

# THE ENGAGEMENT OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN POSTWAR BATTLEFIELD PILGRIMAGES

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*After World War II, many Japanese citizens took part in battlefield pilgrimages to recover the remains of fallen soldiers. Most of these were bereaved family members and veterans, but religious functionaries, including not only Buddhist monks and Shinto priests but also representatives of new religious movements, also joined and organized trips of their own. The lack of sufficient research on their activities and the paucity of information in official government sources supports the need for further study. The following essay offers an overview of the activities of Japanese religious groups, based in large part on reports in the pages of the “Chūgai Nippō,” an inter-denominational Japanese newspaper.*

**W**ORLD WAR II produced a large number of casualties all over the world. It has been calculated that the Allied forces suffered more than four million military deaths and the Japanese military over two million. According to the rules established by the Japanese Army for the recovery and burial of the remains, when it was not possible to recover the whole body, a single finger bone would have to suffice.<sup>1</sup> After the battle of Guadalcanal in 1943, it became difficult to continue the practice. As a result, the bereaved family would often receive no more than a funeral urn with a piece of wood or paper inscribed with the name of the fallen soldier. These empty urns made little sense to families who had lost someone near and dear to them. Some families, clinging desperately to the hope that their loved one had somehow survived, contacted fellow soldiers, and at times even shamans, in search of further information.<sup>2</sup>

1. Fujii Tadatoshi 藤井忠俊, 『兵たちの戦争——手紙・日記・体験記を読み解く』 [The soldier's war: Reading letters, diaries, and memoirs] (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 2000).

2. Nishimura Akira 西村 明, 「遺骨収集・戦地訪問と戦死者遺族——死者と生者の時・空間的隔たりに注目して」 [Bereaved families visiting to battle sites to gather remains and battlefield memorials: Distances in time and space between the living and the dead], 『昭和のくらし研究』 [Studies in the daily life of the Shōwa Era] 6 (2008).

As the soldiers who had returned alive tried to get on with their lives back home, they became increasingly aware of their difference from those who had perished in battle. It was not merely a matter of geographical distance but also of a separation in time. Active soldiers viewed themselves as “alter egos” for their comrades; when one would die, another would stand in for him.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, numerous war-bereaved families and veterans began to make pilgrimages to former battlefields in the hope of recovering remains and in order to perform memorial rites there. Various third-party groups of government officials, NGO members, travel agents, and religious bodies also took part in the practice.

A few scholars studying religious phenomena in modern Japan have conducted research on these memorial rites, and there are several papers focussing on human geography and international relations, and even so the information they provide is limited.<sup>4</sup> Attention has tended to be centered on Yasukuni Shrine or on memorial monuments like *chūkōhi* 忠魂碑. This is not surprising, given the movement to nationalize Yasukuni Shrine that began in the 1960s and the subsequent lawsuits over the involvement of national or local governments with the rituals held there, which led to debates over the constitutional separation of religion and state. In what follows, I will begin with an overview of steps taken by the government from the 1950s to the 1970s to recover war remains and then go on to consider the involvement of religious groups during the same period.

## Government engagement

After World War II, and more noticeably after the end of the Occupation, the Japanese government embarked on a project to retrieve the remains of the war dead, but its handling of the situation was inconsistent and lacking in direction. If anything, the steps it took were always in response to public opinion. The Lower House of Parliament only brought up the question for the first time in 1951, following a year of rising public concern stimulated by the discovery of scattered remains on Wake Island. In June 1952 the Lower House passed a resolution stating that “the government will take all possible measures to recover and repatriate the bodies of fallen soldiers immediately and to maintain a cemetery

3. Nishimura Akira 西村 明, 「遺骨への想い、戦地への想い——戦死者と生存者たちの戦後」 [Feelings for remains, feelings for battle sites: The postwar era for fallen soldiers and survivors,] *Bulletin of the National Museum of Japanese History* 147 (2008).

