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"Freakshow": The Treatment of Ainu at Japanese World's Fair **Exhibits of 1893 and 1904**

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"Freakshow": The Treatment of Ainu at Japanese World's Fair Exhibits of 1893 and 1904

Chris Bulfinch

A group of Ainu women, some old and hunched, others no older than girls, pose in front of a straw hut, blankets underneath them, baskets and tools at their sides. Clad in simple kimonos, the women sit and stand in twos. ii On the left side of the frame, a woman stands behind a large bowl, almost the size of a cauldron, with a large instrument stuck out of it, the whole assemblage reminiscent of a giant mortar and pestle. A child clings to the cauldron's edge, giving a viewer a sense of scale. iii These women are not part of a collection of photos of women in rural Japan, nor part of an ethnographic study or research expedition. The photos were taken in St. Louis in 1904, of a World's Fair exhibit putting Japan's indigenous people on display. Other photos display Ainu people standing around similar huts, all standing orderly, faces impassive. The presence of the Ainu at the St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exhibition is not noteworthy in itself; other nations at the Fair had similar exhibits, such as the United States, which daily fed dog to the subjects of its exhibit on the Igorot, people native to the Philippines. iv Such appalling exhibits were commonplace in World's Fairs around the turn of the century, and Japan's participation in this exploitative tradition was part of a larger project of sociopolitical reorganization, in which Japan attempted to survive Western imperial aggression by adopting their cultural and scientific practices.

The Japanese exhibit is significant because of Japan's then-recent imperial ascendancy to the level of Western powers who originally created such exploitative displays. Japan was aware of a need for international gamesmanship, a life-or-death imperial competition predicated largely on their ability to leverage the Western science of anthropology. In the tradition of many Western nations at the time, the Japanese began to look at their own indigenous populations with a kind of opportunistic science. In an effort to model their society (and, perhaps more critically, how their society looked) after their Western counterparts, the Japanese made science projects out of their indigenous people, the Ainu of Hokkaido. Using Western pseudo-science as a front, the Japanese used the Ainu as glorified diorama items at World's Fairs, notably at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893 and in St. Louis in 1904. This exploitative usage helped to certify Japan's status as a modern, industrialized power, and perhaps most interestingly, occurred before significant Japanese (or Western) archaeological and anthropological research had been conducted. Japan's World's Fair exhibits demonstrate their awareness of their precarious international position vis-à-vis the Western imperial powers, and an eagerness to demonstrate their familiarity with Western sciences. Thus, the Japanese used the Ainu both as research subjects from which to create a national natural history and sense of pseudo-scientific folklore and a racial foil against which to gauge their own purported similarity The exhibits at the 1893 and 1904 World's Fairs demonstrate these efforts in action.

My analysis will be broken down into three sections, the first detailing the rise of the Japanese imperial project in the context of late-19th and early-20th century imperial culture, the second showing Japan's experience with and contributions to anthropology at the time, and the third connecting Japan's imperial designs to their anthropology using their exhibits at the 1893 and 1904 World's Fairs.

Section I: Japan in the World c. 1900

Japan occupied a tenuous international position in the late 19th century, a position which would ultimately produce imperialist ambitions. Japan's ambitions were fueled not by a lust for conquest but to avoid the unenviable fate of other Asian nations that found themselves under the sway of western powers. W.G. Beasley describes a central facet of Japanese imperialism, which was the fact "that it originated within the structure of informal empire which the West established in East Asia during the nineteenth century." Until the arrival of Western powers, Japan's population remained consistent, around 30,000,000, and largely able to provide for themselves without significant international trade. vi Additionally, Japan's government had adopted a strict policy of isolation, "originally had been taken in order to exclude influenced – chiefly Christianity – which were thought to undermine the social order; by the end of the eighteenth century... the policy of the closed country had become axiomatic, a matter of 'ancestral law'."vii meaning that "the dangers of starvation were considered by the shogun's ministers to be less menacing than the dangers of international intercourse." Such aversion to the outside world allowed Japan to avoid answering questions about its identity; according to Eiji Oguma, it was not until the creation of the Japanese nation state after 1868 that a coherent sense of national identity (which would very quickly involve race) would be formed. ix

