



## Travels in the North

Not all the Japanese explorers of the 1860s and 1870s went abroad. Both the islands of Hokkaidō and the Chishima (Kuril) archipelago to the north, and the Ryūkyū Islands far to the south, though considered to be Japanese territory, awaited exploration by Japanese from the three main islands. It is true that there had been Japanese settlers at Matsumae and a few nearby places in Hokkaidō, and the remoter regions to the north had been explored by such men as Mamiya Rinzō (1775–1844), but the first person to leave writings of literary interest about the area was Matsuura Takeshirō (1818–1888), who emerges from his diaries as an appealing figure and a strong and persuasive advocate of justice for the Ainu.

During the course of his lifetime Matsuura visited every one of the sixty-eight provinces of Japan, and left diaries describing most. He was born in Ise in 1818 and from an early age was stirred by the urge to travel and by an almost equally strong urge to become a Buddhist priest. At the age of twelve he entered the private school of a Confucian scholar in Tsu where he acquired the knowledge of the Chinese classics displayed in his diaries, both in his allusions to Chinese literature and in the *kanshi* he composed during the journeys.

Matsuura's travels began in 1833 when he went to Edo for further study, taking advantage on the way home of the opportunity to travel in the mountains of central Japan. From then on, most of his time was spent on his journeys. In 1838, while in Nagasaki, he fell seriously ill, and recovered owing to the care of a Zen priest. In gratitude (but also because he had long aspired to become a priest), Matsuura was ordained as a Zen priest at the age of twenty-one. The first temple he was assigned was on the island of Hirado, and this inspired him to travel to other islands in the Japan Sea including Iki and Tsushima. He wanted to go on to Korea, but an acquaintance, an elderly scholar, urged him to go instead to the north where, because of Japanese indifference, the Russians were gradually making encroachments.

About this time Matsuura learned that during his long absence from home (apparently he never wrote or received letters) both his parents had died. He returned to Ise and in 1844 held services for them. He also visited the Great Shrine of Ise. Buddhist priests were forbidden to worship at the shrine, so Matsuura wore a wig to conceal his shaven head. While there he announced—for reasons he did not reveal—that he had renounced his profession of Buddhist priest. Henceforth he would be an explorer.

In 1845 Matsuura made his first journey to Ezo (Hokkaidō). The local Japanese authorities were strict about allowing casual visitors into the domain. In order to allay their suspicions, he obtained credentials as a merchant. He visited the north three times between 1845 and 1850, not only the parts of Hokkaidō already familiar to the Japanese but the southern part of Sakhalin (Karafuto) and the islands of Kunashiri, Etorofu, and Shikotan in the Kuril chain. He became fluent in Ainu, which helped him enormously in his explorations.

In 1853, when a Russian fleet arrived at Nagasaki with the declared purpose of establishing the boundary between Russian and Japanese territory on Sakhalin, Matsuura's opinions, as an expert on the north, were eagerly sought by patriots, and he went to Kyoto to discuss with members of the nobility the best ways to protect Japan

from the menace of foreign intrusion. By this time he was a convinced believer in *jōi* (expel the barbarians!), an attitude he seems never to have renounced.

Matsuura returned to Sakhalin in 1856 and single-handedly explored the interior. At the end of the year he was stricken with so serious an illness that for a time he expected to die, but he fortunately recovered, and soon resumed his explorations with undiminished energy. His diaries, which narrate his travels from 1856 to 1858 (though they were not published for another five or more years), are of exceptional interest, not only for his descriptions of the places he visited but for what they revealed about him. He does not state why he made these dangerous journeys, but he probably hoped to reaffirm Japanese possession of the northern islands.