4. Kimura Shigeru 木村 茂, 「アジア太平洋戦争海外戦没者の遺骨収集事業——その経緯と問題点」 [Projects to collect the remains of the war dead from World War II: Process and issues], in 『追手門学院大学文学部紀要』 [Review of the faculty of letters at Otomon Gakuin University] 36 (2000); see also Nakano Satoshi, “Politics of Mourning: Postwar Philippines-Japan Relations regarding Memorialization of the Japanese War Dead, in *Philippines-Japan Relations*, Setsuho Ikehata and Lydia N. Yu-Jose, eds. (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003).

for them.” As a result, the government began to conduct preliminary investigations on Iwojima and the Ryūkyū Islands of Okinawa. In October of that year, in response to a cabinet decision, the government inaugurated the repatriation of the remains and the commemoration of the war dead in the United States trust territory. This took place intermittently as part of three multi-year plans spanning the 1950s to the 1970s.

The first plan, from 1953 to 1958, focused exclusively on collecting the ashes of the dead from major battle sites. The remains of some ten thousand bodies were collected.<sup>5</sup> Working teams were organized by representatives of the bereaved families, government officials, and religious functionaries delegated by the Japanese Association of Religious Organizations (JARO) to hold religious services on the sites. A government-owned training ship carried them around the islands.

The second plan was implemented nearly ten years later, from 1967 to 1972, during Japan’s period of rapid economic growth when land development had expanded to islands that were the site of former battlefields.<sup>6</sup> This coincided with the first boom period of Japanese overseas travel during which one in a thousand was said to travel abroad. Furthermore, as will be shown later, private pilgrimage movements also encouraged the government plan. In this second part of the project, the gathered ashes were all supposed to be sent back to Japan. Travelling by airplane, the working teams took more time to collect the remains rather than travel. The teams consisted mainly of government officials. They employed local people to work at the sites. The ashes of about eighty thousand soldiers, over seven times more than the amount in the first plan, were gathered in this period.

The third and final plan operated from 1973 to 1975.<sup>7</sup> The plan saw a dramatic increase in budget, with fiscal 1973 having sixteen more funds allocated than had been available the previous year. In addition to the activities of private recovery groups, a Japanese soldier, Yokoi Shōichi 横井庄一, was found after three decades in the jungles of Guam. These factors contributed to the refinancing. During the years of this final plan, the remains of a hundred thousand war dead were recovered. With that, the Japanese government announced the end of the

5. The first plan covered the following areas: Minami Torishima, Wake, Saipan, Tinian, Guam, Peleliu, Angaur, Iwojima, Fort Richardson (AK), Attu, Solomon, Bismarck, New Guinea, the Malay Peninsula, Singapore, Myanmar, India, Borneo, and the Philippines.

6. The sites in the second plan covered Indonesia, Hong Kong, New Caledonia, Peleliu, the Philippines, Caroline, Mariana, Marshall, Gilbert, Woleai Atoll, New Guinea, Bismarck, Solomons, Malaysia, South Korea, and Iwojima.

7. The sites in the third plan covered the islands of Micronesia, the Philippines, Solomons, Eastern New Guinea, Bismarck, Indonesia, India, Northern Borneo, and Okinawa. It also expanded its search to include sunken ships in the Chuuk Lagoon and Manila Bay.

project and inaugurated a new policy according to which recovery would be conducted only if there was specific information on the whereabouts of remains.

After 1976 the activities shifted to the Japan War Bereaved Association (JWBA), which held pilgrimages for memorial services to be conducted at battle sites. In 1991 the Friendship and Goodwill Memorial Project for the war orphans began. Participants in the project not only held memorial services but also developed contacts with local residents. In fact, already prior to this time private associations connected with religious groups had begun these activities.

