

Wartime Experiences and Indigenous Identities in the Japanese Empire

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Empires, by definition, encompass a range of peoples and political units, and the study of modern empires offers insight into the ‘imperial project’ of ideological and pragmatic control of multiethnic regions. The political, economic, ideological and military demands of nineteenth and twentieth century empires have created, altered and erased ethnic group identities across the globe. While the scholarship of modern empires focused first on European colonial regimes, recent decades have produced significant work on the Japanese Empire as well. These decades have also seen the maturation of research on Indigenous cultures and histories. While emphasis on the distinctiveness of each community is a characteristic of Indigenous studies, the global Indigenous Rights movement has also created a sense of shared identity, rooted in part in common historical experiences of conquest, assimilative pressure and political encapsulation. A key element of the definition of Indigenous peoples as distinguished from ethnic minorities or “nationalities” is their sense of a unique culture and sociopolitical organization (primarily tribal or chiefly traditional political forms), of

being a community distinct from—though encapsulated in—the shared identity of national citizens.¹

As scholars of empires have noted, Indigenous peoples have held an important role in the ideology and social hierarchy characteristic of these large, complex multi-ethnic polities. Indigenous societies were marked out as distinct from majority-population subjects in colonial bureaucracies, stigmatized as ‘primitive’ and governed by unique policies, governed by categories such as those defined by the Japanese imperial bureaucracy, which is described below. Such groups play two roles in the ideology of empire: externally, they demonstrate the empire’s capability as rulers of what were regarded as less-developed peoples. Internally, these groups hold the position of the ultimate “other”: the ‘savage’ or ‘tribal’ against which the civilization or social evolution of the dominant society is measured.²

This paper draws together these research strands by focusing on the experiences of Japan’s Indigenous communities during the Pacific War. Historical accounts of Indigenous peoples during the twentieth century commonly use the phrases “before the war” and “after the war” to mark significant change, eliding what happened during those few, consequential years. More recent Indigenous history has included attention to World War II experiences, though most research has focused on those associated with Allied forces.³

Indigenous groups—with their distinctive social organization and strongly differentiated cultural life—were the lowest-ranked subjects in the Japanese ethnic hierarchy yet held an important symbolic role as markers of the reach and power of empire. While colonialism always pressures its subjects, it is under conditions of war that the nation-state is most assertive in erasing differences, rewarding or enforcing

¹ The definition of “indigenous people” has become increasingly formalized over the past several decades, as the Indigenous Rights movement has gained international legal recognition, though it remains contested in areas of Africa and Asia (Baird, 2016; Dvorak & Tanji, 2015). While it is anachronistic to use the term in its modern sense in reference to World War II, our focus here is on the persistence of group identities that have emerged in recent decades as ‘Indigenous.’

² Tierney (2010) and Kleeman (2014) discuss the symbolic contrast of ‘modernity’ and ‘the primitive’ in the Japanese empire.

³ Poyer (2016) provides a global overview of Indigenous wartime experiences. Riseman (2012) discusses issues in the historiography of Indigenous wartime military service in the Allied context.

loyalty, and enlisting the labor, land and produce of its population. Because war is the ultimate imposition of the nation-state on local communities, we argue that a close look at wartime experiences will illuminate how local identity survived, and even became more consciously effective, under crisis conditions.

Indigenous peoples in the Japanese Empire

The modern Japanese Empire emerged dramatically on the international political stage in the early twentieth century. As Japan strove to prove itself as a modern nation, the central government's relationship with Indigenous groups followed American and European expansionist patterns, though significantly shaped by Japanese ideas, in a process well explored by studies of settler colonialism (Medak-Saltzman, 2008; Veracini, 2010; Wolfe 1999, 2006; Sugimoto, 2013). In this article, we focus on three groups encompassed by the Empire at different stages of its development: Ainu, Indigenous Taiwanese tribes and Micronesian Islanders. These groups were identified as "other" from their first encounters with the new Japanese rulers and were categorized and managed similarly in the imperial bureaucracy (Sugimoto, 2013, pp. 5-6).⁴ Despite categorization into these differentiated, named groups by the Japanese bureaucracy and subsequent governing bodies, Ainu, Indigenous Taiwanese, and Micronesians consisted and consist of many local communities characterized by cultural and linguistic differences.

Of the three groups, Ainu communities were incorporated into Japan first and over a longer period of invasion and colonization. Living in the northern islands of the Japanese archipelago, Ainu were hunting and fishing people whose lands were invaded by agrarian and commercial expansion from the seventeenth through the nineteenth

⁴ We limit ourselves here to these three cases, though other populations had similar experiences. Today, an Indigenous and independence movement exists among Ryuku of Okinawa (annexed by Japan in 1879), but during the 1930s and 1940s Okinawans often rejected being classed with Ainu and Indigenous Taiwanese, arguing for an identity as Japanese, while recognizing their distinctive linguistic, cultural, and historical experiences. Christy (1993) discusses the complexity of Okinawan/Ryukyu cultural identity in relationship to Japan, and Yokota (2015) explains Ryukyu efforts in recent decades to claim Indigenous status. Uilta (Orok), a small Indigenous population of Sakhalin, and Nivkh, of Sakhalin and the Amur River region, are also not discussed here; some served with or interacted with Japanese military on the northern border during World War II (Yoshimi, 2015, pp. 129-132).

century. The uprooting, dispossession, resettlement, bureaucratic management, simultaneous segregationist and assimilationist policies and racialist/racist ideology in the colonization of Hokkaido and Karafuto/Sakhalin is a pattern familiar in settler colonies; the Ainu experience parallels that of Indigenous peoples at the frontiers of expanding states elsewhere in the world. This is the result of historical causation as well as structural parallels: Danika Medak-Saltzman (2008) describes how the incorporation of the Ainu into the Japanese state was affected by Japanese understandings of treatment of Indigenous peoples in the United States, and Kiyoteru Tsutsui (2015) describes in detail how Japanese national policy towards Ainu was shaped at each stage by international paradigms of the “good nation’s” relationship to its Indigenous population.⁵ By the 1930s, Ainu were encompassed by the nation-state: though they were politically incorporated as Japanese citizens, they were not completely culturally assimilated. They remained distinctive in terms of religion and separate schools, meaning that discrimination, landownership issues, ethnic tourism and a pervasive public representation of their culture and themselves as ‘primitive’ also remained (Morris-Suzuki, 1998; Sjöberg, 2007).

