

*From Feudal Fishing Villagers
to an Archipelago's Peoples:
The Historiographical Journey
of Amino Yoshihiko*

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Introduction

Amino Yoshihiko (1928-2004) will be remembered not only as one of the most influential historians of late twentieth-century Japan but as one of the most important public intellectuals of his age. By the time of his death this past spring, it was not uncommon to find entire shelves in the history sections of bookstores devoted to works by and about him. He also had become a prominent public commentator on history-related issues and a critic of theories of Japan and the Japanese (*Nihonron* and *Nihonjinron*). This is no small feat in view of his academic roots and the fact that he never aspired to public notoriety.

This paper asks how that happened. How did Amino's historiography change from his early work, which was very tightly focused on a nearly microscopic scale and invariably based on close readings of primary source documents, to his last works, many of which were broad studies that challenged contemporary notions of national identity? The title of this paper reflects this question; the answer is a story that links the historical record of medieval Japan with modern intellectual history.

Amino's earliest publication based on research using primary source documents examined fishing villagers surrounding Kasumigaura, a lake in present-day Ibaraki Prefecture. Many of his late works examined broad topics concerning the historical fluidity of the Japanese state and society and reached conclusions that contested the fundamental assumptions on which many theories of Japan and the Japanese are based. One of the main assertions in his later work was that at least in medieval times the Japanese archipelago had been inhabited by a number of ethnically distinct peoples not all of whom considered the *tennō* in Kyoto their sovereign. Because he based assertions

such as this on a close reading of primary source documents—which put him as close to the facts as any positivist might demand—Amino’s work remains a barbed brass tack in the side of right-wing nationalists who base their versions of the past on nostalgic imaginings.

This paper does not aspire to a comprehensive overview even of his most important work, which often overwhelms with its meticulous detail, much less of the enormous corpus of writings that he produced during his lifetime. A preliminary bibliography of his published work includes 486 titles. Of these, many were newspaper and magazine interviews and articles, book reviews, dialogues, round-table discussions, and other publications that might be elided from a rigorously edited bibliography of his academic work. Yet Amino did publish between two and three hundred original articles and over twenty books that were monographs or essay collections. In addition, he was responsible, either wholly or in part, for editing several multiple-volume series on historical and ethnographic themes. In short, a complete introduction to the Amino oeuvre would probably require its own book.

Despite his prolific output and stature in Japan, only a handful of papers and only one book (although even that remains unpublished) by Amino have been translated in the English language. As a leading scholar of early modern Japan once told me, everybody talks about *Muen, kugai, raku*, one of Amino’s most important books, but few have read it. For the most part, one could say the same about much of his work.

At least two reasons for this arise from Amino’s work itself. One is that much of it has a highly specialized focus on medieval Japan, and another is the context in which his work is read. Many of his essays and monographs focus like a micro laser on the

minutiae of landholding patterns, forms of taxation, local power relations, changes in legal codes, the reading and interpretation of documents, and similar specialized topics, and as a consequence even in Japan only specialists find them compelling reading. And while much of his later work is compelling to a large segment of the Japanese reading public, it is less so to a general audience outside Japan. This is especially true for his work on issues concerning Japanese ethnic origins, the *tennō*, rice cultivation and consumption, geography, and other topics. These topics are central to the construction of identity in Japan but carry less weight outside that country. Finally, although much of his work would certainly be of interest to students and scholars of Japanese history outside Japan, the shortage of translations remains an obstacle.

Two Contemporary Evaluations of Amino's Historiographical Importance

Before looking more closely at the trajectory of Amino's career as a historian and how his approach to his craft changed over time, it is useful to place him in the broader context of modern Japanese historiography since the late nineteenth century. Carol Gluck, in her seminal essay that appeared in the series *Nihon tsūshi* published by Iwanami Shoten in 1995, divides modern Japanese historiography into four stages. For each stage, Gluck describes how perspectives on the past were linked to views of the future, and it is useful to consider Amino in relation to those stages.

The first stage began in the late nineteenth century and focused on the emergence of the nation state. It depicted the Meiji Restoration overthrowing the *ancien regime* of the Edo Bakufu in favor of a future that promised civilization, progress, and development. The idea of the nation state fused history and the national identity, and the

newly emerging academic historians such as Shigeno Yasutsugu (1827-1910) and Kume Kunitake (1839-1931) replaced the Confucian moralizations of earlier historiography with the scientific method of Rankean positivism.¹

The second stage started after the First World War and continued into the early 1930s. The social costs of industrialization showed that a vision of the future limited to the goals of modernity overlooked the cruelty and contradictions that resulted from the sacrifice of society to the state. In response, historians reassessed the past in terms of economic development and the emperor state. They saw in this version of history a troubled past, but also promise of a utopian future made discernable not through positivism but through “social science” based on universal laws of economic change. Marxist scholars such as Noro Eitarō (1900-1934) and Hattori Shisō (1901-1956) exemplified this approach to history.²

A third stage starts after the Second World War. Rather than lose faith in modernity, historians placed imperialism, totalitarianism, and total war in a past that ended in 1945 and envisioned a future that included democracy, economic growth, and new, independent states that rose from the collapse of European colonialism. Gluck described historians such as Maruyama Masao (1914-1996) and Ishimoda Shō (1912-1986) as historical pathologists who desired to provide a cure for future social and political ills by examining the structures of the past. By continuing trends established in the 1920s, postwar historians, whether Marxist, liberal, or conservative in their approaches, remained in the modernist mode.³