## The Involvement of Religious Groups

While it is easy to point to the activities within the private sector that influenced the governmental project, the published records of the Ministry of Health and Welfare provide little information on the matter. Regarding the delegation members from the JARO, for example, the names of neither the religious functionaries nor their religious groups were mentioned in descriptions of the first recovery plan included in an outline of the Ministry's thirty-year history of the department of the war bereaved family affairs.<sup>8</sup> In an attempt to appreciate their commitment without a direct relationship with the war dead, I have gathered together passages from the pages of *Chūgai Nippō* 中外日報, an interdenominational newspaper, describing the efforts of religious leaders and organizations to recover remains of the fallen and organize battlefield pilgrimages.

*Chūgai Nippō* began publication in 1897 under the name of *Kyōgaku Hōchi* 教学報知 as a journal specializing in religious culture. It consists principally of articles dealing with domestic religious trends, the conditions and administration of various religious groups, and doctrinal discussions, but also contains general religious and political news, essays, and correspondence from readers. Although published daily during the period in question, it now appears thrice weekly. Surveying the microfilms of entries between 1951 and 1980 will give an overview of the role of religious representatives in the government project. From there we may look more closely at a number of case studies of the pilgrimages organized by religious associations.

After the Recovery Act passed the Lower House in 1952, JARO, in cooperation with the Japanese Red Cross Society (JRC), established a Committee for the Commemoration for the War Dead Overseas (CCWDO).<sup>9</sup> The purpose of this committee was to hold commemorative services, repatriate the remains "without error," and to insure that the governmental plan was carried out

8. Ministry of Health and Welfare 厚生省, ed., 『引揚げと援護三十年の歩み』 [Thirty years of supporting repatriation] (Tokyo: Gyōsei, 1978).

9. *Chūgai Nippō*, 28 June 1952.

with accountability.<sup>10</sup> Thus, even though the authorities had only planned for the recovery of remains in the first trip to the islands in Micronesia in 1953, the committee lobbied to send religious representatives, perform religious rituals, and erect memorials at the sites. Three religious representatives and two assistants were selected from the five sub-organizations of JARO.<sup>11</sup> In addition, representatives of sectarian Shinto, Shrine Shinto, and Buddhist groups conducted commemorative rituals after the recovery work and on board ship.

After the delegation had returned to Japan and taken part in a government-sponsored memorial ceremony, JARO, JRC, CCWDO, and JWBA hosted their own “Grand Memorial Service for the War Dead in the Pacific Islands.” In it a spokesperson for the bereaved delivered a biting speech that underscored the difference between the view of the government and that of the private sector.<sup>12</sup>

We may recall here that the CCWDO was established on the assumption that the government implementation of the project would be unsatisfactory. The movement emerged in the postwar years, the repatriation system having already collapsed before the war’s end. Along with the bereaved, many in the general public seem to have felt anger or hopelessness in the face of the government’s inaction. Religious organizations stepped in to conduct independent memorial services even as they continued to collaborate in the government recovery project. Their collaboration, dating from the initial voyages to Iwojima, Okinawa, Attu Island, Myanmar, and New Guinea in the 1950s was aimed at establishing personal and organizational contact with local regions. Iwojima and New Guinea are good examples of this.

In preliminary research conducted on Iwojima, Jushōan Kōami 寿松庵幸阿弥, a Buddhist monk, joined the delegation and was very active. Under his secular name, Wachi Tsunezō 和智恒藏, he commanded the Iwojima garrison forces until three months before the island fell. After demobilization, feelings of survivor’s guilt towards the war dead led him to enter a Tendai Buddhist monastery. After applying five times to the GHQ for permission to travel to the island, his request was finally granted.<sup>13</sup> On his departure, he was appointed as an envoy by the head temples of several Japanese Buddhist sects, among them Enryaku-ji on Mount Hiei, Kongōbu-ji on Mount Kōya, and Shiten’nō-ji. He also received courtesy calls from Izumo Shrine, Yasukuni Shrine, and the YMCA.

