THE AMERICANIZATION OF BUDDHISM IN HAWAII AND THE PROBLEM OF JAPANESE LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE IN THE BUDDHIST CHURCH

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1. One of the most striking social features of Hawaii to visitors from Japan is the strange vitality of Buddhism in Hawaii. For, in Japan, Buddhism is at best dormant. Its spiritual leadership is felt as nil. Most people in Japan suppose that Buddhism today functions only when there is a funeral, a memorial service for the deceased, etc. It is considered to be a religion for the dead, not for the living. More than half of the Japanese youth, if asked about their religion, will answer that they are atheists without knowing what they are talking about. What they mean to say is that they are indifferent to religion.

People from Japan are generally amazed to notice that Buddhist churches in Hawaii hold weekly Sunday worship services, occasional wedding ceremonies, and Sunday schools for children, which are all alien customs to Buddhists in Japan. Hidefumi Akaboshi, a Japanese Buddhist minister’s son who had lived in Japan for ten years and then in Hawaii for the same number of years, observed the differences between Buddhism in Hawaii and Buddhism in Japan as follows (Akaboshi 1963: 81-82).

Sunday school. At the village temple (in Japan) I took no part in anything like what we have in the form of the Sunday school,
for no such institution existed... Here in Hawaii, however, I found it quite different. A Sunday school is a necessary component of any church organization. Here, the parents as well as the society itself expect a child to attend Sunday school...

**Young Buddhist Association.** In Japan, I have never seen such a thing as a YBA. The reasons were that there was no leadership available and because of lack of time... In Hawaii, the situation is completely different. We have both Junior and Senior YBA.

**Wedding ceremony.** Buddhist wedding ceremonies are rarely held in Japan... In Hawaii, the situation is completely different. First of all, wedding ceremonies are held at the temple very frequently. Even those people who do not attend church services regularly get married at the temple.

We see that Hawaiian Buddhism is very different from Japanese Buddhism. After migration from Japan, Buddhism has undergone some transformation in Hawaii. Because it is commonplace to see Sunday school, the organizations of YMCA and YWCA, and wedding ceremonies, etc. in Christian churches in the West, it may safely be inferred that the Hawaiian Buddhist practices, which are very different from those observed in Japan, such as described by Akaboshi in the above quotes, are imitations from the comparable Christian and Western practices. This transformation of Buddhism in Hawaii, whether merely outward or not, can be called Christianization, Westernization or Americanization of Buddhism in Hawaii. It seems that Buddhism in Hawaii has learned to adapt itself to the new environment and has followed to a great extent the policy of Americanization for its own perpetuation,
From the very outset Buddhism in Hawaii adopted the Westernization-Americanization policy. This fact is well documented. Kagai in the following quote was the first Japanese Buddhist priest to visit Hawaii to make a survey of the spiritual situation in 1889.2)

Kagai, however, asserted that it was necessary to adopt a compromise theory for Hawaii which would extend recognition to the God as exemplified in Christianity as not being in conflict with Buddhism and Shintoism... He also... asserted that this compromise was necessary in order to overcome the handicap of a late start, especially in view of the fact that Christianity was gaining popular support among the Japanese in Hawaii.

As a result, we see today that Buddhism in Hawaii is little different from Christianity as far as its outward form and appearance in rituals and liturgies are concerned:3)

The methods adopted by the Honpa Hongwanji or any other Buddhist denomination, though there are some variations, to appeal to the Hawaiian-born include borrowing from Christian apparatus and procedure. There is Sunday school with classrooms, illustrated lesson books, charts, and gathas (hymns). In a wedding ceremony performed by a Buddhist minister, the ritual follows Christian precedent closely. In the “Praise of the Buddha” hymn book are such familiar phrases as “Love”, “Hail Glorious Day”, “Lord, Within Thy Holy Doctrine” and so forth.

