Cultural Tours to Japan Taken by Micronesian Islanders: 
Reflections on the Haunting Colonial Discourse on Assimilation of
“Primitive Peoples”

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This presentation aims to examine how the colonial discourse on assimilation of “primitive peoples” has been reproduced by those from colonizing societies and has been appropriated by those from colonized societies during and after the colonial administration. Cases of cultural tours to Japan taken by Micronesian Islanders, especially by Palauans, will be investigated. Cultural tours to Japan, “Naichi-kanko” in Japanese, were organized by the administration or its related organizations to make “primitive peoples” such as indigenous Taiwanese and Micronesian islanders pro-Japanese. In Micronesia, the tours were organized by the naval administration from 1915 to 1921, by the South Seas Bureau (Nan’yō-chō) from 1922 to 1936, and by the Cultural Society for the South Sea Islands from 1937 to 1941. On the one hand, colonial documents said that the participants were overwhelmed and strongly influenced by Japanese civilization and that those who returned to their villages began to imitate the way of life they had seen during the tours, through wearing clothes and shoes, cutting their hair short, and even modifying the village landscape into modern style. Such a discourse describing cultural tours as an unqualified success in promoting cultural assimilation of “primitive peoples” has been naively reproduced in academic writings by anthropologists and historians down to this day. On the other hand, careful observation of oral histories of indigenous people makes it clear that these people frequently appropriated colonial features while maintaining their own cultural and historical peculiarity. For example, Palauans said that a traditional chief from Ngiwal village constructed a straight road called “Ginzadōri” (Ginza Road) after participating in a cultural tour and ordered the villagers to live along this street. Even though this oral history resembles at first glance a successful example of assimilation of “primitive people,” attention
should be paid to the fact that Palauans themselves recognize that aligning the new village was made possible by the creativity of the traditional chief. Such historical consciousness is to recover their agency subjugated to colonialism.

Key Words: cultural assimilation, cultural tour, Palau, Ginza Road, mimesis

1. Introduction

Even after 65 years since the end of Japanese rule in Micronesia, researchers working in Palau still encounter the legacies of Japanese administration. Japanese researchers often discover familiarity in this region, particularly when they expect to find “otherness” in the field. They are sometimes surprised when encountering older Palauans who talk to them in fluent Japanese.

My research was not exceptional to this kind of reverse cultural shock. When I visited Ngiwal village, situated on the east cost of Babeldaob Island (map 1), for the first time in 2002, I was introduced to the existence of a main road in the village called “Ginzadōri.” “Ginza” (銀座) in Japanese means down town or refers to a specific district in the center of Tokyo, and “dori” (通り) means streets or roads. Most of the houses in the villages are arranged around this long, strait road, which is approximately 500 meter (photo 1). The villagers told me that the Ginza Road was constructed during the Japanese era under the command of a traditional chief (chief N), who had participated in the cultural tour, “Naichi-kanko” (内地観光) in Japanese, to the mainland of Japan. It was said that the chief revamped the composition of village to imitate the scenes he had seen during his travel to Tokyo.

As a researcher from the former suzerain state, I had complicated feelings at this encounter, including sense of guilty, since the episode seemed to illustrate the strong influence of the Japanese administration over Palauans. I thought that Palauans’ concept of the village landscape reflected the colonial experience and that Palauans had assimilated to Japanese culture. However, this point of view reifies the colonial discourse that understood indigenous people in Micronesia as “primitive people” (mikai syuzoku: 未開種族 or tomin: 島民), who were overwhelmed by the power of civilization and destined to be assimilated to the modernized
culture of administrators. It is true that the effect of cultural assimilation permeated to the daily life of Palauans, but it does not mean that they accepted it obediently or without any modification. Even though Palauans named the newly constructed road Ginza Road, they attached different meanings from the original.

Map 1: Palau Islands

Photo 1: Ginza Road in Ngiwal (taken by Shingo IITAKA, 2004)
This presentation aims to examine how the colonial discourse of assimilating “primitive peoples” has been reproduced by those from colonizing societies and has been appropriated by those from colonized societies during and after the colonial periods. First, I will discuss the representations of the Ginza Road by colonizers. Then I will illustrate Palauans’ oral histories on the traditional chief who attended the cultural tour. To assess the episode of the Ginza Road, colonial documents and colonial context will be revisited. Finally, the creativity of indigenous people who imitated the colonial others will be discussed. To begin from the conclusion, the Palauans’ narrative on the construction of Ginza Road by the traditional chief is to recover their agency that was subjugated by colonialism.