After being "forced to open under the gunships of western powers," Japan was confronted with the issue of how best to conduct its affairs with the western powers. Japan began to pay more attention to the ways of the Western world. While the state made assiduous efforts to repeal the unequal treaties, as evidenced by the Iawkura mission of 1871-1873; though it began as a tour to ask for "[revision] of the unequal treaties," eventually shifting to "an all-around observation of the Western world." This Western influence became increasingly evident as exposure to Western powers increased; in fact, many members of the Japanese "literati" apparently became quite enamored with the work of Walt Whitman, a young author named Natsume Soseki called the American poet "a great man descending from heaven" (an interesting comment given the discrimination that members of the LGBTQQIA+ community would ultimately face in the Japanese state), feeling a sense of "fascination" with "Whitman's vision of heroic progress..."

The ultimate course of action undertaken by Japan was one of "defensive modernization." The state "built a rich, strong army," and undertook "dramatic productivity-boosting reforms of the central state's administration..." Tax expansion, the abolition of feudal land rights, and more advanced survey techniques all demonstrate not only a desire to modernize but to take stock of what they had. Westernization even extended as far as the Japanese calendar – the Japanese changed from a lunar calendar to a solar calendar as a "civilizing measure that would facilitate exchange with the West." Parallel to administrative expansion was a cultural shift towards Western values, emphasizing not only a power military and large state apparatus but a change in values. "In Meiji Japan there was a tendency to revise priorities and values..." reflects Marius Jansen, adding that "young Meiji people who came to maturity in a period of cultural reorientation and flux were likely to begin with the view that Japan had to remake itself completely." These revisions came largely in response to feelings in Japan that "their country was too weak to be able to match Western powers," from which many "derived a sense of threat which was to remain not far from the surface in Japanese life... even in periods of

success and apparent self-confidence." Pulled into the paradigm of unequal treaties by the 1850s, Japan realized the importance of international events like World's Fairs as mechanisms of resistance. XiX

"Japan's Meiji leadership," argues Hillary Conroy, "was composed of careful, realistic men" whose "conquests were 'not for fun, glory or gold" and whose "determination [was] not to be overweening or vainglorious..." Yet, they realized that "in order to be taken seriously and to throw off the disadvantages of the unequal treaties, Japan would have to emulate the West, and that as rapidly as possible." Though "Japan... was remarkably slow to figure in the consciousness of Western thinkers and students..." their culture began to evidence imperial designs; at the outset of the Sino-Japanese War in 1894, a play was written about "heroic Japanese war reporters," with handbills promising "large scale land and sea battles involving pyrotechnics..." Similarly, at Japanese universities, studies of literary tradition became more common, as part of an attempt to "build a new literary tradition comparable to that of the West, one that would earn the West's respect," a conversation in which Japanese scholars were "groping for what it was that set Japanese off from Chinese literature in spirit and in truthfulness..." This "cultural statesmanship" serves an effective hallmark for the origins of the Japanese imperial project; "fear and resentment gave... curiosity a new direction. From about 1840 onwards, Japanese study of the West increasingly acquired a military emphasis." "xxxxxxxii

Taking into account the hovering specter of Western imperialism, Japan's modernization efforts take on a defensive character, just as Larsson said. The desire to create a competitive culture and a powerful state, though on the surface an exercise in creating a distinct Japanese identity, was in fact the formation of bulwark against the West. When it became clear, particularly in the context of China's military defeat, that resistance by force of arms was not practical, Japan adopted a version of the philosophy of "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em." They refined and organized their state, replacing feudalism with bureaucracy. They began to promote their own military successes in a self-aggrandizing fashion. Perhaps most importantly, they refined their literary and cultural traditions, critically not with a mind towards ascertaining a Japanese identity *sui generis*, but in a Western style to serve a purpose in a Western paradigm. The Ainu would eventually prove themselves useful in this regard, to borrow a term from David Howell.