However, it must be understood that Christianization, Westernization, Americanization, or whatever term is given to this peculiar
aspect of Buddhism in Hawaii is not at all against the nature of Buddhism, which is all-inclusive, as beautifully explained by a lay Buddhist of Moiliili Hongwanji Church:

The people of Japan are all members of neighborhood (Shinto) shrines. I too am a member of the Hachiman Shrine from birth... I belong to Shinshu worship (of Buddhism), but in order to maintain any steadfastness to my faith I need not reject or become discourteous to other gods, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, because in Namu Amida Butsu all are embodied, and all-embracing like a great ocean in which all pollution is purified.

Therefore, Americanization is not considered by the Buddhists in Hawaii as a compromise but as "flexibility" "an ability to adapt itself to any particular community or society" (Akaboshi 1963: 82).

This understanding of Buddhism is shared by all followers of Shinran who founded the Hongwanji denomination, the largest denomination of Buddhism both in Hawaii and in Japan. Their ministry is not tradition-bound. Whatever is good for the people is what the minister does:

According to some of my interviewees (Hongwanji ministers of Hawaii), these services, as well as funerals and weddings, are not always in accordance with Shinran’s true teaching. Some services are similar to Christian or Shinto services. Nevertheless, they are carried out, because they conform with people’s expectations.

Therefore, our understanding of Buddhism in Hawaii is that it will be flexible enough to turn to whatever direction its people
want to go. It has been the reflection of its people's ambition and aspiration. The people have been busy adjusting themselves to the situation in which they have found themselves. Will the people continue to go the way of Americanization, acculturation and assimilation? Or will they choose to take the way of more ethnic identity and pluralism? Their religion, Buddhism in Hawaii, will continue to provide for them necessary spiritual support whichever way the people may choose to go.

2. Will the Japanese Language be retained in the Buddhist churches and temples in Hawaii? What is the present trend of language use in Buddhistdom in Hawaii? What does the future hold?

In an attempt to answer these questions the writer decided to do preliminary research. He selected and interviewed a dozen Buddhists, each from a different denomination in Honolulu. The interviews were of informal nature. The writer either visited their temple or ministerial residence or talked over the telephone. Most of the interviewees were very cooperative and informative. Of the thirteen interviews eleven were carried out in Japanese and two in English. Each interview lasted from twenty minutes to an hour.

2. 1. Statistics. First, rough statistics of Buddhism and other religions in Hawaii are obtained from the interviewees. In this respect the figures given in Kamikawa et al (1973?: 7) about the present state of Buddhism in Hawaii are proved to be fairly accurate.

(1) Statistics Regarding the Six Largest Buddhist Denominations That Make Up the Hawaii Buddhist Council (Formed in 1950)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>N of Temples</th>
<th>Membership (Family Units)</th>
<th>N of Ministers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Jodo Mission of Hawaii</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Shingon Mission of Hawaii</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Soto Mission of Hawaii</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Nichiren Mission of Hawaii</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Higashi Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2) Two Independent Buddhist Denominations Involved in This Interview Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>N of Temples</th>
<th>Membership (Family Units)</th>
<th>N of Ministers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7. Shinshu Kyokai Mission of Hawaii</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Tendai Mission of Hawaii</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(3) Other Religious Groups of Japan-Origin Involved in This Interview Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>N of Temples</th>
<th>Membership (Family Units)</th>
<th>N of Ministers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. Tenrikyo Mission of Hawaii</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Ise Shrine (Shinto) Mission of Hawaii</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Nichiren Shosshu of America (Sooka Gakkai)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>(persons)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Seicho No Ie Mission of Hawaii</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. 2. Present Language Use in Religious Services

In Buddhist churches, two kinds of services are held each Sunday: English worship and Japanese worship. Of the two, the English service is predominant. This is due to the fact that 70% to 90% of the Buddhist congregation are English-speaking second, third, and fourth generations. The time schedules for worship services are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>English Service</th>
<th>Japanese Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Shingon Mission</td>
<td>Every Sunday</td>
<td>The 1st Day and the 21st Day of Each Month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Higashi Hongwanji</td>
<td>10:00 A.M. Sun.</td>
<td>7:00 A.M. Sun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Shinshu Kyokai</td>
<td>10:00 A.M. Sun.</td>
<td>7:00 A.M. Sun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Nichiren Shoshu of America</td>
<td>Every Sunday</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Ise Shrine</td>
<td>15th Day of Each Month</td>
<td>1st Day of Each Month</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above table it is clear that the English service is given the best hours of Sunday, while the Japanese service is held either on early Sunday morning, on Sunday afternoon, twice monthly, or irregularly. The Japanese service is mostly for monolingual Issei who are very old now and often physically not strong enough to come to church every Sunday.
What Kondo (1973:7) describes about the Buddhist congregation is relevant to the data obtained from the interviewees: "It is safe to assume that less than 30% are monolingual Japanese-speaking Buddhists, and perhaps 20% are bilingual. The remaining 50% do not understand Japanese at all." The Sunday service time-tables reflect this composition of the Buddhist congregation.