*Kita Ezo Yoshi* (Additional Account of Northern Ezo) opens with a brief statement of the proposed itinerary. The party of eight men, including both Japanese and Ainu, would cross over to Sakhalin from Sōya, and after exploring the west coast, make their way to the east coast. Matsuura anticipated that the journey would present extreme hazards, and for this reason restricted the size of the party. It was essential to travel light, and he prescribed exactly what each man would be allowed to carry in the way of clothing and other equipment. The list began:

Item. Clothes to be carried are a short jacket (*hanten*), breeches (*momohiki*), underwear, and a cotton garment (*mempuku*). No cloak. A rain hat, a sash three feet long, an oiled rain cape. Straw sandals to be carried at the waist. However, night clothes are not allowed. For this purpose, each person is to carry one padded garment.

Item. Each person should carry a teacup and a pair of chopsticks. A walking stick is optional.

Item. A candle, a bamboo match-cord, birch chips and spills should be carried.<sup>1</sup>

Other permitted items included a hand towel, flintstones, a fan, and medicine. After the last of the seven articles Matsuura wrote, "Absolutely nothing that is not specified above is to be carried."<sup>2</sup> This would not be a journey of the kind described by the famous diarists of the past, nor a state-sponsored mission of the kind that would soon be sent to distant countries, but a painful and possibly dangerous encounter with the harshest aspects of nature found in Japanese territory.

Japanese who traveled to Europe or America at the end of the shogunate period generally provided themselves with Japanese food to eat on the journey, but when Matsuura and his companions were about to set off for Sakhalin he warned them, "Nothing will be easy on this trip. You will have to eat what the natives eat—fish, grass roots, and whatever else the country provides. But in order to comfort yourselves a little psychologically, you are allowed to take along one bag of rice and a cup of salt."<sup>3</sup>

At various places in his diaries Matsuura described in detail what he ate. In *Shiribeshi Nisshi* (Daily Record of Shiribeshi), the account of a journey in the first month of 1858, there occurs an unforgettable description of a meal of bear meat. Matsuura and his Ainu guides were tired and hungry. They came to a cave that looked like a bear's den, but there was no sign of a bear. They decided to spend the night. Then, perhaps by way of diversion from the grimness of the journey, Matsuura wrote on the wall a *kanishi* in which he described his weariness and his eagerness to eat a bear's paw, a dish often praised by the Chinese as the ultimate delicacy.

The Ainu could not read what he had written and asked what it said. Matsuura answered, no doubt in jest, that he wanted to eat a bear. They replied with the utmost seriousness, "If you are so eager to eat a bear, sir, we'll catch one for you." The four Ainu thereupon set off for the mountains, bows and arrows in hands. That evening they returned not with a bear but with four badgers. The next day, while Matsuura rested in the cave during a fierce snowstorm, the Ainu

again went off into the mountains and returned this time with two badgers and four weasels. But that day they had seen bear tracks, and they knew that a bear was nearby. Here follows Matsuura's description of how they killed and ate the bear:

I climbed up to a high place about forty or fifty yards away and watched. The men thrust pointed sticks into the cave, but the bear remained inside, roaring in anger. The dogs wagged their tails joyfully, two of them dancing around as if they meant to enter the cave; but the Ainu, restraining them, fired three or four poison arrows inside. This made the bear roar all the more furiously, until I thought that the cave would collapse under the reverberations. Then the men, clearing a path in the snow, drove the dogs into the cave. The bear grew all the more crazed as the poison began to take effect, and came roaring out of the cave, heading directly at Tonenbaku. But he, not in the slightest perturbed, cried out, "Damn you, *heureho!*" (The natives call a bear cub a *heureho*, and always use this word when confronting a bear.) He got his arm firmly around the neck of the bear which, though its strength was visibly failing, continued to shake and roar. Tonenbaku drew his knife and thrust the point in from under the bear's legs all the way to the ribs. His skill was really astonishing.<sup>4</sup>

When the other Ainu saw that Tonenbaku had killed the bear, they at once set about cutting up the meat. First, they offered some to the gods of the mountains and sea. Next, they dragged the carcass into the cave where they had spent the previous night, and proceeded to devour the meat, raw or grilled. Matsuura wrote, "The fresh blood froze to their beards, and their hands were stained with blood. They looked exactly like devils in paintings. It was a terrifying sight."<sup>5</sup>

Matsuura did not say whether or not he ate any of the bear meat he had so lightheartedly requested. The sight he describes was horrifying enough to take away the appetite of even a very hungry man.

