"Black Pacific" Considered

——Japanese Early Relations with African Americans——

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Introduction

Asian relations with the United States have been studied for many years, but those with minority groups in America, such as African Americans, have not been adequately known to academics. This neglect is partly due to a general lack of interest in this topic and partly because of the limited availability of records. However, historical studies of Asian relations with African Americans provide us with significant opportunities to construct or reconstruct Asian history as well as American history. It also gives us new perspectives to consider current issues lying between Asia and America.

This paper focuses on Japanese early relations with African Americans from the late 18th century to mid-19th century. The period corresponds to the late Edo era in Japan, and the dawning of the Japan-U. S. relations. The paper deals with some historical encounters between Japanese and African Americans and suggests future agendas in this topic.[2]

Japanese Contacts with African Americans on the U. S. Ships

Although it is not known exactly when the very first encounter between Japanese and African Americans occurred, early contacts are seen on the U. S. commercial or whaling ships around the coast of Japan in the late 18th century. In those days Japan was still closed to most foreign countries.

In the United States, the Declaration of Independence drafted by Thomas Jefferson was proclaimed in 1776 during the Revolutionary War. George Washington, who led the Continental Army in the war, became the first President in 1789. The United States Constitution was enacted in the same year, but as was the case with these "Founding Fathers," the Constitution allowed for slavery of blacks. Two years later, in 1791, there were two American trade ships which

carried sea otter furs from North America and sailed to East Asia. The ships, the *Lady Washington* and the *Grace* arrived in Kashino Bay, Wakayama and anchored there to avoid a storm. During its eleven-day stay, some Japanese were invited aboard and given food and drink. According to a Japanese record, there were "fifty Westerners, twenty blacks, and five Chinese" on the ship.[3] So, it might be possible that the Japanese and black crew had contact with each other then, though further investigation with more detailed records is needed on this incident.

In the early 19th century, there were quite a number of cases of American ships rescuing shipwrecked crew of Japanese fishing boats and cargo vessels. Many of the American ships had African Americans working on board. Among those Japanese, Nakahama Manjirō (a. k. a. John Mung), rescued in 1841, and Hamada Hikozō (a. k. a. Joseph Heco) rescued in 1850, were brought to the U. S. and each spent about ten years there. They saw and experienced racial discrimination at first hand in the country. For instance, when the white American host family of Nakahama Manjirō took him to their Congregational Church to attend a service in Fairhaven, he was refused to sit with the family, and was instructed to be seated in the "Negro pew."

Nakahama and Hamada, these two men contributed to the development of the early Japan-U. S. relations after returning to Japan. Their experiences and activities are fairly known,[4] but there is also little known African American who played an important role in the relations of the two countries.

In April 1845, the American whaling ship *Manhattan*, arrived in Edo Bay after saving more than a score of shipwrecked Japanese.[5] The ship was looking for turtles for food in the seas close to the Izu Islands. During the search, the *Manhattan* rescued eleven men who were survivors of the shipwrecked *Kōhōmaru* of Awa. Those men had been living in a cave on an uninhabited island. On the following day, the ship again rescued eleven crew members from the *Senjumaru*, which was sailing from Kamaishi loaded with salted salmon and was on the brink of sinking.

The Edo government did not allow the *Manhattan*'s crew to go ashore, but

received the rescued Japanese men in Uraga, breaking the general rule of having all foreign ships directed to Nagasaki. During the four days that the *Manhattan* anchored in harbor, the government permitted the magistrate to visit the ship, provided it with water and food, as well as materials for repairs, and sent a letter conveying the gratitude from the *Shōgun*, Tokugawa Ieyoshi.

Some of the crew on the *Manhattan* hired by the Captain Mercator Cooper were African Americans. The rescued Japanese initially feared them more than the whites, but after living for about a month on board, they began to feel closer to them. The strongest impression seems to have been made by the skilled helmsman, Pyrrhus Concer, who was born as a slave. His personality, steering skills, and his talent for singing attracted Japanese. On the ship the Japanese danced the *Ise Ondo* in return for being entertained by Concer and other crew's performance. It was also Concer who pleased the government officials.

