

FOREWORD TO “MEDIEVAL JAPANESE CONSTRUCTIONS OF PEACE AND LIBERTY: MUEN, KUGAI, AND RAKU”

Eiji Sakurai

University of Tokyo

E-mail sakura@fusehime.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp

Yoshihiko Amino is an historian who has perhaps exerted a greater influence than any other on Japanese historical scholarship from the latter part of the twentieth century down to the present. He specialized in Japanese medieval history. He always saw himself as an historian first and foremost, and all his life strove to base his work on sound empirical proof. Yet his ground-breaking work, which overturned many commonly held assumptions about Japanese history, had an impact far beyond academic circles. His topics were wide-ranging – including the history of the *shōen* (private estate) system, urban history, industrial history, the history of sea-faring peoples, women’s history, and the history of the emperor system – and his work has influenced, not only those concerned with Japanese thought and literature, but also the world of film, and he has won broad popular support from among readers. He is rare among historians in Japan in that his name is so widely recognized.

Amino was born into a banking family in Yamanashi prefecture, in central Japan in 1928, the youngest of five children. After graduating in Japanese history from the University of Tokyo in 1950, he joined the Institute for the Study of Japanese Folk Culture and then taught in the social sciences department of the Kitazono Senior High School in Tokyo. In 1967 he was appointed an associate professor at Nagoya University, and from 1980 to 1998 he worked as a professor in the Junior College division of Kanagawa University and also as a specially appointed professor in that university’s Economics faculty. He died in 2004 at the age of 76. During his lifetime he produced more than forty books, and wrote close to one thousand articles, essays, and reviews.

He wrote *Muen, kugai, raku – Nihon chūsei no jiyū to heiwa* (*Muen, kugai, raku – Medieval Japanese Constructions of Peace and Liberty*) in 1978, at the age of 50. As its subtitle denotes, in it he traces the history of the notions of liberty and peace in Japan from the earliest period down to the present day, looking at Japan at a time before European ideas had influenced it and finding out how specifically Japanese ideas of liberty and peace had developed from entirely different origins. Japan, like other regions of the world, had places of asylum or sanctuary of various kinds. In the Edo period, there were special temples women could take refuge in to flee from an unhappy marriage, and from there seek divorce, and Amino discovered vestiges of this in some modern children’s games. He then

went on to demonstrate, using a wide variety of historical documents, that places and people that could be characterized through the concept of asylum existed in many places in medieval Japan and before. These he designated, using terms current in medieval documents, as *muen*, *kugai*, and *raku* places and people. Further, Amino extracted, as the principle underlying *muen*, a denial of lord–vassal relationships and of private ownership; these too were what supported the existence of places of asylum. Here he found a very Japanese conception of liberty and peace.

Amino looked at Japanese history from the time before the principle of *muen* was recognized in society (a time he described as “primitive *muen*”), down to the period between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, when he found *muen* was consciously understood. It was during this latter time that in Europe too the ideas of freedom, peace and equality came to be formulated, to provide a dynamic force later in the establishment of civil society. Amino sees the post-sixteenth-century period as a time when the principle of *muen* began to deteriorate and follow a backwards course, yet, he asserted, it was never completely extinguished. It continues to possess a vitality even today and can act as a marker as we move toward the future.

This work made Amino’s name famous, but it did not necessarily elicit positive reviews at first. Amino had previously attracted considerable scholarly attention with a work on the Mongol invasions, published as a volume in a series of works about Japanese history put out by Shogakkan in 1974. Marxist historians, who comprised the mainstream of Japanese historiography at the time (and among whom Amino counted himself as one), were as scathing in their criticism of *Muen*, *kugai*, *raku* as they had praised the former work. In 1987, nine years after the initial publication, he published a greatly expanded version of the work in an effort to answer this criticism. By this time, though, it was clear to all that Marxist historiography was on the wane, and the expanded work finally attracted the high esteem in which it continues to be held today.

Amino always considered himself to be a Marxist historian and it is a fact that his idea of “primitive *muen*” was inspired by the “primitive communal society” that Marx wrote of in his letter to Vera Zasulich. Today, serious studies are beginning to be made of Amino’s life and work, and certainly the book *Muen*, *kugai*, *raku* provides one of the most important keys to understanding the development of his ideas. The article translated here is only one chapter of twenty-three, and though a summary of the most important points, inevitably cannot give the reader a full understanding of the book’s rich contents. Nevertheless it is a welcome addition to the English literature on Amino, and I hope it will be of help in introducing a wider readership to the work of this outstanding historian.

Translated by Gaynor Sekimori