

LOOSE LEAVES FROM A VILLAGE PRIEST'S NOTEBOOK

This village was formed in 1956 by the merger of three small villages; so now it is one of the largest farm villages in this area. It's population today (1963) is nearly 20,000. It is only about an hour's ride by suburban train from Tokyo station. Despite its nearness to the capitol, however, it is culturally very backward in every respect except in the field of compulsory education. It is especially backward in regard to religion.

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In an area of some thirty square kilometers there are thirty-three Buddhist temples, some thirty Shinto shrines, and one Tenri-kyō church. There are no other religious installations in the village except wayside stones marked with the names of Buddhist and Shinto deities.

The temples belong to the following sects: Jōdo — 1, Nichiren — 3, Shingon Busan-ha — 23, Shingon Daigo-ha — 2, Sōtō Zen — 3, and Tendai — 1.

Twenty-seven of the temples have resident priests but this does not mean that these priests have no other employment. Practically all of them have another occupation, and strictly speaking there really are no full-time priests serving in any of the temples. Six of the thirty-three temples have no resident priest.

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Shinto shrines number thirty. None of these have a full time priest. The thirty shrines are served by two priests who live in the village.

The Tenri Church has its own teacher (*kyōshi*) but he also apparently works outside the village.

Even the resident priest in the largest temple of the village has a position. His temple belongs to the Busan sect of Shingon Buddhism and has more than three hundred supporting families, yet he has a position as clerk in the office of the local agricultural cooperative, where he is working under one of the supporters of his temple.

A rough survey of the "outside" work of the priests indicates that one is a professor in a Buddhist university, another is a clerk in an agricultural cooperative, a third is a part-time employee of the prefectural government, and a fourth is a director of a profit-making enterprise. Two are working as high school teachers; and three each are employed in the local village office, some sectarian headquarters or a large temple in Tokyo, and in primary schools. Some are members of the village board of education or are serving as commissioners of public welfare or juvenile delinquency agencies. These latter cannot be classed with the others who have more or less steady employment.

The number of religious institutions is very large for the population, yet the religious activities of the community

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are rather stagnant. A Sunday School used to be held at a temple, but it was closed several years ago and has not been re-opened. The temples perform funeral or memorial services for the supporting families but do nothing else.

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The Shinto priests officiate at the annual shrine festivals which are usually held in the autumn. They perform other rites such as the ceremonial purification of building sites which take place only occasionally.

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There is no regular preaching or teaching at any shrine or temple in the village (See p. 74). But once the Festival for the Dead (*Bon*) comes around, the sleepy temples are alive with activity. The priests visit the homes of their supporters one by one to conduct short memorial services by chanting a small portion of some sutra. Every year in this area on the morning of the day the festival begins, that is, August 13 for this village, the supporters clean out their household altars by removing all the ancestral tablets to the open alcove in the living room (*tokonoma*) where they are placed in order. Then a priest chants sutras in front of them. After the festival is over they are returned to the altar. It is said that this custom originated in a Tokugawa shogunate order to inspect the family shrines to discover whether any Christian objects were hidden in them.

The supporters visit their ancestral graves and temples in this season, as well as at the time of the vernal and autumnal equinoxes. Besides this some pious families ask their temples to perform memorial services for certain

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ancestors on the death days; but recently this custom has not been observed as strictly as formerly. This and other contemporary conditions are increasing the financial distress of the temples.

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The religious inactivity of the priests is paralleled by the lack of piety on the part of the supporters, — thus making it difficult to finance the temples.

All things considered, however, the most important cause for the financial embarrassment of the temples in farm villages seems to lie in the Agricultural Land Reform Law, which was enacted during the Allied Occupation of this country. Prior to that almost all temples and shrines in this area possessed more or less extensive agricultural land which provided for their financial support. Having been deprived of their land, the temples have had to depend upon the gifts of their supporters, and many of the village temples from the very beginning never had many such families. Therefore, it is quite natural that they have become very poor unless they have devised some other means of support. The priests have solved the problem personally by securing additional positions which provide some regular income, but the religious activities of the temples cannot but suffer and the people's faith in established Buddhism becomes weaker.

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Some villagers have gone into the new religious cults or sects, but the number of such does not seem to be very large in our village. There would hardly seem to be as

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many as fifty. A few people seem to attend meetings held in the headquarters of religions such as Risshō Kōsei Kai, Myōchi Kai, and others: but there are no members of Sōka Gakkai in this village. Hence there has been no trouble here about the burning of family altars or the like.

