

# **AFRICAN SAMURAI**

**The True Story of Yasuke, a Legendary  
Black Warrior in Feudal Japan**

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and  
GEOFFREY GIRARD**

African Samurai

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# AFTERWORD

## *The Witnesses*

**Luís Fróis:** Fróis, the most prolific writer on Yasuke, was born in Lisbon in 1532 and joined the Jesuits in 1548. He arrived in Japan in 1563. Fróis wrote more than one hundred letters and reports about Japan, many running to thousands of words, and several books during the 1580s and '90s. His work, which is highly observant, descriptive and even entertaining, formed much of the basis of European knowledge on Japan until the modern age and he was one of the greats of the Jesuit mission in Japan. He was remembered by a colleague as: “meritorious more than any others of the Japanese Christianity and for the deeds which during thirty-four years consumed him there, and for the memories of the successes of that Church of which he yearly gave news to Europe.” He lived the last seven years of his life in Nagasaki where he died in 1597, aged sixty-five. His

last published work was an eye-witness report of the Nagasaki martyrs' executions of 1597.

**Ōta Gyūichi:** The author of *The Chronicle of Oda Nobunaga*, and numerous other books recording the times in which he lived, was born in 1527 and died in 1613. As a samurai he was an expert archer who took part in many of Nobunaga's early battles. He was also a member of Nobunaga's falconry team. By the 1570s, he had been promoted to Nobunaga's administrative staff in both Kyoto and Azuchi. He proceeded to serve Hideyoshi and then his son in administrative capacities. Most of his writing was only published posthumously from manuscripts and diaries he wrote throughout his life. He recorded Yasuke twice, specifically covering his first audience and the fact of his promotion.

**Matsudaira Ietada:** Matsudaira Ietada, 1555–1600, who recorded Yasuke once in his diary after the Takeda campaign, went on to be promoted under his kinsman Tokugawa Ieyasu. In 1599, he was given command of Fushimi Castle near Kyoto. It proved a fatal appointment. In 1600, just prior to the decisive Battle of Sekigahara at which Tokugawa seized the reins of power for good, Matsudaira died defending the walls. His diary is one of the best historical sources of the times he lived in.

**Lourenço Mexia:** Mexia was a close aide to Valignano and *also* an informant on his activities to Rome, appointed by the Jesuit Superior General himself. He was a strong supporter of Valignano's policy of adaptation to Japanese norms, especially regarding diet. He observed that the Japanese judged people on what they ate and how they ate it, and the European's table manners and dietary choices, especially meat, were damaging their likelihood of converting the Japanese. He must have known Yasuke well, but chose to record his presence only once due to his surpris-

ingly swift promotion in Nobunaga's service (this is one more mention than Valignano saw fit to include). It is from Mexia that we know about Yasuke and Nobunaga's close conversations and potential elevation to lord status. He died in 1599.

### *The Jesuits*

**Alessandro Valignano:** Alessandro Valignano left Japan in 1582 bound for Europe with the first Japanese embassy to Rome, but he never got there. In India, new orders awaited him, appointing him to the post of *Provincial* of the Jesuits in Asia. He returned to Japan twice, in 1590–1592 and 1598–1603, but was based mainly in Macao where he carried on his educational tradition by, among other things, founding St. Paul's College of Macao (which claims to be the first European university in Asia) to train Jesuits in Chinese language and traditions to facilitate their mission there.

Valignano was said to be a man of “tremendous energy and boundless religious ardor, a born leader of men, who by the charm of his personality and the irresistible power of his example inspired the missionaries with ever-fresher and ever-greater enthusiasm for their work.” This energy allowed him to write perhaps dozens of books and thousands of letters about the Far East, the best methods of missionary work and instruction manuals on how to logically refute “paganism” and numerous educational tracts. It is said he often worked into the early hours of the morning.

The Japanese embassy which he sent to Rome in the 1580s, normally referred to as the Tensho Embassy, met with two Popes and wowed both European rulers and their citizens. Their visit was quite the event of the decade, with crowds of thousands turning out to greet them. Even Queen Elizabeth of England, persona non grata in Catholic lands after her excommunication in 1570, demanded two reports a week from her European spies

on their progress. The leader, Ito Mancio, was appointed *Cavaliere di Speron d'Oro* (Knight of the Order of the Golden Spur), and is possibly the only samurai to have concurrently been a European knight also.

After Valignano's death, an anonymous colleague wrote, "In him we lament not only our former Visitor and Father, but, as many will have it, the Apostle of Japan. For, filled with a special love for that Mission and burning with zeal for the conversion of that realm, he set no limit to his efforts on behalf of it."

Valignano died in Macao in 1606, at the age of sixty-seven.

There is no record of him having met Yasuke again.

Today, less than 1 percent of the Japanese population is Christian.

**Father Gnechi Soldo Organtino:** After the destruction of Azuchi, including the seminary, Organtino was resident in the safety of Lord Takayama Ukon's Takatsuki fief until he managed to found a new mission in Osaka. Kyoto was still too volatile and uncertain. He tried to mitigate the fallout from Hideyoshi's banning of the Jesuits in 1587, but ultimately failed. However, he managed to stay in hiding within the proximity of Kyoto to support the Christian community there, and even baptized two of Nobunaga's grandsons. He died in 1609, in Nagasaki, at the age of seventy-six.

**Father Gaspar Coelho:** The mission superior who caused so much trouble by his scheming and overly aggressive attitude did not live long enough to be chastised by Valignano on his second visit. He died in disgrace in 1590 at Kazusa, near Kuchinotsu, where Yasuke had briefly lived ten years before and Valignano had set up his first seminary.

### *The Warlords*

**Hideyoshi:** Hideyoshi came out on top in the brief battle to succeed Nobunaga and continued his work of unifying Japan.

He initially supported the Catholic missionaries in their work, but like Nobunaga had no serious religious conviction, unless it suited his political ends. The Jesuits eventually got on his nerves, and seeing them as a potential threat, like every other potential threat, he dealt with them. In 1587, he banished all Jesuits from his realm. He never seriously enforced the prescript, but it was the first warning sign that Catholicism would not have an easy future in Japan. By the early 1590s, there was nothing left to do in the unification of Japan, and Hideyoshi decided to invade Korea with the ultimate goal being to sit on the imperial throne of China and possibly conquer India as well. Although the war was clearly a failure, Hideyoshi refused to concede defeat and the worn-out samurai held on in isolated castles on the Korean coast until he died. This legacy strains East Asian relations to this day.

**Tokugawa Ieyasu:** Nobunaga's key ally. Following Hideyoshi's death, Tokugawa Ieyasu usurped power through acting as chief regent for Hideyoshi's infant son Hideyori (a similar ploy Hideyoshi had used when assuming Nobunaga's power). Tokugawa's ascent, however, was not without dissent, and resulted in a series of battles. The final conflict was one of the largest battles, globally, of the whole seventeenth century. The Battle of Sekigahara, in which approximately one hundred seventy thousand warriors took part (on the day itself; tens of thousands of others were delayed or fighting on related battlefields), was a decisive victory and decided Japanese politics for nearly three hundred years. Tokugawa's ancestors would rule in peace, with virtually no challenge, until the 1860s. Ieyasu himself, described as one of the richest men in the world by an English merchant, founded Tokyo and left a legacy of laws and guidance that shapes Japanese society to this day. He is considered by some to be one of the greatest statesmen who ever lived.

**Takayama Ukon:** Takayama's support was crucial for Hideyoshi's usurpation of the national leadership of the Oda clan, but

that did not mean he was invulnerable. In 1587, Hideyoshi ordered all Christian lords to renounce their faith. Takayama declined and was banished. He received a measure of forgiveness through being permitted to enter the service of the powerful Maeda clan but still refused to renounce Catholicism. After the definitive and final Jesuit expulsion edict in 1614, which included prominent Japanese Christians, he went into foreign exile, along with three hundred of his followers, in Manila. The colonial government of the Spanish Philippines saw an opportunity and offered to invade Japan to protect the Japanese Christians. Takayama refused to give his support and shortly afterward, in February 1615, breathed his last. The Spanish honored him with the funeral of a great lord and he is commemorated with a statue in the center of the old Japanese quarter of Manila, Plaza Dilao. With the support of Pope Francis in Rome, Takayama was beatified in his home town of Osaka in 2017, and became the Blessed Justo Takayama Ukon, only one step from sainthood.

**Arima Harunobu:** Arima Harunobu, who'd first welcomed Yasuke to Japan, regained some measure of autonomy after the Battle of Okitanawate, but remained in the shadow of his Satsuma clan allies. His people knew peace for the first time in decades. When the Shimazu were humbled by Hideyoshi, Arima bent the knee to him and subsequently was dispatched with two thousand troops to Korea in 1592. His run of picking the victors continued when he supported Tokugawa Ieyasu after Hideyoshi's death but his luck ran out when he failed in a mission to invade Taiwan and some sailors on one of his ships ran amok in Macao and were executed by the Portuguese authorities in 1608. The following year, he seized the Portuguese trading ship in Nagasaki in revenge and after a long battle, Captain Major André Pessoa blew up the whole ship rather than surrender. Although Ieyasu rewarded Arima for this, the "reward" was a marriage

between Arima's son and Ieyasu's adoptive daughter, a problem because Arima's son was already married. The son capitulated and divorced his Catholic wife, apostatized and poisoned Ieyasu's mind against his own father, and in 1612, the senior Arima, already exiled, was ordered to perform seppuku. As a Christian, Arima could not commit suicide, so instead he accepted the death of a common criminal, beheading.

**Katō Kiyomasa:** The warlord who employed “Kurobo,” and wrought havoc in Korea. After Hideyoshi's death, Katō chose to support Tokugawa Ieyasu, and was rewarded richly by becoming one of the most powerful lords in the land. He also remained loyal, however, to Hideyoshi's son Hideyori, whom Ieyasu had usurped, and attempted to act as a mediator between them. He died in 1611.

**Ōtomo Sōrin:** Ōtomo Sōrin became a vassal of the great conqueror, Hideyoshi, in 1587. He died of old age the same year. We know nothing more of his estranged wife “Jezebel,” except that she also died in 1587.

**Ōmura Sumitada:** The lord who gifted the Jesuits Nagasaki. Despite Ōmura's questionable adherence to Catholicism at first (to obtain arms and outside support), he made strenuous efforts to understand the creed and remained a Christian until his death from tuberculosis, on June 23, 1587. There is no record of what happened to his daughter, who'd refused to marry Arima. His son Yoshiaki, however, made the politically astute move (in the climate of the early seventeenth century) to ban the Jesuits and Christianity from the Ōmura domain.

**Hattori Hanzō:** Nobunaga destroyed the autonomy of the Iga ninja once and for all. However, their leader, Hattori Hanzō, took them into the service of Tokugawa Ieyasu, and a large

corps, around three hundred, formed a part of the guard at Ieyasu's new Edo Castle. Hattori has gone down in history and legend as the best known of the ninja, and as such has enjoyed a huge showing in popular culture, video games, movies, television, manga and books in Japan and overseas. Most famously the *Kage no Gundan* (Shadow Warriors) movie and TV series which depict him and his (semifictional) descendants. Hattori and his descendants of each generation, also named Hanzō, were played by Sonny Chiba in the series, and when Quentin Tarantino needed a Hattori Hanzō for the movie *Kill Bill*, he commissioned Chiba to play a fictional Hattori Hanzō XIV. The gate that Hattori guarded in Edo Castle, now the Imperial Palace, was named after him, and in turn the Hanzōmon metro line, is named after the castle gate.

### *The Places*

**Japan:** Japan was reunified as a political unit by Hideyoshi in 1590 bringing an uneasy end to The Age of the Country at War. It turned out to be only a pause in the fighting. When Hideyoshi died in 1598, the struggle to succeed him led to the massive conflagration of the Battle of Sekigahara where the forces loyal to Hideyoshi's seven-year-old son, Hideyori, squared off against Tokugawa Ieyasu. On the battlefield, one hundred seventy thousand samurai fought. In the numerous sideshows, many tens of thousands more were involved. Ieyasu won a crushing victory, and shortly afterward founded a new shogunal dynasty which would rule until the modern age. The final conflict to secure Tokugawa's rule came in 1614–1615 when the last remaining supporters of Hideyori defiantly gathered at Osaka Castle. In a series of battles, Tokugawa Ieyasu again came out on top and this time it was definitive. There would be no real challenge to Tokugawa rule until the 1860s.

