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Yasuke's presence in Japanese history and its relation to social mobility

After deciding on my topic for the final research paper, I decided that I would like to write about a samurai named Yasuke and how his presence marked a special time in Japanese history, where all classes benefited from social mobility. In this paper, I would like to focus on how in certain periods of Japanese history those from non-military backgrounds, as well as foreigners were given chances to become samurai, or even benefit from exponential class growth. In fact, in periods such as Japan's Sengoku period, it was not unheard of for mere peasants to become feared and powerful samurai, especially under the command of Oda Nobunaga (Edwards 2015). Though he would be considered more of a slave as opposed to a peasant before his ascension to the rank of samurai, I believe that the writings of Yasuke's life in Japan will express not only how class mobility in the Sengoku period was fluid, but also how even foreigners were given chances to participate in and also mold Japanese history. However, before I get into the bulk of this paper, I would first like to give readers a brief overview of the Sengoku period, and what samurai could be defined as.

Japan's Sengoku period, also known as the "Warring States period" or "Sengoku Jidai", was a hellish period in Japanese history that lasted from the years 1467-1568 CE. While this period in Japanese history was labeled the "Warring States" period, using the term "Warring Family" would not be too far off the mark. This is because of how it was not a rare sight for

samurai to commit acts such as patricide, matricide, or killing their siblings and children in order to gain power. As extremely gruesome and violent as this time period was, the main goal of many samurai during this period was to achieve the unification of Japan. Though the goal of a unified Japan seemed honorable, the number of dead bodies accumulated from the countless number of wars that arose from this goal is truly haunting (Cartwright 2019).

The main characters that participated in these bitter wars to control Japan were warlords known as “daimyo”, or by the term “samurai” which many identify them as (Cartwright 2019). Though originally used to refer to “aristocratic warriors” or “Bushi”, the term samurai eventually became a blanket term that applied to anyone represent by the warrior class in the twelfth century CE (Britannica 2020). Though they were mostly recognized for their ability on the battlefield and knowledge of military tactics, there is also mention of how the disciplined culture of the samurai gave birth to many Japanese arts such as the tea ceremony, or Ikebana (flower arrangement) (Britannica 2020). Though the samurai valued many things, it would be an understatement to just say that the samurai valued honor. Even going to extremes such as ritual suicide (seppuku), or killing one’s own flesh and blood, honor in the eyes of a samurai was akin to life itself and should someone taint their own honor or insult someone else’s, it would not be uncommon for grave consequences to arise from these actions (Britannica 2020). In fact, there is even mention of how someone bringing dishonor upon themselves does not only affect the individual in question but also affects their family, causing them to receive unfavorable treatment and being put at a disadvantage until someone does an action to restore that honor, which could range from killing someone or themselves (Britannica 2020).

Of these samurai, one famous and equally infamous samurai known as Oda Nobunaga played a major role in Japan’s Sengoku period. Also known as the “demon king”, Oda Nobunaga

is known for unifying half of Japan During his time, before ultimately getting betrayed and killed by his subordinate Akechi Mitsuhide (Ebisawa 2021). Though he was regarded as the “fool of Owari”, Oda Nobunaga is often recognized for his open mindset towards innovation, in regard to how he became the first daimyo to utilize muskets in battle (Ebisawa 2021). While he was known for his ruthlessness towards his enemies, it could also be said that Oda Nobunaga helped peasants by allowing them an opportunity to become warriors. This is because of how Oda Nobunaga utilized warriors known as “Ashigaru”, which were peasant foot soldiers (Huffman 2010, 46). Under Nobunaga’s army, there is even mention of how he would properly train his foot soldiers to be able to properly handle themselves on the battlefield, making each of these soldiers a valuable asset to achieving victory in war (Edwards 2015).

