

Rethinking the Relationship between Christianity and Colonialism:

Nan'yo Dendo Dan, the Japanese Christian Mission
to Micronesia from 1920 to 1942

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Introduction

The subject of this article arose from a request made to me by a friend in Hawaii, a Christian activist and former missionary in Asia now based in Hilo. My friend had been asked by a pastor in Chuuk about research relating to the Japanese missionaries in Micronesia between 1920 and 1942, known as the Nan'yo Dendo Dan. In fact, there are very few studies of Christianity in the area, and even fewer focusing on Nan'yo Dendo Dan. Of those that exist, almost none are in English, which inspired me to visit Chuuk, formerly known as Truk, in December last year.

Some substantial studies of Micronesia were undertaken in the 1930s by Yanaihara Tadao and Paul Clyde, and almost half a century later Mark Peattie's book *Nan'yō: the Rise and Fall of the Japanese in Micronesia 1885-1945*, became a standard text in area studies.¹ In the past twenty years, in Japan, the study of Micronesia has increased as a part of immigrant studies, the study of economic relations, anthropological studies and colonial studies, but is still relatively limited.² However, in order to get a full picture of

1 Tomatsu Haruo, *Japanese Empire and the Mandate Control: International Politics on Micronesia 1914-1947*, Nagoya: University of Nagoya, 2011, p.7.

2 Imaizumi Yumiko, *A Research Project of Reinvestigating Colonialism*, 2003, p.27.

Japanese imperialism, as much attention should be paid to Micronesia as has been paid to Taiwan and Korea. Due to the absence of extensive research, this paper will aim firstly to provide an introduction to the background of Nan'yo Dendo Dan's missionary work, its activities and contribution to the lives of the Micronesian people, and its role in relation to Japanese government policy. Secondly, the significance of Nan'yo Dendo Dan's role in promoting language, state Shinto, and Japanese nationalism will be considered.

A historical overview of Japan's mandate in Micronesia

The Pacific was the last region to be targeted by Western powers in the 19th century, and at that time was being watched carefully by Japan, where the Nanshinron (progress to the South Seas) debate was taking place.³ After joining World War I in 1914, the Japanese navy landed on and occupied the Marianas, Caroline and Marshall islands. As one of the victorious allies, Japan gained official administrative control of the islands, courtesy of a mandate granted by the League of Nations at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. The Nan'yo Cho, the headquarters of the administration office, was established in 1922. Japan did not treat Micronesia in the same way it treated the colonies of Taiwan and Korea, but Micronesia gained great strategic importance particularly following Japan's occupation of Manchuria in 1931.⁴ As Japan's military ambition grew, it ignored requirements imposed upon it by the League of Nations, which led to its eventual withdrawal from the League in 1934. However, until that point, it conformed broadly to the terms of its mandate, which included refraining

3 Discussion of Nanshinron was not continuous, but cropped up from time to time in the 1870, triggered by incidents in Taiwan, and in the 1880s prompted by increasing interest in exploring the area. See details in Ueno Takao, "Japanese Modern Diplomacy History", *Journal of Contemporary Human Studies* of Wako University, vol.1 March 2008.

4 Mark R. Peattie, *Nan'Yo: The Rise and Fall of the Japanese in Micronesia, 1885-1945*, p. 84.

from engaging in military development, and maintaining and improving people's living standards, welfare and mental well-being. All these requirements were accepted by Japan, as was the obligation to provide regular reports to the League, in order to be able to pursue its own economic development and strategic interests.

