The etymology of the ethnonym Saeki/Sapeki

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Abstract:
Saeki 佐伯 is an ethnic group mentioned in Nihon shoki and Fudoki. According to Aston, they could be a group of Ainu origin. In Fudoki they are described as robbers who walked the country. The kanji 佐伯 is a rather meaningless combination, they were chosen just to express the original sound of the name that evidently is not of Japanese origin. To get the reading of these kanji that were used in the period when Fudoki was created, we have to turn to the kan’on reading. The kan’on of 佐 is sa, the kan’on of 伯 is haku, and the original reading of 佐伯 is sa-paku. This word-form looks like a compound of the following Ainu roots: sa “side” + pa “to step” + kur “human being”. And thus, sa-pa-kur can be translated as “people walking from side to side” or “wandering people”.

Keywords: Saeki; Sapeki; Nihon shoki; Fudoki; Emishi; Ainu; Ainu history; Ancient Japan

1. Introduction to the problem

Saeki 佐伯 is an ethnic group mentioned in Nihon shoki and Fudoki. They are supposed to be an ethnic group of Ainu origin, for instance, W.G. Aston in his translation of Nihon shoki notes:

The Chinese characters for Saheki¹ mean "Assistant-Chief." It is apparently a Chinese word and not Japanese, and therefore it seems out of place in the history of a period long previous to the introduction of Chinese learning. But, however unhistorical this narrative may be, it goes to prove that there is an Aino element in the Japanese nation (see Wikisource 2023).

However, the origin and original meaning of the ethnonym of Saeki are unclear, and so in the current paper I am going to clarify these issues.

2. Recordings about Saeki people in Nihon shoki and in Fudoki

2.1. Recordings from Nihon shoki

In Nihon shoki in the 7th scroll, in the part devoted to the emperor Keikō it is said the following:

初日本武尊所佩草薙横刀、是今在尾張國年魚市郡熱田社也。
Kusanagi, the sword, that Yamato-takeru originally wore at his waist, now is in the shrine of Atuta² 熱田社 (Fig. 2), [located] in the county of Ayuchi 年魚, in the province/country of Wopari 尾張國 (Fig. 1).

¹ The word Saeki was Saheki in Classical Japanese and Sapeki in Old Japanese.
² Present-day Atsuta jingū 熱田神 in Nagoya, in Aichi prefecture.
Fig. 1. Location of the historical province of Wopari/Owari 尾張國 (image source – Wikipedia 2023)

於是、所獻神宮 蝦夷等、晝夜喧譁、出入無禮。
Then, the Emishi dedicated to the shrine made noise day and night, went out and in without respect for courtesy/rituals.

時倭姬命曰「是蝦夷等、不可近於神宮」。
Then, Yamato-hime-[no]-mikoto said: “These Emishi may not approach the shrine”.
Fig. 2. Location of Atuta shrine (map has been made after Google Maps screenshot)

則進上於朝庭、仍令安置御諸山傍。
[They] made [them, i.e.: those Emishi] to gather at a courtyard, and they (Emishi) were ordered to settle near Mimoro mount 御諸山(Fig. 3).

未經幾時、悉伐神山樹、叫呼隣里而脅人民。
After a while, they cut trees on the mountain of a kami\(^3\), shouted loudly [in] the neighborhood, and threatened people.

天皇聞之、詔群卿曰「其置神山傍之蝦夷、是本有獸心、難住中國。故、隨其情願、令班邦畿之外」。
Emperor heard [about] it and said to the nobles: “The Emishi that were settled near Mimoro mount originally have hearts of beasts, it is difficult [for them] to live in the midst of the

\(^3\) Kami 神 is one of key concepts of Japanese religion Shintō, this word is usually translated as “deity”, “spirit”, but it is more correct to translate it as “a being that has a lot of vital energy and has an ability to share it”.
country. Therefore, order them to dwell in a remote area from the capital, according to their preference/wish.

Fig. 3. Location of Mimoro mount (map has been made after Google Maps screenshot)

These [Emishi] are ancestors of the present Sapeki-be\(^4\) of five countries/provinces: Parima, Sanuki, Ise, Agi, and Apa (Fig. 4).

2.2. Recordings from Fudoki

In Hitachi Fudoki, in the description of Ubaraki county can be seen the following:

Old people tell\(^5\), [that] in old time there were Kunisu\(^6\): Saheki of mountains [and] Saheki of plains.