Unfortunately for the Jesuits, they'd backed the wrong side.

Crosses and Catholic banners had been held high in battle at Osaka. The punishment was permanent expulsion. Over the next two decades, Catholics—or, according to Tokugawa law, criminals and purveyors of pernicious teachings—were given the chance to recant their faith or face death. The majority apostatized sometimes under heavy torture. At the same time, the large Japanese diaspora around Asia, estimated to have perhaps been as high as one hundred thousand, were not always on their best behavior. Piracy and mercenary activity were rife, a great embarrassment for the shogunate which wished to look respectable in the eyes of the world. By the 1630s, the government had had enough, and promulgated a series of laws prohibiting Japanese citizens from travel abroad (and denying repatriation to those who did not come home quickly). All Catholic nations were forbidden to enter Japanese waters and the Dutch were the only non-Asian foreigners allowed to trade at all. They were restricted to a small man-made island called Dejima in Nagasaki bay. Chinese (and other Asian trade which was often conducted on Chinese ships), Korean, Ryukuan (modern-day Okinawa Prefecture, but then an independent nation) and Ainu (the indigenous inhabitants of Hokkaido and the islands further north) trade continued and formal diplomatic relations were maintained with Korea, Ryukyu and the Dutch East India Company. Yasuke could not have flourished in this world; he would not have even been able to travel farther than the Nagasaki dockside.

In the 1670s and '80s, economic issues, mainly to do with declining output from the silver mines that had funded Japanese imports for so long, forced a rethink and it was decided to further limit the amount of foreign trade each year to retain bullion as far as possible for domestic use. This, coupled with a drive to improve domestic industry to make up for reduced imports, had the effect of boosting the national economy. Production of products like silk, sugar and tea boomed and the quality rivaled

that of the old Chinese imports for the first time as techniques were perfected, often with the help of Chinese experts.

Following the disaster of Hideyoshi's Korean war, the Tokugawa declined any serious foreign military activity and imposed a national peace. The energy that the samurai had once expended in war was spent on the arts and scholarship. Drama, printing, pornography, writing, painting, pottery, in fact just about any form of art you can think of, flourished. Philosophy and ethical studies took over from military strategy as the learning of preference, although the martial arts were never forgotten and were assiduously practiced and perfected. Not everything was rosy, however. Natural disasters and famine were never far away from the growing population. The strict caste system—samurai, peasants, artisans and merchants, in that order—implemented by Hideyoshi and continued by his successors meant that social mobility was difficult.

By the nineteenth century, social pressures were mounting, pressures that would lead to a very different future for Japan. But that is another story.

**Macao:** Macao continued to thrive on trade with Japan until the Japanese government definitively expelled all Portuguese residents and their Japanese families in 1638 due to perceived Portuguese support for a rebellion in the Shimabara peninsula, Arima's old lands. The Macanese were devastated; the Nagasaki trade was the cornerstone of their economy. And so they sent four of their leading citizens to beg for the restoration of trading rights in 1640. The shogunate was not amused with the "worm-like barbarians of Macao," and executed sixty-one of the ship's complement. A skeleton crew of thirteen was left alive to sail back to Macao with the message that if they ever darkened Japanese waters again, no one would be spared. Macao made do with other inter-Asian trade, especially with Manila, but was

never as important an outpost of Portugal as it had been during the early days. By 1999, when it was reunited with mainland China, it had become the last European colony in Asia.

**Nagasaki:** Nagasaki grew and grew. It blossomed on trade and Christian faith until the Tokugawa government banned that religion. Most of the good burghers of Nagasaki quickly recanted Catholicism; the rest died by execution or torture. In the 1630s, it became the sole port authorized to trade with Europeans, and after 1641, the Dutch became the sole Europeans to be permitted trade there. The trade with China and Southeast Asia continued at a regular pace, around one hundred to two hundred Asian ships per year and one, sometimes two, Dutch ships. It remained the most multicultural city in Japan until the modern age. For the next two hundred years, around 10 percent of the population were Chinese.

August 9, 1945—the city of Kokura was half-covered in smoke from fires started by a firebombing raid of more than two hundred United States B-29s on nearby Yahata the previous day. With such low visibility over Kokura, another B-29, *Bockscar*, decided on its backup target and dropped the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, ultimately killing as many as two hundred thousand people.

**Tottori Castle:** Tottori Castle remained a formidable fortress and center of local government until the modern age. In 1943, it was badly damaged in a massive earthquake, and the old noble family which had been in residence since 1600, the Ikedas, donated what was left to the people of the city. Today, the walls have been restored and you can attempt to climb the sheer slopes to the mountain summit. Beware of bears.

**Azuchi:** Azuchi was Nobunaga's city. There was little there before him and little left after him. Today it is a sleepy town of

around ten thousand. The castle ruins are well preserved and can be visited; there is even a reconstruction of the top two floors of Nobunaga's glorious seven-floor donjon. Sadly nothing of the original building remains.

**Sakai:** Sakai lost its international verve and vibe when Japan restricted foreign trade to designated ports, of which it was not one. It continued, however, to be a major center of national shipping and trade, particularly known for its weapon and knife manufacture. Today, it has been all but swallowed up by its larger and louder neighbor, Osaka.

**Kyoto:** Kyoto remains the spiritual capital of Japan, even if it gave up the title of Imperial Capital in 1868 when the emperor moved to his current home in Tokyo. It is one of the world's great cities, bursting with energy both ancient and modern and tourists from around the world flock there. Temples and shrines neighbor markets and department stores. It boasts the second most Michelin stars of any city in the world. Number one is Tokyo.

**The Satsuma and Mori clans:** Although these two hugely powerful clans bent the knee to Hideyoshi, they were never destroyed in the way that Nobunaga had destroyed the Takeda. Both fought against Tokugawa Ieyasu at the Battle of Sekigahara, but again were allowed to survive as coherent entities. The Satsuma clan were even permitted to carry out an invasion of the Ryukyu Kingdom (modern Okinawa) in 1609 and rule those islands as a colony for the next two centuries. This gave them direct access to the hugely lucrative trade with China, something that no other clan other than the ruling Tokugawa enjoyed.

Both clans were mortal enemies of the other, but when they combined forces in 1866, they were powerful enough to remove

the Tokugawa from power and usher in a new era for Japan known as the Meiji Era; they founded modern Japan.

The Mori were canner than the Satsuma, and slowly edged them out of power in the late nineteenth century. To this day, a large number of prime ministers, including the current incumbent (in 2018) Abe Shinzo, are from what was Mori clan territory, the modern Yamaguchi Prefecture.

## AUTHOR NOTE

**I**n 2009, quite by chance, I first happened upon the extraordinary, and little-known (especially then), historical character of Yasuke.

I'd moved to Japan a decade before from Britain for a teaching opportunity. Like Yasuke, I was a stranger in a strange land but learning every day: the Japanese language, patience and staying quiet, Japanese cookery, the beauty of *onsen* (hot springs), what snow really is, the true value of central heating and how to teach and to deal with personal relationships cross-culturally. These first years in Japan, coincidentally in the tiny town of Shikano in Tottori Prefecture (where Yasuke may have visited), changed my life. I grew up, learned a fascinating language (my favorite), determined the shape of my future.

When I stumbled upon the Yasuke story online, I instantly became fascinated by this man who'd traveled so far from his homeland to appear directly beside the dominant warlord in Japan and be granted another culture's highest opportunity and honor. Al-

though I'd initially assumed, blithely, that men and women like Yasuke were all slaves, in grave conditions, I came to see there was actually a far more complex and inspiring story to tell. Here was a slave soldier from Africa who'd most likely worked for royalty in India, then for one of the most prominent Jesuits in Christendom and ultimately for a mighty Japanese warlord. It was remarkable, epic even. A true-life tale of great adventure.

Migrants like Yasuke, however, have generally managed to slip through the cracks of historical research and I soon decided to find out more and begin the study necessary to write a book based on his story.

Over the next six years, I investigated primary sources (diaries, letters, histories written more than three hundred years ago) for any mention of Yasuke or men and women like him. The internet provided new means to access highly obscure European accounts of sixteenth-century Japan, old Japanese chronicles, and dusty volumes about ancient African kingdoms which could not have been easily obtained by one person without a great deal of travel only a decade ago. I also found relevant material in university libraries.

Here, he's mentioned escaping death at the hands of a curious crowd who perhaps craved a piece of clothing as some form of celebrity trophy. Here, a diary entry where Yasuke was witnessed performing feats of strength and chatting convivially alongside the sons of Japan's most powerful warlord. It was not long before I could imagine Yasuke walking the wide boulevards of Kyoto, dressed in exotic garb from China, India and Europe, an intimidating spear in one hand, a gently curved Japanese sword thrust through a sash at his waist. I also began seeing links between Yasuke's story and others, both in Japan and around the world. A new remarkable world of international exploration, soldiery and trade opened up to me, beyond the notion of the only pioneers being western Europeans searching for glory and "new worlds," but, rather, a far more nuanced story of all those moving around

the contracting globe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Those whose talents, the vicissitudes of fate, and perhaps a guardian angel or two, determined where and how far they could, and would, go.

All this detective work merged to paint a picture of Yasuke's life. But the picture had yet to become a complete narrative where all the gaps were filled. Fortunately, I was able to directly contact many researchers and historians around the world who generously answered my requests appealing for otherwise unobtainable research leads, informed opinions and material. Even the first secretary of the Embassy of the Republic of Mozambique in Tokyo granted me an interview to assist in crossing the *Ts* and dotting the *Is* on some outstanding questions on a country about which it is still difficult to find much historical information.

This work gave my career a very new and specific focus: I began to teach courses concentrating expressly on the Japanese discovery of the world and the world's discovery of Japan. Yasuke shaped me. And, by 2015, flush with an abundance of genuine historical material and evidence of this amazing man, I set out on the task of writing his life story, thinking it would cover a few thousand words. At fifteen thousand words—and five thousand over my intended academic publication's word limit—I realized Yasuke had a much larger story to tell than I'd first dreamed.

And so this book came to be written, almost by mistake. But the more stones I rolled over, the more fascinating life stories, yet to be told, emerged: stories of mercenaries, sailors, explorers, travelers, sultans, viziers, concubines, pirates, missionaries, cooks, warlords and adventurers, as well as heartrending tales of hard, anonymous, unrelenting slave labor. It became the story of not just Yasuke, but that of people like him, whose deeds do not normally enter the history books, either because they cannot themselves write their stories, or because the dominant sections of global society tend to concentrate on the great exploits of their own classes and castes, and not the "little people"—or in Yasuke's case, the giants—who

hold them up. I realized, or hoped, that millions of people could speak through Yasuke. He could, when brought fully back to life, perhaps give a voice to those whom history has often forgotten.

But then I made an even more remarkable discovery. Yasuke lives on today. The African samurai actually seems very much to be a character of the internet age as much as the sixteenth century. Hundreds have been inspired to produce documentaries, make computer games, write novels, draw manga and use Yasuke's legend as a base for educational and cultural programs. As the final chapter shows, Yasuke has taken the step bestowed to only a few people in history, from mere mortal to an adaptable and still-growing legend. This remarkable man's story seems to attract people for a variety of reasons as I discovered in 2016 from the feedback to my first academic paper about him: "The story of Yasuke: Nobunaga's African retainer." The reactions that came in via email and other platforms from all over the world were in some ways shocking in what they revealed about modern humans and our relationship to history in general *and* to the historical character of Yasuke in particular.

For Sarah, a television producer, Yasuke was representative of an alternative view of history which does not place white European males at its center, but tells a soaring success story of a non-European, without placing them as a victim. As an American Caucasian female working in a largely male profession in Japan, she'd personally experienced many instances of sexism and racism directed toward her, including jibes at her Japanese husband by a white American coworker. For her, Nobunaga's regard for Yasuke legitimized his worth in her eyes far more than the Jesuit disregard for their African servants casts them as victims of their age.