China (Qing Dynasty) ceded Taiwan to Japan in 1895 after the First Sino-Japanese War. Aware that its actions would be judged internationally as it pursued its goal of becoming a world power, Japan developed its colonial policy and bureaucracy in Taiwan as a model for future expansion. Imperial bureaucracy quickly marked the Indigenous people as distinctive from the majority Chinese and treated them differently in policy and in practice. Indigenous Taiwanese were identified as “raw savages” (*seiban*) by the Japanese and classified into nine tribes with different languages – Atayal, Saisiat, Bunun, Tsou, Rukai, Paiwan, Panapanayan, Amis and Yami.⁶ They were subjected to a lengthy pacification campaign followed by confined settlement on reservations, training in agriculture, and heavy policing. Japanese policy toward the tribes altered significantly after the 1930 Wu She (Musha) uprising, an attack by

⁵ See also: Ching (2001); Mason (2012) explores the link between the historical creation of Japanese identity and representations of the Ainu. Ziomek (2014) describes how Ainu (as well as Indigenous Taiwanese and Okinawans) were constructed and represented as “imperial subjects” – and debates about that identity--at the turn of the 20th century.

⁶ Taiwan’s Indigenous peoples today are identified into sixteen tribes: Amis, Atayal, Paiwan, Bunun, Tsou, Rukai, Pinuyumayan, Saisiyat, Yami, Thao, Kavalan, Truku, Sakizaya, Sediq, Hla’alua, and Kananavu. Their languages belong to the Austronesian speaking family.

Indigenous Taiwanese on Japanese officials and settlers, followed by brutal military counteraction. Public criticism of the harsh colonial response led to changes, including a new less pejorative label, *takasagozoku*, “the tribal peoples of Taiwan” that reflected the inclusion of these groups in the intense assimilationist effort of the wartime era (Ching, 2001, pp. 133-173). Like all Taiwanese, the island’s Indigenous people were subjects of the Emperor, but never citizens of Japan.

The final population we consider is the people of Micronesia, from the Northern Marianas Islands and Palau in the west, through the Caroline Islands to the Marshall Islands in the eastern Pacific, all of whom who came under Japanese control through deliberate empire-building when Germany was stripped of its colonial possessions at the end of World War I and the region was assigned to Japan as a League of Nations mandate. (Guam became a US territory in 1898.) Japan used the opportunity to integrate the islands into its expanding Empire through economic development, settlement by Japanese, Okinawan and Korean immigrants, and, in the late 1930s, by military fortification. While the Pacific Islanders of this region vary in language, culture and degree of integration with the regional economic and political order, they were subsumed into the colonial bureaucracy’s ethnic hierarchy as “third-class peoples” (ranked below both Japanese and immigrant Koreans and Okinawans) who could become imperial subjects only by naturalization or marriage, which happened very rarely. They attended separate schools, were subject to separate laws, were assigned to and barred from certain jobs, neighborhoods, public spaces, brothels and hospitals. As immigration increased, they progressively lost control of their homelands and were confined to the lowest rung of a pervasive colonial system. They learned Japanese and adopted Japanese customs, but were made aware that they were not, and could never become, Japanese citizens (Peattie, 1988, pp. 111-112).

As Japan established itself as a modern colonial empire, its philosophy of racial categorization centered on Japanese identity as a match between “Japanese-ness” as essence, and the rights and duties of citizenship. This conflation of ideas of “race” or “ethnicity” with the position of the subject, citizen or “aborigine” is common to empires, which aggregate numerous communities under a central government. Japanese policy envisioned that colonial populations would move through stages to attain citizenship, as Ainu and the people of Okinawa had done, but rapid expansion of

empire in the 1930s unsettled this narrative. Japan managed the contradiction by officially categorizing subject peoples, a process that increased in scope and significance as the Empire expanded. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity sphere extended imperial racial categories to occupied areas under the slogan, “*Onoono sono tokoro o eseshimuru*’ (To enable all nations to find their proper place—assigned by Japan)” (Higuchi, 2012, p. 142). The resulting paradox this created for colonial subjects was never resolved. Assimilation policy urged them to identify as Japanese in language, thought and behavior, but denied citizenship rights. In short, Japan self-consciously debated civic and cultural identity as the Empire expanded to include the Ryukyu Kingdom (Okinawa), Taiwan, Micronesia, Manchuria, Korea and parts of mainland China.

