, along with the more conventional tale of expanding Japanese state interests in Ezo. Put succinctly then, as a historical site, the place I investigate is (with necessary exceptions) neither the pre-1590 nor post-1800 world of the Japanese or the Ainu, but rather a temporally and spatially localized ecological and cultural snapshot suspended in a two-century historical moment, a moment that profoundly disadvantaged the Ainu and hastened their eventual conquest by the Japanese. In this approach to borderlands, or even ethnic and cultural contact points, I have found like company among the New Western historians.

FRONTIERS, BORDERLANDS, AND THE MIDDLE GROUND

It hardly needs to be said that Frederick Jackson Turner's now famous thesis on the role of the frontier in forging American political and cultur-

al life has attracted the intense scrutiny of American historians. Turner positioned the westward migration of European settlers on the North American continent within the broader narrative of U.S. history by arguing that the "existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development."⁶ Kerwin Lee Klein points out that Turner implied that the process of settling the frontier gave birth to certain "intellectual traits" and to the "growth of democracy" and that these characteristics and trends later became celebrated hallmarks of American life.⁷

Positioning frontier lands within the context of national development is not, of course, unique to Turner or to American history. In fact, Turner's frontier thesis resembles the work of some Japanese historians who viewed the move into Ezo, and later Manchuria, as part of Japanese national development. Takakura Shin'ichirō, for example, a pioneer in the study of the Ainu, wrote in the early 1940s, the high point of Japanese imperialism, that the history of Japan is the history of national development based on continuous expansion. Even in the broadest sense, he continued, the history of Japan is the history of the expansion of the living sphere of the Yamato (ethnic Japanese) people.⁸ With this idea Takakura helped lay the groundwork for a Japanese frontier thesis that plotted the steady march of the Yamato people into the northern island of Hokkaido and, ultimately, Manchuria. Takakura defined the field of Ainu studies in Japan and elsewhere for decades, and despite his ethnocentric vantage point, his work remains unrivaled in the field of Ainu-Japanese studies.⁹

A more recent case in point is Yamamoto Hirofumi's study of seventeenth-century Japanese foreign relations. Reacting to historians who argue against the *sakoku* thesis, that is, against the notion that Japan was a closed country in the Tokugawa years, Yamamoto suggests more broadly that many specific examples of early-modern foreign contact pointed out by these historians were not, strictly speaking, foreign relations at all. Rather, he asserts that these regions were subordinate to the early-modern Japanese state or were at least incorporated into an anti-Christian "defensive perimeter"; thus, he basically positions them on the edge as frontiers and thereby deprives them of their status as autonomously foreign places. He argues that in the 1630s, when Japanese policymakers im-

plemented maritime prohibitions (*kaikin*), they sealed up the country from any outside contact and placed these lands within their administrative purview. Specifically, Yamamoto's thesis places the Ryukyu Kingdom and Ezo, as well as Korea to a certain extent, as the administrative frontiers of the early-modern Japanese state.¹⁰

In the field of U.S. history, dissatisfaction with the frontier thesis has led to the emergence of the New Western history, which posits that viewing the once expanding boundaries of the United States as simply "frontiers" badly distorts historical analysis of Native American homelands and, ultimately, belies the complexity of their conquest. With a few possible exceptions, no single historian has made this point as lucidly as Patricia Nelson Limerick. In *The Legacy of Conquest*, Limerick submits that by rejecting the frontier process as a model of analysis, "we gain the freedom to think of the West as a place—as many complicated environments occupied by natives who considered their homelands to be the center, not the edge." She argues elsewhere that the frontier model is both "nationalist and racist" and that when "cleared of its ethnocentrism, the term [frontier] loses an exact definition." She suggests that the frontier model should be rethought as a process that involves portraying diverse peoples and their "encounters with each other and with the natural environment."¹¹

Richard White, another New Western historian, offers a compelling alternative to the view that ethnic and cultural contact points in the American West can be lumped together as "frontiers." He suggests that the frontier be rethought as a "middle ground," a place located "in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires and the nonstate world." He eloquently describes the middle ground as a place where the local context and historical moment shape cultural and political interaction among diverse groups of people. It is, he explains in the context of the Great Lakes region, the "area between the historical foreground of European invasion and occupation and the back-ground of Indian defeat and retreat." White adds, "On the middle ground diverse peoples adjust their differences through what amounts to a process of creative, and often expedient, misunderstandings. . . . They often misinterpret and distort both the values and practices of those they deal with, but from these misunderstandings arise new meanings and through them new practices—the shared meanings and practices of the middle ground."¹²

The New Western history, then, has sought to complicate the centrality of process in frontier studies and, as White points out, to illustrate how the middle ground arose from ethnic and cultural interaction between people and the natural world. In other words, with the focus now on place rather than exclusively on process, borderland history is no longer simply the tale of the conquerors.