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The piety of the people in general can be said to be rather weak, but there is no looking down upon any established religion. In a word it may be said that except for the old, there is little religious interest among the people. The old people in each community meet at least once a month in the nearest temple or in some home in groups of ten or twenty. The Shingon faith predominates here, but, except for those of the Nichiren faith, they meet together regardless of their sectarian affiliation.

Nichiren believers constitute an exclusive group which meets in one of the Nichiren temples. One of the reasons for this is that, despite their differences in faith, the believers of the Zen or Pure land Buddhism can meet together and chant Shingon Buddhist hymns, while the followers of Nichiren are limited to the Lotus Sutra. Except for the Nichiren believers the groups have no other professional leaders when they serve the Buddha. Consequently only the Nichiren priests have a chance to preach to the people.

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At my temple (Nichiren) the believers meet about twice a month and thus get a chance to hear the chief priest's sermon and to chant the sutra and the sacred title, *Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō*. In addition to a regular festival on the

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first of each month, we observe the festival of Kishimojin, the mother of demons, on February 8, Saint Nichiren's birthday on February 16, the vernal and autumnal equinoxes for three days each, the Festival for the Dead (*Bon*), or Feast of Lanterns, as it is sometimes called, on August 13-16, the memorial day of Nichiren's persecution on September 12, and the founder's death day on November 15. (The last date should be on October 12, but the farmers are too busy at that time,)

The priests do not visit their believers' homes for religious purposes except on the occasion of funerals and during the *Bon* season. But the believers visit their family temples from time to time, especially during the *Bon* and equinoxes. They do this to worship at the ancestral tombs as well as the enshrined buddhas. On such occasions they never fail to bring homemade food, such as various kinds of rice-cake to offer to the Buddha image. At the monthly meetings they take turns bringing cooked food for the members. After a service to the Buddha, they sit around eating, gossiping, singing, and sometimes doing folk dances.

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Some Shingon believers observe special functions such as Daishi-kō. This is for the Great Teacher (*Daishi*) Kōbō, the founder of the Shingon Buddhism in Japan, who is also known as Kūkai. A wooden statue of Kōbō is placed in a small portable palanquin and carried in turns by the villagers in a sort of relay procession from hamlet to hamlet. It takes about a week to make the rounds and wherever it stops the people gather to worship.

At the Nichiren temples the memorial service for commemorating Nichiren's death used to be a great attraction, but since World War II this has changed and little attention is paid to it.

Our village has a Buddhist Society, but this it is a society for the priests rather than believers. It consists of the twenty-seven resident chief priests. Before the three villages were combined there was no such organization but, at a meeting of a few interested priests, it was proposed and the rest agreed to participate. After the regulations were drawn up one of the Nichiren priests was elected president. Several others became directors and one became the treasurer. The object of the society is to promote cooperation in order to cultivate the faith of the villagers; but as the annual membership fee is only ¥ 400 the society is not able to accomplish much. What on earth can be done on ¥ 400 (\$ 1.10) a year?

The first thing undertaken after much discussion was a memorial service for the war-dead who had been born in the village. During the war such services were held from time to time by the priests of each hamlet under the sponsorship of the village office. In the postwar years, however, these were suspended because of the attitude of the Occupation. Even after Japan became independent this condition continued. The villagers seemed to want such a service but the priests did not dare to project such a plan.

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The first activity of our Buddhist Society on a large scale was to sponsor an annual service for the war-dead. This was held on September 26, 1961, the last day of the autumnal equinox. It was decided that the society should provide a Buddhist grave marker, a miniature stupa (*tōba*), for each of those commemorated and cakes for the bereaved families. (After having been offered to the Buddha, cakes were distributed.) About four hundred markers (*tōba*) were prepared.

The day before the festival the priests were very busy cleaning up the main hall of the temple which was to be used as a meeting place. This was necessary because the young man who is chief priest is very idle and does not like to perform such labor. The altar was especially cleaned and all the decorations polished.