With militarization in the 1930s, the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the Second Sino-Japanese War beginning in 1937, and the wider Pacific War beginning in December 1941, these questions – linked with mystical notions of “the Japanese spirit” and loyalty to the Emperor – became increasingly urgent and difficult, sometimes dangerous, for colonial peoples to navigate. In wartime, the requirement of loyalty that overwhelmed the Japanese world was divorced from questions of citizenship. Even for Ainu, no demonstration of loyal citizenship could overcome the lack of “Japanese essence.” The ordinary colonial policy of assimilation was replaced by a wartime program of intensive indoctrination, *kōminka* (“imperialization”), which Leo Ching argues was qualitatively different from pre-war policy, representing “not so much the transformation of colonial subjects into imperial subjects, but the total annihilation of the colonized’s identity and culture.” This “Japanization” program stressed the use of Japanese language, official changes of names into Japanese forms, patriotic education and rituals, and manifest support for the war effort. The intensification of loyalty, commitment, self-identification and service to the Emperor—a very particular form of directed cultural (and even spiritual) transformation under the pressures of war—applied to Indigenous groups as to other imperial subjects. As Ching suggests, when an empire lacks external enemies, Indigenous peoples are the savage “others” who define the civilized “us” (Ching, 2001, pp. 60, 91-92). However, when the empire faces external enemies, internal divisions are replaced by images of loyalty. As subjects of the Emperor, these groups automatically came within the scope of war planning, offering human resources for military service, labor and symbolic value. As we shall see, this does not mean they were treated like Japanese nationals, or even like other colonial subjects.

Ainu wartime experiences

While much of the Ainu homeland is now part of Japan proper (Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands are within Russian borders; two southern Kuril Islands are disputed territory), modern historians of the Ainu describe their incorporation into the Japanese state in terms of colonialism, mirroring that of Indigenous peoples in settler colonies elsewhere. As immigration and commerce intensified and diseases spread through the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, Ainu land was expropriated, hunting, fishing and foraging restricted, and everyday life constrained. Assimilationist policies directed at Ainu, matched by persistent marginalization, discrimination and stereotyping, follow the familiar pattern of state-tribal encounters at frontiers. In the 19th century, Meiji-era desires to transform Japan into a modern nation-state shaped the definition of Ainu as not simply different, but as temporally primitive. Thus, while assimilationist policies pressured Ainu to conform through schooling, farming and language, the state also desired to mark Ainu “otherness” to strengthen its own claim to modernity (Jacobson, 2008; Walker, 2001).

While the formation of Ainu identity within (and after) the Empire is complex, Ainu were considered both imperial subjects and Japanese citizens in the 1930s. The few Ainu rights organizations that had had some success in the prewar years peaked with the 1937 revisions to the Ainu Protection Act and the government’s feeling that Hokkaido Ainu, at least, had been satisfactorily assimilated. Activist voices were then muted as military matters swamped other concerns. Ainu wartime experiences were largely those shared by all Japanese. Ainu men enlisted as regular soldiers and were subject to conscription. They were drafted and served alongside other Japanese, not in ethnically segregated units, throughout the theater of conflict. Hokkaido men served as occupation troops in the Aleutians and in combat on the Mongolia/Manchuria border (some were among the captured Japanese troops imprisoned in Siberia until well after war’s end), the Solomon Islands, and Okinawa (Siddle, 1996; Irish, 2009; Howell, 2004).

Ainu at home supported the war through labor in coal, agriculture and other vital industries. Coastal defenses and some 75,000 troops were installed in Hokkaido. Although the island was not bombed until late in the war, its people suffered from food and fuel shortages, dislocation, intensified labor requirements and security constraints. In his memoir, Ainu cultural and political leader Kayano Shigeru describes his family’s

work as charcoal-makers during the war, urged on by patriotic slogans. He was called up for military training, and in February 1945 found himself volunteering to be a suicidal “new weapon,” though in the end he was drafted as a civilian worker at an airbase. On his return home, he learned of village men dead and missing, recalling that “the hardships were great for those who were left” (Shigeru, 1994, pp. 80-85). The greatest impact of the war on Ainu occurred at its end, when Soviet troops invaded south Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands. Southern Sakhalin (Karafuto) had been incorporated into the home islands in 1942-43, but the area was never strongly fortified, so its residents were unprepared for the massive and rapid conquest by Soviet troops. Japanese citizens, including the Sakhalin Ainu who had become citizens only in 1933, were expelled from the Soviet-held areas and were “repatriated” to unfamiliar Hokkaido.⁷

Being in integrated military units did not mean that Ainu lost their distinctive identity during the war. They drew on their traditions for protection, wearing talismans of fox tooth or mountain elm bark strengthened by the traditional prayers of parents and wives in the home village, or carrying an *inau* (a ritual prayer stick) through the war (Hilger, 1971, p. 106; Kojima, 2014, pp. 101-118, 111). Ainu perception was that their wartime actions demonstrated their loyalty and identity as Japanese. Linguist Kindaichi Kyosuke commented, after the war “that for some thirty years most Ainu had wanted assimilation with the majority Wajin and that their loyalty to the nation did not waver during the war years” (Irish, 2009, p. 204). As Ainu elders commented to one researcher: “no one said then, ‘You are an Ainu,’ or ‘Ainu cannot serve in the Army.’ Our Ainu fought side by side with Japanese soldiers and were imprisoned in Siberia with them” (Hilger, 1971, p. 199).

The end of war offered the chance of dramatic change, but it was not a chance Ainu were in a position to seize. In a 1946 meeting, the American officer in command in Sapporo is said to have offered the Ainu independence, which they, as loyal Japanese, turned down (Koshiro, 1999, p. 110; Siddle, 1996, pp. 148-153). Occupation policy both

⁷ On Ainu wartime history, see Irish (2009, pp. 245-263); for Ainu experiences at war’s end, Siddle, (1996, pp. 147-148), Stephan (1971, pp. 142-164) and Seaton (2016). Japanese and Ainu living on the Japanese-Russian/USSR border were relocated several times over the past century and a half in response to shifts in international relations. On the complicated history of Karafuto/Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands, see Paichadze and Seaton (2015).

helped and hurt Ainu. Increased freedom allowed Ainu organizations to re-emerge briefly, but American authorities “had no time for minority interests” and land reform resulted in significant loss of Ainu land (Siddle, 1996, pp. 148-153). After the war, young Ainu veterans objected to continued discrimination and primitivization of Ainu as barbarians (Passin, 1982, p. 163).