In recent historiography related to Ezo, an approach to analyzing trade and other contact between Ainu and Japanese that downplays the ethnocentric vantage point of the Japanese, an approach similar to the New Western history in that it positions Ezo as a place rather than process, has been slow to permeate recent scholarship. To be sure, in the past several decades, a new generation of Japanese historians has shifted attention away from the political and economic process of "developing" (*kaitaku*) the northern frontier, to exploring the cultural and ethnic distinctiveness of this borderland itself. In the new historiography, Ezo is positioned not as a frontier, or not as open lands just waiting to be developed by the Japanese, but as a foreign land that served as the northern border for the early-modern Japanese polity.¹³ Kikuchi Isao nicely represents this generation of scholarship. In his fascinating work, he places Japanese contact with the Ainu in the context of the early-modern Japanese system, borrowed from China, of foreign relations and international order (*ka'i chit-sujo*), which emphasized a two-tiered structure that viewed foreign relations as ceremonial meetings between a "civilized center" (represented by Japan) and a "barbarian edge" (represented by such groups as the Ainu). Because of this emphasis on an early-modern "system" of foreign relations, Kikuchi's treatment of contact with the Ainu and their homeland needs to be seen as part of a longer historiographical trajectory linked to earlier critiques of *sakoku*.¹⁴ He thus places contact with the Ainu in the same context as relations with other foreign countries, such as Tsushima domain and Korea or Satsuma domain and the Ryukyu Kingdom. He admits that Ezo was, strictly speaking, not a foreign "country" like Korea, but because its inhabitants spoke a foreign language and had distinct cultural traditions, the place where they lived—Ezo—was thus seen by the Japanese of the day as a foreign country.

In this early-modern system of foreign relations and international order, the one employed by the Tokugawa regime, little room remained

for anything resembling White's "middle ground," or cultural and ethnic slippage in an ambiguous space—both familiar and foreign, civilized and barbaric—where the lines between the center (*ka*) and edge (*i*) were blurred through the interaction between two peoples. The *ka'i chitsujo* demanded, by its very nature and conception, that cultural, geographic, and even ethnic lines be drawn between people. Of course, as Kikuchi and others demonstrate, placing relations with Ezo in the context of an early-modern system of international order is highly instructive (I explore this point in chapter 8), but by too closely adhering to this system one risks overlooking a historical reality: Ezo's conquest (at least from the perspective of the Ainu). Moreover, the early-modern system of international order resembles in its own way a new kind of frontier thesis. In the context of Ezo, an emphasis on the delineation of "Japanese" borders, and on the construction of "Japanese" identities, places the move into the Ainu homeland as an integral part of "Japanese" history and belies the more complex and troublesome story of increasing Japanese advances into Ezochi, in particular at the ecological and cultural levels. Borders between Ainu and Japanese were erected in Ezo (something I explore in chapter 1), but the Japanese-manufactured goods and foreign pathogens that so altered Ainu society and hastened their conquest failed to recognize these boundaries. In other words, one might say that as part of an earlier frontier thesis, or even the *ka'i chitsujo* of the Tokugawa world, Ezo failed to escape the orbit of the Japanese colonizers.¹⁵

More recently, David Howell has explored the possibility of a middle ground in Ezo during the early-modern period. In the ambiguous space of Ezo, he points out, along with a heightening of material and technological exchange between Ainu and Japanese, there was interaction at the human level that exemplifies the ways in which the middle ground influenced individual lives. In 1634, for example, records from a Dutch ship made reference to a trader whose father was Japanese and whose mother was Ainu, and who spoke both languages. Howell submits that prior to Shakushain's War in 1669 (after which more-rigid ethnic boundaries between Ainu and Japanese were erected), a middle ground existed where Ainu and Japanese interacted, at the basic human level, to form altogether new relationships. Howell also provides the example of Iwano-

suke, of Kennichi village, who appears to have been thoroughly assimilated to the everyday customs of Japanese life. He had a Japanese name, explains Howell, lived in a predominantly Japanese village, and wore his hair in a trendy Japanese fashion. However, on the seventh day of the new year, Iwanosuke underwent what Howell calls a “curious metamorphosis.” Like a proper Ainu, he grew his hair long and, “as a representative of the Ainu people,” or the country of Ezo, went to Fukuyama Castle to participate in an audience with the Matsumae lord. Howell argues that “Iwanosuke assumed what had become for him a false identity for reasons that had little to do with old Ainu customs and everything to do with the institutions of the Matsumae domain.”¹⁶ In different ways, both of these examples reveal people who stood at the intersection of Ainu and Japanese life. Howell argues that “contact and interdependence led to the birth of a new identity” for such people, and even if a middle ground did not exist at the macro level, everyday Ainu and Japanese worked and lived together in the fisheries, making ethnic interaction a reality.¹⁷

For this book, the notion of the middle ground, as a broader historical context, is crucial because the contrast between Ainu society before and after the period investigated, a period that might be seen as a kind of middle ground in itself, is striking. Like the “area between the historical foreground of European invasion and occupation and the back-ground of Indian defeat and retreat” investigated by White, Ezo, when positioned as a middle ground, demonstrates how early Ainu groups once stood as militantly independent people, forging inter-island alliances and boldly repelling Mongol invasions of Sakhalin Island in 1263 and 1284, and frustrating Japanese advances in southern Ezo on at least nine different occasions between 1456 and 1536. However, by the end of the eighteenth century, Ainu communities were dependent on trade with Japan, and the Ainu were resigned to watching as Japanese exploited once-bountiful hunting and fishing grounds, reportedly raped their wives, drowned their prized hunting dogs, and eventually settled their homeland. In the space of about two centuries, the Ainu degenerated from a relatively autonomous people, willing to spill blood for their land and way of life, to a miserably dependent people plagued by dislocation and epidemic disease—viewed by later Japanese and foreign observers as in dire need of