When talking about Oda Nobunaga’s innovative mindset, it becomes clear that the Portuguese also played a role in Japanese history, in terms of how Nobunaga would receive rifles from trade with the Portuguese. Other than being known for trading weapons with Japan during the Sengoku period, the Portuguese also sent catholic missionaries known as Jesuits, to spread the Christian faith in Japan. Though their goal of spreading Christianity in Japan went well upon their initial arrival in Japan, history will tell you that this period of welcoming did not last long, as they were kick out of the country around 1620 CE (Ledford 2015). In terms of their presence in the Sengoku period, we can see how these missionaries were an ally to Oda Nobunaga despite his nick name of “demon daimyo”, as he would often trade with them (Ledford 2015). Aside from trading with the “ruthless daimyo” himself, the Jesuit missionaries would also be responsible for introducing Oda Nobunaga to an ally that would eventually become Japan’s first documented black samurai.

Although they did not introduce him to Nobunaga directly, as the Jesuit missionaries brought a number of Portuguese slaves along with them. Little did the missionaries know, one of these slaves would soon gain extreme popularity for his dark skin, tall stature of at least six feet, and strength akin to that of a small army. In fact, there is even mentioned how this slave would become so popular, that there would be crowds of people that would rush to the church just to only get a glimpse him (Fikes 2016). Eventually, this popularity would soon capture the attention of Oda Nobunaga, in terms of how he would request an audience with this slave. It was in this meeting that the famous story of this slave removing his shirt scrubbing his skin with soap in water, in order to prove that his brown skin was not fake would originate (Makoto 1998, 95). While there is no solid date, it is speculated that it was after this meeting that the slave would be given the name Yasuke and would serve under Oda Nobunaga during this violent time, known as Japan's "Warring States Era" (Fikes 2016).

While his original name is unknown, the life of Yasuke after coming to Japan seemed to be one filled with adventure. During his time in Japan, we also see how Japanese people viewed Yasuke with more curiosity, and rarely held any contempt towards him due to his skin color. Even though there is mentioned of how Yasuke was regarded as "inhuman" or a "beast" (Makoto 1998), when we look at the "Shincho Ko Ki" we can see how he is described as a "healthy and talented man, that is stronger than ten men and black as a crow, who appears to be in his mid-twenties" (Makoto 1998, 96). It should also be noted that during this time period, the concept of a "color line" was very vague, due to how the Japanese term "Kokujin" would be used to describe all dark-skinned individuals (Africans, Indians, Malaysians, etc.) (Makoto 1998, 96). However, it should also be noted that this curiosity also saved his life due to how after he surrendered to Akechi Mitsuhide, he was spared due to him "not being Japanese" (Wright 1998, 135).

When talking about Yasuke's rise to becoming a samurai and his life as one, there is no definite date on when he became one. However, we can speculate that his enlistment under Oda Nobunaga's command started shortly after his audience with Nobunaga in Kyoto. During his career as a samurai, there is mention of how Yasuke enjoyed certain privileges that only few other samurai had been granted. These privileges ranged from dining beside Oda Nobunaga, to even receiving his own set of ceremonial swords (Fikes 2016). It could also be speculated that Yasuke enjoyed the basic privileges of being a samurai along with these special privileges, such as being granted land due to how the practice of "Shoen", which granted samurai private tax-free land, was still in effect at this time. Interestingly, there is also mention of how Yasuke was able to acquire the Japanese language during his time as a samurai, in regard to how it is stated that he carried conversations with Oda Nobunaga in Japanese (Fikes 2016).

Although his career as a samurai could be depicted as a successful one, fighting alongside Oda Nobunaga in many of his war campaigns, it ended abruptly when Oda Nobunaga was confronted with a coup staged by his subordinate Akechi Mitsuhide (Fikes 2016). During the famous betrayal of Akechi Mitsuhide, it is mentioned how Nobunaga previously order Mitsuhide to assist the former Hashiba Hideyoshi, eventually named Toyotomi Hideyoshi, in his endeavors against the Mori clan. However, as history will tell, Mitsuhide promptly ignored Nobunaga's orders and directed his troops to Honnou-ji temple, where Nobunaga was currently resting (Saikaiangle 2020). Quoting Mitsuhide's famous line of "the enemy is at Honnou-ji", this coup took place on June 21 of 1582 and consisted of a bloody melee between the Oda and Akechi forces. This event ultimately resulted in Akechi Mitsuhide's victory, and before Oda Nobunaga could be captured he committed "seppuku" (honorable suicide), resulting in this event being named the "Honnou-ji Incident" (Saikaiangle 2020). While the reasons for Mitsuhide's betrayal is speculated