The mission's background: political climate and objectives

The major Christian influence in Micronesia was of missionaries sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Among the first missionaries, two were native Hawaiians arriving in 1852.⁵ With the colonial rules of Spain from 1885 to 1898 and of Germany from 1899 to 1914,⁶ Micronesia's Christian population grew large, and its influence significant. Therefore, maintaining Christianity was considered to be important in terms of the islands' administration, and in fostering the process of modernization. Consequently, among the conditions imposed by the League of Nations when power was transferred was that Christianity should continue to be supported in the islands.⁷ However, when Japan first took control from Germany, most missionaries were asked to leave, so there were few present during the first few years of the mandate. However, Yamamoto Mieno, a professor at Kyoto Imperial University and member of an investigatory team dispatched by the Japanese government, stressed the importance of Christianity in relation to the islanders' education.⁸

5 Ronald Fujiyoshi, "How did the Gospel get to Micronesia?", speech at the conference of Micronesian pastors in December 19, 2011

6 In 1565 Spain staked a claim to Micronesia, but failed owing to strong local opposition. Prior to Spain and Germany's later occupation, an American Christian group, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, had already visited in 1852.

7 Nakamura Satoshi, *Nihon Protesutanto Kaigai Senkyoshi, a History of Japan's Overseas Missions*. Tokyo: Shinkyō Publishing, 2011.

8 Han Sokki, *Studies on Japanese Christian Overseas Mission*, Kyoto: Doshisha University Ph.D dissertation, p.232, 1999.

In her analysis of the Nan'yo Cho's policies, Imaizumi Yumiko describes the authorities' dilemma in the following terms: "on one hand they are afraid of planting anti-Japanese sentiment by western missionaries but on the other hand they appreciate the contribution of Christianity or missionary works in developing discipline prohibiting alcoholic drinking, improper sexual behavior and all night dancing. Therefore, they thought Christianity was important for seeking industrial development for the future economic benefit." In such circumstances, the Japanese authorities, particularly the navy, recognized "the valuable influence of Christianity which encouraged the Japanese Congregational Churches to assume missionary work in the islands in 1920." ⁹

Coincidentally, an influential navy officer lived next to the Reinanzaka Church, a Japanese Congregational Church in Tokyo.¹⁰ The pastor of that church was Kozaki Hiromichi, who was the first graduate of Doshisha seminary and the leader of the Kumamoto band. Kozaki accepted a request made by the navy and organized a committee for sending missionaries to Micronesia, which was named Nan'yo Dendo Dan, or South Sea Mission.¹¹ In his memoirs, Kozaki gave his reasons for accepting the officer's request to organize the committee. He recalled:

There are two reasons to accept: 1) the Nan'yo is the American Board's first overseas mission, and our Congregational church has a deep relationship with

⁹ Yanaihara, Tadao, *Pacific Islands Under Japanese Mandate*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976. (First published in 1940 by Oxford University Press, London, New York)

¹⁰ The Congregational church in Japan had the closest relationship with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, which started mission work in Micronesia in 1852.

¹¹ The committee members were: Chair, Kozaki Hiromichi; Staff, Iwamura Seishiro; Board Members Hirata Yoshimichi, Kimura Kiyomatsu, Fukunaga Bunnosuke, Matsuyam Tsunejiro, Amijima Yoshikichi. The first meeting was held on December 8, 1919. Kozaki Makoto, *Senjika ni okeru Nihon Kirisuto Kyodan no Senkyo* (The Mission of Japanese Congregational Church during the War), *Obirin Ronsyu*, March 2001, No.28, p.27 (notes).

the Board; 2) the Nan'yo has had a close and special relationship with our navy.¹²

Kozaki was a devoted and ambitious Christian, but at the same time a faithful nationalist. Therefore, he was motivated not just by his personal connection with the officer living next to his church but also because he believed the mission to be a contribution to the nation of Japan. He began to contact other members of his network within the Japanese Congregational Church, and with other committee members of the Nan'yo Dendo Dan actively pursued the project. Mark Peattie's research seems to confirm this:

In 1920, a Japanese Congregationalist group, the Nan'yo Dendo Dan (South Seas Mission) received permission to send four missionaries to Micronesia: two each to Truk and Pohnpei.¹³