In wartime, Ainu were largely treated as, and responded as, Japanese citizens, with identities fully recognized as Japanese, both by themselves and by other Japanese. After the war, military service became part of the Ainu argument for civil rights. Yet, looking back from modern claims of Indigenous identity and cultural distinctiveness, we can see ways in which that identity was maintained throughout the wartime era. Sharing the experiences and suffering of other Japanese citizens, Ainu came closest of the three cases to merging “Imperial subject” with “Japanese identity”. Though unsuccessful, the paradox of assimilation and equality nonetheless left space enough for a robust revival of Indigenous identity late in the 20th century.

Indigenous Taiwanese wartime experiences

China’s Qing Dynasty ceded Taiwan to Japan in 1895 at the conclusion of the First Sino-Japanese War. The majority of Taiwan’s Han Chinese residents resisted Japanese rule, and Japanese troops occupying the island fought a series of rebellions. As most of Taiwan came under Japanese control, official attention turned to the central mountainous and eastern Taiwan homelands of Indigenous tribes, where the colonial service faced the challenge of this blank-map region inhabited by “primitive”, “savage”, “headhunters”. The effort began with geographical exploration and ethnological studies, followed by acculturative pressures and intensive policing. The 1930 Wu She Uprising and the years-long military retaliation drew public attention to colonial policy and altered it significantly. An intensive relocation and assimilation program re-envisioned tribal peoples from savages to loyal imperial subjects.⁸

⁸ For overviews of Indigenous Taiwan groups under Japanese rule, see Ching (2001) and Liao and Wang (2006). This section relies on interviews and ethnographic research with Indigenous Taiwanese by Tsai in addition to published research cited.

The approach of war brought *kōminka* to all imperial subjects, with Taiwan called on to provide huge amounts of military manpower and supplies. The *kominization* program, obligatory “volunteer” labor, military service and all the other aspects of an empire at war, became, during those years, an overwhelming force pressuring all local identities to subordinate to national/imperial needs. Indigenous villages experienced the multi-layered process of resettlement, pacification, and *kōminka* that was the colonial policy of the 1930s and 1940s. The absence of young men and increased labor demands caused hardship for families. Children and youth were heavily involved with patriotic activities. Wartime security measures governed everyday life.

For Indigenous communities, this era is vividly recalled in terms of efforts to instill “the Japanese spirit,” especially in youth through school practice and patriotic clubs. This was strikingly successful in the case of the young men who volunteered for service in separate ethnic military units created for Indigenous Taiwanese, the Takasago Volunteers (*Takasago-Giyutai*). Eight Takasago corps were called up successively, starting in 1942, along with other military units, totaling about 8,000 Indigenous men who served throughout the conflict areas of the Southwest Pacific (Huang, 2001; Sun, 2005). Enlistment and service in the Takasago volunteer units brought men from different tribes into close sustained contact for the first time, laying groundwork for a sense of shared identity as Indigenous Taiwanese. Unlike the Ainu who enlisted as regular soldiers, most Takasago Volunteers served as carriers or cooks, though others had combat roles.

In 1974, the last man fighting for the Japanese army was discovered in hiding in Morotai island, Indonesia;⁹ the revelation that he was a member of Taiwan’s Amis tribe spurred inquiry by both Japanese and Taiwanese researchers into the Takasago Volunteers, and efforts began to request indemnification for accumulated wages owed by the Japanese. Studies of Takasago Volunteers appeared from the 1990s, including personal testimonies, historical and social justice topics and studies of colonialism and identity (Chen & Huang, 1997; Chou, 1995a; Chou, 1995b; Hayashi, 1994; Isayama, et al.,

⁹ Identified under his enlisted name, Nakamura Teruo, the soldier was not Japanese, but a member of the Amis Indigenous tribe from eastern Taiwan; he returned to his home village in Taitung. His Amis name is Suniyon, which the government of Taiwan later changed to the Chinese Li Guanghuei. Trefalt (2003) describes how the return of “stragglers” affected Japanese memories of the war, and how this Indigenous Taiwanese veteran was perceived and treated.

2002; Ishibashi, 1992; Kadowaki, 1994; Li, 1997; Nakamura, 1992; Nakamura, 2001; Pan, 2008). From this research, we can recognize the persistence of Indigenous cultural identity during the war years. For example, Scott Simon discusses the experiences of Taroko (Truku) men in the Japanese military: “even as soldiers for the Japanese army, they were conscious of doing it as members of the fierce Taroko [Truku] tribe.” Simon (2006) argues that it was “the Japanese occupation that fashioned the Taroko [Truku] into self-conscious historical actors” – that is, that Truku Indigenous identity was built from the interaction of Japanese colonial invasion and local resistance and response. This direct ‘nation-to-nation’ aspect of Indigenous identity is an important element of the current international Indigenous Rights movement.

Taiwan’s various Indigenous peoples were not simply subsumed into the majority Taiwanese colonial population in the Japanese Empire but were marked out as distinctive. Like many others, Bunun tribal member T.B. Istanda connected his 1942-45 service in New Guinea with Indigenous identity: “joining with the Japanese was like joining a strong tribe...my decision was spontaneous. In Bunun culture, when we are needed, we go to fight. Bravery is rewarded in your social standing in the tribe. I was not afraid of getting hurt or dying” (Martin, 2005). An Atayal man, Buyan Nawi, similarly commented, “since ancient times, Tayal [Atayal] men have faced death in battle resolutely, and we would never feel sad about it. When I joined the Fifth *Giyutai* and was ready to go to war, the whole tribe threw a big farewell party for me and the dancing continued till daybreak. I made my decision to do great deeds for Japan and the Emperor. We Tayal [Atayal] people have always been brave. We have never been fearful of going to war. We regard it as honorable” (Huang, 2001, pp. 229-230; Hayashi, 1998, pp. 190-191).