The roles of Concer as well as of the Captain Cooper, both from Southampton in Long Island, New York, should be more closely examined. With regard to Concer, he later became famous as the first black person in his native town to see Japan, and it is reported that "it was very interesting to listen to the aged man's thrilling narrative of the incidents leading to his visit to that country."[6] An obituary on him in a local newspaper the *Sea-Side Times* in September, 1897 says, "The death of Pyrrhus Concer has removed from our village a man who was as well known and as highly respected as any one in the community" and continues to introduce how he became a free man at an early age, how he went to the village school during winter when there was no work, how his personality was, and his observations about Japan. The article concludes, "though born a slave he possessed those virtues without which kings are but slaves."[7]

So far, Arthur P. Davis' sixteen-page small booklet *A Black Diamond in the Queen's Tiara* (1974) is the only published material dealing with Pyrrhus Concer.[8] Concer should take his rightful place as a noted figure in the early years of the Japan-U. S. contacts.

Arrival of "Black Ships" and African Americans in Japan

In July 1853, four ships of the U. S. Navy led by Commodore Matthew Perry arrived off Uraga calling for opening of the country. Perry came ashore in Kurihama and handed over an official letter from President Fillmore, and left promising to come again next spring. This is the so-called arrival of the "black ships."

Perry arrived again in mid-February, 1854; this time he led seven ships at first, joined later by another two ships, and with the show of military strength, negotiations of the treaty was started in Yokohama in March. Perry landed in Japan and he walked past the sailors, marines, musicians and officers forming a line, to the reception building. Reportedly, "two tall, well-built black men marched on both sides of the Commodore. They were fully armed and were guarding the Commodore. The two, who were specially selected for this day, were the most handsome black men in the fleet. Of course, this was all done for effect."[9] Then, at the delivery of the letter, invited by the Commodore, two boys step forward holding aloft a box with the letter and other documents. "Two sturdy black men followed right after the boys and stepped towards the vermilion-lacquered chest. They received the box from the boys, opened it, took out the letter, and showing the documents and the seal, placed them on the lid of the chest —— everything proceeded in perfect silence."[10]

It is not known precisely how Perry utilized his African American men at the reception or the ceremony in Japan, but he probably realized that their black skin color or appearance gave Japanese officials strong impact and, to some extent, intimidated them. It might be a part of Perry's "gunboat diplomacy."

After the conclusion of the Treaty of Kanagawa, the Edo government was forced to open the harbors of Shimoda and Hakodate to foreign ships. Perry's fleet stayed in Shimoda for 25 days, and then in Hakodate for almost 20 days during May to June. Records describe, in Hakodate, the residents at first feared the sailors coming ashore, and most of the stores and houses were closed shut. They felt particularly uneasy about blacks, but soon their impression changed. The residents saw that blacks looked violent at first, but they turned out to be the

most polite people of the group.

Perry invited Japanese government officials to his flagship, the *Powhattan*, for an evening banquet, and the "Ethiopian Minstrel" was shown to entertain them on board. It was a minstrel show based on whites' stereotyped images of blacks and was performed by white sailors dressed as black men.[11] A record says, "Even the serious-looking Hayashi [Daigaku no Kami] could not resist the quaint show, and joined his colleagues in the storm of laughter caused by the antics and funny performance of the fake blacks."[12] There was even a printed program of the evening. The performance consisted of six sections, the first part, "As Colored Gemmen' of the North" and the second, "As Niggas of the South." The show was presented later in Hakodate for officials of Matsumae province, in Shimoda for Hayashi and other officials, and in Naha on their way home, for dignitaries of the Kingdom of Ryūkyū.[13]

The whites' stereotyped images of blacks, such as those seen in the minstrel show, influenced the formative process of Japanese views of African Americans. Japanese early views of them, often negative ones, were handed over to later generations.

The First Japanese Mission to the United States

In 1858, two years after the conclusion of the Treaty of Kanagawa, Consulate-General Townsend Harris arrived in Shimoda and the Treaty of Amity and Commerce was signed. In order to exchange the letter of ratification for the Treaty, the first Japanese diplomatic mission to the U. S. (*Manen Gannen Kenbei Shisetsu*) traveled on its way to America in February 1860.

The U. S. government provided the American vessel, the *Powhattan* for the route via San Francisco to the Isthmus of Panama. Envoy Shinmi Masaoki headed the mission of 77 men and, on the *Kanrinmaru*, the Japanese ship accompanied with the *Powhattan* to the West Coast of America.