A British author and fellow Japanese history enthusiast wrote to suggest Yasuke proves that, despite what some people across all nations now claim, the world "has *always* been a lot smaller than it appears." Looking through history, we find tens of thousands of Yasukes—immigrants in places you'd never think a person of

that race, color, nationality or creed would be. “In times when the world faces a refugee crisis, Yasuke proves there have always been exceptional people who’ve adapted and become part of a culture completely alien to their own.”

For many correspondents, Yasuke represented the outsider who achieves success, a lesson for everybody on how to deal with modern-day issues of multiculturalism and alienation in a globalized world—a world where homogenous societies no longer exist and political states rarely follow ethnic or tribal borders. There is no reason why a man like Yasuke was any less likely to rise to prominence in a medieval Japanese setting than Handel was in a British setting or Son Masayoshi, son of postwar Korean immigrants and one of the world’s richest self-made men, in modern-day Japan. Yasuke’s story is one to provoke inspiration, inclusion and positive action.

The fact that published history has traditionally been written from an ethnocentric, and predominantly Eurocentric, perspective is probably the most likely reason why Yasuke’s story has received so little serious attention up to now. It does not fit into any national box, nor does it identify with major national diasporas or cross-national community relationships, as no one knows for certain from where he originates. The academic research on the black presence in Japan and East Asia, in any language, is tiny, and research on non-Japanese and immigrant communities, with the exception of European traders in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and current-day immigration issues, in the Japanese context is also highly limited. Yasuke has essentially managed to slip through the cracks of historical research and therefore historical storytelling until now. Whether this attempt at telling the full and comprehensive story of the African samurai will change it, or in fact reduce the fascination that comes with his mystery is hard to tell. I, for one, hope not. I hope Yasuke’s story lives on for a long time and continues to provide a source of inspiration for whoever needs or wants it.

This book is about one young man of African origin whom the tides of history washed up in Japan. The central theme is his life, but to understand and analyze that life, it became necessary to illuminate the maritime and migratory lives of Africans and other peoples who had contact with them in the sixteenth century. As such, it covers a wide swathe of the globe illuminating his journey and likely life from Africa to Japan. After the more than eight years that this book eventually took to create, I apologize for any errors that may have slipped in, and the fault is entirely mine.

This book does not in general attempt a critical look at the African slave trade and its global consequences, nor does it attempt any particular cultural criticism of any who engaged in what we might now regard as dubious practices. It tries to look at facts and possibilities and present them as such. To the contemporary mind, many of the activities and beliefs of people of all ilk herein seem strange and perhaps even horrific. However, at the time they were not necessarily seen in the same light. In a world where Christians and Muslims, and indeed militant Buddhist monks, saw it as their prime and sacred duty to spread the word of “their” god, enslaving and even killing people was often justified as an act that would save the victim’s eternal soul. It is easy to look back and judge, and likely people in the future will look back at our world with disbelief and horror. I have tried to resist the temptation to write as a modern judge and, instead, write as a dispassionate observer so as to give a better feeling and flavor of the times. I hope not to appear callous for doing this.

I would like to express profound gratitude to Manami Tamaki, my agent, and her team and colleagues, particularly Ken Mori and Alex Korenori, at the Tuttle-Mori Agency in Tokyo, for having the faith, and dedicating the energy and time to help develop a very rough idea from a first-time author. None of this would ever have happened without them. They helped shape an earlier rendering of this book (published in Japan) and found the right agency in the United States to facilitate the version which you now find in

your hands. Thank you to Peter McGuigan and the whole team at Foundry Literary + Media for your commitment to the project, shaping its future and helping to bring Yasuke to a wider audience.

Peter teamed me with Geoffrey Girard, an experienced, inspiring and innovative author and collaborator. Throughout the time we were writing together, I never failed to pick up new tips, ideas and techniques which continuously strengthened and took the book in new, exciting and often unforeseen directions. Geoffrey and I traveled several thousand miles together across Japan in the summer of 2017, investigating Kyoto, Azuchi, Lake Biwa, Mount Fuji and the former Takeda domains and the routes of Yasuke's principal travels. Not to mention more general background work in various regions—from research in the National Diet Library in Tokyo to an unforgettable dinner in Kyoto at one of the oldest restaurants in Japan, which amazingly existed during Yasuke's lifetime. It was a fast-paced and tiring expedition, and my leg muscles felt ten years younger at the end. Geoffrey, thank you for all your hard work, your great questions and your discerning eye.

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Finally I also would like to thank my wife, Junko, for putting up with endless Yasuke talk, probably not quite finished yet. Her ideas, advice and translation help with obscure texts were key to conceiving of Yasuke's life. Secondly, my children, Eleanor and Harry, who wanted to hear the stories and play sword fighting (I always had to be Akechi) in the park. Masae and Yusaburo Kinoshita and Andrew (my dad) and Caryl Lockley for looking after us and the kids so well to give me time to work on the book.

Yasuke's story continues—it sometimes seems that it's only now getting started—and continues to provide a source of inspiration for all who meet him.

弥助殿、幸あれ。バンザイ!

Thomas Lockley, Tokyo, 2018

# NOTES

The selected bibliography at the end of each chapter section is a collection of the best resources available for readers to find out more about Yasuke's world. For more, please visit [AfricanSamurai.com](http://AfricanSamurai.com).

## PART 1

### Chapter 1

**Yasuke's name:** The word *Yasuke* (pronounced *Yas-kay*) is almost definitely a Japanese rendering of a foreign name, although "Yasuke" is not a wholly unknown name in Japan. Slaves and freedmen in the Portuguese world were generally known by the Portuguese names their masters gave them, and Yasuke would have been introduced by Father Organtino, the priest who accompanied him to his audience with Nobunaga, by this name. Similar-sounding names can be found in many of the variants of the biblical name "Isaac" from around the Indian Ocean. It is Yisake in Amharic (Ethiopian), Isaque in Portuguese (pronounced something like "Yi-saa-ki") and Ishaq

in Arabic (pronounced “Yi-shak”). Any of these three variants would quite likely be rendered into Japanese as “Yasuke,” as the sounds of Japanese do not exactly match those of an Ethiopian language, Arabic or Portuguese.

**Guns:** Warfare in Japan changed forever in the years following 1543, when a Chinese pirate ship with several Portuguese merchants onboard was accidentally blown to the tiny island of Tanegashima just south of Kyushu. The local *daimyō* was predictably fascinated by the harquebus muskets which the merchants were only too happy to demonstrate the use of, and it didn’t take long for his craftsmen to copy the innovative and effective killing machine. From there on, gun usage and manufacture spread like wildfire, and one of the earliest proponents was a youthful Oda Nobunaga. The gun transformed warfare, and society, as even peasants could be trained to use them cheaply, easily and quickly. No longer did samurai have to train from birth with sword and bow before they stood a chance on the battlefield. Armies could and did expand quickly and cheaply. While the older weapons still had their role, guns quickly became the center of strategy and battle plans. The Japanese soon copied and started to mass-manufacture them on a massive scale. These guns were of the harquebus type, early matchlock muskets, fired by pulling a trigger which touched a lighted match to the ignition. A charge of gunpowder was inserted into the muzzle, followed by the lead shot. The load was placed securely at the correct end of the barrel with a ramrod. These were light guns, easily carried by fast-moving armies and required little training to use. Shot was made on the battlefield by molding molten lead with a bullet mold carried at the warrior’s belt. It is said that by the turn of the seventeenth century, there were more guns in Japan than in the whole of the rest of the world combined.

**Dates:** The dates used throughout this book are derived from historical documents. The calendar used in Japan at the time was the Chinese lunar calendar, hence New Year occurring in February of the European calendrical system. The calendar used by the Jesuits during this time was the Julian calendar. The Gregorian calendar, used in much of the world today, was adopted by the Catholic Church in 1582, but news of this would not have reached Japan for some time. Some dates in the historical documents are unclear, others contradictory. Every effort has been made to be as accurate as possible.

**Burial at sea:** Death at sea on Portuguese ships, when it came, was a simple matter. The master blew his silver whistle, the survivors bowed their

heads and prayed to their god or gods that they were not next, and then their comrade, still warm, was tossed into the sea wrapped—*if* he was rich enough to have one—in his own sleeping mat.

**Missing travelers:** Many of the other Europeans employed on the initial India run—a mishmash of Portuguese, Germans, Flemings, Italians and Spaniards; mostly fugitives or desperate treasure hunters—had either perished on the earlier voyages or been content to stay in Goa or other parts of India after the arduous trip east, hence the high proportion of African and Indian sailors on Portuguese ships in Japanese art of the period. Any remaining European officers onboard had specific orders from the Portuguese Crown, who made all appointments, to carry on eastward. The Jesuits were sent by their order, and the mission superior (or Visitor if one were present) could decide where to send them upon their arrival in India. The common sailors had no such orders. They were short-term hires, engaged only for the one-way voyage, and then laid off or rehired once they landed at a new dock.

**Trade in Japan:** Systems and industries often thrive in strife-torn times, and sixteenth-century Japan was no exception. People from across the world, from Rome to China and Mexico, recognized those opportunities in Japan and went to answer that call. Japan had been focused for hundreds of years on a China-based trade system which had transferred extraordinary wealth from the center of Asia (China) to the periphery (Japan, Korea, Thailand and the smaller kingdoms and sultanates which now make up Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines), yet demanded subordination to the power, munificence and spiritual centrality of the Chinese emperor: The Son of Heaven. Trade was only allowed in controlled amounts, permitted to specially appointed trade partners (e.g., the governments that the Chinese throne recognized as legitimate) in the subordinate countries. Officially, it was designated as “tribute” but the Chinese government paid handsome sums for this tribute, and it was, in effect, a complicated closed-trading system which also conferred recognition on native rulers who engaged in the tribute trade. As civil war shook the Japanese islands, just who “the government” was became increasingly unclear. In the early sixteenth century, two noble Japanese families arrived in China claiming that status, and the Chinese agreed to trade only with one of them: the Hosokawa (later to refuse Akechi’s advances and take Hideyoshi’s side). Those left out, the Ouchi, were enraged and started a violent rampage in the Chinese port of Ningbo, killing locals and plundering property.

The Chinese were unsurprisingly not pleased with a foreign conflict spilling over onto their own soil, and demanded the perpetrators be delivered to them for justice. With no government in Japan able to enforce the Chinese request, nothing happened and eventually the Chinese cut both trade and diplomatic ties with all of Japan. Japanese people were henceforth forbidden to enter Chinese territory on pain of death, and Chinese merchants would suffer the same penalty if they traded with Japan. China's allies in Korea also tightened trading relations and restricted Japanese traders to one port, Busan, in the southeast. Products that had previously come from China, either from China itself or traded through Chinese ports from destinations as far away as Africa, became hard to come by in Japan. Korean trade also dropped dramatically. The products which became scarce ranged from luxuries such as silk, tiger skins, art, books, ivory and sugar to necessities such as coins, medicines and tea. There were two solutions to this problem: piracy and finding other sources of trade. Asian states that had previously traded only via China now opened up direct relations with Japanese lords and merchants. (As there was no effective central power in Japan, the regional lords and private entities were the ones to negotiate with.) Japanese ships started to range far afield for the first time, establishing Japanese communities and trading hubs in places like Siam (Thailand) and Manila. These "Japan Towns" facilitated a dramatic increase in trade, foreign relations and knowledge of the wider world. There were fortunes to be made in trading both local goods and products such as leather and sugar, and also China-derived goods such as silk; war machines needed to be oiled, and trade was the ideal way to make money. Furthermore, contacts were made now with strange pink and black peoples, the likes of whom many Japanese had never seen or conceived of before. Europeans, having met Chinese and Japanese merchants in Indian and other Asian ports, pressed east to find the source of the silver and silk these men carried with them. Setting foot in East Asia for the first time, they jumped into the intermediary trade too; it was much easier to trade spoilable products over short distances and then simply export the silver westward to trade again for products like spices which fetched a king's ransom in Europe. The Portuguese were allowed to trade in the Chinese port of Guangzhou (Canton) and eventually founded a base at Macao nearby. They could therefore get those products from the Chinese that the Japanese so desired, and make a huge profit by trading them. The riches to be made became legendary and the Portuguese Crown reaped the rewards. Thousands of Chinese entrepreneurs, or pirates, also avoiding the shackles of central trade quotas, disappeared mysteriously from southern Chinese ports each year, only to return later with ships filled with Japanese silver, gold,

sulfur, art works and weapons. By Yasuke's time, Japan had become a place central to trade networks in its own right, not only a peripheral state in the Chinese hegemonic sphere. Local extractive and manufacturing industries expanded massively to pay for these imported products: silver, sulfur, copper and manufactures—mainly traditional weapons, but increasingly guns too. As these were new industries, expert help from abroad was sometimes engaged to share knowledge of exploitation techniques. These engineers came mainly from China clandestinely, but Portuguese and others, like Yasuke, also found their skills and knowledge in high demand. The increased income from silver and foreign trade enabled Japanese people to pay for ever more foreign products, thus increasing sophistication and cosmopolitanism in the islands. It also attracted ever more foreigners and adventurers, with skills to sell, to take part in the trade. As the foreign population and their power and influence increased, perceptions of the usefulness of, and of course the threat they posed, changed accordingly. The Japanese became far more open to ideas beyond their traditional mixture of native and Chinese roots and interest in other foreign ideas, products, culture and concepts—such as Christianity—became *de rigueur* among the ruling classes (“interest in” did not automatically mean acceptance, of course). Yasuke was, in Nobunaga's mind, a representative of this new feeling in Japan that the world was smaller, more relevant. Yasuke symbolized this in himself, simply by being at Nobunaga's side, but also proved it to others. It raised Nobunaga up in his supplicants' eyes and gave him the legitimacy of foreign as well as domestic recognition, connecting him in everyone's eyes with a world that stretched far beyond a horizon that any Japanese ruler had before conceived of.