Section II: Anthropology as a Mechanism of Imperialism, Western and Japanese

Anthropology would come to prove itself as indispensable to the Japanese Imperial project, not unlike the Western colonial powers; this field of study would ultimately give the Japanese a use for the Ainu. The imperial state embraced the 19th and 20th century Western version of anthropology, a science that often served to justify colonial aggressions and ambitions. Japan's embrace of anthropology served two ends; the first was to legitimize its imperial aggressions and the second was to cement its status as a world power on the level of the western nations. In order to certify themselves as "Western," the Japanese needed a racial foil against which to define themselves in the eyes of the vulture-like Western powers. Using anthropology, the Japanese held up the Ainu as a backwards, "dying race," thereby elevating themselves.

"Anthropology as a distinct discipline," writes Jaganath Pathy, "emerged and flourished along with the expansion of colonial imperium." Japan's original reason for pursuing the "science" was to ensure stability in their burgeoning nation; anthropology "was not open-ended or curiosity-driven research," but a search for historical evidence to provide legitimacy to the

Meiji emperor. **xviii Because Japan had reorganized itself with the Meiji emperor as a kind of sociopolitical nucleus, the longevity of Japan's new empire depended upon "support for the idea of an unbroken imperial line only served to strengthen support for the new government and stabilize the country in response to the threat posed by Western powers."*** Anthropology thus became a tool of the state, used to help the Japanese acquire and maintain legitimacy in the paradigm of Western imperialism.

Europeans had their own ideas about the origins of the Japanese, as well as where they fell on an arbitrary, pseudo-scientific spectrum of race. A 1912 entry in *The Journal of Race* Development (a telling title in its own right) expresses confusion about the Japanese; "in a certain sense," reads the article, "the Japanese are one of the newest 'races' in the world, and their recent entrance into the ranks of the great powers makes it difficult to judge them accurately and assign to each of the factors responsible for their existence its proper and definite weight."xxx European visitors brought with them this racialized analysis, as evidenced by the writings of Isabella Bird. In her travel memoirs detailing her time in Japan, Bird discusses "how diminutive the Japanese look in Western dress," in addition to their "miserable physique and the national defects of concave chests and bow legs."xxxi This kind of rhetoric in many ways legitimizes Japan's fears of military, political, and economic domination by the western powers. The language not only makes them nothing more than the subject of Western scientific interest, but they are described as weak and, while "intellectually at the head of the Mongolian race... they were placed physically at its foot."xxxii This language fit the Japanese into a centuries-old European racial schema that was imbued with a nineteenth-century scientific "knowledge." xxxiii European powers and their anthropologists existed, as least partially, to "[justify] the actions of the colonial governments on the ground that the native people had no knowledge of what was good for themselves; hence the colonial powers in their mission to civilize the 'savage' had to be assisted in all possible ways."xxxiv Chamberlain's analysis alleges that the Japanese "had not yet possessed themselves thoroughly," meaning that they were "physically feeble" and "mentally distraught"; taken together, these factors constituted what Chamberlain described as a "theory of Japanese weakness." An observer can see the pressure under which the Japanese found themselves in their early days of state creation, and such rhetoric explains their desire to be seen as competent and culturally sophisticated.

Unsurprisingly given the above context, the Japanese cultivated a culture of dependency amongst the Ainu. Work of anthropologists either native to or long-residing in Japan contributed to "an image of the Ainu as a primitive race that was considered racially immature." Using anthropology, the Japanese created a national and racial sense of self, an identity that the Ainu could not share. In the same way that the Western powers circumscribed the Japanese to a race hierarchy assembled "in a frantic quest for parameters that could prove the existence of distinct and unequal racial types," that often involved "biased sampling, statistical fallacy, and... deliberate falsification," the Japanese hastily contracted a theory of their own race. xxxvii In the 1880s, theories of the Japanese people and nation had split into two distinct camps, according to Oguma; the first camp espoused the "mixed nation theory, which argued that the Japanese nation consisted of a mixture between a conquering people and a previous aboriginal people and others," while the second believed the "homogeneous nation theory," which posited that "the Japanese nation had lived in Japan since time immemorial."xxxviii