¹ Kiyaroru Gurakku (Carol Gluck), “Sengo shigaku no metahisutorī” (The metahistory of postwar history), in *Nihon tsūshi, bekkān 1, rekishiki ishiki no genzai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995), pp. 5-6.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

The fourth stage that Gluck describes begins in the 1970s, and is the age of history and the “post”: post-rapid growth, post-cold war, post-postwar, post-colonial, and post-modern. With this age, the end of the past is the beginning of the future. Most importantly, it marked the end of the “grand theories” of historical development; they simply did not fit the real world. As a consequence, the narratives that had dominated previous historical discourse fell by the wayside and only fragments remained. Historians turned from macroscopic political history to microscopic social history, from economy to culture, from history as scientific inquiry to history as interpretation. As a representative historian in this final stage, Gluck offers Amino Yoshihiko.

This overview is useful for setting a context and for the way it positions Amino’s work, but is problematic in at least two major respects. First, it completely skips over historians of the war years. While some were ideologues who simply glorified the Japanese state, the *tennō*, and past generations of warriors, many had sophisticated visions of the future and based their assertions on a positivistic methodology similar to that of their predecessors. They were an important generation of historians, some of whom had undergone *tenkō* or conversion from the Marxist historiography of the 1920s and early 1930s. They sometimes influenced later historians who rejected some of their conclusions and their visions of the future but who also found inspiration in some of their methods and arguments.

Second, it produces snapshots of both the periods and the historians it describes, snapshots of living beings who often looked quite different both before and after the image that appears here. As a result, the reader receives little sense of continuities between the periods and how individual historians crossed from one period to the next.

This is especially problematic in the case of Amino, who studied under Ishimoda Shō but who then challenged Ishimoda’s ideas in his early years as a scholar, and who went on to become a poster child for the “post” generation without ever rejecting his Marxist roots. Despite these shortcomings, which arguably are inevitable in order to create a sketch of modern Japanese historiography, Gluck’s model is extremely useful as a way to establish our bearings in this field and to position Amino in it.⁴

In the same volume in which the Gluck essay appears, there is an essay by Kano Masanao, the historian of modern Japan, on theories of Japanese culture and historical consciousness. That essay describes some of Amino’s major contributions to modern historiography.

The first, and one of the most significant contributions, was to raise peoples’ awareness regarding “*Nihon*” as a state name. Amino positioned the first appearance of this name in the late seventh or early eighth century. A stele discovered in China early this year confirms this; it contains the earliest written record of “*Nihon*” discovered to date and was created in 734 or soon after. In addition, Amino tied the early use of the term “*tennō*” to the word “*Nihon*” and geographically located the use of both in western Japan.⁵

Second, Amino introduced the category of “non-agricultural persons”

⁴ In an essay entitled “The Fourteenth Century in Twentieth-Century Perspective,” the noted historian of medieval Japan, Ōyama Kyōhei, provides a more focused view of Japanese historiography, but also creates a snapshot that of necessity distorts the larger view. See Ōyama Kyōhei, “The Fourteenth Century in Twentieth-Century Perspective,” in *The Origins of Japan’s Medieval World*, edited by Jeffrey Mass (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 345-365.

⁵ Kano Masanao, “Nihon bunkaron to rekishi ishiki” (Theories of Japanese culture and historical consciousness), in *Nihon tsūshi, bekkā 1, rekishi ishiki no genzai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995), pp. 194-195.

(*hinōgyōmin*) to the study of medieval Japan. This category included not only persons who did not work the land, but those who had no lords or masters such as tradespersons who had specific crafts—for example, founders, blacksmiths and other metal workers, wood and bamboo workers; those who peddled specific goods such as salt or tofu; or those who had special skills, such as women entertainers called *shirabyōshi* and *yūjo*.⁶

Yet another important contribution that Amino made to historical discourse was to introduce the categories *muen*, *kugai*, and *raku*. These three terms range from difficult to virtually impossible to translate: *muen* was originally a Buddhist term that signified being without worldly attachments; *kugai* can be literally translated as the “public world” or “public domain,” but the meaning of “public” must be carefully delineated within the cultural boundaries of medieval Japan; *raku* is by itself without a parallel expression in English, but generally signifies the markets and merchants who were protected from taxes, fees, and restrictions on movement and included both places without specific ownership and persons who had no feudal masters.⁷

A fourth contribution that Kano considers is Amino’s persistent pursuit of the *tennō* or emperor system throughout his work. Kano points out that although Amino addressed the issue directly only in a few works it persists as a theme throughout his career. A related but separate contribution was Amino’s examination of political, economic, and cultural differences between eastern and western Japan. The political division was deep: there were places in eastern Japan, such as Tosaminato, that arguably did not recognize the Kyoto *tennō* as late as the early sixteenth century.⁸

⁶ Ibid., pp. 195-196.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 196-197.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 197-198.