**Japão:** The Jesuits' lingua franca was Portuguese and they called Japan “Japão,” but they also sometimes used *Iapam* which is a name from old Portuguese, a word nearer to modern Galician (a Spanish regional language) than modern Portuguese. The revolutionary 1603–1604 dictionary *Vocabulario da Lingoa de Iapam* (written by the Jesuits and comprising 32,293 entries) contains two more entries for Japan: *nifon* and *iippon*. The title of the book, however, clearly gives the name: *Iapam*. (The letter *J* was not used regularly until the seventeenth century.) The early Mandarin Chinese name for Japan was *Cipan* (sun origin), but the Portuguese likely first heard the word *Jipang* being used in the islands of Southeast Asia. Over time, *Cipan* and *Jipang* and *Iapam* morphed into the English word “Japan.”

**The Black Ships:** When the Portuguese conquered Goa, they conveniently found a thriving shipbuilding industry combined with an abundance of timber resources within easy distance. They co-opted, probably enslaved, the shipwrights and established secure supplies of wood, and were soon building all shapes and sizes of vessels, from longboats to galleys to huge ocean-going *naos*, which eventually exceeded one thousand tons. This meant that they did not have to rely on ships arriving from Europe and could swiftly increase their local maritime power through exploiting colonial resources and manpower. It is said these ships were constructed of a black-colored wood, hence the name by which they became known in Japan—“*kurofune*,” or “black ships.”

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## Chapter 2

**“Italian”:** Valignano would have called himself Neapolitan. The ruling family of the Spanish Empire, the Hapsburgs, had territories dotted throughout Europe and the world that they’d acquired by marriage or conquest, and Naples happened to be one of them at this time. Subjects from different parts of the Hapsburg empire would not have referred to themselves by their emperor’s name; they used their local appellation. The people we now know as “Spanish” would have said Castilian or Catalan, etc., depending on their birthplace.

**Jesuits in Japan:** The Jesuits, during Yasuke’s time, were the only missionary order Rome allowed to preach in Japan. To keep this monopoly, they argued that other orders—the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians—would only misunderstand the knotty complications of the Japanese mission; that their meddling would simply undo all the good work already done by Ignatius’s followers. While other orders, particularly the Franciscans, were lobbying to be let in, Rome steadfastly maintained the Jesuit monopoly. When other orders did eventually gain access, the Jesuits were proved right, among the first martyrs of Japan were a group of Franciscans who had overstepped the mark in what was considered decent and respectful behavior. They were crucified for their actions.

Jesuit missionaries had been active in Asia—what Europeans knew as “the Indies”—since only 1542. Attracted by travelers’ and merchants’ tales, Francis Xavier first landed in the port of Kagoshima, in the southernmost of the main Japanese islands, Kyushu, in 1549. While he may have held the Japanese in high regard and referred to them as “the best race yet discovered,” as a good Jesuit, he still made great efforts to debate and supplant their religion and philosophy. The Buddhist establishment there was not initially hostile to these strange foreigners with their outlandish ideas and dogma, merely curious to know more, wondering perhaps if it was a new version of their own beliefs. Although Xavier made only a few hundred converts prior to his death in 1552, he’d efficaciously laid the foundations of the Jesuit mission in Japan and sent back the first reliable information on the “mysterious country” to Europe. He also left behind several priests, brothers and converts to carry on his work, which they duly did. By the time Yasuke arrived in 1579, there’d been one hundred thousand conversions. It was a fine start to the business of soul saving. The Jesuits worked hard at their mission in Japan, and from the first, they made genuine efforts

to spread the Word of God through helping the poor and people in need of aid. While this endeared them to those people, much of the wider population remained puzzled by this and tended to look down on such charitable actions: *Why would people who claimed such high status demean themselves by consorting with lepers and outcasts?* Well, the poor themselves clearly didn't all see it that way and the Jesuits founded hospitals, leper colonies and orphanages to which many flocked.

**Jesuit schools:** By the 1570s, in the Japanese domains that had been touched by the missions, there were Jesuit catechism classes, informal schools which taught their students to be good Catholics, and also literacy in Japanese and basic Latin prayers. It was a rare opportunity to read and write in an age of war and chaos when only those upon high normally could. Although they would receive occasional attention from visiting priests and brothers, it was the Japanese lay helpers who carried on the teaching day to day. The Jesuits believed in education, and extended it wherever they could. They'd opened their first school in Europe in 1548 and founded more than thirty within the next decade. These schools were intended to counter the Reformation, act as missionary beachheads and promote the veracity of Roman Catholic thought. They also sponsored and facilitated scholarship, knowledge creation and global publishing on a massive scale. Jesuit dictionaries and lexicons of native languages in seventeenth-century Asia and the Americas were the first resources Europeans used to understand these ancient tongues, and still provide modern scholars with many of the earliest reliable phonetic transcriptions. In the next two hundred years, they'd found more than eight hundred formal educational institutions worldwide, in addition to countless unrecorded community classes, becoming one of the largest nongovernmental educational organizations in human history. Today, they still run more than five hundred institutions. (Jesuit schools have educated, among others, Descartes, Voltaire, Molière, James Joyce, Peter Paul Rubens, Arthur Conan Doyle, Fidel Castro, Alfred Hitchcock and Bill Clinton.)

**Hinoe Castle:** The fact of Arima's castle of Hinoe containing building material from plundered Buddhist temples is taken from archeological records. It is estimated that some forty temples and shrines were destroyed while Valignano stayed in Kuchinotsu. What had been a rough fortress in 1579 had, by 1590, become a palace, with both Chinese and European influence worked into its Japanese splendor. The sliding doors were painted

with gold leaf, and summer scenes of the flora and fauna of the mountains adorned them. After opening these doors, the beautiful scenery of the Sea of Ariake dotted with islands could be seen. Fróis's assessment in 1590 was: "All rooms, big and small, were decorated with golden objects and resplendent and gorgeous paintings. This mansion is located within a brilliantly completed castle that was recently built by Arima Harunobu."

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## Chapter 3

**Yasuke's origins:** Pinpointing Yasuke's origins in Africa is difficult. One secondary source, Solier, who wrote about Yasuke in the 1620s, stated that Yasuke was from Mozambique. There is no other evidence for this, and no prior source mentions it. The tribe in the immediate vicinity of the Portuguese-occupied island of Mozambique were called the Makua, a relatively peaceful agricultural people who had only migrated to the region in the 1570s. Until circa 1585, long after Yasuke had left, they managed a

relatively conflict-free coexistence with the Europeans. While there were probably a few Makua slaves at Yasuke's time, the record is unclear, and the peaceful nature of relations makes it less likely that he was a Makua, as slaves would more likely have come from people who were unfriendly to the Portuguese. The possibility that he was sold because his family was in dire straits and he was an unneeded mouth to feed also exists. There were several famines during the decade, but a family would normally sell a young child not a strong young man. Another problem with this theory is that slavers preferred children because they were easier to control and manipulate; Yasuke would have been eighteen or nineteen when Valignano passed through Mozambique, late in the day to be enslaved. Finally the Makua had a very distinctive culture of filing teeth into points, this would surely have been a remarkable fact to the Japanese of the time, and would probably have been mentioned. It is not. One final problem with the Mozambique origin theory is that the Portuguese slave trade from Mozambique was relatively small at this time; only around two hundred to five hundred people a year were forcibly transported to India. Between 1500 and 1850 the total number of enslaved people transported to Indian Ocean destinations from Mozambique is estimated to have been between forty thousand to eighty thousand. The Arab, Jewish, Gujarati and Turkish slave trade from Northeast Africa by contrast was far larger; over the course of history, an estimated eleven to fourteen million Northeast African people were sold.

And then there is his height and extremely dark skin. Neither are characteristic of the peoples of the Mozambique region, who are generally smaller and have lighter-colored skin. But the north of Africa, integrated into the Indian Ocean slave trade, provides a people who sound far more like our description of Yasuke. The Dinka, for example, from what is now (in 2018) the world's youngest state, South Sudan, are famously, on average, the tallest people in the world. They are also strong warriors who hold themselves well and are much darker skinned (all things said of Yasuke) than their neighbors, in modern-day Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. The Dinka are cattle herders and fierce warriors who in those days lived slightly farther north of their current lands on the banks of the Nile. They partake of distinctive facial scarring upon reaching adulthood, but Yasuke would probably have been taken before his coming of age rituals and therefore lacked these features. Slave raiders from what is now northern Sudan also raided the Dinka people at this time. The Dinka people only got their modern name in the nineteenth century, probably after being randomly assigned it by a British explorer or administrator. They call themselves the

*Jaang*. Through process of elimination, I have concluded that Yasuke was a member of the Jaang people.

**The Age of the Country at War:** The name *The Age of the Country at War* (*Sengoku jidai* in Japanese) harks back to an era of intensive warfare in ancient China which concluded with the victory of the state of Qin in 221 BCE and the submission of the other six independent states which formed the Chinese world of the time. This was the first unified Chinese Empire, and the Japanese historians who named *their* “Age of the Country at War” after it were seeking to legitimize their own state’s unification and nationhood by alluding to a classical example of a state forged in bloody conflict.

**The Jesuit printing press:** The Jesuit press in Japan, exported from Lisbon on Valignano’s orders, became their most globally prolific in the final years of the sixteenth century, producing copies of European *and* Japanese texts in the thousands when most print runs in Europe only ran into the hundreds. It was removed to Macao when the Jesuits were expelled.

**Jesuit plotting:** Despite their worldwide reach and willingness to do virtually anything to meet their goals in Christ, the Jesuits truly didn’t have any plots more sinister than the saving of souls at this time. Any dreams of global European imperial domination are retrospective. That said, the leading Jesuits were often members of the most exalted families of Europe, and political intrigue came quite naturally. They could rarely avoid using worldly means to achieve their otherworldly ends. Some of the more blustering Portuguese *Fidalgos* and Spanish conquistador types, however, did have more nefarious plans, perhaps, seeing the Jesuits as their tools to make a beachhead in East Asia. But such plans were pie in the sky and the Spanish throne absolutely forbade them; provoking the Chinese or Japanese to war would result in the loss of the Philippines and other imperial territories and valuable trade, not to mention the potential massacre of tens of thousands of Christians. The King of Spain specifically forbade his subjects to fight with Japanese samurai.