The first place the mission saw in the U. S. was San Francisco. The city had grown rapidly during the Gold Rush. The city hall, which welcomed them, and the hotels they stayed at were four to five stories buildings of stone. There were

printed newspapers, machines powered by steam, and at night, gas lamps lit the streets. The mission was amazed by the many signs of modern technology and convenience.

Then, the group went southwards by sea to Panama and crossed the Isthmus by train. They embarked another ship, the *Roanoke*, to Washington D. C. After spending in New York, they boarded the *Niagara* and sailed around Africa, for the Indian Ocean, Batavia and Hong Kong and finally arrived in Shinagawa in November. It was a round-the-world tour.

Many of the members of the mission wrote diaries and memoirs of the travel, of which about 40 remain. They met people of many races and ethnicities, including African Americans.

The mission saw blacks in large numbers for the first time in the Isthmus of Panama. Nonomura Ichinoshin, for instance, describes their faces and appearances, as "their color was as black as if painted with black ink; their hair was black and frizzled; they were tall; their nostrils were flared like lions; their lips were thick; the lowly went barefoot, and the soldiers resembled Americans."[14]

In Washington D. C., the three envoys were invited to a concert by a blind black pianist in a hotel. A member was told of the discrimination by a black woman working in the hotel, and sympathizing with her, gave her a fan he had brought with him. One of the interpreters, Namura Gohachirō, who knew of the move towards the abolition of slavery, denounced trafficking in human beings as evil. Indeed, it was just a few years before the abolition that the mission visited the U. S.

On its way home, the group stopped at San Vicente Island in Cabo Verde as well as at Luanda in Angola, both in Portuguese Africa. In San Vicente, Tamamushi Sadayū and others met a black person who came to sell pineapples on a small boat and spoke a few words in Japanese, such as "*wakaranai*" (I don't understand) and "*sukebei*" (lechery). That man seemed to have stayed in Nagasaki before.[15] In Luanda, all members went ashore, and stayed for about 10 days. What they saw first was the sight of people working in chains. The place

was known as an export base for black slaves. American and British patrol vessels were deployed, for slave trade had been banned by that time. Nevertheless, Muragaki Norimasa wrote that he heard of an American ship which had procured about 600 slaves in the town.[16]

Thus, American activities regarding the African slave trade at that time were observed and even recorded by Japanese mission officials. Scrutinizing their writings and/or the U.S. and other foreign sources on the mission would probably reveal little known aspects of Japanese early contacts with Africans and African Americans.

Conclusion

As this paper briefly describes, there were significant encounters between Japanese and African Americans even in the late Edo period, which is also the dawning of the Japan-U. S. relations. Since then, numerous and various encounters or contacts between the two have been seen up to present, though many of them have not been adequately studied yet. In fact, Japanese and African Americans have shared a modern history, often influencing each other on the both sides of the Pacific.

In his brilliant and provocative book, *The Black Atlantic* (1993), a black British scholar Paul Gilroy presented the concept of "Black Atlantic" which attempted to deconstruct the framework of "black nationalism." The book threw African American studies into the Pan-Atlantic arena and expanded the horizon of the African diaspora studies. It also demonstrated that people of African descent in Americas and those in Europe were historically well linked together.[17]

Now, a perspective we need in the studies of the African diaspora is one to see Asian factors.[18] First, it is necessary to make theoretical and practical frameworks to show the history of the African diaspora in South and Southeast Asia, and in East Asia. These might be named "Black Indian Ocean" and "Black Pacific" respectively.

This paper deals with only some aspects in the "Black Pacific," but historical studies of Asian relations with African Americans is a promising new topic just

beginning to be seriously explored. We have to examine both roots and routes in their relations. "Black Pacific" gives us new and global perspectives to construct or reconstruct Asian history as well as African American history.

Notes

1 In Japanese, the family name comes before the personal name. I would like to follow this cultural convention in this article.

2 This article is partly based on *Nihonjin to Afurikakei Amerikajin: Nichibei-kankeishi niokeru Sono Shosō* [Japanese and African Americans: Historical Aspects of Their Relations] (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2004), the book in Japanese cowritten by Furukawa Hiromi and Furukawa Tetsushi. We are now revising the book to publish its English version in the United States. The academic needs of its publication in English are, for example, expressed in a book review by Morikawa Suzuko of Chicago State University. See Morikawa's "Hiromi Furukawa and Tetsushi Furukawa, *Nihonjin to Afurikakei Amerikajin* (*Japanese and African Americans: Historical Aspects of Their Relations*)," *The Journal of African American History,* Vol. 91, No. 3 (2006), pp. 339–341. Also see Gerald Horne, "Toward a Transnational Research Agenda for African American History in the 21st Century," *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 91, No. 3 (2006), pp. 288–303.