to be the death of his aunt as a consequence due to one Nobunaga's decision, the actual reason is mostly unknown. It should also be noted that this event earned Akechi Mitsuhide the title of "thirteen-day Shogun" or "Juusan Kobuu". This is due to how his victory was short lived, lasting only thirteen days, until he was murdered by a bandit (Saikaiangel 2020).

In terms of how Yasuke's career came to an end during this incident, before Mitsuhide claimed complete victory over Oda Nobunaga's forces at Honnou-ji temple, there is mention of how Yasuke was instructed to go to the aid of Nobunaga's son, Oda Nobutada, in order to continue the fight (Fikes 2016). Although it is mentioned that Yasuke fought until the bitter end, battling even after all was lost, Mitsuhide's forces had yet again prevailed over the Oda forces, resulting in Oda Nobutada suffering the same fate of ritual suicide, and Yasuke surrendering himself to Mitsuhide's forces (Gina 2018). Though Yasuke surrendered to enemy forces, as stated earlier in this essay, the curiosity surrounding Yasuke as a person would save his life. This is because of how after he was brought before Akechi Mitsuhide after the battle, he was spared from committing "seppuku" because he was "not Japanese" as stated by Akechi Mitsuhide (Wright 1998, 135). While the most commonly told story of Yasuke's life after being released by Mitsuhide is that he was returned to the Jesuit missionaries, the truth is that we actually do not know what became of Yasuke after his release due to no solid documentation (Fikes 2016). Interestingly, there is also speculation that Yasuke never returned to the Jesuit missionaries, and remained in Japan and started a family due to how he was speculated to have a wife during his time as a samurai. Unfortunately, due to no concrete evidence about what happened to Yasuke after surrendering to Akechi Mitsuhide, all we can do is speculate until more evidence is found concerning Yasuke's life in Japan.

As interesting and intriguing as Yasuke's story is, I believe that his story is a prime example of how social mobility during the Sengoku period seemed to be extremely fluid. Not only did Yasuke transition from being a slave to a warrior, but he also was able to become a high ranking official within Oda Nobunaga's ranks. While there are many stories about exponential social mobility throughout history, during this time period it was almost unheard of for a Portuguese slave to achieve the amount of success that Yasuke did in a foreign country. Even though social mobility during the Sengoku period was fluid, the reason why I chose to emphasize Oda Nobunaga's army is mainly due to how serving in his army seemed like the most effective way to move up the social ladder. This due to how the "Ashigaru" that Nobunaga would recruit into his army, saw war as a fast way to climb the social ladder and how naturally this would require you to win wars in order to increase one's social class (Edwards 2015).

In fact, one of the main reasons as to why Oda Nobunaga was so powerful during his lifetime, can mostly be attributed to how he possessed an open mind and innovate attitude towards weaponry and tactics. Which can be seen in how this mindset, pushed Oda Nobunaga to allow peasants with no prior combat experience or military background to join his ranks. Also, not only did he allow them join, but he would also train them to become a deadly fighting force capable of winning wars (Edwards 2015). It could also be argued that this open mindset led Oda Nobunaga to enlist Yasuke into his forces. When looking at Oda Nobunaga's achievements, ranging from being the first daimyo to utilize muskets in battle, and developing the tactic of rotational firing squads to account for the musket's long reload and prep time, it is almost ironic how Nobunaga was once called the "fool of Owari" (Ebisawa 2021). However, as history will prove time and time again, those with revolutionary ideals or even geniuses are sometimes labeled as "crazy", in regard to how the common person could potentially not be able to understand them. Personally, I

believe that Nobunaga could have actually won against Mitsuhide's forces had he not been ambushed. It could also be argued that if Nobunaga survived Mitsuhide's ambush, then he may have succeeded in uniting the entire nation of Japan and would have possibly kept Yasuke enlisted in his forces. However, we can only speculate as to what could have been had things happened differently, since there is no way to change the past.