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## Chapters 4 & 5

**The Jesuits and drama:** All around the world, the Jesuits were also strong believers in the power of theatre and drama to bring bible stories and the

message of Jesus to life. Japan was no exception. The plays were performed with elaborate music and dance, often in the dark, and lit by lanterns and torches that were designed to keep out the literal and spiritual dark and show the central message of The Light. These became key events, cementing the central role of missions in lives and communities, even “uncomprehending converts,” perhaps simply following their patriarch’s, headman’s or lord’s order to become Christian, got a living, breathing expression of the concept they had professed during baptism. Divinity lived and could be seen. School children and local people took part and viewed them with gusto. One can only imagine the wonder with which these plays were greeted in small and extremely remote Japanese fishing villages and mountain communities, far from the domainal capitals and castle towns where any form of theatrical entertainment normally took place. In a way that would not be possible through words or pictures, until the printing press arrived from Europe in 1590 and started to mass-produce Christian artwork and texts, the message of the Bible came to life and worked its way into the people’s hearts through performance. The most popular were the Christmas plays, and the first one took place in Ōtomo Sōrin’s territory, Bungo, in 1560. Thousands are said to have traveled from miles around to see the story of Adam and Eve enacted by local Japanese Catholics. A tree sporting golden apples was placed in the middle of the stage, and so “real” was the performance that when Lucifer tempted Eve beneath the apple tree, the audience burst into tears. Things only got worse when an angel appeared and led Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden. As a finale, the angel reappeared and consoled the weeping playgoers with news of a distant day of salvation. Yasuke must also have enjoyed these dramas, a release from the often-monotonous work of his everyday life; perhaps he even joined in the acting. Balthazar, one of the three kings who attended Jesus’ birth was, after all, traditionally depicted as a black-skinned Ethiopian.

**Nagasaki prostitution:** The Nagasaki region was poverty stricken and difficult to farm, and has borne the reputation for centuries of selling its daughters, and sometimes sons, into prostitution, permanently or as a temporary measure to raise a dowry for a good marriage, a reputation that continued well into the twentieth century. The fact that it was a port city with a widely fluctuating and wealthy population from all over the world simply added to a historic issue of poverty, capitalistic craving and human trafficking. Both poor women themselves and their families often jumped

at the chance to escape poverty and to share in the riches of trade seemingly everywhere around them.

**Images of Africans:** Later, pictures of non-Asians (both black and white) would show them as devil-like beings, but the pictures during this early period of contact before Christianity came to be seen as a threat, seem to be remarkably nondiscriminatory. They show the “exotic” habits, clothes, behavior and racial characteristics in a generally unprejudiced, but clearly fascinated, way.

**Blackened teeth:** *Ohaguro* was a fashion for painting teeth black for cosmetic purposes, which persisted in Japan from ancient times until the nineteenth century. Women normally did it after they had married, but high-class men such as imperial court aristocrats and senior samurai also partook. Teeth were varnished with a lacquer made of iron filings, which needed to be reapplied several times a week, somewhat similar to modern-day nail varnish. The people in the fishing villages where Yasuke initially lived would probably not have had the time or resources to paint their teeth in this manner, but Lord Arima’s court would have, so Yasuke would have encountered it soon after arriving in Japan. He may also have been aware of the practice from living in Macao.

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## Chapter 6

**Marriage and divorce:** Yasuke arrived in 1579, an interesting time for sexual relations in Japan. Despite long exposure to Chinese ideas, society was still in the process of absorbing Confucian ethics of human relations, where women take a decidedly inferior role to males. However, it had probably not taken serious root among the less educated lower and rural classes. Buddhism had also become popular among the lower classes over the previous few centuries and the emphasis it puts on perceived female pollution may also have been having an effect on how society saw women and women saw themselves. In 1579, Catholicism, with its very foreign concepts of marriage and sexual relations had only a small hold in Kyushu and central Japan, but there seems to be little indication that many male converts chose to follow the missionaries' teachings on having only one sexual partner. Indeed, why should they when they saw the foreign Catholics, and later Protestants, who lived in Japan ignoring them with abandon? Following local custom, the foreign visitors commonly took a temporary wife and then paid her off at the end of their stay. That money became her dowry, so that she could take a more stable local husband and have a family. At this point in history it does not seem to have damaged a woman's reputation to have had sexual relations with a foreigner. Japanese and foreign men who could afford it often had one principle wife (polygamy in Japan was rare), but several concubines; the temporary visitors to Japan simply took temporary "wives," and "divorced" them at the end of their stay. Japanese men who had reason to live in different places at different times of the year, for

example, merchants, also followed this practice and men who were exiled abroad, for example to the Amami Islands (which only officially became part of Japan much later) often took a local wife too.

But what were the older ways that still exercised such a powerful influence on the Japan that Yasuke knew? Firstly, this era was seeing the lowest point in the status of women in a region that had since ancient times held female status in high regard with clear property and inheritance rights, wide participation in economic and military activity, relative sexual freedom for both sexes, high rates of divorce by either party and remarriage among other things. We now see these things as modern, but various parts of the world knew them of old. From 1300, this status began to fall and by Yasuke's time, wives were going to live with their husband's family instead of staying with their own, inheritance was largely the privilege of an elder son, divorce by the male was more common than the female, property rights were reduced and dowries became commonplace. Still the Jesuits were shocked at the degree of freedom that women enjoyed, freedom of movement without a husband's permission, high levels of female literacy (the fact that literate females were respected), the commonplaceness of makeup and beautification (among both sexes), and the degree to which women were able to refuse an arranged marriage and enjoyed certain sexual freedoms. They also noted that the higher up the social scale, the less equal intersex relations were; i.e., a peasant couple were basically equal but aristocratic ladies far from it.

**Mori clan drives out Catholics:** The Mori clan of western Honshu were originally a minor family in the shadow of the far more powerful Ouchi clan, but by the 1550s, the Ouchi's day was done and in 1557 they were destroyed by the Mori, who took their capital city of Yamaguchi. The Jesuits had set up one of their first missions there in 1550 and around five hundred local people had been quickly converted. It is said that the first ever Japanese Christmas mass was in fact celebrated there in 1552. The Mori were not impressed with the headway made by the Jesuits and expelled them forthwith.

**Sea Lords:** They were often simply called pirates in Japanese, *kaizoku*, and *wokou*, Japanese bandits (or dwarf bandits) in Chinese. Sea Lords is the name modern scholarship assigns them. They were generally peripheral peoples who came under no central land-based control until just around Yasuke's time when they were being co-opted into "legitimate" state structures and land-based norms of hierarchy.

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## Chapter 7

**Pirate attacks:** Japanese pirates were known around the world to be tenacious fighters. One particular example was that of an English ship overrun off Singapore in 1604, which managed to contain a raiding pirate band in its own main cabin after a long fight. After four further hours of siege, the English realized the pirates would fight until the last man and ultimately used their cannon to destroy a portion of their own ship; all the pirates died.

**Rocket launchers:** After the end of the Korean invasions in the 1590s, the Japanese government sent a mission to find out more about these rockets, as they'd been so deadly. They also appear to have been on Japanese pirates' ships in Yasuke's time, a decade or more earlier.

**Ama:** The “sea women” divers have a history stretching back several millennia. Until the 1960s, the ama dived wearing only a loincloth or noth-

ing at all, and still today dive without the aid of scuba equipment. They are best known for pearl diving, but traditionally dived for anything of saleable value, including shellfish, coral and kelp. Today, a few women still ply this trade, but the harshness of the environment and availability of other work means this ancient profession dwindles by the generation.

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## Chapter 8

**Kyoto:** Kyoto’s location and layout were originally chosen primarily for their auspicious properties as defined by geomancy (*hōgaku* or *hōi* in Japa-

nese) and magical divination. These spiritual antecedents had practical advantages too—the rivers and southern valleys allowed positive energy to flow from favorable directions, but *also* trade goods. The mountains blocked malicious spirits and evil from disrupting human affairs but *also* acted as defensive barriers and sources of natural resources. Water to the north, Lake Biwa, channeled prosperous currents, and *also* acted as a useful trade route connecting Kyoto with the north coast and abundant marine produce, particularly mackerel. Kyoto was founded as Heian-kyo, meaning the “capital of tranquility and peace” when Emperor Kammu moved the Japanese capital there from Nagaokakyō in 794, and was conceived on an enormous scale. Chinese and Japanese architects, engineers, soothsayers and diviners laid out the city and its key buildings on Chinese lines, an enormous grid system of twelve hundred blocks of uniform size. The main entrance to the south was the great Rajōmon gate, which opened on the imposing Suzaku Avenue that bisected the city. The wide boulevard’s northern terminus was the Imperial Palace, whose compound housed both ceremonial and residential buildings and additional structures, such as the Court of Abundant Pleasures, a pavilion designed for banqueting and entertainments. Civil space was reserved for two large public markets, as well as for merchant and artisan quarters in the lower city. High nobility and other aristocratic families were allotted land for residences according to rank in the upper city. Over the next ten centuries, the city had been called Kyo, Miyako, or Kyo no Miyako; and in the eleventh century, the city was renamed Kyoto (capital city), and all of the appellations essentially used Japanese renderings of the Chinese character for capital. Even after the seat of imperial power was moved to Tokyo in 1868, there remained a view—persisting to modern times—that Kyoto was still the spiritual and cultural capital of Japan. In 1945, Kyoto was the initial target for the “Fat Man” atomic bomb. However, several senior American generals knew Japan well enough to argue that destroying cherished Kyoto would make it impossible for the Japanese to ever forgive or work beside the Americans. The room agreed and another target on the list was ultimately chosen instead: Kokura, to the northeast of Nagasaki.

**African or African American women in Japan:** When Yokohama, near Tokyo, opened for foreign trade in 1859, large numbers of foreign people came to live there. Among these were the first black, believed to be African American, women who were described by the famous artist Utagawa

Sadahide as very hard workers. He portrayed them in a famous artwork in which he anthropologically recorded conditions among the foreigners.

**The Kanō School:** The Kanō School was the dominant Japanese school of artistry from the late fifteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Artists often created work in teams, under a leading artisan, often a member of the original Kanō family. Typical subjects were scenes from nature and from Chinese classics. However, around 1590, the great works that we can see in this chapter, depicting multicultural life in Nagasaki, began to be created. They are called *nanban byōbu*, or “southern barbarian folding screens.”

*Southern barbarian* was the term by which the Japanese referred to southern Europeans, Africans and Indians because they approached Japan from the south on Portuguese ships. The term *southern barbarian* itself is Chinese and originally referred to the people of the South China Seas. The Japanese were often called “eastern barbarians” by the Chinese.

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## Chapter 9

**“The Black Monk from Christian”:** By the time of Yasuke’s arrival in Japan, the Japanese concept of the world had developed quite considerably, or rather that of the ruling classes had. The Jesuits brought the first globes to Japan sometime in the 1570s, and it is known that Nobunaga treasured his and spoke at length with foreigners like Yasuke whom he met. Nobunaga (and the other high-ranking Japanese lords) would have been as conversant in world geography as most European rulers of the time.

However, outside ruling circles, old parlances would have proliferated. The traditional way of describing the world was *gosankoku* (The Three Countries), meaning China, Japan and India, and by extension, in traditional thought, the known “civilized” world. The traditional Asian worldview was centered on China, the *Sinosphere*. The very characters that make up the name for China in the Japanese language (and in many other East Asian languages) mean “the central kingdom” or sometimes “central effervescence.” Culturally, this remained the same in Yasuke’s day, but the Chinese had definitively rejected Japan diplomatically and commercially in the first half of the sixteenth century and this forced Japan to look farther afield for resources and markets. Ironically, this set off a great century of Japanese seafaring and commercial expansion in Asia and, to a certain extent, as far afield as Europe, with the help of the Jesuits. Introducing Yasuke as the “Black monk from Christian,” was a sign that the speaker, and Nobunaga’s court, were aware of a world outside the Sinosphere, and that Yasuke was from Christendom.