3 Sakamoto Tenzan, *Tenzan Zenshū* [Complete Works of Sakamoto Tenzan], Shinano Mainichi Shinbunsha, 1936, Vol. 1, pp. 507–512; Sayama Kazuo, *Waga Na wa Kendorikku* [My Name is Kendrick], Kōdansha, 1991, p. 18.

4 Some works are available on them including Arakawa Hidetoshi ed., *Ikoku Hyōryūki Shū* [Records of Drifting to Other Countries], Yoshikawa Kōbun-kan, 1962; Miyanaga Takashi, *John Mung to Yobareta Otoko* [The Man Called John Mung], Shūei-sha, 1994.

5 Hirao Nobuko's book describes the arrival of the Captain Cooper and his ship *Manhattan* to Japan. See Hirao Nobuko, *Kurofune Zenya no Deai: Hogei Senchō Kūpā no Raikō* [An Encounter on the Eve of the Black Ships: A Whaling Ship Captain Cooper's Visit to Japan], NHK Books, 1994.

6 *The Southampton Press* (Southampton, Long Island), August 28, 1897.

7 *The Sea-Side Times* (Southampton, Long Island), September 2, 1897.

8 Arthur P. Davis, *A Black Diamond in the Queen's Tiara,* 1974. This sixteen-page booklet is the author's private publication.

9 *Perī-Kantai Nihon Enseiki* [Chronicles of the Journey by Perry's Fleet to Japan], Vol. 1, Eikōkyōiku Bunka Kenkyūsho, 1997, pp. 254–255. This is the collection of the

United States Congressional Documents, "Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to China Seas and Japan, in the Year of 1852, 53, and 1854" (Senate Printer, 1856).

10 *Ibid.,* pp. 255–256.

11 The "minstrel show" in the U. S. was a popular performing art in the 19th century, in which white street performers would paint themselves black, and mimic songs, dance and talks of black people. "Jim Crow," by Thomas Dartmouth Rice (1808–60) is said to be the first of its kind. This was followed by Dan Emmett (1815–1904) who created the group, "Virginia Minstrels" in 1843, giving full-scale performances. This led to a boom in minstrel shows. With regard to the term "Ethiopian" in the "Ethiopian Minstrel" show, it was often used as "black" those days.

12 *Perī-Kantai Nihon Enseiki* [Chronicles of the Journey by Perry's Fleet to Japan], Vol. 1, Eikōkyōiku Bunka Kenkyūsho, 1997, p. 376.

13 Kasahara Kiyoshi, *Kurofune Raikō to Ongaku* [The Arrival of the Black Ships and Music], Yoshikawa Kōbun-kan, 2001, pp. 116–117.

14 Nonomura Tadazane, "Kōkai Nichiroku [Daily Log of the Voyage]," Nichibei Shūkō Hyakunen Kinen Gyōji Uneikai ed., *Manen Gannen Kenbei Shisetsu Shiryō Shūsei* [Collection of Materials on the Manen Gannen Mission to the U. S.], Kazama Shobō, 1960, Vol. 3, p. 177.

15 Tamamushi Sadayū, "Kōbei Nichiroku [Daily Log of the Voyage to America]," *Seiyō Kenbun Shū* [Collection of Japanese Experiences in the West], Iwanami Shoten, 1974, p. 163.

16 Muragaki Awaji no Kami Norimasa, "Kōkai Nikki [Daily Log of the Voyage]," Vol. II, *Manen Gannen Daiichi Kenbei Shisetsu Nikki* [Diaries of the Manen Gannen Mission to the U. S.], Nichibei Kyōkai, 1918, p. 201.

17 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

18 With regard to a historical overview of East Asian factors, see Furukawa Tetsushi, "Black-Asian Relations," in Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. eds., *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience,* 2nd edition, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, Vol. 1, pp. 479–480. I also presented a paper titled "East Asia, Africa, and the African Diaspora: A Historical Perspective" at the 5th International Convention of Asia Scholars, which was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in August 2007. I attended this conference in order to set up an international research project/group on "Black Pacific."

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