Next, Kano notes that Amino often saw Japan from a maritime perspective. Although a kind of national mythology establishes the oceans as barriers, Amino also saw them as a roadway to the world. The seas were thoroughways that often led to rural prosperity. The view of oceans as a boundary came from state authority, which benefited from monopolizing foreign contact. Yet in medieval Japan in particular, commerce and contact with foreign countries was not all state sponsored. Despite this, most historical discourse has ignored the ocean-based peoples of the Japanese archipelago, something that Amino worked to overcome.⁹

Finally, Kano describes Amino in a constant search for threads of historical continuity. In this way he challenged the view held by many postwar historians that periodization, and as a consequence clearly delineated stages of development, could be scientifically established. According to Kano, Amino used the ethnographic idea that there are unchanging patterns beneath historical change to challenge the idea that there is progress in history. This is, as I shall soon show, a point that I believe Amino himself would have challenged. A final point, and one that Kano considers especially important, is that Amino forced historians to question their common assumptions while at the same time showing them how to liberate themselves from those assumptions.¹⁰

Both Gluck and Kano describe Amino primarily as a historian who explained significance rather than change. In their descriptions of Amino's work, he seems to focus on the interpretation of meaning in the past and not on explaining change over time. Their descriptions of Amino's historiography are indeed accurate up to a point, but they

⁹ Ibid., pp. 198-199.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 199.

give no sense of how Amino arrived at this point, or if, indeed, it is a complete description of his work. To restate the question: how does Amino make the journey from Marxian to “post” historian?

Early Signposts on Amino’s Historiographical Journey

Amino’s career as a historian spanned a full half-century, starting with his first publications in the 1950s and ending only with his death. He was born in Yamanashi Prefecture, but at age twelve entered a primary school in Tokyo. The rest of his school education was also in Tokyo. He finished the preparatory school for Tokyo Higher School (Tokyo Kōtōgakkō Jinjōka) in 1944, graduated from Tokyo Higher School in 1947, and received his bachelor’s degree from University of Tokyo in 1950. His senior thesis used primary source materials in a study of Tara-no-shō in Wakasa, beginning a research project that he continued for fifteen years. Soon after his graduation, he entered the Nihon Jōmin Bunka Kenkyūjo and stayed there until 1956, when he became a high school instructor in Tokyo. He remained in that position until 1967, when he became an assistant professor at Nagoya University. Amino stayed there until 1980, when he became a professor at Kanagawa University’s Junior College and Research Fellow at the same university’s Nihon Jōmin Kenkyūjo. While this was not a highly prestigious position, Amino made this move from Nagoya University so that he could focus his energies on research and writing rather than assume the administrative duties of being a full professor at a national university. He retired from those positions in 1998.

Amino’s career was distinctive for a number of reasons. He came from a generation of scholars who could establish themselves simply on the basis of research

and writing: he never finished a master's degree, much less a doctorate. After several years as a researcher, he became a high school teacher with a passion for research, and on the basis of his publication record and highly developed skills reading and interpreting primary source documents he was appointed assistant professor at Nagoya University.

By then, Amino had already carefully thought through and established his historiographical position in light of contemporary trends. His first two publications appeared in 1951, soon after his graduation from University of Tokyo. Both examined broad questions concerning the origins of feudalism in Japan, establishing a theoretical agenda. Of the two, the second was the more substantial and hinted at important themes in his later work.

This essay, entitled “Hōken seido to wa nani ka” (What is the feudal system?), appeared in a volume that included pieces by Takeuchi Rizō, Nagahara Keiji, and Satō Shin'ichi, all of whom became leading historians of the period. The author of the central essay in this volume, Matsumoto Shinpachirō, had supported Amino in his early work.

On the one hand, this piece was a model of Kōza-ha scholarship. In it, Amino described the emergence of feudalism in Japan from the end of the Heian period. Feudalism had undergone a number of revolutionary periods, the most recent of which was under the absolute state during the Pacific War. However, in the war's aftermath the growth of a rudimentary proletariat promised a coming revolution that would catapult Japan into the next stage of historical development.¹¹

¹¹ Amino Yoshihiko, “Hōken seido to wa nani ka” (What is the feudal system?), *Nihon rekishi kōza*, vol. 3, *chūsei hen* (Tokyo: Kawade Shobō, 1951) pp. 70-85. For his assertions on the next stage of development, see p. 85.

In 1998, he said, “It is a painful memory to me now, but at that time I wrote an essay as pathetic as ‘Hōken seido to wa nani ka.’”¹² Despite Amino’s harsh evaluation of this early essay, it did point to trends in his later scholarship. One is the Marxist thread that remained unbroken throughout his career. Amino had first encountered Marx in an air-raid shelter during World War Two, where a neighbor showed him a volume of Marx’s *Capital* that he was reading in his spare time. Afraid of possible repercussions, Amino had been reluctant to examine his friend’s book, and it was not until he had become a student under Ishimoda Shō and Maruyama Masao that he rigorously read Marx.¹³ As a history student at University of Tokyo in the early postwar years, Amino became involved in both Marxist historiography and the student movement.

Another trend that appeared in this early essay and that continued throughout his life is the emphasis on common people, both contemporary and historical, through folklore and ethnology. While in its main thrust this essay might have been little more than an encomium of the Kōza Faction’s view of history, it called for sensitivity regarding people’s everyday lives. As a student of Ishimoda Shō, it is hardly surprising that Amino should have become a proponent of ethnology. Ishimoda had revived a Marxian emphasis on ethnology that had existed from the 1930s, although he did not situate his own ideas in this earlier work.