**Seppuku:** The act of ritual suicide by cutting open one’s own belly (and then being swiftly beheaded by a friend to shorten the pain) was first recorded in 1180. It was used by warriors, male and female, to avoid falling into enemy hands, to mitigate shame or as the basis of a peace agreement. It was usually performed before spectators. If the initial cut to the gut is performed deeply enough, it can sever the descending aorta and bring death even before the beheading. An expert beheading (done by a second) includes *dakikubi* (the embraced head), in which a strip of flesh is left attaching the head to the body. Seppuku was forbidden as judicial punishment in 1873. Voluntary seppuku has continued, although it is extremely rare. The most famous example in the twentieth century was that of Nogi Maresuke, who performed seppuku with his wife on the day of the Emperor Meiji’s funeral in 1912, to follow his liege lord in death. Due to his victories in the Russo-Japanese War, Nogi was a well known military figure around the world and

his loyalty was widely praised on newspaper front pages globally including *The New York Times*. In 1970, famous author Mishima Yukio performed seppuku in protest during a failed coup to bring the emperor back to power.

**Honnō-ji Temple:** Honnō-ji Temple was originally founded in 1415 but moved several times due to destruction by fire. In 1582, it was situated to the south of what is now Nijō Castle and was again destroyed by fire during the battle that claimed Nobunaga's life and ensured Yasuke's place in history. It was rebuilt in 1592 in its current location near Kyoto City Hall and has managed to survive there to this day. It is a significant pilgrimage site for Nobunaga fans and houses a small museum with artifacts related to Nobunaga including Mori Ranmaru's sword. The temple has been the subject of numerous movies, manga and novels due to the cult of Nobunaga that lives to this day in Japan and around the world.

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## Chapter 10

**The height of Japanese doors:** The standard height of a Japanese door, and length of tatami mat, even today, is six *shaku*, about six feet. Yasuke was described as 6 *shaku* 2 *sun*, and may have been taller. One *sun* is approximately equivalent to an inch.

**Bowing in Japan:** Bowing probably arrived in Japan with prehistorical immigrants from China and Korea, and has remained a crucial part of culture and etiquette ever since. Today, it is second nature to Japanese people, and done virtually unconsciously in any number of situations, both formal and informal. Bowing, especially formal bowing, is governed by a myriad of rules. The bows that Yasuke and other supplicants to Nobunaga, including Valignano and Nobunaga’s other senior vassals perform in this book were predominantly from a kneeling position on the floor. The bower would have knelt, placed both hands in front of themselves and lowered their head to the floor. Depending on the situation and the bowing person’s rank, they might remain in that position, or return to an upright kneeling posture.

**Massed musket volley fire:** This deadly modern tactic became one of the most potent tools of armies throughout the world over the next centuries until machine guns were invented in the late nineteenth century. The contemporary popular imagination probably associates the technique most with the massed squares of infantry musketeers in the Napoleonic Wars more than two hundred years after Yasuke and Nobunaga lived. It was probably invented independently by the Chinese, Nobunaga and the Dutch, who are first recorded as using the tactic in Europe in the early seventeenth century.

**Kiyomizu Temple:** Entering the famous Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto today, one of the first statues you see is a larger-than-life image of Daikokuten, the Japanese incarnation of the Indian god Shiva. He is the color of black ink, the same color as Yasuke is described as being.

**Dinka cattle rearing culture:** Dinka customs of dying hair with cow urine and stimulating the cows to produce more milk are well documented and can be seen on YouTube as well as read about in books.

**Yasuke gifted:** An episode from a decade later may also give a clue to Valignano's feelings toward the situation he found himself in when Nobunaga expressed an interest in Yasuke. Nobunaga's successor, Hideyoshi, had been mostly generous with the Jesuits, partly because he hoped for their help with obtaining two Portuguese warships. One day, he paid them a visit, a singular honor, on the huge galley that the Jesuits had built to defend Nagasaki and to transport themselves in style around the country. Hideyoshi "expressed great interest" in the galley, the implication being that he wanted it for himself, but the Jesuits declined to simply give it to him, and foolishly tried to bargain some extra land for it. Hideyoshi did not react with any outward rage; he appeared to simply forget about the galley. However, mere days later, he banned the Jesuits from propagating and forbade lords to force their vassals to convert, naming Christianity "a great evil for Japan." This was the first step on the path to eventual Jesuit expulsion and wider Catholic persecution. Had Nobunaga expressed a desire to take Yasuke into his service at Valignano's audience, as Hideyoshi did the galley, the Jesuit would have found it hard to decline the request. In fact, he may have even *offered* Yasuke's services before they were requested as he could see how taken Nobunaga was with the warrior. This was the diplomatic thing to do and Valignano was a highly seasoned diplomat. Had later Jesuits followed his example, the future of Japanese Christianity may have turned out very differently.

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## PART 2

### Chapter 11

**The Emperor Ōgimachi:** Ōgimachi reigned from October 27, 1557, to his abdication on December 17, 1586, His personal name was Michihito. His reign saw a modest revival of imperial fortunes as Nobunaga and

Hideyoshi were happy to exchange funds for imperial recognition and political legitimacy.

**The ancient nobility of Kyoto:** The imperial nobility of Kyoto, known as *kuge*, were the ancient aristocracy of the imperial court dating back to the eighth century, and sometimes longer. When the emperor actually ruled, they held power, but with the coming of the first military government, shogunate, in the twelfth century, their power-wielding days were over, as were the emperor's. In Yasuke's time, they were mostly powerless figureheads, puppets in the hands of the warlords who fed them crumbs. Their only political function was to give legitimacy to the warlord governments by bestowing meaningless but prestigious "imperial" rank upon men like Nobunaga.

**The former shoguns, the Ashikaga Dynasty:** The Ashikaga shogunate governed Japan from 1338 to 1573 when Oda Nobunaga deposed the last member of the dynasty, Ashikaga Yoshiaki. Each shogun was a member of the Ashikaga clan who'd originally come from northern Japan, what is today Tochigi. This period is also known as the Muromachi period and gets its name from the Muromachi district of Kyoto, where the government was based.

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## Chapter 12

**Akbar the Great:** Akbar the Great was the third Mughal emperor of India, who reigned from 1556 to 1605. During his rule, the Mughal Empire tripled in size and wealth, due mainly to his unstoppable conquests, but also connected to a centralized system of administration he established. Although a Muslim himself, he was careful to respect the different faiths of his subjects and it's believed he had a Catholic wife. Although dyslexic and illiterate, he was fond of literature, and created a library of more than twenty-four thousand volumes written in multiple languages from around the world. His reign significantly influenced the course of Indian history.

**Habshi:** *Habshi* slave soldiers essentially became members of mercenary bands—the commanders were senior African generals, who'd risen through the ranks to become men of wealth and power. It was they who bought the slave boys in the market and schooled their new “recruits” in the deadly arts. The training endured by the newly bought *Habshi* slave soldiers was brutal, the young men, as with child soldiers today, forced to kill and maim to become inured to the deeds they had to soon carry out. This inculcated a fierce loyalty to their generals, their employers and to each other. As outsiders in a foreign land, they had few other ties, and perhaps for Yasuke, becoming *Habshi* would have given him a sense of brotherhood and belonging. After the long and probably terrifying period of his life post-capture, he would finally have felt secure again, with comrades, friends and a family of sorts. Military slaves were normally paid a salary, fed and clothed. They also enjoyed spoils of war and generous bonuses, which boosted their loyalty further. Slaves were freed on their master's death, following Islamic tradition, so many did not feel that slavery was a life sentence—they had a future beyond servitude. If they survived. Many *Habshi* mercenaries are recorded as having been in Portuguese service (for example, six hundred formed a defensive force in the constantly beleaguered Portuguese fort of Diu, one hundred eighty miles north of Mumbai), and many others worked as sailors on Portuguese ships.

**The Goa-Africa slave trade:** Goa was renowned as a beautiful city of Muslim, Hindu, European, Persian and Turkish influences. And it was based, as all Portuguese outposts were, on easily defendable islands. As well as *Habshis*, many of the African slaves in Portuguese India came on Portuguese ships from the regions with maximum Portuguese contact in Africa, the area of the southeastern seaboard that now comprises Mozambique, Tanzania and Kenya. Some slaves, however, were brought from the deep interior in caravans that also transported ivory and gold for external markets. Portuguese slaving from southeast Africa to India comprised around 200–250 people a year in the late sixteenth century; in later centuries it would increase exponentially when demand from other Europeans, particularly the French, increased. Between 1500 and 1850, the Portuguese transported around forty to eighty thousand of an estimated five to six hundred thousand African people enslaved by Europeans in areas around the Indian Ocean. Northeast Africans also ended up with the Portuguese, especially in Yasuke’s time, when the Portuguese did not have the capacity to directly traffic as many slaves as the conditions and booming economies of their Indian territories required. For many Africans, the Indian subcontinent proved not to be the final destination; their odysseys—like Yasuke’s—continued farther to China and even Japan. The Dutch seafarer Linschoten noted that “these Abexiins (Africans) such as are free do serve in all India for sailors and seafaring men with such merchants as sail from Goa to China, Japan, Bengala, Mallaca, Ormus and all the Oriental coast.”

**Africans in Japan:** That Japanese people were fascinated by and hospitable to Africans is noted multiple times. The Spaniard Sebastian Vizcaino considered offering public concerts when he saw how much excitement an African drummer among his attendants caused. Toyotomi Hideyoshi specifically asked Africans to entertain him on at least two occasions in the 1590s. On the first occasion, a single man, a sailor on a Portuguese ship, attended court to dance and sing; on the second occasion, a group of African guards dressed in red and armed with golden spears danced “a wild dance of fife and drum.” They were gifted white robes for the performance.

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## Chapter 13

**The Samurai as caste:** In Yasuke's time, the word *samurai* simply described a profession: warrior (albeit a very specialized one). Shortly afterward, it became a caste name. At the end of The Age of the Country at War, around the end of the sixteenth century, most of those who'd fought on the samurai side in the civil wars, even some of the peasants, pirates and ninja, were classified as "samurai" in a formalized caste structure with the samurai at the top—a hereditary warrior/administrator/ruling class. The caste ranking continued with peasants, artisans and merchants, who took the lowest status (because they lived off everybody else's hard work). Outside of the scope of the caste system were *eta*, impure people who dealt with death, and *hinin*, nonpersons such as ex-convicts and vagrants who worked as town guards, street cleaners or entertainers. Legally speaking, an *eta* was worth one-seventh of a human being. The Age of the Country at War had been probably the most socially fluid period since the eighth century. Able men and women, like Yasuke, were able to rise through the ranks due to the chaos. No more. From this time until their caste was abolished by law in 1873, the samurai were forbidden (in most of the country) to farm or engage in mercantile activity and had to live in castle towns rather than country villages. This was the time when the word *samurai* takes on its modern meaning of a warrior *caste* rather than actual warrior *role*. In the virtual absence of war or any challenge from below between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the samurai caste had little warring to do and the martial arts we now associate with this class were codified and formed the roots of modern sports like kendo, judo and aikido. Samurai were still furnished with a stipend by their lord, determined by rank, although over time, the value of the stipend was devalued so much by inflation that many samurai families were forced to find other ways to make ends meet. A few, such as the Mitsui family, founders of the modern-day multinational conglomerate, gave up their samurai swords and lowered themselves to merchant status. For the overwhelming majority, this was a step too far, and they starved or lived in abject poverty rather than "lower" themselves.

**Ronin:** The most famous story about masterless samurai is perhaps that of the forty-seven *ronin*, the subject of a recent movie starring Keanu Reeves, as well as numerous other books, plays and media ever since the event took place. Their lord, Asano Naganori, had been ordered to perform seppuku, his lands were confiscated and his retainers made masterless samurai, *ronin*, a fate nearly as bad as death in their eyes. The sentence was handed down because Asano had dared to draw his sword within the precincts of the shogun's castle, a heinous offence. To defend his honor and legacy, forty-seven of his retainers, now *ronin*, carefully plotted revenge on Lord Kira Yoshinaka, the man who'd intentionally besmirched the honor of their master and caused his death. They pretended to live debauched lives so their intended target would lower his guard. This took fourteen months, but when the time was ripe, they gathered and attacked the culprit and his men. The attack, however, took place only after they'd sworn not to harm helpless members of the household and had informed the neighbors of their mission, to prevent their being thought of as simple robbers. The forty-seven *ronin* took Kira's head and laid it on their old master's tomb. They then presented themselves to the authorities for punishment. They were duly sentenced to cut their own bellies, and forty-six of them did on February 4, 1703. The forty-seventh man had been sent home to report the mission's success. He died in 1747 and was later commemorated beside his comrades.