The question of the extent to which these men volunteered, were conscripted or were psychologically pressured into volunteering has been extensively discussed (Fu, 2007; Tsai, 2010; Lin, 2014), but it is clear that they were motivated at least in part by a desire to fulfill the demands of the Emperor imposed by *kōminka*, to reverse discrimination, and to assert their tribal identity (Cai, 2015; Kobatyashi, 1998; Huang, 2001). Their wartime recollections reflect their own understandings of the conflict, relationships with Japanese servicemen, and their appreciation of their own distinctive qualities of bravery, loyalty, resourcefulness, knowledge of nature and foraging skills.

However, the volunteers also recognized that even as they fought for the Empire in the Pacific jungles, they still were not the same as the Japanese (Cai, 2015, p. 21; Tang, 2009). Their accounts reveal that the identity of the Takasago Volunteers was a complex entangling of “the Japanese spirit” and Indigenous subjectivity. The enthusiasm of Indigenous men in joining the Takasago Volunteers seemed to be (and was presented in propaganda as) a success of *kominization*; however, the Takasago Volunteers’ “Japanese spirit” was at once a means of resistance to the colonial Empire, a desire to combat discrimination, and a reinforcement of certain aspects of Indigenous identity, such as hunting and bravery.

Micronesian wartime experiences

Japanese traders and voyagers engaged with Micronesia from the nineteenth century, and Japan had a longstanding interest in the region. Impelled to demonstrate its capability as a modern industrial state equal to the US and European nations, Japan took the opportunity to seize the islands in 1914, and take over the administration under a League of Nations mandate after Germany’s defeat. With this territory, Japan could simultaneously demonstrate its equality with other colonial powers, significantly expand the geographic reach of empire, and develop commercial and resettlement opportunities for its subjects.

For Micronesians, Japanese administration meant a tightly organized governance system that provided education, health clinics, policing, increased wage labor and opportunities for travel and personal development. It also meant increasing regimentation of everyday life, loss of influence for some traditional leaders and, by the 1930s, significant loss of land and reduction in status as the number of Japanese and Okinawan settlers ballooned to far exceed the Indigenous population. Their powerlessness increased as war neared and Japanese military replaced civilian colonial administration. The islands were fortified as the Empire’s eastern edge, and with the

1944 Allied invasion of the Marshall Islands, Micronesians found themselves caught between Japanese defenders and American attackers.¹⁰

Unlike Ainu and Indigenous Taiwanese, Micronesians' homelands were combat zones. War preparations brought airbases, military garrisons and naval depots, forcing land confiscation and relocation. Islanders were subjected to intense security measures and were recruited (and eventually conscripted) for military labor. In a limited version of the Takasago program, two small groups of Micronesian men from Palau and Pohnpei were recruited to serve as military workers in New Guinea early in the war (Higuchi, 1991; Watakabe, 1972). As non-citizens, Micronesian men were not allowed to enlist in the regular armed forces, but they participated in military and quasi-military work, from lookouts to cremation attendants. Women absorbed additional work at home, and eventually they too were conscripted for labor. Children were also obliged to work when agricultural needs increased after sea lanes closed trapping large garrisons on small islands. The colonial civil service was replaced by military rule and martial law. The *kōminka* program encouraging Micronesians to identify as imperial subjects, in place since the mid-1930s, lost its effectiveness over the years of war as isolation, shortages of food, clothing and supplies, and mistreatment took their toll. American bombing, bombardment and invasion destroyed Micronesian lives and livelihoods while attacking the Japanese military (Poyer, Falgout, and Carucci, 2001).

In contrast to Ainu and Indigenous Taiwanese, who identified as loyal Japanese, most Micronesians did not feel strong support for the Imperial struggle. At the start of the war they admired Japan's confidence and extensive military preparations but the years of scarcity, destruction and harsh treatment by the military separated them clearly from the Japanese. The wartime isolation of islands without military installations meant that people were free to manage their own lives. On fortified islands, people focused on survival by avoiding Japanese attention as much as possible, emphasizing ties with relatives, with Christian faith, and with their own community life. In the final stages of

¹⁰ This section relies on interviews and ethnographic research with Micronesians by Poyer in addition to published research cited. Collection of oral histories of World War II in Micronesia was funded by the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities, RO-22103-90 (Lin Poyer, Suzanne Falgout, Laurence M. Carucci).

On these islands under Japanese rule, see Peattie (1998) and Hezel (1995). On war preparations, see Poyer, Falgout and Carucci (2001).

war, with constant Allied bombing and the threat (and reality) of invasion, Japanese military governance disintegrated in some areas, and in others was felt to be at a breaking point, with local people fearing the army's intention to massacre them (Poyer, Falgout, & Carucci, 2001, pp. 163-163, 231-234; Falgout, Poyer, & Carucci, 2008, pp. 127-151).

For most Micronesians, the perception of the war then and now is that it was “not our war,” but a conflict between two global powers in which they were unwilling observers, forced participants and unhappy victims (Falgout, Poyer, & Carucci, 2008; Poyer, Falgout, & Carucci, 2001, pp. 315-355; Murray, 2016, pp. 215-227). The *kōminka* process of intensive wartime indoctrination into loyalty to the Emperor seems to have had only limited, and not long-lasting, effect in these islands.