10. *Ibid.*, 8 July 1952.

11. *Ibid.*, 12 July 1952. JARO was established in 1946 as a federation consisting of the Federation of Sectarian Shinto, the Japan Confederation of Christian Churches, the Japan Buddhist Federation, the Association of Shinto Shrines, and the Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan.

12. *Ibid.*, 31 March 1953.

13. *Ibid.*, 22 January 1952.

In this way, his travels took on particular significance as representative of a variety of different religious institutions.<sup>14</sup>

During the government recovery project conducted in New Guinea in 1956, Katō Ryōichi 加藤亮一, a minister in the United Church of Christ in Japan, joined the recovery work as part of a delegation from JARO. He mounted a campaign to repatriate the remains of Japanese war criminals from a cemetery in Kota Baru (formerly Hollandia, now Kota Jayapura), Indonesia. Katō recounts how he was stimulated by contrasting attitudes to Japan:

Native Indonesians, especially Christian church members, were so pro-Japanese that those travelling were surprised at the global influence of Christianity. In contrast, Dutch feelings towards Japan were so negative that I couldn't hold back the tears at the sight of the poor state of the Japanese cemetery in comparison with the imposing facilities erected to honor unknown Dutch soldiers. What is more, we were not allowed to take the remains of the war criminals back with us. I intend to lobby the Dutch government on this matter through the mediation of the Dutch Reformed Church.<sup>15</sup>

The general synod of the United Church of Christ adopted Katō's proposal unanimously and asked the Committee on World Affairs for the National Christian Council in Japan (NCC) to negotiate with the Dutch Reformed Church through the World Council of Churches.<sup>16</sup> In the end the committee decided not to approach the Dutch Reformed Church and the Dutch government, having been dissuaded by a foreign ministry official on the grounds that such action would be premature.<sup>17</sup> Top-level staff members in the NCC determined that it would be an international issue, although Katō and his supporters might try to open up a negotiating channel through the transnational character of Christianity.

## Private Efforts

The second stage of the government recovery plan, which started in 1968, was stimulated by privately organized pilgrimages and triggered by an event sponsored by the publisher of the *Chūgai Nippō*. In 1965, the newspaper arranged a trip to gather remains from Guam, Saipan, and the Philippines. The trip was to

14. *Idem; ibid.*, 6 March 1952.

15. *Ibid.*, 28 August 1956.

16. *Ibid.*, 28 October and 23 November 1956.

17. *Ibid.*, 8 February 1957.

mark the twentieth anniversary of the end of World War II and was coordinated with the support of JARO and JWBA.<sup>18</sup>

Reported as the first private delegation for which the families of the bereaved and other concerned parties held out hope, it consisted of a mere eleven participants: three Shinto, one Buddhist, and seven others that included journalists and members of the bereaved. The article in the *Chūgai Nippō* noted:

It is indeed significant that a delegation is being dispatched to regions which the government plan would not have included and that it can count on the voluntary participation of Shinto and Buddhist religious functionaries closely related to those regions.... The Japanese religious world bears the serious responsibility to commemorate the dead spirits of Japanese and all nationalities at the site of the former battles to pray for a world peace that transcends former animosities.<sup>19</sup>

After the trip, the *Chūgai Nippō* organized a round-table discussion of the participants. The moderation referred to the mounting requests for pilgrimages to the battlefields and invited a comment from the executive officer of JWBA. In his response, the officer noted that the association was planning such trips with the support of both the religious world and the government.<sup>20</sup>