2.3. Buddhist Clergy and Language

Leading Buddhist clergymen in Hawaii are either Japanese-English bilingual or English-speaking. Japanese monolingual priests, if doing their jobs properly, usually have their excellent translators. A case in point is Rev. Okano I of Moiliili Hongwanji Church. He preaches in Japanese in the Japanese service. And his sermons are translated by Dr. Miyamoto, a layman of the congregation, for monthly publication in its organ The White Way. Rev. Okano II, son to Rev. Okano I, spent his primary school years in Japan, finished his secondary and higher education in Hawaii and studied at Ryukoku University (seminary of the denomination in Kyoto) for seven years, and is a perfect bilingual. He leads the English service of the church.

A similar pattern of language shift according to generation is observed in the clergy of Shinshu Kyokai Mission of Hawaii, where Rev. Takiguchi I preaches in the Japanese service and his son Rev. Takiguchi II assumes responsibility for the English service. Mrs. Takiguchi II, who met Rev. Takiguchi II in Kyoto where he was studying Buddhist theology for his ministry, says that, although Japanese is his mother tongue, Rev. Takiguchi II is more capable in English because he has lived all his life in America except the
seven years of his ministerial training in Kyoto. At home he speaks English with his family. Their daughters are sent to a Japanese school every afternoon after they return from regular elementary school. Mrs. Takiguchi II says that the couple are beginning to doubt the value of forcing them to go to Japanese school since, as long as they live in America, according to Mrs. Takiguchi II, occasions for the use of Japanese are so scarce: it is not used even at a Buddhist minister's home.

A little advanced pattern from the standpoint of language shift is the case of the Rev. Imamuras. The late Rev. Imamura I was one of the founders of Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, he was of course Japanese-speaking. Rev. Imamura II is the present Bishop of the Mission and a perfect bilingual. Rev. Imamura III, Director of the Buddhist Study Center on University Ave. in Honolulu seldom speaks Japanese. One of the interviewees said that Rev. Imamura III, born, raised and educated in America, was not able to study at Ryukoku University in Kyoto for more than one year because his Japanese is not adequate.

A young Japanese Buddhist missionary-minister, a graduate of a Buddhist seminary in Kyoto, has recently arrived to serve at Palolo Higashi Hongwanji Church in Honolulu. He says that he cannot speak English though he has studied English for more than eight years according to the Japanese school system. He is supposed to succeed to Rev. Moori, the present priest of the church, in a few years. So what Rev. and Mrs. Moori are going to do for him is to give him a chance to learn to speak English. Speaking English is a must to a Buddhist priest in Hawaii because, according to Mrs. Moori, less than a third of the congregation understand
Japanese when spoken from the pulpit.

2. 4. Demand for English-speaking and American-born Ministry

The biggest topic today for the members of the churches belonging to the Honpa Hongwanji Denomination, the largest Buddhist denomination in Hawaii, is who would succeed to the present Bishop Rev. Imamura II because of his announcement that he would retire on his 70th birthday. What is significant is the fact that he is the first local-born bilingual Nisei Bishop in the Mission’s 85-year history. All the former Bishops were Japan­born and Japanese-speaking.

METTA, the Buddhist Study Center’s monthly organ, takes up the topic in its May 1974 issue. It raises a question: “can we afford to take a step backward by looking to Japan for our next Bishop?” Then it answers the question: “we emphatically say ”No!” It demands that their next Bishop must be English-speaking and local. Finally it recommends a certain local priest for the position because “he is English-speaking and understands us.”