Distinction under duress

War sharpens issues of identity in both pragmatic and symbolic ways. While these three groups differ in how they experienced and remember the war, in each case we can see the persistence of distinction, a sense of identity that did not disappear on the part of either the Indigenous peoples or of the encompassing state – even in the maximal hegemony of wartime. The extensive literature on the history of defining Japanese citizenship and identity indicates the complexity of the topic, but it is significant that the issue of military service was part of the identity debate from the early Meiji period. Decisions were made at different points to allow, and then to require, military service of different categories of colonial subjects (Morris-Suzuki, 1998).¹¹

While Ainu men were incorporated into the regular military, Taiwanese Indigenous men and Micronesians were treated distinctly not only from Japanese citizens, but from the majority colonial population. Though they were equally subjects of the Emperor, and obliged by duty to support the war, the essential paradox of unity and “otherness” did not disappear during wartime. In fact, it was emphasized. As the most visible “outsiders” or “others”, Indigenous peoples needed to be drawn into the

¹¹ For more general, comparative discussions of the application of ethnic categories to imperial militaries, see Young (1982) and Enloe (1980).

war effort to confirm universal dedication to the cause. Because of their marginal status, they were susceptible to suspicions of disloyalty, making it even more important to affirm their dutifulness.¹²

Concomitant to the demand for universal engagement is the use of Indigenous participation as war propaganda, as crucial symbols of national unity, a phenomenon that has been well-described for US and Canadian wartime publicity of Native service members.¹³ Kyōko Kojima describes a wartime publicity photo of Ainu women—identifiable in their traditional dress—assembling “comfort packages” for soldiers alongside other Japanese women; “this piece of propaganda showed that ‘former native’ Ainu also were serving the nation. In their own consciousness, Ainu people had become members of the Japanese community of national subjects, and were taking part in the war, too. Elderly residents and women from the *kotan* which had sent troops to the front, however, prayed in the Ainu manner for the soldiers’ safety” (Kojima, 2014, p. 111). A popular war-era story and film set in Taiwan, *The Bell of Sayon*, lauded the patriotic self-sacrifice of an Atayal young woman and that of the tribe’s young men who longed to serve the Emperor by being accepted as Takasago Volunteers (Ching, 2001, pp. 162-167; Sakujiro, 2006; Kleeman, 2014, pp. 34-46). Some photos of the Volunteers show them with knives in scabbards decorated with tribal designs. For all combatants, propaganda displaying the eager participation of (even) the most marginal subjects was a popular trope, one that simultaneously affirmed their loyalty and confirmed their “otherness”.

A second rationale for using Indigenous peoples is awareness of their distinctive qualities, touted in wartime as military assets. It is hard to evaluate how much of this was pragmatic and how much was simply racial stereotyping, but certainly much commentary by Japanese who commanded or served with Takasago Volunteers emphasized their special abilities: excellent vision, especially at night, superb hearing, skill at finding their way in the jungle and above all their ability to survive—to find, identify and prepare local food, a matter of life and death when the retreating Japanese army was starving in the Southwest Pacific. The martial abilities of Indigenous

¹² For example, Japanese military police targeted those who were Christian or English-speaking as potential spies (Poyer, Falgout, & Carucci, 2001, pp. 231-233; Huang, 1996, p. 426).

¹³ Examples for Canada are described in Lackenbauer (2013) and Sheffield (2004); for the United States, Townsend (2000) and Franco (1999).

Taiwanese had been well proven, from the Japanese point of view, in their resistance to Japanese pacification efforts in Taiwan. In Micronesia, an additional factor entered: the war was fought on Islanders' land. While to some extent and where possible, Micronesians were moved out of the line of fire or invasion, the Japanese military also recognized the value of using Micronesians' skills and knowledge, for example in inter-island navigation and in making the most of local food resources.

The Empire's goal in its handling of these groups was consistent: the need to monitor all populations to ensure maximum contributions to war needs. Each group's response to these demands, however, was unique. While they did indeed respond to and engage with the war, that engagement was in some sense on their own terms. By retaining some distance from that overwhelming political order, they emerged from the war with a potential for asserting distinctiveness that eventually developed into space for Indigenous Rights.

Before the war, Ainu had mounted a multi-decade effort to demonstrate their "Japanese-ness" to reduce discrimination, expand their civil rights and increase their inclusion in Japanese society. The war gave them a chance to demonstrate their worthiness to be considered Japanese, and to an extent it succeeded. But, at the same time, war also limned the essentialist limits of assimilation in the Japanese Imperial ethnic order, on both sides of the line. While Ainu were fully subject to conscription and expected to act as loyal subjects and citizens, discrimination existed even within the army (Figal, 2001). Ainu themselves maintained their distinct identity while they served, and families at home turned to their own religious traditions to protect those gone to war.

While Ainu commitment to the Empire's war is undisputed, there is less clarity about whether the Takasago men volunteered or were coerced, and what their claims of loyalty meant. How could children of men killed by the Japanese military after the Wu She uprising have turned so easily to serving the same military? To what extent do their recent claims of wartime loyalty to Japan reflect ongoing demands for recompense for their service? We argue that such discussions do not adequately consider the distinctive position of Indigenous peoples within nation-states. Their identity was focused at the local level; there was no notion of shared Indigenous identity among Taiwan's tribes at this time. Each group identified locally, and before pacification each engaged in trade

and warfare with other groups as “others”; that is why shared service in Takasago units made an impression. Their identity was not linked to national citizenship and cannot be evaluated in those terms. In experiencing *kōminka* they saw a direct link between their own local identity and service to the Emperor—not an identity mediated (as it was for Han Taiwanese) through the concept of a national order. It was in good part their own warfare traditions that motivated them to join the Japanese military. In describing how Takasago Volunteers proclaimed “the Japanese spirit”, Chi-hue Huang says that these men confused nation-state and tribal warfare (Huang, 2001, p. 246); it might be clearer to say that they understood their role in the Empire’s war in terms of their own personal affiliation with Japan (that is, in terms of personal identity) rather than in terms of a national identity.