But on other occasions he ate Ainu food, though he did not necessarily enjoy it. For example, here is his description of some millet dumplings he ate: "The way they make it is to pound millet into a powder, mix it with flour made of lily root, add salmon roe, roll it into balls, and then boil them. They gave them to me just as they were, but the natives fry them in deep fish oil. The taste is extremely unusual."<sup>6</sup>

He also related how he was invited to a meal by an *otona* (headman), and used this experience to poke fun at Japanese who refused to eat Ainu food: "They went out and brought back some viper grass and mountain arum root which they cooked for me. They said as they served it that this was the potato of the natives. It tasted delicious. They said the Japanese refuse to eat it, because they think it is poisonous, but they informed me that if you remove the hard part at the core it is not in the least poisonous. I ate seven or eight for lunch without the slightest ill effect."<sup>7</sup>

On still another occasion he was invited to dinner by an elderly *otona* whom he described in these terms: "The *otona* Arayuku (seventy-four years old) wore a wide-sleeved kimono of Ōsugi pale green damask, and a jacket of Santan<sup>8</sup> brocade. Two boys stood by his side, one holding his sword and the other his tobacco pouch . . . His white hair fell over his shoulders. He stroked his reddish beard, which all but covered his knees. He came out to meet me, leaning on a stick. His appearance was imposing, and he seemed every inch the chief of a fiefdom."<sup>9</sup>

When all the guests were seated, the second son of the chief greeted Matsuura with Ainu words that meant, "It's been a long time, hasn't it?" Everyone was surprised that the man should have known Matsuura, but the chief's son explained to the others that in 1856 they had traveled together to remote parts of the country. Then, "he came before me and politely expressed his thanks for my kindness at that time. I, too, thought it was truly extraordinary to meet here someone I had known deep in the mountains, and I was feeling happy about this when the second son, addressing the others in the

gathering, said, "This gentleman has been all the way to Orokko,<sup>10</sup> Santan, and Taraika,"<sup>11</sup> at which everybody showed me greater respect than ever."<sup>12</sup>

Dinner consisted of choice cuts of bear meat, deer intestines, and slices of frozen salmon. Naturally, there was also plenty to drink. Matsuura was clearly a member of the gathering, not an observer. The Ainu were his friends and he was happy to share their food, as he would share his food with them. There is no suggestion of condescension in his attitude: he never appears to be congratulating himself on his willingness to eat at the table of inferiors. Unlike those Japanese whose fear of being poisoned made them refuse to eat certain Ainu dishes, it was obvious to Matsuura that if food was actually poisonous it would kill the Ainu as well as the Japanese. No doubt Matsuura had to overcome many prejudices before he could enjoy an Ainu meal, but he made the effort, and in the end he unaffectedly joined in the pleasure of a feast with them.

Matsuura was able to a remarkable degree to enter the lives of the Ainu and frequently expressed his admiration for them. His travels would have been impossible without their help, and his life was in their hands when they traveled through dangerous places. Again and again he found refuge in their homes. He was impressed by their bravery and fortitude, but (contrary to the general belief of Japanese at the time), he also found them intelligent, and he devoted many pages of his diaries to describing their generous actions. When something puzzled or disturbed Matsuura during his travels, he would always turn to the Ainu for guidance. On his journey to Shiribetsu, for example, he was overjoyed to find water after five days of thirst, but when he drank the water, it was bitter. He asked an Ainu why this was so, and was told, "The water is bitter because it comes from a mountain where *todo*<sup>13</sup> and Ezo pines grow. Water from mountains with birches, walnut trees, and ginger plants tastes sweet.' Now that I heard the reason, it certainly seemed so. Water from mountains with *todo* and pines even looks a little different—rather sooty. The natives

have investigated even such things. This was not the only thing I have learned from them. I have again and again benefited by their knowledge."<sup>14</sup>