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## Chapter 14

**Ranmaru:** The relationship between Nobunaga and Ranmaru counts as one of the greatest love stories in Japanese history, and their relationship remains revered and sacrosanct to this day. Ranmaru's huge *odachi* sword remains as a viewable artifact in the modern-day Honnō-ji Temple.

**Sex with Nobunaga:** Even if such a thing was public knowledge, no Jesuit would have written of it and our key Japanese sources, Ōta Gyūichi and Matsudaira Ietada, did not mention any personal details about Nobunaga's relationship with Yasuke other than the fact of Yasuke's first audience and warrior service with Nobunaga. [Special thanks to Cliff Pereira for his expert advice on the section about sexual practices in Africa and to Professor Timon Screech for his expert personal opinion on the depths of the Yasuke/Nobunaga relationship.]

**Sex in Japan:** Japan, at this time, did not take a particularly restrictive view to any sexual relationships, although different types of partnership, marriage, concubinage, casual, paid or unpaid sex, and kept mistresses or boys were often highly codified and sometimes had strict laws pertaining to them, particularly among the upper classes. Men who could afford it kept numerous concubines—Nobunaga's favorite, Kitsuno, was the mother of his first two sons—but polygamy in any formalized sense was not practiced. Multiple sexual partners for both sexes was common, as was divorce and remarriage. Traditionally, children were often held in common in the countryside, being brought up by the community rather than in exclusive nuclear families. This declined in the early modern age due in large part to the increased rule of law and hence the need to formalize inheritance and property rights. Among the lower classes, there was a lot more leeway and many families never had their relations formalized in any civil or religious fashion. Senior wives of the upper class, often the result of political marriages, were normally expected to employ courtesans and sex workers, temporarily or permanently, to entertain their husbands; and the senior wife often adopted the offspring of such liaisons, especially if no official heir was forthcoming, or a new one was needed. In Nobunaga's case, his senior wife, Nōhime, was unable to conceive, so she adopted his children by other women and is believed to have been cared for by his second son, Nobukatsu, after her husband's death. In Hideyoshi's case the opposite is rumored. His concubine, Lady Yodo, a formidable woman and daughter

of Nobunaga's sister Oichi, is supposed to have conceived her son Hideyori with someone else as Hideyoshi could not do it. Not surprisingly, the Jesuits took a dim view of Japanese sexuality, especially homosexual relationships. The non-Jesuit Europeans and Africans though, thought they were in wonderland, and seemed often to be happy enough to follow the saying "when in Rome..."

**Valignano leaves:** Valignano eventually left from Nagasaki on board the Portuguese ship of Captain Ignacio de Lima on February 20, 1582. Accompanying him were the four young Japanese ambassadors to Rome, kinsmen of the Christian lords, Ōtomo Sōrin, Arima Harunobu and Ōmura Sumitada.

**The gifted screens depicting Azuchi:** After reaching Rome (which Valignano never did), the Pope duly expressed his wonder at Nobunaga's gift, and no doubt others did afterward. Europeans have always had a fascination for Asian art, and Japanese art in particular, partly set off by these early wonders which were carefully chosen to astonish. The fate of the screens thereafter is unknown. It's thought that, in the absence of expertise to preserve these magnificent works of art, they rotted away over time.

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## Chapters 15 & 16

**Hideyoshi's rise:** Not much is known for certain about Hideyoshi's youth apart from the fact that he came from a very humble background, and his father was an *ashigaru* (common foot soldier) named Yaemon. Before 1570, his story is mostly legend, but he appears in documents from this time as one of Nobunaga's officers. In 1573, Nobunaga made him a lord, and his star never stopped rising.

**Tottori castle ghost story:** In the mid-1980s, seven high school students were joking around and having a late-night coffee at a café in the shadow of Tottori Castle. The conversation turned to the story of ghostly samurai

on the castle mountain. Eventually, they dared each other, *kimodameshi*, or test of courage in the face of the supernatural, to enter the mountain castle grounds and brave the samurai ghosts within. Tottori Castle is on several levels; the modern entrance is at road level and steep stone stairs take one up the lower mountainside defenses. The braver students surged ahead to the second-highest level, maybe two hundred-plus feet above the moat. To go higher really would have been foolhardy in the dark; it is not only ghosts that are a threat, there are bears, and other dangerous animals living wild there too. It was 2:00 a.m., the witching hour. The streetlights below glowed, but the mountainside was pitch black and ominous. The young people, fueled by their own stories and imagination, looked around them, hoping the ghosts were nothing but stories. One student, Minoru, who was especially sensitive to supernatural entities, felt more fearful than the others. He'd seen ghosts before and climbed the slope more slowly, knowing this was not a joke. Suddenly, a huge samurai burst out of the ether, six feet tall. He was armored, wore his swords sheathed and his eyes were bloodred. There was no time to take in more details. The samurai grabbed for the students, trying to pull one away. Minoru saw it all, but the prospective victim was utterly oblivious to the ghostly presence. Minoru immediately turned and ran. In panic at the sudden flight, his friends followed him down the steep and dangerous stairs and nearly brained themselves tripping on the stone, but managed to reach the main gate and the streetlights that beckoned safety beyond. The ghost did not follow them. Panting from the run and fear, Minoru's friend asked "Why did you run?" and Minoru, his heart racing, told him of the armored warrior who'd tried to take him. Decades later, Minoru still visits Tottori Castle every April to view the cherry blossoms, but he has never returned to that one spot where years ago his twentieth-century friend was attacked by a samurai from Yasuke's day.

**Ishikawa Goemon's death:** In 1594, Ishikawa Goemon attempted to assassinate Hideyoshi, but his luck had run out. He was sentenced to death by boiling. His infant son was also sentenced to die with him, but the ninja managed to save the boy by holding him *above* the boiling cauldron. Hideyoshi is supposed to have generously spared the boy's life to honor the father's brave action. The type of metal bath that he died in is now known as a "Goemon bath" in his honor.

**The name "ninja":** It's likely the word *ninja* was hardly ever used in Yasuke's time. In fact, it probably only entered common usage in Japanese in

the post-WWII period when the concept was popularized overseas. This is supposedly because the word *ninja* is easier to render into English than many of the other terms used to refer to special operative troops in ancient Japan. Yasuke would have known them by names like *shinobi*, *Iga no mono* (a person from Iga), *rappa* (thief/ruffian), *kusa* (grass, because they hid in the grass), or *nokizaru* (roof-monkey, as they moved around on roofs rather than using the road).

**Yasuke's spiritual life:** Yasuke's spiritual life remains only in historic speculation. None of those who saw fit to record his life mentioned anything related to his faith. As seems most likely—due to his path through India, his skin color, and extreme height—he was born of the Dinka (*Jaang*) people in what is now South Sudan and brought up believing in a supreme creator god, Nhialic. A divine force present in all of creation, Nhialic controls the destiny of every human, plant and animal in the Dinka world. If Yasuke still held any of the spirituality he'd been born with, he would have been thanking Nhialic for his blessings. The spiritual leader of a Dinka community was the Spear Master, who was both political chief *and* holy man. Spear Masters mediated between the gods and their communities, and were the spiritual representatives on earth of Nhialic himself. Each village, as Yasuke would have seen it, had its own "Pope." The Spear Master's religious invocations ensured the giving and preservation of life, the general well-being of his people, and success against their enemies, elements and wild animals. He could also purportedly smite his enemies. Prayers were often supplemented by the sacrifice of cattle, a holy animal in the Dinka world: the source of all wealth, most nourishment and the giver of life. A cow's sacrifice was no small matter, but an action filled with significance and gravity. Enslaved during childhood, Yasuke hadn't had the chance to complete any of the ceremonies which accompanied manhood—including scarification of the face and the removal of six teeth from the lower jaw. Other Africans in Asia had been described so, but not Yasuke.

Yasuke had most likely fallen into the hands of Muslim slavers, and it is virtually certain he'd been converted to Islam. The conversion of *kaffir*, "infidel," slaves took place either willingly or forcibly, and typically happened during the slave's journey to the marketplace. Conversion to Islam is, at least on the surface, a straightforward act; all a person has to do is pronounce *Shahada*, the testimony of faith, in Arabic: "There is no true god but God (Allah), and Mohammed is his messenger." When Yasuke recited these words, he'd have been a Muslim. Whether the vast majority of

newly enslaved non-Muslims who recited these words—enchained, torn from their homes, in a language they did not understand, for reasons they probably did not comprehend—actually understood what they were signing up for is unlikely. Most, in fact, were simply—as with the Jesuits and Japanese—following their new master’s instructions. Had Yasuke remained a Muslim slave in a Muslim world (or in service to a Muslim master in India), however, this had various advantages. He would have had social status as a member of the faithful that was unavailable to non-Muslims, a route to emancipation *and* the legal protection that any children he fathered would have automatic freedom—as it was illegal for Muslims to enslave anybody born a Muslim. A French Jesuit reporting on Yasuke’s exploits some fifty years *after* Nobunaga’s death wrote that Yasuke was a Moor. A *possible* reference to Islam, although more likely to have meant only that he was a “black man” as such parlance was common at the time to describe *every* African, Arab or Indian. Prior to Valignano’s employment, Yasuke no doubt took on his *third* belief system. Valignano wouldn’t have engaged the services of a man like Yasuke who did not, outwardly at least, profess the Catholic faith. Yasuke was therefore, technically required to be able to recite the Paternoster, Ave Maria, the Commandments and the Articles of Faith, as well as having been baptized—the minimum official qualifications necessary to deem a “heathen” as Catholic. In practice, many enslaved Africans were baptized with little knowledge of what was happening to them, due to lack of priests available. At various points in time, the Portuguese Crown even allowed slaving ship captains to perform mass baptisms. In Yasuke’s time, this often took place in Africa *before* they boarded the ships for the destination where they were to be put to work. Fortunately for the enslaved—or so the Christian slavers told themselves—this meant that if they died from murder, despair, starvation or disease, in the terrible conditions on the slave ships, their souls had at least been saved. In Yasuke’s case, he’d arrived in India via the Muslim world rather than through a Portuguese settlement in Africa. Therefore, he may well have been baptized *after* arriving in Goa, Cochin or any of the other Portuguese-controlled enclaves along the subcontinental coastline. Legally speaking, in the Portuguese world, slave children of ten or under were not given a choice about baptism; those older than ten, however, could in theory refuse. As Yasuke was employed by Valignano around the age of twenty, and perhaps not yet Catholic, he technically could have refused baptism. However, Valignano was a strict and rather demanding character, and would have insisted that any conversion be properly observed, rather than perfunctory. Living with Valignano and among the Jesuits, Yasuke had been exposed to strong and zealous profes-

sions of Catholicism on a daily basis, thereby becoming familiar with even niche areas of doctrine and practice. Yasuke outwardly showed many signs of Catholicism and attended mass and prayers, either voluntarily or as part of his duties, on a daily basis. He may well, perhaps, have truly believed.

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## Chapter 17

**The practice of collecting heads:** Head collecting has a long history in Japan, and in its most basic form can be seen as the proof of a job well done. Proof that the kill or kills have been made. For the most important of heads, those of senior samurai or lords, protocol was strict and always observed if there was time. Of course in the heat of battle, that was not always possible. In Korea, during the invasions of the 1590s, the samurai tried their best to collect heads, but the sheer number of kills and the distance to courier them back to Japan, not to mention logistical problems of getting them through hostile country, meant that a nose or ear had to suffice.

Many, approximately thirty-eight thousand, were interred in a mound in Kyoto called Mimizuka (which actually means “ear mound”). You can still see this gruesome monument today.

**The *Shigeshoshi*:** The makeup artists (almost always women) who accompanied samurai armies were a key part of the rituals attending victory in battle. To respect the fallen, heads would be cleaned and made-up, their hair dressed properly and only then displayed to the victorious general. Sometimes victors were known to have conversations with their fallen foe’s head, praying to the soul or asking forgiveness. Nobunaga’s treatment of Takeda Katsuyori’s head was not the only time a victor crowed over his dead enemy, but it is the most infamous.