The *Chūgai Nippō*'s trip gave encouragement not only to concerned parties at home but also to the local people in the places they visited. Several months later, Oscar Calvo, a Catholic priest in Guam, asked the Committee of the Commemoration for the War Dead Overseas to recover Japanese remains and erect a memorial in their honor.<sup>21</sup> He traveled to Tokyo the following year to meet with concerned parties and religious figures. He interviewed Doi Tatsuo 土井辰雄, the Cardinal Archbishop of Tokyo, and a number of Buddhist priests to ask for their support in his plan build a South Pacific Memorial Park and Monument to honor both the Japanese fallen soldiers and the civilians who had died there.<sup>22</sup> A "prominent Chamorro priest and spiritual figure" in Guam,<sup>23</sup> Calvo was well known to parties in Japan as an indigenous priest engaged in the commemoration of the Japanese war dead. The *Chūgai Nippō* articles explained that Calvo and his followers were prompted by the fact that a large number of remains lay neglected in jungles and caves in the islands of the South Pacific. One article quoted him as saying of his motivation:

18. *Ibid.*, 18 February 1965.

19. *Ibid.*, 21 March 1965.

20. *Ibid.*, 25 and 28 April, 1965

21. *Ibid.*, 5 May 1966.

22. *Ibid.*, 19 August 1966.

23. Keith Camacho, *Cultures of Commemoration: The Politics of War, Memory, and History in the Mariana Islands*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 100.

It is only natural for me to console the spirits of the war dead whoever they may be—US military, islanders, or Japanese soldiers. Japanese remains are still to be found on the island, despite the fact that the remains of US soldiers, fewer in number than those of the Japanese, have nearly all been repatriated and given a proper burial. I would like to promote friendship between the United States and Japan and regard the memorial as a symbol of peace.<sup>24</sup>

Taking their lead from the Japan Buddhist Federation, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan pledged cooperation with Calvo's project and Cardinal Doi encouraged Catholics nationwide to offer donations.<sup>25</sup> The South Pacific Memorial Association (SPMA) was established in November of 1966 and Calvo assumed the position of vice-president. A number of Japanese Catholics and Buddhists joined as executive board members, as did members of the Japanese Diet and the governor of Guam. In 1967 a 117-member pilgrimage was organized by the SPMA to visit Guam to collect remains and to hold a ground-breaking ceremony. Initially the local legislature adopted a resolution opposing the construction of the memorial,<sup>26</sup> but through the strenuous efforts of Father Calvo, the plan was realized in 1970.

Elsewhere similar interreligious and transnational collaboration to commemorate the war dead took place. In 1969 Yamada Mumon 山田無文, president of Hanazono University in Kyoto and a high-ranking monk of Rinzai Zen in Japan, organized a pilgrimage of ten persons to New Guinea. He was moved to the idea by the passion of a war orphan who was the first pilgrim to visit New Guinea in a private capacity after the war with the aim of building a memorial there. Yamada accompanied him and the other pilgrims to make that wish a reality.<sup>27</sup> After the New Guinea trip, in 1970 Yamada established the Association of South Pacific Friendship (ASPF, now the Association of Asian South Pacific Friendship) which involved monks of other Buddhist sects as well. Each year the association has been assiduous in arranging several visits to battle sites of the Pacific War.

In late 1970, an American Catholic missionary named William Liebert paid a visit to Yamada in Japan. Liebert was mission director for the Society of the Divine Word in Wewak, the capital of the East Sepik province of Papua New Guinea. He told Yamada of his plan to build a war memorial chapel on Mission Hill above the Wewak airfield (Wiruri) where his church was located and which was the scene of one of the bloodiest campaigns in the war. Yamada offered his

24. *Chūgai Nippō* 29 April 1969.

25. *Ibid.*, 19 August 1966.

26. *Ibid.*, 29 April 1969.

27. *Ibid.*, 26 January and 8 April 1969.



support and made a donation for the project.<sup>28</sup> Construction of a chapel for 150 people began two years later. Yamada's contribution of two million yen (about \$6,600 US at the time) covered about 55 percent of the cost, the remainder of which is said to have come from the Vatican.<sup>29</sup>

The reason Yamada was so generous is that the memorial he had assisted the war orphan in building sits atop that same Mission Hill through the kind graces of Father Liebert. The inscription on it reads:

In memory of the brave soldiers who paid the supreme sacrifice for their countries Japan, Australia, America, and New Guinea during World War II from 1941 to 1945. We sincerely hope that our men will never again engage in war but that a deep spirit of friendship may exist between all.