No one has ever described his countrymen more harshly than Matsuura in his work *Kinsei Ezo Jimbutsu Shi* (Account of Ezo People in Recent Times). He gave example after example of Ainu who, because of their simple goodness, had been exploited by the Japanese, who possessed the power to make the Ainu obey. For example, once, when Matsuura and his companions were traveling in Sakhalin and needed a place to spend the night, they asked for shelter at the house of an old man who gladly took them in. After a time, when it had become dark, the old man took down from a shelf a five-stringed koto, which he played as he sang. Matsuura was struck by the man's devotion to music and asked another Ainu about him. He was told, "Many melodies were preserved from ancient times on this island, but because we were forced by the *unjōya*<sup>15</sup> to work in the fishery, and had to do this so often, the number of people who could still play the music rapidly decreased until finally there was nobody left at all. The only one who still plays it in the bay region is this old man."<sup>16</sup>

Before he left, Matsuura was presented with an old koto and told, "The Ezo people who lived around this bay long ago used to play this instrument to soothe their feelings, but now there is no time to enjoy it. Ever since they established the *unjōya*, we have done forced labor all year round. You can tell from the fact that nobody can play this instrument anymore just how bitter our lives have been. When next some gentleman comes here from the country they call Edo, please tell him of this."<sup>17</sup>

In Matsuura's stories of the Ainu of recent times, the agents of the Japanese presence in the north figure as destroyers of Ainu culture, merciless exploiters of the Ainu men, and brutal seducers of the

Ainu women. He related the stories of three Ainu women who had been the victims of the Japanese. The first, an old woman with two daughters, had been left to live alone in the mountains. Her elder daughter, Peratoruka, had attracted the attention of a Japanese guard named Toramatsu, who tried in every way to get her to yield to him. He arranged to have Peratoruka's husband sent to a distant fishing ground, and took Peratoruka with him to his own fishing ground. In the end, Peratoruka had no choice but to do what Toramatsu demanded. Her sister was also separated from their mother, and her sons were forced to work for the Japanese. When one of the sons asked an official for permission to visit his grandmother, the Japanese cursed him and declared, "What need have you to visit an old woman who's been left in the mountains because she can't work any longer? She's in the mountains—let her live as she pleases in the mountains, and then let her croak."<sup>18</sup> The brutality of the man might seem unbelievable if Matsuura had not furnished many instances of similar behavior. The various officials did not treat the Ainu like human beings.

Matsuura's attitude toward the Ainu was quite unlike that of most Japanese of the time. In every instance he sympathized with them. He saw how the houses in their villages were dwindling in numbers, and records with unflinching honesty the poverty that was too terrible to behold. He seems to have thought of the Ainu rather as Europeans of the eighteenth century thought of the "noble savage." Voltaire, in his play *Alzire*, set in Peru at the time of the Spanish conquest, expressed his belief in the moral superiority of the civilization of the defeated people to the brute force of the conquerors' civilization. Later, in the nineteenth century, James Fenimore Cooper portrayed American Indians who, though they lacked the benefits of a European education, were not only brave but heroic, and fully possessed of moral integrity. Matsuura's Ainu knew nothing of Confucian teachings, but they displayed filial piety naturally. They were friendly and generous toward the Japanese, though the latter treated

them like animals, and the special warmth they showed Matsuura was a sign of the gratitude they felt toward a Japanese who had taken the trouble to learn their language and customs.