The year 1951, when Amino published this early piece, was important with regard to Marxist historiography and ideas surrounding the somewhat slippery term, *minzoku* (and here, I mean the term *zoku* expressed with the ideogram for “family” (族)). It

¹² Ibid., p. 91.

¹³ Amino Yoshihiko and Miyata Noboru, “Sengo Nihon shigaku to minzokugaku no aida de” (Between history and folklore in postwar Japan), *Daikokai*, vol. 25, 1998, p. 90.

marked a split between those who saw the Japanese nation (*minzoku*) as emerging over a long period that started before the nineteenth century, and those who believed that a Japanese national identity was of modern origins. Ishimoda, Matsumoto Shinpachirō, and others based primarily in Tokyo emphasized early origins. The other perspective, popular among Kyoto scholars including Inoue Kiyoshi, believed that the Japanese nation emerged in reaction to Western colonial powers, and became ascendant only after the Meiji Restoration.

Despite Ishimoda's specific use of the term *minzoku*, Amino did not seem to have this meaning in mind when he used it in this early essay, where he wrote: "The tradition of [Japanese] scholarship, when compared with that of western Europe, has only shallow roots in the life of the people [*minzoku*]" ; the resulting scholarship, he noted, had been one-sided.¹⁴ To this, he added, "Scholarship until now has not made people's lives its starting point; scholarship has not put down roots in the lives of the 'people' ('*minzoku*' *no seikatsu ni ne o oroshite inakatta*)."¹⁵

Amino soon changed some of his historiographical assumptions after he published this essay. Later in life, he said that his attitude toward Marx had changed greatly in 1953, after which he said that he ceased to be a follower of Marxism but instead became a follower of Marx. The difference is, perhaps, best expressed in Amino's paraphrase of Goethe's *Faust*, in which he said: "All theory is grey, but green and rich are facts."¹⁶ (Goethe's original reads, "*Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie, Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum*," which can be translated as "All theory is grey, my friend, and green is

¹⁴ Amino Yoshihiko, "Hōken seido to wa nani ka," p. 70.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Amino Yoshihiko and Miyata Noboru, "Sengo Nihon shigaku to minzokugaku no aida de," p. 92.

the golden tree of life.”) This seems to echo Marx’s aphorism in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, in which he writes: “All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.”¹⁷ Throughout his career, Amino remained skeptical toward what he saw as inflexible theory while at the same time his views remained informed but not determined by theory. Most importantly, he never completely rejected a materialist view of historical change. During the 1950s, Amino read much of Marx in the original German, and throughout the rest of his life remained especially fond of the later Marx. There, Amino believed that he had found Marx’s own aversion to theoretical dogmatism and openness to real-life situations that allowed for possibilities of combining theoretical principles of historical change with specific historical circumstances.¹⁸

For five years, between 1951 and 1956, Amino published nothing but did continue to examine primary source materials. At the same time, he reconsidered his approach to history. Amino’s skeptical attitude toward theory led him to question the ideas of Ishimoda and the Kōza Faction’s historiography. The year 1955 marked an important turning point both for Amino and for Japanese historiography in general because of changes within the Historical Science Society (Rekishigaku Kenkyūkai, or Rekken for short). In that year, Rekken made the proprietary lord system (*ryōshu sei*) and landholding system (*jinushi sei*) its main focus for the study of medieval Japan. Amino felt a resistance to the way the debate was being conducted and, in his own words, “completely fell by the wayside” (“*kanzen na ochikobore ni narimashita*”).¹⁹ In saying

¹⁷ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, second edition (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 145.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-93.

¹⁹ Amino Yoshihiko and Miyata Noboru, p. 93.

this, he probably had in mind the break he experienced at this time with his mentor, Ishimoda Shō.²⁰

It is unclear if any single incident initiated this break, but another source of Amino's distancing himself from his mentor and contemporary mainstream historiography was his partial agreement with the conclusions of Shimizu Mitsuo (1909-1947). Shimizu had been a Marxist historian who had undergone a conversion (*tenkō*) following his arrest in 1938. After this, Shimizu had criticized his previous work on Ōyama-no-shō in Tanba by saying that in looking for conclusions concerning the general structure of feudal society he had overlooked the lives of the people. In his later work, Shimizu went so far as to criticize the idea that Japanese *shōen* paralleled the manors of western European feudalism, and instead focused on the "public" (*kō*) character of landholding and the way that character became the basis for the later development of villages. Amino was drawn to this line of thinking, which pulled him farther away from the ongoing debates over the Ishimoda model of feudal development.

Rather than participate in the Rekken debate, which was dominated by Ishimoda's ideas concerning the development of feudalism under proprietary lords, he continued to research the commoners on Tara-no-shō in Wakasa and related topics.

Also in 1955, Rekken assumed a negative attitude toward folklore studies. This marked a shift from a prewar emphasis on folklore and ethnology by members of Rekken, as well as from the Society's official stance after the war.²¹ Before this time, Yanagita Kunio had said that he voted for Communist Party candidates and Rekken

²⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

²¹ For pre-World War Two Rekken attitudes regarding folklore studies and ethnology, see Curtis Anderson Gayle, *Marxist History and Postwar Japanese Nationalism* (London: Routledge Curzon, 1993), pp. 22-39.

members had solicited his support for the pursuit of local histories.²² According to Amino, however, after 1955 folklore and ethnology became taboo for many historians.²³

The following year, Amino published an article in the *Rekishigaku kenkyū*—which certainly suggests that he had not fallen completely by the wayside—that he later described as having written once the blinders had fallen from his eyes (*me kara uroko ga ochita ato*). This article used primary documents to examine the self-governing organizations of fishing villagers surrounding Kasumigaura. These organizations had evolved so that by the end of the sixteenth century, they controlled the fishing equipment, the locations to be fished, and the duration of the fishing season for the purpose of avoiding over-fishing. After that, increased demand for fish from farmers who used them as fertilizer, combined with the privatization of lakeshore harbors and havens for fishing boats, both contributed to over-fishing and the decline of the industry.²⁴ He saw this as a clear case in which the development of the agricultural economy did not improve the lives of all the commoners close to it.

