

# ***Yemyo Imamura: Connecting the Dots***

**by Dr. Alfred Bloom, Emeritus Professor, University of Hawaii**

Honpa Hongwanji Mission will celebrate the 750<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Shinran's (1173-1262) death in 2011 and also the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Hongwanji Hawaii Betsuin. During this time it is good to recall the history in which the foundation for the Hongwanji was laid in Hawaii. The focal point for considering this history is the second Bishop Yemyo Imamura (1900-1932) who was a towering figure in the history of Buddhism in Hawaii.

Yemyo Imamura not only placed the Hongwanji in a position of leadership among the Buddhist denominations by his long tenure and activism, but as a person he possessed a broad and creative vision for Buddhism. Yet there is much that lies hidden behind him. In this essay, we want to make a few suggestions to give perspective and depth to his life.

In order to do this, we must first mention Abbot Myonyo (1850–1903) who was the leader of Hongwanji in Japan through the transition of the Meiji period and Japan's opening to the West. Abbot Myonyo also had a broad vision for Hongwanji in the developing modern society of Japan, attempting to reform the sect to adapt it to the new age. However, he notably failed because of the conservatism of other leaders of the sect. Nevertheless, turning his attention to overseas missions, he established missions in Hawaii, sending first Rev. Kagahi Soryu, later followed by Rev. Satomi Honi who became the first Bishop (Kantoku, now Socho) in Hawaii. He was soon succeeded by Rev. Yemyo Imamura, his nephew, in 1900, three years before Myonyo died. He came to Hawaii at the age of 33.

Rev. Yemyo Imamura for his part was to have been the successor of the Sentokuji in Fukui prefecture. He initially studied under the Kangaku (a high level position in Hongwanji) Rev. Ama Tokumon. This is significant because, as a priest in Kyoto, Ama was the head of Kahokan which had a liberal environment and co-mingling of students from various sects, studying general Buddhism. It was a more liberal environment. In addition, while studying at the Hongwanji Futsukyoko (Common Study School), Imamura joined the reform-minded Hanseikai and Kaigai Senyokai (Association for Overseas Propagation). He served as the editor of the publication Hanseikai Zasshi which later became the periodical Chuo Koron, which continues to today. Hanseikai means "Gathering for Reflection." It also strove for significant change in the Hongwanji to meet the demands of the new society. Later with a scholarship, Imamura studied under Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) who advocated enlightenment-education and modern education. Imamura graduated from the Keio University founded by Fukuzawa.

It is entirely possible that Abbot Myonyo supported Imamura. However, since reform had failed in Japan, perhaps Hongwanji could take a different path in a foreign land. Further, advocating reforms within a very conservative institution would be difficult in the future. Therefore, Yemyo acceded to the request of his uncle to go to Hawaii. When he became Bishop, Imamura laid the groundwork for the adaptation of Buddhism in American society. He developed an English hymn book, together with Rev. Shinkaku Hunt, a Caucasian minister, and established a Dharma school (Sunday school) system. He also promoted education, establishing schools at each temple and in Honolulu, a Japanese High School. It should be noted that despite intensive Christian evangelism, Bishop Imamura cooperated with Rev. Takie Okumura in assisting Nisei youth get an education in mainland schools.

Imamura envisioned and began English services, while establishing the English Department. In later years he initiated the Young Buddhist Association and the International Buddhist Institute which drew numbers of non-Japanese members, reaching about 68 persons. They published several issues of the Hawaii Buddhist Annual which contained essays by numerous members on Buddhist topics. Yemyo Imamura was a farsighted, progressive leader.

Through friendship with Mrs. Mary Foster, the Hongwanji had received land where the present Betsuin (a Japanese term for the head temple in a region) and the Mission school stand. Here he built a grand temple, largely in Indian style, as a symbol for the universality of Buddhism. The interior was outfitted with pews and a pulpit, combining western elements with a traditional Japanese altar. It was dedicated in 1918 with a gala celebration.

Imamura also met Buddhist leaders who passed through Hawaii such as Anagarika Dharmapala from then- Ceylon who founded the Mahabodhi society in India, and the famous Chinese scholar-monk Tai Hsu who advocated harmony between science and Buddhism. Important Japanese scholars also came to Hawaii such as Takakusu Junjiro, who founded the Musashino University. He worked with Imamura to establish a Japanese Library which later became the basis for the Asian collection at the University of Hawaii.