The Buddhist Center, led by the English-speaking Rev. Imamura III, represents today’s young Buddhists in Hawaii, that is, the third and fourth generations. They define themselves as “Western” rather than Oriental or Japanese, and talk like this:

Many of us in a real sense see the ending of an era for the Hongwanji. The sansei and yonsei generations are qualitatively different from their parents and are responding to their parents’ institutions in a totally different manner...

... if the Hongwaji does not want to alienate its youth, it must also accept the style of the youth. And who is better to decide
What that style is than the youth themselves?

What young Buddhists in Hawaii seek today is an American Buddhist identity which is "qualitatively" different from the Japanese Buddhist identity that has been in the past for the first and second generations. And to the kind of American Buddhist identity that they ask for, English-speaking is an essential factor.

3. Given the kind of flexibility of Buddhism in Hawaii as described in the first section and the present trend in language shift in Buddhistdom in Hawaii as expounded in the second, is it possible for the Japanese language to survive in the Buddhist churches and temples in Hawaii? The answer seems to be very gloomy.

The writer stayed at Shinshu Kyokai Dormitory on Beretania St., Honolulu for a week about ten years ago. There he observed the strange vitality of Hawaiian Buddhism for the first time. There were then more than fifty people attending the Japanese Sunday worship service. Mrs. Takiguchi I says that today it is only about ten people that come to the Japanese Sunday service. She is sad that the Japanese language in the church will die out together with its Isei membership.

Rev. Okano I of Moiliili Hongwanji Mission says that not before long Japanese will have to totally give way to English in the Buddhist church in Hawaii. To the question whether or not the essence of Buddhism can be transmitted in English he says that nearest possible approximation is the best one can hope for in any translation. In these respects Rev. Machida of Soto Mission also agrees. But in Rev. Machida's opinion, true seekers of truth will also
learn the language in which the doctrine of a particular school of
religion was originally written. So there is a possibility for
Japanese to survive in the Buddhist church in Hawaii among a few
seekers of truth in the same sense that Sanskrit is studied today.
A minister of Shingon Mission who answered my telephone interview
said that it is almost time that Buddhist ministers should part
with Japanese language in their church.

The feeling of termination of an era in Buddhist history in Hawaii
is thus unanimously shared by the Buddhist interviewees. This
realization of the inevitability of the future is culminated when it
comes from the mouth of the President of the largest Buddhist
denomination both in Japan and in Hawaii. President Kosho
Ohtani of Honpa Hongwanji of Japan greeted Hawaiian Buddhists
on the occasion of the 85th anniversary of the founding of the
Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii and said: “The time is nearing
when proselytizing in Japanese shall have come to an end.”

As things stand today, it is quite possible that the Buddhist
church language in Hawaii will totally be shifted to English in one
more generation.

Notes

1. Of some 220,000 Japanese Americans in Hawaii, 150,000 are supposed
to be Buddhists according to a count. In another count the Buddhist
population is 68.5% of the total Japanese population of Hawaii. See
Kondo (1973: 6).

2. Okahata (1971: 228). This is a quote from the Beifu Jiho August
1, 1962.

of articles. It is regrettable, however, that its date and the editor’s
name are missing. There are six copies of the manuscript in the reading room of the Department of East Asian Languages, University of Hawaii.


5. Hasegawa (1963: 75-76). Hasegawa, like Akaboshi, is a Hawaiian Hongwanji minister's son. He was himself heading for the ministry at the time of his writing.


7. It is expressed like: "... our Western way of looking ..." (emphasis added) (METTA, No. 19, April 1974: 3.)


9. Kosho Ohtani. Felicitations. The White Way, Vol. 18, No. 3, March 1974: 2. The message of the President (who is husband to a sister of Japan’s Empress) further reads: “And of course, new problems will arise, for not only the language but also the very philosophy of life may differ in the sangha that shall be. I fervently hope that the past experiences in overcoming difficulties shall be a lesson in meeting new circumstances, and that the teaching of Jodo Shinshu shall flourish and become the ‘Light in the heart’ of people throughout Hawaii for a truly bright and harmonious society.”

References


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