This article established several basic themes that Amino continued to examine throughout his career. Fishing villagers, together with other people who used boats to make a living, and more generally with non-agricultural people, remained an important research subject for him. Amino's focus in this paper on self-governing organizations turned away from Rekken's emphasis on proprietary lords and landlords and looked instead at power relations among common people as well as between them and governing powers. The limits of liberty and self-governance, and the changing political boundaries

²² Amino Yoshihiko and Miyata Noboru, p. 95.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Amino Yoshihiko, "Kasumigaura shijūhattsu to mitomegawa," *Rekishigaku kinkyū*, no. 192 (1956).

imposed by central authorities, remained subjects of Amino's later work, and stand tall in his most influential writings. Finally, it is important to point out that Amino's explanation of change in this case was based on the transformation of agricultural production and the subsequent collision of social classes. Throughout his career, Amino wavered little from this model of historical change. Although it hardly represented the Kōza Faction's perspective, and indeed it gave no hint regarding periodization, Amino's approach was based on a close examination of primary sources that revealed changes in the economy and society.

Maturation

During the next decade, Amino continued to peruse primary sources with a single-minded passion that other men his age brought to mahjongg or the horse track. While a high school teacher, he continued to examine Tara-no-shō, Kasumigaura, and the documents related to other *shōen* of Tōji, the great Kyoto temple, and to publish journal articles in *Shigaku zasshi*, *Nihonshi kenkyū*, and *Rekishigaku kenkyū*. Most of this work continued the historiographical trends already established in his earlier years, and his subjects included not only fishing villagers, “evil doers” (*akutō*), and the Mongol invasions, but also peasants, *shōen*, and their changing power relationships with regional and national authorities.

In 1966, Amino published his first book: *Chūsei shōen no yōsō* (Conditions on medieval estates). This comprehensive study was based on fifteen years of researching the primary sources concerning Tara-no-shō in Wakasa. This book followed the rise, blossoming, and decline of Tara-no-shō with impressive detail. It started from the late

eleventh century and followed this single *shōen* until its dissolution in the fifteenth century. It examined not only economic and political changes but also clearly delineated disparate categories of persons as they changed over time: both the various lords and their functionaries and the various classes of commoners both high and low who lived there. It continued established themes in Amino's scholarship: the growth of the agricultural economy and improved living conditions for peasants; the struggles between the center and the periphery; changes in taxation and the use of legal measures and sometimes of violence in the struggles between commoners and rulers over unprecedented or untoward demands for higher tax payments; the rise of religious institutions as local governing powers; the use of the term *akutō* or "evil doers" in conflicts between rulers and commoners.

This book, in conjunction with his journal publications, established Amino's credentials as a researcher. By this time he had become a renowned master of interpreting primary sources, a highly prized skill among historians. Colleagues and students alike marveled at his ability to read the primary source documents. One of his skills was to read the "raw documents" backwards; *shōen* and other documents frequently were used as backing for screens on which they were pasted face-in, with the main painting mounted on top of them. When experts reconditioned the screens, Amino often would be called in to look at what was underneath the artwork; he read these documents as if they were face-up in front of him.

With over twenty journal articles and a monograph to his credit, historians from both Kyoto and Tokyo recommended his appointment as associate professor of Japanese history at Nagoya University in 1967, where he joined an all-star cast that included

Hayakawa Shōhachi, Miki Seiichirō, and Yamaguchi Keiji. Amino and his young family moved from Tokyo to a working-class *danchi* or apartment complex that year, where they lived until they returned to Tokyo thirteen years later.

As if to display his qualifications for this position, one year after his arrival at Nagoya, Amino penned a chapter for the influential third series of the *Nihonshi kenkyū nyūmon* (Introduction to research in Japanese history) on the subject of “Chūsei zenki no shakai to keizai” (“Society and economy of the early medieval period”).²⁵ This was the same topic from which he had fallen by the wayside just over ten years earlier, but in this essay he examined the major trends in these subjects since before World War Two. This historiographical essay was central to Amino’s own work and the defining statement in the field of medieval studies to that date.

