

Paper presented to the American Studies Association annual meeting in November 2006 by Jean Libby, historian

The travels across America with Arinori Mori,<sup>1</sup> the first Japanese resident diplomat to the United States, begin in a steamer bound for Hong Kong with eighteen other samurai students secretly sent abroad in 1865 to learn western culture. The students did not disappoint their sponsors, attending first the University of London, then examining other parts of Europe. While Mori was in St. Petersburg studying Orthodox Christianity in 1867, the Satsuma sponsors lost interest in funding and recalled the entourage.

Six of the students, including Arinori Mori--then twenty years old--decided to stay abroad and travel to America with a religious leader who took them in to convert them to his own movement, Thomas Lake Harris of the Brotherhood of New Life. Free room, board, and travel expenses! Imagine the possibilities.

Mori's rapid education soon outgrew the confines of the utopian and totalitarian community in Brocton, upper New York and particularly that of Harris, who was re-ordering sexual behavior in a derivation from the intellectual tradition of his Swedenborgian genesis in Europe. Harris found plenty of room in America to develop his ideas and to establish a winery to support the cult movement, which espoused temperance. Obviously, the Japanese youths had been recruited for vineyard labor.<sup>2</sup> The Brotherhood of New Life, as well as other utopian movements in the United States, demanded equal rights and respect for women in their organization, paving the way for gender equality as a national expectation by the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Another of the recommendations stemming from the Brotherhood of New Life, which imposed even marital celibacy until the couple had been indoctrinated into a proper "sense of chastity," was intermarriage with American women of Northern European origin and bringing them back to Japan with the converts for the purpose of eugenics. Handsome Mori was particularly recommended for this task, which he sidestepped by replying that "it was not necessary to go into the marrying business quite so suddenly." (Hall 185-186) When he did marry in Japan in 1875, it was a Christian wedding with his bride, Tonseko, the daughter of the Shuzuoka samurai family, in western

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars often position the name as in Japanese, last name first, Mori Arinori. I have opted to use the placement of his given name first, family name second. Like all the others, I will mostly call him "Mori."

<sup>2</sup> The youngest of the group, Kanaye Nagasawa, remained with Harris and moved near Santa Rosa, California, to establish a Brotherhood called "Eden of the West" and also made wine for financial support. There is an historical exhibit about Nagasawa and his winemaking genius for the Brotherhood at the present Paradise Ridge Winery on Thomas Lake Harris Road in Fountain Grove today. Unfortunately the grand communal house, Austivossa ("high country of divine joy") and cottages were torn down in 1969 to make room for development.

clothes (and the reception with western food). More importantly, the ceremony was a written contract which pledged fidelity by both and joint property ownership. (Hall 252)

By 1868 Mori left the Brotherhood in New York—having seen much of America and Americans in the process, including California—and sailed for Japan, then in the midst of the Meiji Revolution. He was active in the new government, making a name for himself as a revolutionary by proposing the elimination of wearing ceremonial swords except by government officials. (Kishida 42) This was unanimously voted down, and Mori returned to his own education, majoring in American Studies!) at an Agricultural School and teaching English, with which he was increasingly fluent. Three years later the Meiji restoration government voted a more stringent resolution restricting the wearing of ceremonial swords, and asked Arinori Mori to return to America to be the charge d'affaires of the Japanese legation in Washington D.C. Mori arrived in February 1871 and remained until March, 1873. (Van Sant xix-xx)

Among his tasks was the preparation of *Life and Resources in America*, a guide for the first embassy from Japan to the United States, the Iwakura Embassy, to travel and understand the country. Mori employed a secretary, Charles Lanman, a librarian in Washington D.C. Lanman had been secretary to Senator Daniel Webster (later writing his biography) and was a trained artist. His influence on Mori with his own journeys into western American landscape have created speculation that Mori's travels before writing the guide were sometimes vicarious. Like Toqueville, the written record of Mori is questioned as to actual authorship by the secretary.

In his case the question arises because of its original publication in 1871 in English. How could the writing be so good by someone whose first language was Japanese? One has only to consider that, when Mori became Minister of Education of the Japanese government in 1875, he recommended the use of English as the national language. This was another proposal that did not get support, and caused enough resentment to contribute to popular approval of his assassination in 1889. While English was not instituted as a national language, another of his recommendations, that of western dress except for ceremonial occasions, was adopted by the Empress of Japan. The purpose of this was to be less conspicuous in international gatherings of western nations—to appear progressive and be equal in negotiations.

Mori's criticism of the American government, which he observed in the Grant administration with its attendant corruption and the election of 1872 between Grant and Horace Greeley (described by Ivan Hall as "some of the most vicious mud-slinging and political lampooning in the history of the Republic") is considered to be firmly his own. Similarity of criticism with *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Toqueville is natural because Mori is known to have owned a copy, and presented one to

Kanda Kohei, one of the organizers of the Japanese national assembly along democratic lines. (Hall 209-210)

Although often called “the first Japanese westerner,” Arinori Mori does not lose his own cultural identity or his revolutionary patriotism. He particularly supports the idea of monarchy over democracy, finding rule by government as servants rather than masters of the people rather odd. Mori’s hard-hitting essay on the “time-serving politicians” who he blames for “nearly all the troubles which befall [and] the country are the result of their petty schemes and selfish intrigues. There is not a village in the land in which they do not congregate or pursue in secret their unpatriotic designs.” (Van Sant 10) His attitude toward clerks is nearly equally critical. Because of their secure wages, even though low, they are “generally improvident and idle—a floating population...but occasionally one will leave government service and become distinguished as merchants, or in some of the professions.” (Van Sant 8) His comments on African Americans are dismally racist, particularly of those who reside in Washington D.C., who he does note are a refugee population. With education, he believes there will be significant changes, although he believes social separation is unchangeable. (Van Sant 9)

Mori prefaces his remarks on people of the West with the following: “The frontiers of America are so extensive, and the pursuits of the inhabitants so various, that an entire volume would not suffice to describe them with minuteness.” He likes the open space lands, the prairies and tidal swamps, much better than he likes any urban area. He gives nominal description to cities that are clearly taken from government reports. The only exception to this is Chicago. It is described in relationship to cattle marketing, and the recent disastrous fire (1871) and subsequent rebuilding. The Iwakura Embassy brought a substantial donation of funds for relief of the residents of Chicago displaced by the fire.