The Micronesian case shows the weakest affiliation with Japan’s wartime aims. Certainly, many Micronesians served Japanese military requirements loyally. Phillip Mendierra, a Chamorro of Rota Island, was shaped by his *kōminka* education and his work for the government. He travelled to Japan as representative to a Young Buddhists Convention, his desire to become Japanese quite clear in his statement: “We would like to become Japanese soon, and also have a go at becoming soldiers” (Yoshimi, 2015, pp. 132-133). Chamorros from the Northern Mariana Islands played a role in the Japanese military occupation of Guam, and there is plenty of evidence of their loyal service (Camacho, 2008). But farther east, in less assimilated colonial areas, people’s primary affiliation was to their local community. While Japanese patriots lauded the small groups of Islander volunteers, and while many Micronesians valued personal ties with individual Japanese, they were aware that they were not, and were not expected or allowed to be, Japanese. Local community identity remained paramount; even recent post-war independence efforts have struggled to create a sense of national identity out of various local identities.

In each case, we see an Indigenous response to wartime pressure that is somewhat different from that of other subject (or citizen) populations. In each case, we see the primacy of local identity maintained throughout the war—maintained in part by the Empire’s own restrictions and by Japanese discrimination, but also by Indigenous peoples’ persistence in their own ideas, traditions and self-concept. Takasago veterans recall how their tribal knowledge of jungle resources helped them (and their Japanese

comrades) survive in New Guinea. Indigenous Taiwanese veterans of these campaigns talk about finding common ground with the New Guinea people they met. Micronesians taught fishing skills and food preservation techniques to starving Japanese in bypassed garrisons, and recall that certain Japanese commanders, acknowledging that the Islanders had no part in the war, attempted to protect them from it. Ainu describe valuing the protection of homemade charms. Indigenous identity is resilient; loyalty to the Japanese Empire was not a replacement for it. Despite assimilationist efforts, Indigenous communities went into the war as distinct cultures. Wartime experiences confirmed these distinctions, and post-war life expanded them.

Post-war experiences and the shaping of memory

To understand the significance of the war in Indigenous identity, we must follow the history into the immediate post-war years. The end of war was an upheaval of empires, the waning of one era of colonialism and the beginning of new international order shaped by Cold War strategic interests. All three Indigenous groups discussed here came under new, foreign post-war regimes.

Ainu were affected by both Soviet and American actions at the war's end. The USSR's assault on Japan's northern border split the Ainu, with some in the conquered territory relocated to Hokkaido—where they had never lived—while those who remained came under Soviet policies for “small peoples” (Stephan, 1971, pp. 111-164; Morris-Suzuki, 1999). The other significant post-war change was the decision by American occupying forces to transfer control of some Ainu land to non-Ainu farmers renting it, despite Ainu lobbying (Siddle, 1996, pp. 149-151; Irish, 2009, pp. 204-205). These events produced a vivid sense of Ainu being in fact Japanese citizens; it also energized recognition of the importance of their land. That is, they felt both very Japanese, and very connected to their Ainu homeland and identity. Ainu activism re-emerged in the politically freer post-war context, but it was stymied for decades by public and government disinterest. In the 1970s Ainu leaders began to connect with international Indigenous Rights movements (Rice, 2006), and from that era more focused and activist efforts combined with a changing international context for Indigenous Rights produced successful political activism and an increasingly positive

view of Ainu identity. After much effort—and in direct contrast to the common perception of Japanese homogeneity—Ainu were declared an “Indigenous people” by the Japanese government in 2008.

Historians of Indigenous Taiwan describe the post-war period as a second era of colonialism, as the island was removed from Japanese governance and the Kuomintang (KMT) took over Taiwan in 1945. Taiwanese struggled to recalibrate after 50 years of modernization and assimilation under Japanese rule. The KMT government largely adopted Japanese administration and policy towards Indigenous peoples, with “sinicization” replacing “japanization”. For veterans of the Takasago units, this was a period of silence, as their loyal service to the Japanese Emperor became not only irrelevant, but an actual danger to them in the new political order. Their knowledge of Japanese language and affection for Japanese culture went underground; many felt too old and disheartened to learn Mandarin and were thus cut off from their own Mandarin-educated grandchildren, who seldom learned the tribal language. Persistent questions of Japanese reparations and back pay dogged their memories; they shared a long-lasting feeling that their service was unrewarded—denigrated by the KMT government, but also not adequately appreciated or compensated by Japan. As a result, Indigenous veterans and their families rarely spoke of their war experiences in public.¹⁴

It was only with the publicity accompanying the discovery of the last Japanese Imperial Army soldier (in fact an Amis man) in Indonesia in 1974, that Japanese began to collect testimonies of the Takasago Volunteers; in Taiwan, it was only after the suspension of martial law in 1987 that they became a subject of research and public interest. In 1977, Payan Tenu of the Atayal tribe and the families of 10 other Takasago veterans went to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo to request the return of the spirits of their ancestors killed in the Pacific War. More recently, Indigenous Taiwanese have travelled to the Southwest Pacific to worship ancestors killed on the battlefields of the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, and Indigenous artist Siki Sufin is working to establish monuments to Takasago Volunteers in Taiwan and Okinawa (Sun, 2005, p. 96; Djupelang & Ataw, 2012; Tsai, 2011). The ongoing acts in memory of the Takasago

¹⁴ Such concerns are mentioned in many of the oral histories cited here. See also Simon (2007) and Huang (2001, p. 242).

Volunteers shows that their war experience continues to play an important role in modern Indigenous identity.

In 1998, Indigenous scholar Dachuan Sun (Pinuyumayan tribe) was one of the organizers of an academic conference on the Takasago Volunteers, which had as one of its objectives, an effort to reconstruct the history of the group in order to gain justice for the veterans (Dai, 1998). Sun collaborated with another Indigenous scholar, Zhongcheng Pu (Tsou tribe) on a 2001 research project that discussed compensation and political issues in caring for the veterans (Pu & Sun, 2001). The work of both Pu and Sun has been important in Indigenous social and political movements as both eventually became government officials. Two members of Sun's family were Takasago veterans, leading him to seek to understand how their experiences transformed the consciousness of the Indigenous peoples in Taiwan. The work of these Indigenous scholars is distinctive in its ability to reconstruct Indigenous subjectivity through personal ties and affection.