In it, Amino considered the year 1955 as a turning point in medieval Japanese historiography. The work that preceded that year had been based on the assumption that Japanese and European feudalism were nearly identical and that the roots of modern society grew out of feudal society. Before World War Two this perspective had been supported by the ideas of Asakawa Kan’ichi and Edwin O. Reischauer, and picked up by the Marxist historian Shimizu Mitsuo. Although Asakawa and Reischauer were hardly Marxists, the important point was their emphasis on the parallel development between Japan and Europe.²⁶ After the war, Ishimoda Shō and Matsumoto Shinpachirō became the main proponents of a strict Marxist approach, which then was criticized by Araki Moriaki—who, himself, became one of Amino’s most strident critics from the 1980s. In

²⁵ Amino Yoshihiko, “Chūsei zenki no shakai to keizai,” in *Nihon shi kinkyū nyūmon*, Inoue Mitsusada and Nagahara Keiji, eds. (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press), 1969, pp. 87-120.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

addition, research by Umesao Tadao and Miyamoto Tsuneichi using primary sources added a critical perspective on Marxist work that they believed was over-dependent on secondary sources. Finally, scholars in Kyoto also critiqued the Ishimoda-Matsumoto approach, and called for research on previously undervalued topics such as *kokugaryō*, village assemblies, guilds (*za*), and various sacred persons, especially *jinin*.²⁷

Amino depicted the period after 1955 as being far more comprehensive in its approach. First, researchers generally based their conclusions on primary sources, even when they contradicted accepted theory. Second, it included disciplines that previous historians had ignored or viewed only lightly, such as geography, sociology, folklore, ethnology, and other fields. Also, it also took into consideration any prewar work in legal, institutional, social, and economic history that had been carefully conducted. Another important source of evidence appeared after World War Two as numerous prefectures, cities, towns, and villages compiled their historical documents, and indexes of both secondary and primary sources appeared. As a result of these developments, Marxist theory and ideas of the first period were not completely discarded but rather had become subject to critical appraisal in view of solid evidence.²⁸ Representative scholars of this second period included Nagahara Keiji, Ōyama Kyōhei, and Kuroda Toshio. Amino emphasized that this second period in the historiography of medieval Japan was still in full swing as he wrote this essay in 1968.

Most of this essay focused on research developments during the period after 1955, but in it Amino did two important things with regard to his own research. First, he raised

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 88-89.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 87-88.

issues that scholars had examined in part, but which called for further scholarship. In doing this, he mapped out much of his own work for the following decades. Examples include work by other scholars on non-agricultural workers, such as tradespersons, merchants, and *hinin*; east-west differences in village governance that used a broad range of materials as evidence; the structure and function of the economy, governance, and society on lands that belonged to courtiers, shrines and temples; and whether Japan actually constituted a single state during medieval times. All of these became topics for extensive research by Amino; the last of these became of enormous importance for him.

The conclusion to this essay outlined Amino's own thoughts concerning debates over the *shōen* system. In it, he asserted that two views of the medieval world had emerged. One emphasized the organization of peasants who did not form independent villages into serfs and bondsmen, who then were under the control of proprietary lords (*zaichi ryōshu*). These lords based their authority on patrilineal lord-vassal relationships, which in turn formed the foundation of the government's military authority. The other view emphasized the governance of peasants who formed villages by the proprietors of *shōen* (*shōen no ryōshu*). This form of authority was based on a principle of sovereign rule by the courtiers (*kuge*), temples and shrines. Where some scholars had argued for one model over the other, Amino argued that the former appeared in the east, whereas the second model predominated in the west. The former, in turn, resembled a western European style of development; the latter was interpreted as an "Asiatic" model of development.²⁹

²⁹ Ibid., p. 118.

Finally, Amino wrote that this debate over medieval landholding patterns, which had continued for nearly two decades, was rooted in medieval society while at the same time it could be understood only in the context of modern Japanese intellectual history. He concluded that these were not merely academic differences in history but had an impact on Marxist historiography itself.³⁰

Those who doubted these conclusions at this time found it more difficult to challenge them when Amino published *Chūsei Tōji to Tōjiryō shoen* (Medieval Tōji and its territorial estates), his definitive study of *shōen*, in 1978.³¹ That year marked another important turning point not only in Amino's own scholarship but also in Japanese medieval historiography. Arguably, it ended the second period that Amino described as having started in 1955. Amino's own *Chūsei Tōji to Tōjiryō shoen* concurred with the conclusions that he had reached in his 1969 essay on medieval historiography; indeed, he included the earlier essay in its entirety in the latter volume.³² Not everybody in the field might have been convinced, but scholarship from that point took a turn away from attempting to explain the transformation from ancient to feudal society and from the feudal to the early modern based primarily on Marxist ideas of economic change and class conflict. Instead, it turned toward other themes that Amino had raised in his 1969 essay, and especially toward the interpretation of medieval society, of differences between eastern and western Japan, and of the historical boundaries of the Japanese state and its ostensible sovereign, the *tennō*.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 119.

³¹ Amino Yoshihiko, *Chūsei Tōji to Tōjiryō shōen* (Medieval Tōji and its territorial estates) (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1978).

³² Ibid., pp. 32-60.

The Laws of History in Two Dimensions: Structural and Ethnographic

Amino published one more book in 1978, but where *Chūsei Tōji to Tōjiryō shoen* marked an end point of sorts, his other book, *Muen, kugai, raku: Nihon chūsei no jiyū to heiwa* (Liberty and peace in medieval Japan), marked a definite beginning. At the same time, both books were intimately linked: the term *muen*, which can be defined as unattachedness or being without worldly ties, had appeared in the documents on which he based the former book. His attempt to make historical sense of this term and the related terms of *kugai*, or “public space,” and *raku*, which defies definition, resulted in the latter book. All three concepts invoke the idea of asylum, which is to say that places exist where secular political power does not reach. However Amino extends this to persons in medieval Japan who transcended secular political power, which he called *muenja* or *muen* persons, as well as to fixed places such as shrines, temples, bridges, crossroads, and markets.