What impresses Mori about America and Americans? Using the Census of Manufactures as his resource, the young envoy waxes poetic on the industry of mechanics, citing the general level of education is such that workers can step into supervisory duties if needed. Using Patent Office records (remember his secretary Charles Lanman is a government librarian!) Mori states that this general education is the force that develops the greatest mechanical ingenuity in the world. This superlative is dampened by a growing class of “middle men—who neither produce nor sell at their own risk—who[se] influence on the prosperity of the country is thought to be of doubtful character.” (Van Sant 49)

Social history by Mori in *Life and Resources in America* was helpful to me as a teacher of U.S. History to international students in community college in California (De Anza College, my last

school before retirement, actively recruited students in Japan). His “Amusements and Festivals” descriptions of 19<sup>th</sup> century clam-bakes, corn-huskings, barn raisings, and Texas barbeques are full of pleasure at the experience and very ethnically descriptive of the populations . (Van Sant 27-30) Students responded to the historical materials written originally in English by an ESL writer, and I would encourage teachers in many disciplines, history, multicultural surveys, and ESL as well as American Studies to prepare Arinori Mori’s social tour of American celebration customs as a handout.

The very readable *The Japanese in America* by Charles Lanman, published in London in 1872, has many delightful notices of the five young women who came with the Iwakura Embassy to be educated in the United States. One of the young ladies boarded with the Lanman family, and that experience gives the personal aspect that makes the work alive. Inclusion of letters of 24-year old Arinori Mori as worried as a mother hen while the Embassy makes its way from San Francisco to Washington D.C. in winter adds interest. Do Americans welcome the Japanese travelers and put them in their own homes when the train is snowbound? Of course we do. And when Brigham Young invites Ambassador Iwakura to come to visit, but he cannot call on him because he is in jail, a whole new protocol almost occurs. (Lanman 23-24)

It is the American experience of free will in religion that persuades Arinori Mori to become an advocate of bringing legitimacy to Christianity in Japan, where it was outlawed. He is especially impressed with the YMCA and its libraries, lectures, and physical regimen. Mori was a strong proponent of mind and body as a team. In 1873 he writes a pamphlet, *Religious Freedom in Japan* with a helpful critique by Hamilton Fish, the U.S. Secretary of State.<sup>3</sup> He then writes (also in English while still in America). *Education in Japan*, with controversial recommendation of the abolition of the Japanese language and a discussion of the decline of Asian religions among the people and their supernatural nature contributing to a backward perspective, is not reprinted in western publications. Mori is blamed for extreme rigidity in the Japanese curriculum that even continues today.

I was astonished that students in my U.S. history classes from Japan had not encountered him in their textbooks. He was erased from Japanese history at the secondary and undergraduate levels. Perhaps now, with Japanese scholarship focusing on his work in the 1990s, Arinori Mori will find his way into Japanese textbooks as one of the “new lights” of the Meiji leadership. But for now, he is a prophet without honor in his own country.

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<sup>3</sup> *Religious Freedom in Japan* has been reprinted in the Appendix of John E. Van Sant’s *Mori Arinori’s Life and Resources in America*, Lexington Books, 2004. Because of the ready accessibility of this book for teachers and students, I have cited all the quoted passages in this paper from this edition.

Accounts of Mori's assassination in 1889, on the eve of the reification of the Constitution of Japan—and to which he made significant contribution—vary widely in interpretation. He was killed with a sword in his own home by a student who was supposedly not pleased with the institution of a tuition for higher education. Mori's bodyguard was unable to save him, but did kill the assassin with his own sword. Percival Lowell, the astronomer of an illustrious Massachusetts family who built an observatory in Arizona, had an earlier career in the Far East. He wrote in 1894 that the issue was one of alleged desecration of a Shinto shrine, and that "Japan rose in a body not to do honor to the murdered man, but to his murderer. Even the muzzled press managed to hint on which side it was, by some as curious editorials as were ever penned." (Lowell 19) It was not the first assassination attempt on Mori. He brought a sword to Joseph Henry, the secretary of Smithsonian Institution, which he told him had been used in a failed attempt. Henry assisted Mori by holding funds for him that were to be used for assistance to Japanese students in America—Mori's job as charge d'affairs. The balance was returned to Mori in 1873. That sword may still be at Smithsonian.

In conclusion, Mori's contribution is that he initiated a movement of Issei to America who were like him, idealists and intellectuals, looking to establish utopian societies – a City on a Hill – during the 1880s and 1890s. Many in this early Issei immigration studied at the University of California at Berkeley, in the College of Agriculture and other practical pursuits—at the same time writing newspapers and letters to bring other pioneers across the Pacific. Some of these early Issei were new Christian ministers who officiated the transnational contract marriages known as "picture brides" in the United States. Although it was his intention to bring America to Japan, Mori's lasting influence is bringing Japan to America.

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