Returning to the topic of Social mobility under Oda Nobunaga's army, another major figure that benefited from Social mobility while serving in Oda Nobunaga's ranks is Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Going from peasant to the eventually becoming one of the biggest daimyo in Japan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi served under Oda Nobunaga in the 16th century. During his early years serving under Nobunaga, it is mentioned how his energetic nature and strategic intelligence helped Hideyoshi to gain the favor of Oda Nobunaga, resulting in him being promoted to the rank of samurai (Kuwata, 2020). During his years after becoming Samurai, there would be mention of how Hideyoshi would fight alongside Nobunaga in many of his battles, gaining more recognition with each battle (Kuwata, 2020). Interestingly, it is also stated that Hideyoshi received the nickname of "monkey" (Saru) from Oda Nobunaga due to his mannerisms, but it is later reviled that his actual nickname was "bald rat" which we can assume was given to him for similar reasons (Kanae 2017). When talking about his life as a peasant, there is mention of how he was believed to be illiterate as well as uncultured. This assumption would later be proven to be false due to him secretly educating himself, learning how to compose poetry and eventually demonstrated mastery in traditional ceremonies such as the tea ceremony (Kuwata, 2020). It would be this intelligence that would allow Hideyoshi to rise from being Nobunaga's sandal bearer, to being a respected samurai within Nobunaga's ranks (Kuwata 2020).

After the events of the Honnou-ji temple incident, it is mentioned how Hideyoshi would make peace with the Mori clan, and quickly return to avenge his dead master at the battle of Yamazaki against Mitsuhide, in which Mitsuhide would escape after confirming that his defeat was imminent (Kuwata 2020). After claiming victory against Mitsuhide, Hideyoshi would then become the successor of Oda Nobunaga, achieving his goal of a unified Japan and claiming the title of “Great Unifier.” Surprisingly, even after uniting Japan and eventually leading an expedition in Korea, Hideyoshi ultimately was not allowed to claim the title of shogun due to his background as a peasant, though ironically it could be argued that he was still the shogun due to his power alone even if he was not able to officially claim the title (Kuwata 2020).

When looking at Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s life it could be argued that his transition from being an illiterate peasant to a successful and renowned samurai, is another prime example of class mobility under Nobunaga’s army during the Sengoku period, next to the story of Yasuke. However, even though Hideyoshi’s story is a good example of social mobility during this time, the ability to change classes also somewhat ended during his ascension to power. This is due to how he enforced the policy of sword hunting, also known as “katana kari”, which prevented farmers and merchants from owning swords (Kuwata 2020). This policy is ironic because if the same policy were put in place during Hideyoshi’s rise to power, then he would not have been able to become a samurai. However, it could also be argued that the reason why Hideyoshi decided to enforce this law, was a way to protect himself from other peasants rising to power in a similar fashion to how he did.

If we were to speculate even further, it could also be argued that Hideyoshi’s success as a samurai could be a byproduct of Oda Nobunaga’s open mindset. The reason why I say this, is due to how the peasant soldiers that were utilized by Nobunaga’s army were not just cannon fodder.

This is because of how Nobunaga made sure that his peasant fighting force was trained in a way to actually be viable on the battlefield (Edwards 2015). Considering how Hideyoshi was originally Oda Nobunaga's sandal bearer, it could be speculated that after proving his worth to Nobunaga, he would have been trained in the art of war under the direct tutelage of Oda Nobunaga, and some of his high-ranking officials. Should this be the case, it would make sense why Hideyoshi was not only able to accompany Oda Nobunaga on the battlefield and survive, but also why he was able to successfully pick up where Nobunaga left off and unite Japan.