Muen, kugai, raku marked another beginning for Amino as well. Whereas until then he had written primarily for an academic audience of specialists, in this and many of his later books he wrote both for scholars and a broader if educated reading public. This was not the first time he had done this, however. In 1974, he had published a volume on the Mongol Invasions in the series published by Shōgakkan, *Nihon no rekishi*.³³ This volume had synthesized much of Amino’s research to that point on topics he had flagged in his historiographical essay published in 1969. These included the lives of commoners, and especially the non-agricultural people (he used the term *hinōgyōmin* in this book, possibly for the first time), the rise of popular Buddhism, Japan’s place in the larger

³³ Amino Yoshihiko, *Mōko shūrai* (The Mongol invasions) (Tokyo: Shōgakkan, 1974).

world of East Asia during the thirteenth century, debt-relief movements, and the fall of the Kamakura Bakufu. Commercially, this was a successful volume, and remains in print to this day. Yet it also was successful academically, setting the stage for *Muen, kugai, raku*, which was so popular that it sold enough copies for Amino to buy a house in Tokyo not long after its publication.

The reasons for this book's popularity were not obvious. When it appeared, book shops found the title so mystifying that some put it in music sections (based on the term *raku*), some put it among books on legal studies (based on the term *kugai*), while some placed it with Buddhist studies (based on the term *muen*). The text itself consists of straightforward Japanese interspersed with frequent quotations of medieval documents in the original language, if not orthography. Yet it worked in a way that combined the familiar, starting with its analysis of children's games at the beginning, with the foreign. What people found compelling was the way it presented the everyday lives of previous times in ways that were surprising, starting with its beginning examples of divorce temples (*engiri dera*) and going back in time to explore limitations on political power in medieval times that people today found surprising. These included limitations on entry (*funyūken*), tax exemptions, guaranteed rights of free travel, places of peace where it was the custom to refrain from conflicts pursued in other places, locations that enforced liberation from serfdom and slavery, places where the suspension of debts was enforced, where punishments were limited solely to the individual responsible for an offence, and where authority was organized according to age and seniority.³⁴ People found the differences between modern and medieval times intriguing, especially since it implied

³⁴ Amino Yoshihiko, *Muen, kugai, raku: Nihon chūsei no jiyū to heiwa* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1978).

that the political and cultural restrictions on modern life are historically relative and open to change.

This was a book organized retrospectively, from the more recent to the more ancient. By doing this, it takes the reader from seeing the principle of *muen*, or the state of being without worldly ties, in decline during the Edo period to a state of full blossom in primitive societies. This is a decidedly ethnographic work, yet one that Amino saw as implying universal principles. It described these practices of asylum as passing through three stages: the first being a period in which they were based on the sacred or magical; the second being a period in which they were based on utilitarian principles; the third being a period of decline that ended in their extinction. Amino described these stages as manifesting “fundamental laws (*hōsoku*) of human history and of world history” that existed on a different dimension from the previously accepted “fundamental laws of world history.”³⁵

Amino’s most important book after this was his *Nihon chūsei no hinōgyōmin to tennō* (Non-agricultural people and the *tennō* in medieval Japan). Where his critics had attacked *Muen*, *kugai*, *raku* as somewhat loose and fast in its reasoning, he responded in this book with the kind of meticulous scholarship displayed in his previous monographs. *Nihon chūsei no hinōgyōmin to tennō* made its assertions based on the close reading of an enormous number of primary documents while at the same time addressing the most important secondary literature. The book begins with Amino contrasting Tsuda Sōkichi’s assertion that the *tennō*’s power was based on a kind of cultural and intellectual authority that had the quality of a natural phenomenon with Ishimoda Shō’s view that political

³⁵ Amino Yoshihiko, *Muen, kugai, raku*, pp. 242-243.

power, including the *tennō*, could be understood through scientifically established laws of history. Amino strives to accept part of both perspectives. He clearly asserts that he is seeking the laws of history, as did Ishimoda, and as a consequence thinks of history as a science. At the same time he expresses the desire to fathom the actual conditions under which the Japanese had lived in the past with the same rigor that Tsuda applied in his own work.³⁶

In pursuit of this goal, this book examines the lives of non-agricultural people in a way that parallels Amino's close study of landholding and agricultural practices in his book on the landed estates of Tōji. Amino spells out the historiographic and documentary basis for the concept of non-agricultural people, and then closely examines their relationship with the *tennō*. To do this, he uses examples that include *kugonin* or imperial purveyors of various goods; *sansho*, the places later associated with the *burakumin* and the various trades and crafts persons who lived on them; cormorant fishers and other people who made their livings on the water; founders and other metal workers. For one case study of people who made their living on the water, Amino inserted his earlier study on the fishing villagers of Kasumigaura that he had published nearly three decades earlier.³⁷ While clearly Amino had gone far in the intervening years, some themes continued to appear throughout his work.

While this book is written as a series of episodes or case studies and does not establish a narrative structure, the conclusion does return to the themes Amino raises in the introduction. In this last chapter, Amino asserts that history can be examined in two

³⁶ Amino Yoshihiko, *Nihon chūsei no hinōgyōmin to tennō* (Non-agricultural people and the *tennō* in medieval Japan) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1984), p. 9.