\(^4\) Be 部 was a guild or a clan in ancient Japan, during the Yamato period (about 250–710 CE).
Fig. 4. Historical provinces where Sapeki-be were settled (the map has been drawn after a map taken from Wikipedia 2023)

(俗語都知久母又云夜都賀波岐。)
(In the local language [they] are named Tsuchikumo or Yatsugahagi.)

普置堀土窟。
Generally [they] dug holes in the ground\(^7\).

常居穴。

\(^5\) The original text of Hitachi Fudoki was taken from National Diet Library 2023.
\(^6\) Kunisu (or Kuzu) 国巣 seems to be an ethnic group of Ainu origin (see Nonno 2017). And it is quite noteworthy that Saheki are described as subgroups of Kunisu in Fudoki.
\(^7\) It looks like a description of pit-houses.
When some strangers come, [they] hide [themselves in their] holes and run away.

When those people (i.e.: strangers) go, they (i.e.: Sapeki) come out to open space for play/entertainment.

They have the nature of a wolf and the soul of an owl; [they] spy out and rob [like rats/mice].

[They] are not calmed, and resist manners.

That time Opoomi-no-Kurosaka-no-mikoto waited for [them] to come out for play, [and then he] ordered to place thorny bushes in [their] holes/caves.

And gave free rein/ordered to the cavalry troops to chase [Saheki]

Saheki as usual wanted to run and return to their earth caves.

Ran into thorns, got wounded, [some] died and [some] dispersed/scattered.

Someone told, [that there were] mountain Saheki and valley Saheki.

[Saheki] became the leaders of the robbers

Leading their gangs, they walked the country, robbed, and killed many.

Then Kurosaka-no-mikoto intending to exterminate these robbers, ordered to make a fence of thorny shrubs named *ubara*.

[And] the place was named Ubaraki after the thorny shrub *ubara*.

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8 This explanation actually looks like a folk etymology, i.e.: the place name of Uabaraki could be not connected with thorny shrub originally, and the kanji 茨 having *ubara* “thorny shrub” as one of its readings, could be chosen simply phonetically, to express the sound original place name that can be not of Japanese origin.
The description of the Saeki people that we can see in Hitachi Fudoki is generally consistent with other descriptions of non-Japanese ethnic groups from ancient Japanese chronicles and records. In the context of the Japanese colonial paradigm, aboriginal groups are described in ancient Japanese chronicles with quite a standard set of characteristics: ‘wild’, ‘incapable of civilization’, and ‘demonstrating not much difference from animals’. In fact, if anyone here is wild, it is the ancient Japanese themselves. Saeki simply wanted to maintain their way of life. And it is quite obvious that if the Saeki would write their own history, they would have written it differently.

3. Possible etymology of the ethnonym Sapeki 佐伯

The name Sapeki is recorded by the following kanji: 佐作, 作 means “help” and 伯 means “chief”. As an ethnonym (or a name of a group), this combination of kanji is rather meaningless. And, thus, it is possible to state that kanji 佐伯 could be chosen simply phonetically, to express the sound original name that evidently is not of Japanese origin, and the people who recorded the name Sapeki that way evidently didn’t care much about the meaning of the received compound.

To get the pronunciation of these kanji that were used in the Nara period when Fudoki was created, we have to turn to the kan’on reading. The kan’on of 作 is sa and the kan’on of 伯 is haku, and thus, it is possible to say that the original reading of the compound of 佐伯 originally was sa-paku.

And I suppose that this word originally was a compound of the following Ainu roots: sa “side” (Ōta 2005: 184) + pa “to step” + kur “human being”, “man” (Kayano 2005: 2018). And thus, sa-pa-kur can be translated as “people walking from side to side” or simply “wandering people”. This translation correlates pretty well with the above-shown description of these people in Fudoki.

References


9 Kan’on (literally 漢音 Han sounds), one of the sources of pronunciation of kanji. Kan’on was borrowed and became widely spread in Nara period (710 – 794 AD.), i.e.: if we want to restore original pronunciation of words from Kojiki and Nihon shoki we have to turn to kan’on.

10 This pa can be seen in, for instance, such forms as: paye – plural form of verb “to go”, and in verb pas “to run” (see Nonno 2016: 40).