Yamada's party held a joint memorial service with the Christian missionaries in the presence of the state governor and local war veterans.<sup>30</sup>

### Nationalism and Transnationalism in Postwar Japanese Religions

Immediately after his donation, Yamada contributed an essay to the *Chūgai Nippō* entitled "Praying for Peace and Prosperity," highlighting his views:

We never hold memorial services only for Japanese fallen soldiers. Rather, we include all the war dead in collaboration with local Catholic priests. Moreover, we respect the local people and their aid to our soldiers, and apologize to them for the pain they endured from them.... I always tell war orphans that whatever human remains we recover, the flesh and blood of our forebears is lost forever. These south islands are therefore our blood brothers. The task for us, the bereaved, is to love these islands as sacred ground where our fathers rest in eternal peace, to pray for peace and work together for the prosperity of the local people.<sup>31</sup>

Several case studies have been depicted here on the recovery of remains and the memorial services conducted by Japanese religious organizations on former battle sites of the Pacific War and their relationships with local people.<sup>32</sup> They attest to the cooperative efforts of individuals who have found a way to cross

28. *Ibid.*, 19 November 1970.

29. *Ibid.*, 29 July 1972.

30. *Ibid.*, 9 April 1969.

31. *Ibid.*, 29 September 1972.

32. Articles on the involvement of Shinto and new religious movements are also to be found in the pages of the *Chūgai Nippō*, but space prohibits us from including them here.

national and religious institutional borders. Unlike those bereaved who tend to get caught up in their personal connections with the dead, or those veterans who cling to nationalistic views, religious functionaries have been able to turn their hearts to the casualties of the battlefield and try to engage the local people as “third parties” with an open mind.

At first glance, we might be tempted to attribute to them a true transnationalism with the universal concern of the world’s religions for salvation as a bridge. But matters are not so simple when we look more closely at individual cases.

For example, Yamada Mumon and the pilgrims of the ASPF always paid a visit to Yasukuni Shrine prior to their departure. He was also a promoter of the Society to Repay the Heroic Spirits, formerly known as the National Convention for Realizing State Support for Yasukuni Jinja. Brian Victoria cites Yamada’s address at the association’s inaugural meeting as an example of postwar Buddhist leaders who continued to provide religious justification for the war. Yamada regarded the Japanese defeat as foundational for the independence of Asian countries and saw the war as a “holy war.”<sup>33</sup> The attempt to justify the war is clear. He referred to the “Greater East Asia War” in the aforementioned article and dubbed the deceased soldiers “heroic spirits,” terms often used during the war to support Japanese military actions. But he also confessed:

I cannot forget my responsibility for encouraging soldiers by justifying that war as a holy crusade to liberate the nations of Asia.... Our aim is to deepen our friendship with them. We must go further than the Japanese government does.

And on the occasion of the erection of a war memorial by the ASPF in Saipan in 1972, he further applied the term “heroic spirits” not only to Japanese soldiers but also to the soldiers in the Allied Forces.<sup>34</sup> Thus Mumon’s attitude seems to be an odd mixture of nationalism and transnationalism, if not at times ultra-nationalism. Nevertheless, his gaze was always fixed on those people abandoned by the government. Such an attitude was shared by other religious functionaries who took part in pilgrimages to the battlefields.

33. Brian Daizen Victoria, “When God(s) and Buddhas Go to War,” in *War and State Terrorism: The United States, Japan, and the Asia-Pacific in the Long Twentieth Century*, Mark Selden and Alvin Y. So, eds. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 102–3.

34. *Chūgai Nippō* 15 January 1972.