³⁷ Amino Yoshihiko, *Nihon chūsei no hinōgyōmin to tennō*, pp. 366-391, also see p. 587 for Amino's explanation of his including this earlier piece here.

separate dimensions at the same time: one that focused on the history of social structures (*shakaikōseishiteki jigen*) and one that encompassed historical ethnology (*minzokushiteki jigen*).

Here, Amino clearly affirms the periodization of history with the categories of ancient, medieval, early modern, and modern, and that distinctions in the relationships necessary for economic production—between slave systems and serf systems, for example—provided a firm basis for establishing the turning points between these periods. In other words, Amino still supports a Marxist view of history.³⁸

On the other hand, he also points out that cultural history, the examination of ethnographic materials, can lead to important insights as firmly established in the historical record as social structures. He presents numerous examples drawn both from the evidence presented in this book and from other sources. None of these, however, are timeless or eternal and all, including the *tennō*, have a beginning and an end.³⁹ In this respect he challenges an essentializing concept of Japaneseness and any such idea that a cultural identity could possibly transcend time.

This is a point that Amino developed further and made repeatedly during the next fifteen years, and is one that has attracted a wide readership. In this way, Amino's perspective represents an intellectual and evidence-based inversion to the emotionally based essentialism of nationalists such as Kobayashi Yoshinori and Ishihara Shintarō.

In an essay entitled “Nihon rettō to sono shūhen—<Nihon ron> no genzai” (The Japanese archipelago and its surroundings: “Japan theory” today), which appeared in the

³⁸ Ibid., p. 571.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 581.

same series in which Carol Gluck and Kano Masanao published their essays on modern Japanese historiography, Amino presents in a nutshell the key points and arguments that he spells out in several other books and essays.⁴⁰ He strove to overcome the widely held idea that the Japanese represent a homogeneous people and that in premodern times most commoners (*hyakushō*) cultivated rice paddies. However rice remained a sacred grain used by cultivators as offerings to deities, taxes, seed grain, and for trade. Yet because of the importance of rice to the state, it considered all commoners (*hyakushō*) to be farmers. This certainly was not the case. With over 3,700 islands in the Japanese archipelago, the sea played an enormous role in the economy and culture of the peoples who lived there. Not to be forgotten are the other people who produced non-agricultural products and who engaged in various trade and service industries all vital to the premodern state and economy. With these and further points, Amino made it clear that premodern society simply did not fit modern notions of cultural and ethnic homogeneity, and in doing so challenged notions of what it meant to be Japanese.

He did not stop there. Because the word “Nihon” did not exist before the late seventh or early eighth centuries, it does not make sense to speak of Japan or the Japanese before this time. Once the word did appear, it had meaning only for the aristocracy, and even then it had only a limited meaning. Even more provocatively, Amino argued that there existed two states, east and west, at least until the Kamakura period. After that, trade with China and Korea continued in ways that made the

⁴⁰ Amino Yoshihiko, “Nihon rettō to sono shūhen—<Nihon ron> no genzai” (The Japanese archipelago and its surroundings: “Japan theory” today), in *Iwanami kōza Nihon tsūshi*, vol. 1, *Nihon rettō to jinrui shakai* (The Japanese archipelago and its people and society) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1993), pp. 5-37.

boundaries of Japan unclear, and it was not until much later that a consciousness of the Japanese state took root in the furthest western and eastern parts of the archipelago.

The evidence that Amino accumulated to make his argument was enormous. Yet he was no simple collector of antiquities, and in the end, he challenged the current practices both of “scientific” history as he and his colleagues understood it and of ethnography. Amino did not advocate the complete abandonment of previous historiography but rather a judicious winnowing. The results, however, continue to challenge contemporary concepts of Japanese identity and of Japan itself. He asserted this clearly when he wrote:

[I]t is time to throw away baseless “structuralism,” accept the accurate parts of previous research, and create new concepts and theories that accept the multiplicity of human societies and states. Based on this, it is now time to reposition the societies and various states that existed on the Japanese archipelago.⁴¹

⁴¹ Amino Yoshihiko, “Nihon rettō to sono shūhen,” pp. 24-25.

From Feudal Fishing Villagers to an Archipelago's Peoples: the Historiographical Journey of Amino Yoshihiko (2005) by William Johnston. The contents of this page are sourced from Wikipedia article. A cursory tour of the archipelago reveals that each island has its own unique form of architecture. If there is any similarity between them, it is that each race builds in a manner that is stubbornly at odds with the immediate environment. On rocky hillsides there are wooden huts and in wooded valleys, towns of brick. At the centre of the archipelago, perhaps in the most favoured spot of all, lies an island that has been deserted for many generations. There is no obvious reason for its abandonment; it has good soil, plenty of freshwater, two natural ports and a climate no more or less suitable to the raising of crops than its neighbour's. But no birds circle overhead and no lights come on in the evenings. It has not always been like this. Archipelagos, Institute of Marine Conservation, is a Greek non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to conservation of the marine and terrestrial environments of the Greek seas and islands. Archipelagos has been active since 1998 in several parts of the Greek seas (Ionian, Sporades, Central Aegean, Lybian and Eastern Aegean). Since 2000, Archipelagos' field of action has focused on the eastern Aegean. Our main terrestrial research base is located on the island of Ikaria and our main marine research base is on the island of Samos, while we also provide research stations in 3 isl