Matsuura never forgot, however, that he was Japanese, and constantly worried over the possibility that the Russians might deprive Japan of its northern possessions. He remembered with respect his predecessors as explorers of Ezo, especially Kondō Morishige, Mogami Tokunai, and Mamiya Rinzō, and he listened eagerly when some aged Ainu recalled having seen these men. Like them, he desired nothing more than to strengthen Japanese control over the region, but unlike them, he did not think of the Ainu as a people unrelated to the Japanese. Again and again he pointed out instances of the cultural kinship between the two peoples. The Ainu, he declared in a diary, preserved the ancient Japanese language and customs even better than the Japanese themselves. He found that the Ainu place-names sometimes included words relating to Shinto religious rites,<sup>19</sup> and wrote about some Ainu dances he had witnessed, "I was moved with gratitude, indeed so overcome that words cannot describe it, to think that the manner of dancing of the capital has survived here, in a corner of Chishima."<sup>20</sup>

The old Ainu culture, exemplified by the legends related in the *yukari*, the epic poems that were recited for hours at a time, also appealed to Matsuura, as we know from the mentions of recitations scattered throughout his diary, such as the following: "I spent the night in the shade of a mountain. I gave the natives sake, and they enjoyed it all night long; sitting around a bonfire. A man named Samemon sang *yukari*, and everybody happily joined in the refrain. Their pleasure was extreme and lasted until dawn, without anyone feeling in the least the severe cold emanating from the eternal snow."<sup>21</sup> Matsuura was probably the first Japanese to take pleasure in these songs. But much of the old Ainu culture was being rapidly destroyed. Matsuura, after describing the traditional Ainu dyeing, wrote, "I thought there wasn't anyone any longer who knew the

method of dyeing, but I was deeply impressed to hear that it still survives in these mountains.”<sup>22</sup>

The lament for disappearing arts is a familiar strain in the accounts of people who seem doomed to extinction. The Japanese had hastened the end of the Ainu by sending the able-bodied men to the coastal settlements or distant fishing grounds, taking the women for their wives; and in many once-prosperous villages only the old and infirm were left. Matsuura heard that the population of one village had been halved during the fifty years since the Japanese first exercised control of the region. His informant commented, “If things go on in this way, I worry about what will happen to the native race in another twenty years.”<sup>23</sup>

Matsuura did not, on the other hand, shrink from describing the unpleasant aspects of his life among the Ainu. During his travels in the Tokachi region, for example, he had what he described as the worst experience of any journey:

One thing that bothered us was that for some time we had all been suffering from diarrhea and had to relieve ourselves often. The toilets of the natives consist of nothing more than two thick pieces of wood laid parallel in the middle of the fields. One squats on these to do one’s business. There is no roof, no walls around it, nothing at all. Tonight it was raining, so [without going into the fields], I stepped outside and somewhere or other exposed my behind. At once some dogs, soaking wet and intending to eat my excrement, thrust their muzzles under my behind and fought, biting one another, to see who would get first choice. The wet hair of their muzzles brushed against my behind, splashing mud over it and also over my crotch and my clothes. There was nothing I could do about this nuisance.<sup>24</sup>

One is reminded of Takezoe Shin’ichirō’s account of a toilet at a Chinese inn.

Travel in the north was extremely unpleasant most of the time. During much of the year (and not only in the winter months) it was bitterly cold. Matsuura’s description of a journey made in the snow at the beginning of the second month (early in March in the solar calendar) is memorable:

The ground is so muddy underfoot that sometimes one sinks all the way down to one’s hips. The pain is indescribable. The wind is not a wind from this or that direction but something that swoops like a whirlwind, blowing up the snow. One feels as if one’s face has been slashed open; one’s hands and feet feel no sensation; and one’s mouth won’t move. The sky, which has been perfectly clear, turns dark in a moment, then bright again the next moment. There is no accounting for the transformations. When I looked off to the right, the place I was to go looked like a head with an *ebōshi* on top, and below it was a sheer drop of several hundred *jō*.<sup>25</sup> I thought that if I were blown over by the wind I would fall to the bottom of the valley. I still shudder in body and spirit at the thought of that precipitous cliff. But even if I get past the dangerous places today, what kind of places await me farther on?<sup>26</sup>

Even in summer it was chilly in the mountains, and Matsuura and his companions were otherwise tormented by insects—mosquitoes, horseflies, flies, gnats—that often kept them from sleeping. Wild animals made the journey dangerous. In *Shiretoko Nikki* (Shiretoko Diary) he wrote, “When it got dark, bears came from their hiding places and ate with a crunching sound the fish bones we had thrown away. It was a desolate sound.”<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere, wolves passed close by them:

