

Comments on Iwasaki Yoshitaka's "Freedmen in the Indian Territory after the Civil War: The Dual Approaches of the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations"

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Introduction

My assignment for this session is to make a brief comment on Mr. Iwasaki's presentation on "The Negro Question" that arose in two Native American nations, the Choctaw and the Chickasaw, after the Civil War. First of all, I commend Mr. Iwasaki for choosing a topic on freedmen who once lived in Native American nations, because almost no Japanese historian until today has ever researched or given a presentation focusing on those people. It is appropriate to say that the reason why most Japanese historians have overlooked freedmen in Native nations is that both scholars of Native American history and those of African American history have usually devoted their energies only to the disclosure of historical relations between Native Americans and Euro-Americans or between African Americans and Euro-Americans. Nevertheless, attention to the historical relations between Native Americans and African Americans is recently growing rapidly as a field of academic research in the United States because the notion has come to be widely accepted that knowledge of various historical relations between minority groups is indispensable when historians write a more comprehensive and multilayered American history.¹ Therefore, I'm sure that Mr. Iwasaki's intriguing and informative presentation was a good introduction of the field to Japanese scholars who are interested in Native American history, African American history, and the history of Native American-African American relations as well as the broader history of Reconstruction.

Outline of the Presentation

Before I make comments on Mr. Iwasaki's presentation and raise some questions, let me summarize his presentation first.

In his introduction, Mr. Iwasaki listed the main questions he would answer in his study as follows: "Why did the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations treat their Freedmen more severely than the three other nations, and why did the Choctaw

and Chickasaw differ in their policies over the ‘The Negro Question,’ that is, how to treat Freedmen?” Prior to considering these questions, Mr. Iwasaki outlined the history of African slavery among the Chickasaw and the Choctaw nations in the first section of the presentation. In his historical sketch, Mr. Iwasaki explained that before their removal to the Indian Territory both nations began to acquire African slaves following the example of their Euro-American neighbors in the Southern States and during their removal they brought their African slaves to the Indian Territory, now Oklahoma, with them. And he pointed out that only a handful of elite or “mixed blood” Chickasaw and Choctaw planters owned most African slaves within both nations. Then Mr. Iwasaki explained that although both the Chickasaw and the Choctaw nations, like the other three so-called “Civilized Tribes,” the Cherokees, the Creeks, and the Seminoles, were guaranteed autonomy by treaties concluded with the U. S. government, they were required to emancipate their African slaves and to grant them citizenship by the U. S. government after the Civil War if those ex-slaves chose to remain in each nation. And Mr. Iwasaki also explained that most of the ex-slaves of each nation chose not to leave but to remain where they were because many of them saw the nations as their homelands.

In the second and the third sections of the presentation, Mr. Iwasaki examined the historical process of the post-Civil War treatment of the freedmen in the Chickasaw nation and the Choctaw nation separately to consider the questions he raised in the introduction. In the second section, following the explanation of political controversies over “the Negro Question” in the Chickasaw nation, Mr. Iwasaki insisted that the reason the Chickasaw government resisted granting full citizenship to freedmen was their strong fear of infiltration by Euro-Americans and freed African Americans from outside which would cause a rapid growth of the non-Chickasaw population within the nation. He also asserted that the Chickasaw government was trying to control the non-Chickasaw population, especially to protect the livelihood of small-scale, poor “full blood” farmers from non-Chickasaw newcomers’ demands for farmland. “Full blood” Chickasaws were the majority of the nation at that time and supported their government firmly.

In the third section of the presentation, after explaining the political divisions between the Eagle Party or “progressives” and the Buzzard Party or “conservatives” that had developed in the Choctaw nation and their different attitudes toward “the Negro Question,” Mr. Iwasaki offered the following four reasons for the Choctaw nation’s decision to grant the freedmen citizenship. The first was that the Eagle Party, which mainly consisted of rich, “mixed blood” Choctaws who were planters and landholders, tended to welcome the increase in labor power and economic growth brought by the non-Choctaw population and seized the initiative of the Choctaw government when the decision was made. The second was that the U. S. government which had substantially treated the Choctaw nation and the Chickasaw nation as a single nation for years and had

demanded that both nations act in unison over "the Negro Question" after the Civil War changed its policy and permitted them to make their own decisions over the treatment of freedmen. The third was that the Choctaws were concerned about the migration movement which had been promoted by the U. S. government to settle freedmen on "the leased district"—land partitioned from the Indian Territory for freedmen's use—and feared that "a Negro Colony" would be formed close to their territory and that it would become a dangerous threat to the nation. The final reason was the supposed influence of abolitionism which missionaries had brought into the Choctaw nation. There was a possibility that some members of the Eagle Party were committed to it and had sympathy for the freedmen's fate.