Another possible connection with Yemyo Imamura may be Lady Takeko Kujo, the daughter of Abbot Myonyo. She was well educated, modern minded and independent. She was known for her social work, her poetry, and her work on behalf of Buddhist women. In the English Gatha-hymn book used in Hawaii, we find two of her poems, *Seiya* (Splendor of an Evening Sky) and *Gassho no Uta* (Song of Gassho [palms together]). It is possible that Bishop Imamura knew and admired the work of Lady Kujo. In that interconnected world of Hongwanji clergy, there is strong possibility that she may have affirmed his efforts, as did her brother Abbot Ohtani Kozui.

Of great importance historically was Bishop Imamura's alliance with the sugar workers and their efforts to elevate their economic position. Implied within the Mahayana principles of compassion and interdependence is a social awareness whereby the bodhisattva shares in and uplifts the sufferings of sentient beings. It is a note sounded also in the Gatha of Weighty Vows (*Juseige*), constantly chanted in Shin temples. It reads: "Should I fail to save all in need (the poor and foolish), I would never attain Enlightenment."

In addition, Bishop Imamura opposed the effort to close the Language schools. He called attention in his writings to the hypocritical efforts of political leaders to close the schools while advocating democracy. The opponents of the language schools claimed that they were un-American and promoted the view that one could not be a good American unless one was a Christian. Despite legislation in the territorial legislature to close the school, the U.S. Supreme Court decided in favor of the schools, settling that issue.

With this broad ideal in the background, Bishop Yemyo Imamura (Bishop 1900-1932) involved himself in a variety of efforts to educate and improve the welfare of the Japanese immigrants who labored on the sugar plantations. He stated that since he came to Hawai'i, "I continued in my small way to work together with my fellow immigrants on religious, educational, social welfare and other vital services." In the face of opposition to Buddhism in the mainly Christian community, he wrote essays defending the compatibility of Buddhism with democracy (*Democracy According to the Buddhist Viewpoint*) and science. He also advocated complete equality of all people.

Bishop Imamura's commitment to the welfare of workers was first demonstrated in 1904 when he was called in to mediate a labor dispute at the Waipahu plantation, which even the Japanese consul could not resolve. As a result of this incident and the influence of religion in ending the strike, the planters donated land and assistance in building temples, probably aimed at coopting the members. However, these gestures did not prevent Bishop Imamura and the Hongwanji from supporting the workers' just demands in later disputes such as that in 1920.

In this difficult strike Bishop Imamura brought the weight of Hongwanji together with the Bishops of the other Buddhist denominations to the support of sugar strikers. The Bishops

wrote a letter to the Hawai'i Sugar Planters Association urging them to improve wages and working conditions in response to their efforts over the years to encourage workers to be faithful and productive. They supported their demand that wages be increased from 77 cents a day to \$1.25, calling attention to the ancient Buddhist Kutadanta Sutta which states that disturbances arise when people do not have sufficient income to live contentedly.

Their effort was met with disinformation and charges of "alien conspiracy" and anti-Americanism. The minister of the Central Union Church, Rev. Albert Palmer, recognized the justice of their complaint and tried to help, while Japanese Christian ministers urged their members not to participate. Despite recriminations, 3000 strikers marched in Honolulu, carrying a picture of Lincoln borrowed from the Soto Mission.

This incident, among the numerous labor struggles extending from 1886 to 1939, was particularly onerous because issues of wages, ethnicity, nationality, politics and religion complicated the labor situation and were exploited by management. The suffering of the strike was further increased by the outbreak of an influenza epidemic which took 1,088 lives. Strikers who were evicted from their plantation homes took refuge in temples.

Bishop Imamura and other Buddhist leaders were called ungrateful for the support temples had received from the growers, as well as censured for interfering in the strike and advising the workers. Denunciation of Buddhism continued, alleging that it was an effort to compete with Christianity and dominate the sugar industry.

Bishop Imamura was a social activist in the broadest sense of the term, motivated by a deep desire for the well-being of all people. In his vision and achievements which extend beyond those dealing with labor disputes, we can observe the potentiality of Buddhism not only to speak a word of consolation about human destiny in the hereafter, but also in the here and now.

In conclusion, Bishop Yemyo Imamura had a tenure of some thirty years during which he laid the religious and social foundations of the Hongwanji. His progressive spirit has continued to influence the Hongwanji, despite the legal struggles over language schools in the 1920s and the disruptions of war and cultural closure it brought to the community. Now the future opens and Hongwanji is moving to recapture that spirit through its educational institutions, the Hongwanji Mission school and the Pacific Buddhist Academy, as well as increasing participation of the clergy and members in the social welfare of the community with such efforts as Project Dana and the success of young students in gaining the recognition of Peace day in the Hawaii legislature.

## **Bibliography**

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