Indigenous activism in Taiwan is complexly linked with national and international politics. As Taiwan's politics developed, Indigenous identity became entangled with national politics, as competing visions of Taiwan as Chinese or as Taiwanese drew on Indigenous affiliations and symbols in complex ways.¹⁵ Defining Taiwan as Austronesian rather than Chinese, representing the Wu She action as a symbol of general Taiwanese rebellion against colonialism (rather than a single tribe's action) as in the popular 2011 film *Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale*, the involvement of Indigenous Taiwanese with the global Indigenous Rights movement, and tensions over Japan's resistance in facing its colonial and wartime history, all drew Indigenous identity into national and international arenas. At the same time, activists and local communities have taken advantage of increased freedom and national support to promote Indigenous cultural, linguistic and political life. A series of laws protecting Indigenous rights were put in place in the first decade of the twenty-first century, but challenges to cultural and political self-determination remain.

¹⁵ See Huang and Liu (2016) for a recent review of contemporary policy and social issues for Indigenous Taiwanese; also Simon (2007; 2010)

Like Taiwan, Micronesia, as a conquered territory, immediately left the Japanese order and came under new governance, first under US Navy administration, then as a specially designated UN Strategic Trust – an American-ruled area under UN oversight. War destroyed much of the colonial economic infrastructure, and repatriation removed the civilian immigrant population (who had outnumbered Islanders in most places) as well as the Japanese military. Micronesians had to rebuild their lives in the midst of massive physical destruction, the loss of local, regional and international economic structures, and the unfamiliar context of the English language and American cultural expectations. The US interest in these islands was primarily strategic, meaning that governance was unclear and confusing. There followed a long period of economic retrenchment and loosely directed development of social and political structures, as Micronesians found their way within a new political relationship and cultural context (Hezel, 1995; Hanlon, 1998). At the end of the century, new political arrangements emerged in the form of the US Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and the independent nations of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia, all with strong economic and political ties to the US.

Post-war accounts of wartime identity are especially vivid for Chamorros of the Mariana Islands, where issues of commemoration and questions of loyalty persist. Guam, invaded and held by Japan from December 1941-August 1944, experienced military occupation and a program of Japanese propaganda and assimilation, but its population retained a strong sense of affiliation with the US. But Keith Camacho describes how tensions in historical memory in the Northern Marianas, a Japanese colony from 1914 until Allied invasion in mid-1944, requires people to rethink and recast their wartime allegiance to empire (Camacho, 2011). While Micronesians in the new nations of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia have framed their historical experience of war in terms of relative independence—and a modern desire to steer clear of military entanglements—this has been more difficult for those living in what is now the US Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, who experienced a longer and more intensive era of Japanese loyalty, and after the war chose and pursued a closer post-war relationship with the US.

The legacy of war, for the independent nations of Micronesia, is a lively sophistication in the global order. Their mid-Pacific Ocean geographic position is strategically potent; as a result of their wartime and post-war experiences they are aware of the power and danger of that location. They have used their historical experience and geostrategic locale as a bully pulpit to speak against nuclear weapons (especially the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Republic of Palau) and more recently for solutions to climate change. Memories of the Pacific War allow Islanders to evaluate different world powers, and to feel confident in their ability to take assertive global policy stands despite their small population and relative political weakness.

Conclusion

In describing the formation of Japanese memories of World War II, Philip Seaton comments that the memories of the Ainu are both shared with other Japanese, and distinctive: “Ainu identity is a clear example of how alternative identities to Japanese national identity may inform a critical assessment of Japanese war conduct” (Seaton, 2007). For all the groups described here, the particular qualities of being Indigenous entailed a distinctive perspective on imperial war.

While each community’s experience is unique, these groups share certain structural qualities as small-scale politically coherent communities encapsulated by nation-states. Modern nation-states have consistently seen this difference in social evolutionist terms – exerting effort to “civilize” them through often harsh assimilationist policies. But aggressive assimilation efforts have not, in the long run, erased these communities. Unless they are deliberately and completely annihilated, Indigenous peoples have demonstrated a compelling ability to maintain some degree of cultural distinctiveness and sociopolitical autonomy under enormous pressure. War is certainly the condition under which the nation-state is at its most assertive—it is most intolerant of “otherness” and most demanding of loyalty. Yet even the pressing demands of universal mobilization in the pursuit of war cannot persuade empires to fully integrate all subjects without discrimination, nor can it succeed in stripping subjects of their local identities.

Japan propounded a vision of empire, ultimately coalescing as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which incorporated diverse populations into a single economic and political unit. This vision of a multi-ethnic Japanese-centric Empire created—as the similar concepts of European civilization did for the Western empires—a complex intersection of policy and ideology to deal with the difference between “identity” and “citizenship”, “civilization” and “savagery”, center and periphery. Assimilation was incomplete due to the persistence of these enduring cultural communities, but also due to the external pressure of the imperial Japanese racial hierarchy.

Today we are seeing the development of a distinctive pan-national, global, Indigenous identity, marked by distinctive cultures and political forms persisting within nation-states. Most Indigenous peoples do not desire to establish their own nation-states, but to exist with a degree of autonomy within national borders. The case of the Japanese Empire shows us how these groups managed to retain their identity even under the most extreme pressures. Current developments of Indigenous rights at local, national and global levels suggest that new formulations of citizenship, loyalty and identity can be more flexible and open to diversity than we have seen in the past.

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