Finally, in his conclusion Mr. Iwasaki summed up the findings of his study, insisting that the difference between the Chickasaw nation and the Choctaw nation on "the Negro Question" originated from the difference of political initiatives. The Chickasaw government acted in accordance with the wishes of the poorer "full blood" majority in contrast to the Choctaw government that was controlled by the richer "mixed blood" elites. But at the same time, Mr. Iwasaki did not forget to emphasize that an attitude of racial discrimination toward freedmen was shared by both nations.

Comments and Questions on the Presentation

Now, I would like to make some comments on Mr. Iwasaki's presentation and offer a few questions about it. First of all, as I mentioned before, in his introduction Mr. Iwasaki raised two questions he attempted to answer in his study. First, why did the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations treat their freedmen more severely than the Cherokee, the Creek, and the Seminole nations? Second, why did the Choctaw and Chickasaw differ in their policies on 'the Negro Question'? But it seems to me that Mr. Iwasaki has not fully answered the first question in his presentation. Even though in his introduction he explained that the other three nations granted citizenship to their freedmen right after the Civil War and in the second section he also pointed out how the Chickasaws and the Choctaws were discriminatory to the freedmen as exemplified by examples of plunder, mob violence, and even lynchings committed by Chickasaw tribesmen, he did not mention a word about the situation of freedmen in the other three nations for comparison, except for the fact of granted citizenships.² Therefore I could not judge whether the Choctaw and the Chickasaw nations really treated their freedmen more severely than other nations, especially when I look at the facts that the Chickasaw nation granted citizenship to freedmen even though it was nominal and the Choctaw nation granted citizenship to freedmen in the end. Though I must admit that I don't know much about the case of the Creeks, as far as I know, the Cherokees also treated their freedmen with discrimination, even though they granted citizenship to their ex-slaves because of the treaty concluded with the U. S. government. This was because most of the contents of the treaty, including the

emancipation clause, were forced by the U. S. government and the Cherokees had no choice but to grant citizenship to their freedmen. But they did so reluctantly.³ On the other hand, the Seminoles who included a substantial number of so-called “Black Seminoles” who had fought against Euro-Americans with the Seminoles before their removal, treated African tribesmen more kindly than the other four nations of “the Five Civilized Tribes.” But still the Seminoles did not consider “Black Seminoles” to be equal to them and had discriminatory feelings toward “Black Seminoles”.⁴ Therefore, what differences among “the Five Civilized Tribes” on their “Negro Questions” can we find when we compare one case to another? This is my first question.

I will move on to the next comment and question. In his historical sketch of Chickasaw and the Choctaw slavery in the first section of his presentation, Mr. Iwasaki insisted that generally, the Chickasaw and the Choctaw slaveholders treated their slaves moderately before the emancipation exemplifying testimonies of ex-slaves which superficially recollected the period of their enslavement in a good light.⁵ But I wonder how much we can rely on those testimonies. Of course, I understand there is an interpretation that the African slaver practices by Native Americans were milder than those of Euro-Americans.⁶ Still I think we should be cautious about this kind of generalization because the severity of slavery was comparative and there were always exceptions.⁷ So if we want to judge it, there should be a good counterpart, slavery practiced by Euro-Americans in this case, and more evidence for comparison. Then I would like to ask Mr. Iwasaki what was the most distinctive difference we can find between the slavery practiced by the Chickasaws and the Choctaws and slavery as practiced by Euro-Americans.

Let me raise one more question regarding the Chickasaw and the Choctaw attitudes toward Africans, however not before the emancipation but after it. In his conclusion, Mr. Iwasaki pointed out that the racial discrimination after the Civil War was not particular to the Chickasaw nation and was exemplified by the racially segregated school system of the Choctaw nation.⁸ And if the Choctaws were also racially discriminatory toward their ex-slaves after the emancipation as Mr. Iwasaki insisted, then what caused the Choctaws to be so? Mr. Iwasaki only explained the reason for the Chickasaws in the second section of his presentation: the Chickasaws came to blame their freedmen for the disastrous after-effects of the Civil War because the war had been fought, it was argued, to end slavery.⁹ But he did not mention any reason for the Choctaws. I thought Mr. Iwasaki’s explanation about the Chickasaws was intriguing. But I would like to know if there is any special reason for the Choctaws to be also racially discriminatory toward their freedmen after the Civil War. Or was the racial discrimination among Native Americans who were ex-slaveholders a general phenomenon after the emancipation as was so among Euro-American ex-slaveholders?

Now, I move on to the next comment and question. Mr. Iwasaki’s explanation about the plan promoted by the U. S. government to found “a Negro Colony” on

"the leased district"—a land partitioned from the Indian Territory—in which to settle freedmen really touched my curiosity.¹⁰ Therefore I would like to know more about details of the colony, especially the intention of the U. S. government to try to set up a colony especially for freedmen. That kind of colony reminds me of Liberia or the Indian Territory—later Indian reservations. Did the U. S. government plan to found another "Liberia" within U. S. territory as a colony for "unabsorbable" freedmen? Or did the government try to set up another "internment camp" similar to the Indian Territory for "unassimilable" freedmen? In any case, if the intention of the U. S. government was to make a place within U. S. territory to banish people unwelcomed by Euro-American U. S. citizens, I think that "a Negro Colony" would be a comparable example to Indian reservations.