Overall, when talking about Japanese history and discussing the topic of Social mobility during this time period, it becomes clear that opportunity for class growth has existed in many parts throughout Japanese history. With this being said, it could also be argued that no other period in Japanese history benefited from fluid social mobility more than Japan's Sengoku period. During this period, it was not uncommon for a peasant to become a warrior to live a better albeit more dangerous life. While there are many stories depicting exponential class growth, I would say that peasants who join Oda Nobunaga's army benefited from the most social growth, which could possibly be due to how Nobunaga's army won many wars. It could also be argued that Oda Nobunaga delegating resources to train his men, allowed those under him to become more successful as warriors and make names for themselves, due to how their training and combat experience would have been very valuable to daimyo looking for mercenaries to assist in small skirmishes. We can also speculate that after Nobunaga's death at Honnou-ji temple, some of his foot soldiers went to join the armies of other Daimyo instead of becoming mercenaries.

When looking at Nobunaga's subordinates, two people benefited from exponential class growth under his command: one being a former slave and the other being a peasant. Of these two subordinates, the story of Yasuke seems to be the most unique. The reason why is because

Yasuke's story, could be considered the first documentation that we have of foreigners becoming samurai in Japan. In that same sense, Yasuke's story also represents a unique opportunity to move up socially, which was not heard of for many Portuguese slaves during that time period. Although, unfortunately only a portion of his life is documented, and we do not know what became of Yasuke after being released by Mitsuhide, it is still a fact that his story can be a great example of social mobility during the Sengoku period.

Expanding on the main topic of social mobility in this research paper, it could also be argued that not every peasant had to become a warrior or "Ashigaru" in order to be able to benefit from social mobility during this time. Even though these classes are actually ranked below peasants, there is also mention of how some peasants would become artisans or merchants during this time period (Szczepanski 2019). Although ranked underneath peasants, both merchants and artisans witnessed a boom during the Sengoku period. When looking at this situation from a logical standpoint, it could be argued that the fact of how weaponry and other resources are vital in waging wars, could have influenced the decision to become an artisan or merchant. Furthermore, seeing as how many wars were being waged by various Daimyo during this era, the decision to become a merchant or artisan was almost ingenious due to how artisans, such as blacksmiths or bow makers, as well as merchants were almost guaranteed to make a profit whenever a samurai came into town. In terms of the lifestyle of merchants and artisans, there is mention of how artisans lived in their own segregated section of major cities, but were still respected to a degree (Szczepanski 2019). However, when looking at the lowest class of merchants, we see that they were ridiculed as being "parasites that profited from the work of others". Ironically, this class could have been considered to be the second most powerful class riveling that of even the samurai, despite them being ranked the lowest in the class system. This was due to how a merchant's worth

was measured by how much wealth they amassed during this time period, this wealth would also allow them to be able to gain political influence. Like artisans, merchants also resided in segregated sections of major city, however, the other classes were forbidden from mixing with this class, with conducting business being the only exception that allowed other classes to interact with merchants (Szczepanski 2019).

In conclusion, even though I may have gone on a few rants within this paper, the main goal I intended to achieve with this research paper was to shed light on how Japan's Sengoku period was truly a time of social mobility and opportunities. Although extremely violent and gruesome, the Sengoku period offered those from various background the chance of becoming either wealthy or becoming a warrior. We are also able to learn that these opportunities were not just exclusive to Japanese natives, as we can see with the story of Yasuke, that even foreigners were given opportunities to move up the social ladder in Japan. Personally, I would say that I have benefited from conducting research on this topic, due to how I was able to learn more about Japan's history and also about how social mobility during the Sengoku period seemed to be fluid for both foreigners and Japanese natives. I also found it interesting to learn about how merchants were considered to be the lowest in class, even though they had the potential to become one of the most powerful.

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