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A number of problems were confronted in preparing for the service. One was the choice of a sutra to be chanted. There are very few sutras that are chanted commonly by all sects. In fact there is no common sutra for those of the True Pure Land (*Jōdo Shin*) and the Nichiren faith. The former depends on the Three Sutras of the Pure Land (*Jōdo Sambu-kyō*), while the latter depends solely on the Lotus Sutra. Fortunately, however, there was no *Jōdo Shin* priest involved so that by a little concession on the part of the Nichiren priests this problem was settled. They decided to chant the Sutra of the Essence of Wisdom (*Han'nya Shin-gyō*) and *Kannon-gyō* of the Lotus Sutra which is chanted by almost all sects.

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Because of the lack of money we thought we would ask the authorities of the village to sponsor the ceremony, but the president objected on the ground that this might run counter to the principle of the separation of "church" and state as stipulated in the Constitution. Hence it was decided to conduct the service sponsored by the society itself. On the day of the service the head of the village and other local dignitaries were present.

The ceremony was solemnly observed by all the priests in the society with the president officiating. Incense was offered to the Buddha and the souls of the war-dead were consoled by the five hundred persons who attended. When the initial ceremony was over, the president preached for over an hour. (It was too long!) He spoke to the effect that as Buddhism advocates the way of the bodhisattva (a buddha-to-be), or one who sacrifices his life in some great cause, and Buddhism aims to realize a peaceful Pure Land in this world, those who sacrifice their lives for the sake of their ideals may be said to be practicing the Bodhisattva Way. If any survivor fails to make an effort to achieve a peaceful country, the sacrifice of those who died would be in vain. If, however, they exert themselves, he said that the war-dead would become bodhisattvas. Thus, whether the war-dead ultimately attain this blessed state depends solely on whether the bereaved are spiritually awakened. This, the speaker said, was the true purpose of memorial services in honor of the war-dead. After the service those present placed markers beside each of the graves.

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This service was repeated in 1962 on the same day, but in the interval the president changed his attitude, so the service was observed under the co-sponsorship of the Society and the village authorities. It was understood that should any Shinto group wish to sponsor the same sort of service the people would also assist it. The place of the service this time was the village auditorium because it was of easy access. The meeting was as successful as the first one.

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This is all that the Buddhist Society has done. The president proposed that the birthday of Buddha, that is, the Flower Festival on April 8, be sponsored and that a paper-mache elephant be drawn by the children in relays from hamlet to hamlet; but this proposal was rejected for lack of funds. He also advocated the erection of a Buddhist Center in the village which could be used for propaganda and educational purposes, but this also was rejected. The local people are not interested in propagating Buddhism. The priests as well as the laymen are dormant. The gospel of the Buddha is never heard by most people. They are indeed pitiable. Even if competent preachers are not to be found in each temple, those who can preach could take turns. Others services could also be conducted jointly, if there were a Buddhist Center. This ought to be possible with 3,000 Buddhist families, but the directors would not agree to the proposal. They regard it as too idealistic.

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Religious education at the school is practically non-existent. No public school teacher, including those who concurrently

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hold the office of priest, seem to give the children any religious education. The priest-teachers are in the best position to give a really sound religious education.

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A certain young Christian teacher who commutes from Tokyo once told the children in his class, which included my daughter, that Buddhism persecuted the Christians in ancient times and that Buddhism was the enemy of Christianity. This view of history may be partly correct, but his attitude toward religion should be improved. A member of the Education Board advised the teacher not to discuss religion in that way. As for the Buddhist teachers, nothing is heard about their ever mentioning religion.

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Once a member of the board asked a girl in the second-year class of the junior high school who had sung some Christmas carols something about Gotama Buddha and Jesus Christ, but she could not tell him anything.

I understand that the president of the Buddhist Society wants to hold meetings in order to help the Buddhist priest-teachers learn how to deal with religious education in the school.

April 10, 1963.

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Kanji Glossary

Bon 盆	Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō
Buzan-ha 叢山派	南無妙法蓮華經
Daigo-ha 醍醐派	Nichiren 日蓮
Daishi-kō 大師講	Risshō Kōsei Kai 立正佼成会
Han'nyā Shin-gyo 般若心經	Shingon 真言
Jōdo 淨土	Soka Gakkai 創価学会
Jōdo Sanbu Kyō 淨土三部經	Sōtō 曹洞
Jōdo Shin 淨土真	Tenri-kyō 天理教
Kannon-gyō 觀音經	Toba 塔婆
Kōbō 弘法	Tokugawa 徳川
Kyōshi 教師	tokonoma 床の間
Kūkai 空海	Zen 禪
Myōchi Kai 妙智会	