I have one more question regarding "a Negro Colony" and the infiltration of non-Native populations into the Chickasaw and the Choctaw nations. Mr. Iwasaki emphasized the booming African American and Euro-American populations in both nations using statistics and explained that the inproportionate rate of the growing non-Native population, especially within the Chickasaw nation, was the source of the Chickasaw fear of "a Negro Colony" and their refusal to grant citizenship to freedmen.¹¹ Although I agree with this explanation about the Chickasaw "Negro Question," it seems to me that the booming population of Euro-Americans was more of a threat than that of African Americans to the Chickasaw nation. Therefore I wonder if there was really any possibility to exclude Euro-American illegal squatters from their nation as then Chickasaw Governor Overton wanted. And I also wonder if the Chickasaw nation had the power to deport their freedmen and other African American squatters. In my opinion even if it would have been possible to expel African American squatters, it was much more difficult, or maybe impossible, to get rid of Euro-American squatters or Chickasaw freedmen.

Finally, let me offer one more comment and question, although they will be very fundamental. In his conclusion, Mr. Iwasaki listed four findings from his study.¹² But I think that those findings are all mere facts we can find from the surface of historical events. In other words, they are very raw materials which we can use when we analyze the historical meanings of certain events. Then I would like to ask Mr. Iwasaki my final question on his study. That is, what kind of historical meanings can we draw from the comparison of the Chickasaw "Negro Question" and the Choctaw "Negro Question" in a broader historical context? It seems to me that Mr. Iwasaki's conclusion did not fully answer this important question. And I think this is the key point of his study.

Conclusion

Native Americans and African Americans have had extensive contact and made various relations throughout American history. These interactions between

two different human groups have occurred in all areas of the United States including the South, the West, and also the East, and on just about every possible occasion as far back as the colonial period. Although these interactions between Native Americans and African Americans have not always been friendly as Mr. Iwasaki showed with his presentation, we must not hesitate to disclose these historical realities to construct a more comprehensive and multilayered American history. This is because I believe that studies on the historical relations between Native Americans and African Americans as well as between all different minority groups have the potential to be a good means to criticize a simple dichotomic understanding of American history. Before I close my comments, I would like to express appreciation to Mr. Iwasaki once again for his informative research. I am very sure that his presentation today gave us a good chance to touch one of the interesting, but unknown, chapters of American history.

Notes

- 1 One good example of this growing academic attention to the historical relations between Native Americans and African Americans is the publication of results of a conference which was held at Dartmouth College in April 2000 under the title "'Eating Out of the Same Pot': Relating Indian and Black (Hi) story." See James F. Brooks, ed., *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002). For a review of studies on the history of Native American-African American relations in Japanese, see Sato Madoka, "Senju Amerikajin-Afurikakei Amerikajin Kankeishi Kenkyu no Kanosei (The Possibility of Historical Studies on Native American-African American Relations)," *Otsuma Journal of Comparative Culture*, 8 (March 2007): 5-23.
- 2 Iwasaki Yoshitaka, "Freedmen in the Indian Territory after the Civil War: The Dual Approaches of the Choctaw and the Chickasaw Nations," Presentation draft for NASSS 2008, pp. 1, 8-9, 13.
- 3 For further details on the Cherokee freedmen, see Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., *The Cherokee Freedmen: From Emancipation to American Citizenship* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978).
- 4 For further details on "Black Seminoles", see Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., *Africans and Seminoles: From Removal to Emancipation* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977); Kevin Mulroy, *Freedom on the Border: The Seminole Maroons in Florida, the Indian Territory, Coahuila, and Texas* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 1993); idem, *The Seminole Freedmen: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007); and Kenneth W. Porter, *The Black Seminoles: History of a Freedom-Seeking People* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1996).
- 5 Iwasaki, "Freedmen in the Indian Territory after the Civil War," p. 3
- 6 See, for example, Theda Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540-1866* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979), especially chap. 3.
- 7 For instance, in 1842 a group of runaway slaves from the Cherokee and the Choctaw nation joined "Black Seminoles" and made their way to the Rio Grande together, where the

fugitives, whose number finally totaled 600, believed that they would find a town of refuge.
See *ibid*, pp. 82-83, 163-164 n. 30.

8 Iwasaki, "Freedmen in the Indian Territory after the Civil War," p. 13.

9 *Ibid*, pp. 8-9.

10 *Ibid*, p. 5, 6, 11.

11 *Ibid*, pp. 7-9.

12 *Ibid*, pp. 12-13.