Japan opted for the former of the two theories of national identity, and set about the process of differentiating themselves from the Ainu in a similar manner to that used by the West to differentiate themselves from the Japanese. They did have a leg up in one particular regard;

the West already viewed the Ainu as a filthy aboriginal people. In John Batchelor's account *The* Ainu of Japan: The Religion, Superstitions and General History of the Hairy Aborigines of Japan, the Ainu are "not a handsome nation, though... the race is strong, thick-set, squarely built and full-chested."xxxix There is a clear distinction between Western description of the Japanese and the Ainu, particularly their physicality. Batchelor thought the Ainu were noble, assuming one could get over the fact that the Ainu "do not produce a very favorable impression," noting that "to many people they quickly become repulsive, especially on account of their filth." The Japanese began appropriating and expanding upon rhetoric that described the Ainu as a "dying race."xli Batchelor attributed the decline and conquest of the Ainu to ancient wars of Japanese, exposure to disease and a lack of modern medicine, an "intense desire for intoxicating drinks," conflicts among Ainu groups, and "intermarriage with the Japanese." Japanese anthropologists and ethnographers, like Japanese government officials, were willing to leave the Ainu to their own devices because the work in which they "immersed themselves in was not the survey and of the customs of other people, but the search for the origins of the Japanese nation," and to clarify the relationship between these people [Ainu and other subjects of early modern anthropology] and the Japanese nation."xliii Other than taking no interest in traditional Ainu culture, the Japanese state set about assimilationist policies that all but guaranteed the erasure of Ainu culture. xliv By treating the Ainu as both a dying race and a target of assimilation, the Japanese accomplished two ends; they demonstrated imperial control over their indigenous people and furthered their own advances in Western-style anthropology.

The Japanese, understanding the value of national origin and mythology to the late-19th and early-20th century, began participating in the "science" of anthropology. As an academic discipline and an intellectual exercise, anthropology did not serve any scientific end but rather as a bulwark against Western imperialist aggression. Having seen the example of China and other Asian nations subjugated by the West as a result of a kind of cultural and societal inflexibility, the Japanese realized that it would behoove them to adopt the methods of their adversaries. xlv There existed two core tenets to the Japanese re-invention during the Meiji period: creation of national history and racial differentiation. Anthropology served both of these ends; by exploring their racial history, the Japanese were forced to acknowledge their multiracial background. The Ainu thus became a visible testament to Japan's mixed heritage. On a domestic level, the Japanese could shuffle the Ainu off to reservations and farms to either die off or assimilate, but that did not solve their racial problem internationally; Western imperialist anthropologists were already aware of and had conducted studies on the Ainu. Confronted with evidence contrary to the national myth that they were making such assiduously Western efforts to establish, the Japanese decided to "make lemonade" with the Ainu; they would use them to showcase Japanese efforts in the Western field of anthropology and link Japan with other Western nation by displaying their indigenous people at the World's Fairs.

Indigenous People at the World's Fairs as an Exercise in State-building

"The interest in the World's Columbian Exhibition which foreign nations have so generally shown," wrote Gozo Tateno, the Japanese Minister at Washington, in 1893, "is cordially shared in Japan." The 1893 World's Fair, an event ostensibly celebrating the power of modernity, was in fact an exercise of colonialism. The eponymous figure of Columbus, a poster boy for European expansion and colonization who figured in a significant way to both American and European ideals; a commemorative half dollar produced by the U.S. Mint depicted

Columbus' ship, the *Santa Maria*, above maps of both the Eastern and Western Hemispheres. ^{xlvii} Even the pocket change of fair organizers and fairgoers was steeped in imperial aspirations.

Chicago in 1893 bore witness to a significant display of late-19th century anthropology. An 1893 article from *The American Anthropologist* detailed "the wonderfully varied exhibits of the Columbian Exhibition," which included "witnessing dances of the Kwakiutl Indians of the northwest coasts... visits to the Midway Plaisance, with American Indian and Eastern primitive villages, oriental and barbarian dances, oriental jugglers, trained animals..." Exhibits using living indigenous subjects were commonplace; Native Americans and the Javanese were both subjects of such exhibits – the Java exhibit had a 1,000-seat bamboo theater constructed. xlix Similarly, the Philadelphia World's Fair in 1876 featured exhibits of "Wild Men of Borneo' and freaks shows" alongside food stands. The 1893 World's Fair featured a "Midway Plaisance" that displayed "a literal counter-image to the civilization emblazoned in the monumental architecture," with "the strong presence of exotic oriental (Bedouins, Egyptians, Sudanese, Turks, Chinese, Japanese and Javanese) and 'primitive' cultures (American Indians, Dahomeans, and South Sea Islanders)." The language of "counter-image" shows the extent to which such exhibits were important to Western peoples' self-definition. This large exhibit demonstrates the incarnation of Western racial hierarchy, with some Eastern cultures placed above "savage" ones, but critically beneath the Western people gawking at the exotic exhibits in the "White City."