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## Chapter 18

**Tokugawa Ieyasu, the sycophant:** Ieyasu was from a minor family of nobles and grew up a hostage in a rival *daimyō*’s court. He spent much of his life kowtowing to more powerful men, and was very good at it, gradually

rising in power as an ally to Nobunaga and then Hideyoshi. In the end, his patience and respectful demeanor paid off when he became supreme master of Japan and shogun in 1603. His sycophancy should not be viewed negatively; he was bowing to the reality of his world, and working hard to ensure the peace of his small (but growing) realm and its people. Ultimately, the peace he founded at the end of The Age of the Country at War was one of the longest periods of sustained peace in human history, anywhere, a massive boon for the Japanese people. His early respect for the power of others and later careful and wise lawmaking made this possible.

**Mount Fuji's name:** Mount Fuji is probably one of the most famous mountains in the world and perhaps the most recognizable. While iconic mountain names such as the Matterhorn are known universally, few mountains other than Fuji have attained the instant recognition of its profile all over the world. The name itself is clouded in mystery, but it is thought to originate with the original settlers of the Japanese islands tens of thousands of years ago, and can therefore be said to have been a holy site for humans far into prehistory. Its name likely comes from the indigenous people of Japan, the Ainu, and is derived from an Ainu term meaning “fire,” coupled with *san*, the Japanese word for “mountain.”

**Houchonin today:** *Houchonin* were cookery masters, highly respected elite chefs to the rich and powerful. The position was often hereditary, and they were sometimes even descended from imperial branch families. As with tea masters, they sometimes taught their art to paying students, and started “schools” with ranks, and allowed students to wear ceremonial clothes of different colors as they progressed in the art (somewhat similar to colored belts in the martial arts). One warlord who studied to be a *houchonin* was Hosokawa Yusai, Akechi Mitsuhide’s brother-in-law. Today there are still a few men who identify as descendants of *houchonin*, but the art has declined. One author, Eric Rath, puts this down to the fact that modern sensibilities are too squeamish to appreciate the art of carving and “bringing back to life” dead animals.

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## Chapter 19

**Akechi's betrayal:** The reason for Akechi's treachery has been debated for four hundred years, and will likely be for *another* four hundred. Essentially, we will never know, but the following are some of the theories that have been proposed. (1) Ambition. Akechi felt it was his time. This is unlikely as he did not have sufficient numbers in his army, and the coup was always a very long shot. (2) Nobunaga directly caused the death of Akechi's mother by reneging on a hostage deal. This is quite likely, if not true, but the story is not certain and if so, Akechi waited a long time to take revenge as the event happened in 1578 or 1579, more than *three years* earlier. (3) Nobunaga complained about the feast Akechi'd prepared for Tokugawa Ieyasu and threw it into the garden, stamping on it, and humiliating the warlord. If this was the reason for the coup, it may have been the culmination of many slights (Nobunaga was not overly respectful to his subordinates) rather than for this act alone. (4) Betrayal by Hosokawa Yusai, Akechi's brother-in-law. Hosokawa was said to have promised to support Akechi, but actually reported the plot to Hideyoshi. If this is true, why didn't Hosokawa tell Nobunaga, who was much closer than Hideyoshi? In any event his family suffered greatly due to their association with Akechi. Akechi's daughter, Tama (more often known by her baptismal name of Gracia), who was married to Hosokawa's son, spent the rest of her life confined to her house or country estate, unable to show her face in public. This theory is unlikely. (5) Protecting the emperor and imperial court. Emperor Ōgimachi did not have an entirely smooth relationship with Nobunaga, despite the extensive funding he received and the other honors Nobunaga paid him. Some have suggested Nobunaga intended to cap a lifetime of surprising deeds with

the abolishment of the imperial line. After all, he'd already done the same with the shogunal family, the Ashikaga, whom Akechi had served in the past. The theory goes that Akechi acted as he did to protect the emperor. This, also, is unlikely. Nobunaga had invested great resources in obtaining imperial recognition but it is possible that he believed that he no longer needed such support. The most likely cause is a lifetime of slights and massive frustration.

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## Chapter 20

**Nobunaga's head:** There is no evidence for Yasuke having taken Nobunaga's head; however, Oda family lore has it so. Yasuke's memory does live on in the families that were most closely associated with him. Another story has him associated with a supposed death mask made for Nobunaga, but this is highly unlikely.

**Nobunaga's legend:** Oda Nobunaga is one of the most popular figures in Japanese history. Enter any bookshop in Japan—on many street corners and in most train stations of any size—and you will find a book about him, either fact or fiction. Probably both. It's open to question why he enjoys such popularity, but his decisiveness, ruthlessness and charisma are cited by

the Japanese public as the prime reasons. Anybody associated with him, for example Yasuke, also basks in his glory and popularity.

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## **PART 3**

### **Chapters 21 & 22**

**The Shimazu clan’s domination of Kyushu:** Beginning in 1550, the Shimazu family of Satsuma Province fought to expand their territory and by 1574, they had secured their home province and neighboring Ōsumi Province. In 1577, they took parts of Hyūga Province on the eastern side of Kyushu, and fought Ōtomo Sōrin the following year. This was the occasion that a party of Jesuits had to flee for their lives. In 1584, in alliance with Arima Harunobu, they won the Battle of Okitanawate to take control of western Kyushu and had nearly achieved domination of the island, when Hideyoshi led his all-conquering armies against them.

**The *Fusta*:** The Jesuits' galley known as a *fusta* in Portuguese and a *galliot* in English was the first ship of its kind seen in Japan and was probably constructed in 1581/1582 by Valignano's command in Nagasaki. The Portuguese used such ships, descended from the ancient Mediterranean trireme, extensively throughout their empire, although this example, with a crew of up to three hundred must have been on the larger end. Galliotics typically had between ten to twenty oars on each side, pulled by two men on each oar. Due to the energy needed to row, replacement crews were needed, and would have taken the oars in turns to keep up speed. Galliotics also had sails to make use of wind when available, but were superior warships to galleons due to their ability to move even when there was no wind.

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## Chapter 23

**Catholic persecution:** When Catholicism became illegal, its practitioners became criminals. It could be compared to the banning of certain sects or extremist political groups like Nazis in the modern world. That is certainly how it was seen at the time and it should not be forgotten that Catholics made up a very small proportion of the overall population and were generally confined to peripheral regions. However, when people refused to recant, the puzzled Tokugawa government got serious. Experience told them that to allow rebellious elements the freedom to defy the law brought chaos and war, something that it had taken nearly one hundred thirty years to exterminate from Japan. From the Catholic perspective of course, things looked a little different. No one knows for sure how many Japanese people had converted, and by the early seventeenth century some Christian families were into their third generation of believers, but the faith was virtually pervasive in the parts of Kyushu where the Jesuits had had their greatest success. Some estimates put the number of Catholics at over three hundred thousand, around 2 percent of the estimated total Japanese population of the time. Some Jesuits, particularly Japanese ones, had gone underground to minister to their flock. The hunt started for them and then leading Catholic citizens came under pressure to set a good example. Anyone found to be assisting the missionaries was also sentenced to death, but could avoid this by apostatizing. This included foreigners as well as Japanese people. To their credit, many resisted and were subsequently tortured and many executed by fire or sword, but large numbers also recanted and stamped on the religious image, the *fumi-e*, or “stamping picture” which was used to test the faith of potential Catholics between the 1620s and 1856. Those who gave up their faith were treated well, to try to persuade the remaining Christians to follow their example. The tortures used were particularly horrific. The most common one was hanging upside down in a pit, sometimes filled with excrement or even snakes. One hand was left free to indicate readiness to recant. The victim was literally left there until they made the hand sign that they had had enough or until they had perished. The patron saint of the

Philippines, Saint Lorenzo Ruiz, a Chinese Filipino, did not recant and died in the pit. One Portuguese priest, Cristóvão Ferreira, lasted five hours before making the hand signal in 1633. The worst torture was perhaps being suspended over volcanic sulfur pools until nearly dead, then being revived with cold water before being put through the whole ordeal again. It was no wonder most people were not prepared to suffer such horrors for their faith and stamped on the *fumi-e*.

**Africans in China with the Jesuits:** As elsewhere, slaves were essential to Portuguese activities in Macao, and a considerable number of these, perhaps around five thousand, were African males. Aside from performing manual labor, Africans in Macao participated in festivals dedicated to them and performed in orchestras and dance troupes in which “they all appeared resplendent in scarlet and other delights.” They also performed for fascinated Chinese audiences as part of Jesuit missions into the Chinese interior, playing “fanfares on their trumpets and shawms (a woodwind instrument a bit like an oboe).” One man, Antonio, a Portuguese–Cantonese interpreter, was described as a “Capher Eathioipan Abissen.” His ability in the local language suggests that he had been in Southern China for some time. The Catholic priest Domingo Navarette also reported Africans working with and for Chinese employers in Guangzhou, and believed them to have escaped slavery in Macao.

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## Chapter 24

**Manga and anime:** Manga as an art form can trace its history back to the twelfth century and in its premodern form to the eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Manga may represent the first graphic novels of the type we would find recognizable today. By 1995, the manga market in Japan was valued at \$6 to \$7 billion annually, but it had also managed to make significant strides overseas, with the French market alone valued at around \$569 million in 2005. In the rest of Europe and the Middle East, the market was valued at \$250 million in 2012. And in 2008, the US and Canada market was valued at \$175 million. As such it can be considered one of Japan’s most successful cultural exports in the modern age, and this success means that it is not now only a Japanese art form, but also a global one, with artists from every continent taking part. The word *anime* derives from the French word for animation, and refers to the moving picture variety of the comic form. The iconic movies of Miyazaki have traditionally been held to be part of this art form, but Miyazaki himself derided *anime*, describing it as “animators lacking motivation and with mass-produced, overly expressionistic products relying upon a fixed iconography of facial expressions and protracted and exaggerated action scenes but lacking depth and sophistication in that they do not attempt to convey emotion or thought.” Anime, however, has produced many worldwide cultural phenomenons such as One Piece, Naruto, Sailor Moon, the Power Rangers and Pokémon.

***Daigenkai***: *Daigenkai*, the poetically named “Great Word Sea,” was probably the first scholarly attempt to scientifically approach the Japanese language in the same manner as was becoming increasingly common for European languages in the 1880s. *The Oxford English Dictionary* was in development at the same time. It was a project of its time and place in history, when the Japanese world was putting a massive amount of energy into both understanding new disciplines, and also reconciling them with prior traditions to form a balance in society and preserve Japan as Japan and not some mere superficial realm copied from outside influences. This effort was no mere lip service—a whole massive and proud nation of tens of millions of people threw themselves wholeheartedly into seeking this balance, from farmers seeking more nutritious cash crops and meat production in foreign methodology, to artists who created globally iconic and phenomenal movements, to constitutional lawyers creating entirely new and revolutionary legal codes. *Daigenkai*, and its shorter predecessor *Genkai*, was part of this brave new world. It was written by Ōtsuki Fumihiko, who descended from a long line of scholars of “Western” learning and advisors to the Tokugawa shoguns. His father was an expert in gunnery and in his teens, he himself was involved in the cataclysmic Boshin War of 1867/1868 which ushered in the Meiji Imperial Restoration and the end of the Tokugawa shogunate. Ōtsuki was a lexicographer, linguist and grammarian whose modern linguistic studies revolutionised understanding of the Japanese language, turning it from an art to a scientific discipline. Although Ōtsuki paid for the original publication expenses himself, it was soon republished and expanded in commercial editions that went through over a thousand printings. Modeled in part on Western monolingual dictionaries, *Genkai* gave not only basic information about words—their representations in Japanese characters and their definitions in Japanese—but also pronunciations and etymologies and historical citations of their use. Its successor, the four-volume *Daigenkai*, though published under Ōtsuki’s name and based in part on his work, appeared some years after his death and was completed by other lexicographers. It is from these epic works that we know of *Kurobo* as an epithet and its origins. And furthermore, the example which gives useful information on Yasuke’s story about Shikano in Inaba Province.

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