“Two or three wolves began to howl furiously at a place that I estimated was four or five hundred yards away. Their howling was somehow even more unearthly, more desolate than the roaring of a bear. As the wind blew through the rushes, it occurred to me that

perhaps the wolves were hungry in the snow and would come to eat our food. I could not sleep."<sup>28</sup>

Matsuura was deeply attached to Ezo, despite the hardships of the life. He mentions several times his excitement, upon looking at a landscape, to realize that it was as big as a whole province in other parts of Japan. Most unusually for a Japanese of that time, when he heard of some mountain that had never been climbed, he was eager to be the first to conquer it, however difficult the ascent.<sup>29</sup> Ezo was a land of adventure for Matsuura, but more than the wonderful, unspoiled scenery, it was the Ainu who drew him back.

He was not the only visitor to Ezo who was charmed by the Ainu. Isabella Bird, who claimed to have been the first European woman to have made a foray into the country of the aborigines, referred to the Ainu as savages, but was obviously entranced by them. She wrote of one of the first Ainu men she saw, "I think I never saw a face more completely beautiful in features and expression, with a lofty, sad, far-off, gentle, intellectual look . . . His manner was most grateful, and he spoke both Ainu and Japanese in the low musical tone which I find is a characteristic of Ainu speech."<sup>30</sup>

Later, when she crossed a river, two Ainu men helped her. She wrote, "They were superb-looking men, gentle, and extremely courteous, handing me in and out of the boat, and holding the stirrups while I mounted, with much natural grace. On leaving, they extended their arms and waved their hands inwards twice, stroking their grand beards afterwards, which is their usual salutation."<sup>31</sup>

Miss Bird spent three days and two nights in an Ainu hut, not (as in Matsuura's case) because she needed shelter from the elements, but because she was boundlessly curious about people. Her mixed feelings about the Ainu were summed up in one long sentence:

They have no history, their traditions are scarcely worthy the name, they claim descent from a dog, their houses and persons swarm with vermin, they have no letters or numbers above a thousand, they are clothed in the bark of trees and the un-

tanned skins of beasts, they worship the bear, the sun, moon, fire, water, and I know not what, they are uncivilisable and altogether irreclaimable savages, yet they are attractive, and in some ways fascinating, and I hope I shall never forget the music of their low, sweet voices, the soft light of their mild, brown eyes, and the wonderful sweetness of their smile.<sup>32</sup>

Miss Bird was mistaken when she pronounced the Ainu to be "uncivilisable," but she was sincere when she described what in the Ainu so attracted her. Matsuura does not mention the voices, the eyes, or the smiles of the Ainu, but the attraction these people exerted over him is no less evident. The most remarkable sentence in his diaries occurs after mention of his arrival at the Japanese settlement in Ishikari. "For the first time in forty-two days I had my hair dressed, took a bath, and lay down under a quilt, but I felt as if I had lost my humanity."<sup>33</sup> One would have imagined that for a Japanese, indeed, for any civilized man, a bath and clean clothes after forty-two days of dirt would be heaven itself, but Matsuura believed that he had lost something precious. He had once more become Japanese, involved in a Japanese world, and could no longer experience the "real life" of the Ainu, with whom he had traveled as a brother.

Matsuura's writings earned him many enemies among the Japanese officials in Ezo. This was hardly surprising, in view of his attacks on the ruthless actions of the various oppressors of the Ainu, some of whom he named. One official with whom he remained on good terms was Muragaki, the governor of Awaji, who was stationed in Hakodate, the main Japanese settlement in Hokkaidō, before going to America, and later returned to this post.

Matsuura did not go back to Ezo after the Meiji Restoration, but he had the distinction of giving the main island its name, Hokkaidō—North Sea Island. Perhaps his enemies were too strong, but perhaps also he feared that the Ainu way of life he had loved no longer existed.