The Japanese exhibit at the 1893 World's Fair did not feature the Ainu, but it was well-received and helped to solidify Japan's status amongst other imperial powers, coming at the end of close to two decades of World's Fair participation. On the eve of the Sino-Japanese War, which would begin months after the Columbian Exhibition's conclusion, Japan's Washington Minister was quietly confident, reflecting that "we deem it even more desirable that the world should gain a more accurate and comprehensive knowledge of our country, its history, it progress, and its aspiration." This fit into a description of the Anthropologic Congress "serving an important function in giving emphasis to the value of the great assemblage of anthropological material there brought together," stating that "the importance of the outcome of the whole group of anthropologic features connected with the Fair depends largely on the action of Chicago with respect to the opportunity of the century in museum-making." The purpose of anthropology in the nations that presented at the 1893 World's Fair, then, was not to understand other cultures but to compare notes about different nations' respective indigenous people and build both scholarly reports and museums, thus establishing themselves scientifically and culturally.

Japan's Minster to Washington mediated upon Japan's shifting role in the world when he stated in 1893, "The unique experience through which Japan has passed during the past thirty years is known to all... But the trials to which she has been subjected, and the obstacles she has had to overcome in the path of progress she has chosen for herself, are not so generally understood or appreciated." Evidently, Japan understood its own recent history and recognized the World's fairs as an opportunity to show the herculean efforts that it had gone through to modernize. Tateno further reflected that "the experience of a nation suddenly emerging from the isolation of centuries into the noonday sun of the nineteenth century undoubtedly presents picturesque features." This statement reflects well Japan's motivations for its participation in the Fairs; aware of their inability to divorce themselves from their feudal past and Ainu indigenes (represented by Tateno's comment about "picturesque features"), the Japanese at the Fairs seemed to embrace their checkered (in the Western mind) past and turn it into an asset. Japan's exhibits at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exhibition were constitutive of these sentiments.

A letter written in the summer of 1903 written by W. J. McGee, a member of the Bureau of Anthropology for the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exhibition reads "the aim of the Department of Anthropology at the World's Fair will be to present human progress, from the dark prime to the highest enlightenment, from savagery to civic organization, from egoism to altruism." The irony of thinking that early-20th century Western anthropology was a science trying to defeat egoism aside, McGee's comments also reveal the concept of social and racial determinism that undergirded anthropology of the era, at the fair particularly; such comments corroborate Pathy's assertion that "changes... in anthropology within the span of [the] colonial period was structurally determined by the then-prevailing socio-historical forces." Japan, as evidenced by Tateno's comments, was invested in the World's Fairs as a tool to help themselves escape the grip of Western powers. Thus, nine Ainu were brought from Hokkaido in 1904 to become a living exhibit. lix "The Louisiana Purchase Exposition," reads an article in *Science* dated August 19, 1904, "affords unequalled opportunities for ethnologic study." Groups represented at the Fair included "the Ainu, Patagonians, Pygmies, 'Red Africans,' Cocopa Indians from Baja California, Klaokwaht Indians from Vancouver Island, and over a dozen tribes from the United States Indians, and the Philippine exhibit including all the leading tribes from the Archipelago"; "Pygmies" were from Africa, the "Patagonian Giants" were from Argentina, and the Native American tribes included Cocopa, Kwakiutl, Pawnee, Dakota, Wichita, Navajo, Pima, and Kickapoo. lxilxii The 1904 Fair, then, was the perfect opportunity, both scientifically and politically, for Japan to present its native people at the World's Fair, simultaneously distancing themselves racially from their "savages" and participating in the intellectual and cultural vogue of anthropology; as Japan waged war with Russia in 1904, such expression of autonomy and power would have proven politically useful.