However, the words "received permission" suggests that although Kozaki and other congregation members initiated the sending of missionaries, the Japanese government was in full cooperation. This point is supported by the fact that 90% of the mission's budget came from the government. In a book written by Tanaka Sakaeko, the daughter of a former missionary, it was remarked that missionaries' salaries were three times greater than those of the average worker in Japan at the time.¹⁴

Another possible reason for the establishment of the Nan'yo Dendo Dan is that the

12 Kozaki Hiromichi, *Nanjyunen no Kaiko*, (Retrospective of 70 years).

13 Imaiazumi Yumiko, *Kokusai Renmei deno Shinsa nimiru Nan'yo guntou Genchi Jyumin Seisaku* (Policies for the people in Nan'yo Islands from the perspective of the criteria of the League of Nations Report). Rekishigaku, p.29

14 Tanaka Sakaeko, *Yasashii Manazashi, Ponape Jima Senkyo 25 nen* (Kind watching: Mission in Pohnpei for 25 years). Tokyo: The Recording Committee for Pohnpei Mission 1980

islands' people requested that the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) send a missionary. As the ABCFM already had missionaries in Japan, it forwarded this request to the Congregational Church there.¹⁵ Further proof of the people's desire to have church leaders is the return of the German Liebenzell mission in 1927.¹⁶

As I have mentioned, research material on the Nan'yo Dendo Dan is limited, so it is difficult to be quite sure of the reasons for sending missionaries to Micronesia. However, we can be sure that the Nan'yo Dendo Dan was organized by Kozaki and other ordained pastors on its steering committee and mainly supported financially by the Japanese government. As suggested above, Kozaki was partly motivated by his feeling that Christianity could contribute towards nation-building, so rather than being under compulsion, he was accepting the government's help. In the furtherance of his ambitions, he later established an "Association of Christian Overseas Missions."¹⁷ This organization also received government funds, albeit irregularly and with no connection with the navy.

Next I would like to review some of the work undertaken by the missionaries.

Missionaries' activities and national education in the Japanese language

Following the formation of the committee, there were a total of eight missionaries: the first two were Yamaguchi Shokichi and Tanaka Kinzo and their families, the other

¹⁵ Another episode is introduced by Han to prove this point: Taguchi Ukichi, a Christian, was asked to send missionaries by an American missionary Ms. Hoppin. Han Han, *Studies on Japanese Christian Overseas Mission*, p.232

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.268

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ps.241

missionaries, Teruya Hironori, Kawashima Naoji, Uchida Masao, Azumi Kiyoshi, Mizumukai Eitaro, and Miyachi Osamu, some were single and others had children. They undertook four major tasks: to take care of existing church members; to build new churches to train evangelists by establishing seminaries; and to provide education programs. Educational activities were wide-ranging: for example, at a seminary built by Yamaguchi Shokichi, subjects such as mathematics, science, world history, geology, Japanese and Shushin (Japanese Emperor-worship) were taught. These were in addition to Bible study, which was also taught at the various churches.

The missionaries' energetic pursuit of their tasks can be seen in the attitudes of the locals. Tanaka Sakaeko describes how eager people were to learn at the churches:

For the people of the island Sunday is full of cheer and energy, and everybody dresses up. People really love going to church. There are two services, one in the morning and one in the evening. There are also three meetings during the week; one for members to pray, one for single people, and one for women. Church is at the centre of their lives—for a big Sunday school gathering from two to three thousand people get together.¹⁸

Ordained missionaries were not the only people working hard to help the island people; there were also some Japanese women teachers whose role deserves particular attention:

Students and teachers alike were enamored with a vivacious Japanese woman, Miss Yamada—not yet 30 years old when she arrived in mid-1937—sent by the Tokyo-based Nan'yo Dendo Dan, to teach at Wot. Very quickly

18 Tanaka Sakaeko, *Yasashii Manazashi, Ponape Jima Senkyo 25 nen* (Kind watching: mission in Pohnpei for 25 years). Tokyo: The Recording Committee for Pohnpei Mission 1980

she become (sic) an integral member of the mission school family.¹⁹

Thanks to the eagerness of participants on both sides, mission work brought meaning to life on the islands. In a report referring not to Pohnpei, but to the Marshall Islands, Garrett describes the Japanese missionaries' work in the following terms:

Before the war the Japanese language and the Japanese Protestant mission (Nan'yo Dendo Dan) had affected the running of the ABCFM schools and mission staff in Micronesia. Older American missionaries, under the League of Nations mandate, had modified their work by cooperating with the Congregational Churches in Japan, which owed the support and the founding of their own educational institutions to ABCFM activities.²⁰

Comments such as these make it easy to assume that the Japanese mandate was well thought of by the people of the islands; indeed, Mark Peattie believed that Japanese control there was valued highly not just by the island's inhabitants but also by the Japanese government and by the League of Nations. However, he warned that although the purpose of the mandate was to protect the Micronesian people, it seemed likely that Japanese influence would become all-pervasive. For example, by forcing Micronesian people to attend public schools, they would be imbued with loyalty towards Japan.²¹

Whether or not the Japanese missionaries intended to promote feelings of loyalty towards Japan or not, the school curricula included lessons in Japanese language and

19 Buck, Elden M., *Island of Angels: The Growth of the Church on Kosrae 1852-2002*, p. 336.

20 Garrett, John, *Where Nets Were Cast: Christianity In Oceania Since World War II*, Suva and Geneva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific in association with World Council of Churches, 1997, p.125

21 Mark Peattie, "Nihon Shokuminchi Shihaika no Micronesia" (Micronesia under Japanese Colonialism) in *Kindai Nihon to Shokuminchi* (Modern Japan and Colony), vol.1. Tokyo: Iwanami, 1992, p. 197.

Japanese morality, which were important tools in establishing a sense of national identity. Whether the missionaries reflected upon such issues is unknown, but although they probably felt obliged to conform with Japanese government policies, it is known that some resisted Nan'yo Cho officers' demands for forced labor, and protested at the harassment of the islands' women.

To conclude, the work of Nan'yo Dendo Dan leaves many questions to be answered from the point of view of today's Micronesia, and in relation to interpretations of Christian missions, nationalism and colonialism. In what follows, I will briefly consider some of the points that arise.



Skiar Church built by Rev. Kawashima Naoji



Kinamwe Church built by Rev. Yamaguchi Shokichi

Considering Nan'yo Dendo Dan's role in respecting of language, nationalism and state Shinto.

One of the burdens imposed upon the peoples of Japan's colonies was worship at shrines, thus demonstrating loyalty to the Japanese emperor. The first national shrine to be built on colonial land was in Taiwan, followed by Korea in 1925. In the case of Micronesia the first shrine was built in 1940 at a time of accelerated military expansion.

Although the Meiji Imperial Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion, state Shinto was not deemed to be a religion, and all groups were compelled to worship the emperor at Shinto shrines. The story that some Christians refused to worship at shrines, and were imprisoned, has been told and retold, but most Christians had been indoctrinated by the ideology of the emperor system. In 1967 the Japanese Congregational Churches admitted responsibility for war crimes committed by both the military and the government. Given this historical background it is easy to believe that the Nan'yo mission could have cooperated in encouraging emperor worship in Micronesia.

Another aspect of Nan'yo Dendo Dan's work was the teaching of the Japanese language. Language, of course, makes a major contribution to one's national identity, and in Micronesia Japanese was taught as Kokugo, or national language, along with the vernacular. It seems that the Japanese pastors did not find any contradiction in teaching Japanese as Kokugo, although more research needs to be done on this topic. However, as documentary evidence is limited, it will be necessary to conduct further investigations by interviewing the descendants of those involved.

In conclusion, I would like to pose these questions, which I hope to explore in future research.

Who developed the Japanese-run seminary curricula which included Japanese language training? Was it by order of the Japanese government or not?

Did the missionaries worship the emperor as did most Japanese pastors, including Kozaki?