The Ainu and other indigenous people at the 1904 World's Fair were, unsurprisingly, treated as little more than objects of study and profit. The spiritual successor of the 1893 Midway Plaisance in Chicago at St. Louis was an "amusement centre" known as the Pike. kniii After an expedition to see Hokkaido firsthand, Frederick Starr and W. J. McGee published an account of their journey and sold them near the Ainu exhibit at the Fair for 75 cents each. lxiv Ainu subjects "were measured, questioned... and faced anthropology classes while professors lectured on their customs, religion, and ceremonies." The Ainu who participated in the Fair's exhibits were in fact handpicked for their "Ainu-ness"; though Japan's assimilation policies discouraged cultural behavior (the Ainu were clean-shaven when they arrived in St. Louis), by the end of exhibition, they had regrown their characteristic beards. lxvi As though adding insult to injury, the Ainu were the ones responsible for erecting their own house in the exhibit, and dedicated to McGee and other Fair organizers. lxvii Native peoples sold their crafts at the St. Louis Fair, "to supplement their meager pay as fair participants," a practice that was discouraged by Fair organizers for fear that "different groups were purchasing items from each other and 'contaminating' the ethnographic displays by having items created by other in their homes." This clearly evidences not only the strict classifications that undergirded Western anthropology. But the degree to which the Fair's organizers needed the native peoples to fit into their worldview. The Japanese also required that their indigenes acquire Japanese passports, demonstrating the extent to which the Ainu were being forcibly integrated into, and subsequently used, by the Japanese state. lxviii

Japan's exhibit ultimately proved popular with the Louisiana Purchase Exposition's 19 million visitors, labeled "by far the most unique exhibit of any foreign country." The political utility of this sentiment to the Japanese was significant. In their quest to "[construct] a new Japanese identity that resisted further colonial incursion into Japanese sovereignty," the

Meiji regime leveraged anthropology and cultural gamesmanship to establish themselves as a world power. Japan's participation in the 1893 World's Fair preceded their first major expansive victory over China (itself an interesting event, as one victim of the unequal treaties attacked another), while the 1904 World's Fair occurred several months into the pivotal Russo-Japanese War. Though there is no substantive military correlation between Japan's participation in the World's Fair and their wartime victories, in 1894 the Western powers began renegotiation of the unequal treaties, regaining tariff and judicial autonomy by 1899, a process that would conclude in 1911 when Japan regained its full autonomy. Japan, while the World's Fairs were likely not the root cause of this change, Japan's exhibits served as striking examples of its ability to engage with the Western ideals of modernity and of the ethos that Japan adopted in the context of international gamesmanship and race situate the World's Fairs as visible evidence of the marrow-deep changes occurring in the Meiji state in the twilight of the 19th century.

Japan's ascension from a victim of unequal treaties to international player capable of winning military victories against both neighbors and imperial Western powers was built, at least partially, on the backs of the Ainu, perhaps the Meiji state's most vulnerable denizens. By treating them not as citizens but science projects, Japan resolved two pressing issues; firstly, it created an "other" to place beneath below themselves in the Western racial schema, and secondly, it produced scholarship that it could contribute to international anthropologic discourse, cementing Japan's status as a modern, civilized nation. Japan's proficiency in Western pseudo-science helped it to rise above its peers and cast off the shackles of the unequal treaties.

ⁱ Gifford M. Mast, *Ainu, Japan, St. Louis World's Fair, Missouri*, Keystone-Mast Collection, University of California, Riverside, California, accessed December 5, 2016, http://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt5779p8gs/?brand=oac4.

ii Ibid.

iii Ibid.

^{iv} Greg Allen, "'Living Exhibits' at 1904 World's Fair Revisisted," *National Public Radio*, May 31, 2004, section goes here, accessed December 5, 2016, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1909651.

^v W. G. Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism*, 1894-1945 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 14, accessed December 7, 2016.

http://site.ebrary.com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/lib/trinity/reader.action?docID=10539069&ppg=16. vi *Ibid*.

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