2. The Haunting Discourse on Assimilation of “Primitive People”

It was in 1915, a year after the occupation of Micronesian islands by the Japanese Navy, when the first cultural tour to the mainland of Japan was organized. The tours had been organized annually until the year 1940 to promote and instill favorable attitudes toward Japan. The tours were offered to at first among Micronesian leaders, such as the traditional chiefs and their families, and later among young Micronesians who excelled in public schools (South Sea Islands Education Association 1938). They were sponsored by governmental or semi-governmental organizations: the Japanese Navy from 1915 to 1921, the South Seas Bureau (Nan’yō-chō: 南洋庁) from 1922 to 1936, and the Cultural Society for the South Sea Islands from 1937 to 1941. The participants stayed in Japan for one or two weeks and visited major military and cultural facilities around Tokyo. As I will give the detail later, the chief who built the Ginza Road was one of the participants of the very first cultural tour.

According to the explanation by administrators, the participants from Micronesian islands were drastically changed after attending cultural tours. As early as in 1918, the reports from the Japanese Navy said that the tours were effective enough to make them obey Japanese. But it also said that it was rather funny that some Micronesians tried to imitate the Japanese manners they had seen during the tours. Micronesian participants, who had departed their islands with loincloths and long hair, came back in suits and shoes, with their hair cut shorter (South Sea Islands Education Association 1938). Such description of cultural tours as the nodal point of
social reform succeeded to the description by historians in the post-Pacific War period. Mark Peattie pointed out that cultural tours were “the most effective programs to win over the hearts and mind of Micronesians (1988: 109).”

The construction of Ginza Road is often taken as a key example of voluntary assimilation, not only in the reports from administrators but in the academic texts written by historians or anthropologists. In general, academic writings on Micronesians’ cultural tour follow the perspective provided by the administrators. For example, a famous artist and ethnographer, Hisakatsu Hijikata, who had been in Palau as a temporary employee under the South Sea Government wrote his impression when he visited Ngiwal in 1941 and stayed one night at the house of chief N.

This old man took part in the first cultural tour. He must have been a greatest young chief at that time. He had been so impressed with what he had seen in the mainland of Japan that he tried to make his village look like Ginza. He relocated the houses originally scattering on hilly country and rearranged them in line in an orderly way along the straight road newly constructed along the seashore with coconut trees. He was not satisfied with it at that time and arranged the box lamps along the both side of the street to light up, even though he stopped using them since enough oil was not provided. He is such a person with an amusing anecdote (Hijikata 1979).

American anthropologists reproduced similar kind of narratives on the Ginza Road in Ngiwal, mentioning the effect of cultural tour and drastic relocation of villagers caused by it. In 1960, Roland Force described the results of cultural tours in the same way as the Japanese administrators did. Then, he explained the construction of the Ginza Road as Hijikata did.

……These individuals returned to their homeland thoroughly impressed with the technological accomplishments of their dominators and every effort was made to emulate them: for example, after one such tour by one of the senior chiefs in Palau, he decreed that henceforth all men must wear their hair short, in keeping with the Japanese custom.

Styles of dress, cooking techniques, architectural design, and even village
organization felt the impact of Japanese culture. A village chief from Babeldaob Island returned from his visit to Japan and set forth a plan for rearranging all of the dwellings in the village in orderly rows along a main roadway. This roadway is still referred to as the Ginza (Force 1960: 73).

From reading literature, it is obvious that cultural tours have been assessed by not only administrators but also scholars, as the most effective program which made Micronesians pro-Japanese and even drove them to imitate civilization they saw in Japan. Furthermore, in this text, the chief in Ngiwal is described as a leader who induced villagers to follow the new lifestyle and accomplished the relocation. While his initiative is recognized to a certain degree, he is regarded as a country bumpkin longing for civilization. Micronesians are described as passive actors who could not resist the wave of social upheaval during the Japanese administration.

3. Palauans’ Oral Histories on the Construction of Ginza Road in Ngiwal

At first glance, Palauans also seem to reproduce this colonial discourse. Oral histories told by Palauans said that chief N’s participation in the cultural tour was the direct cause of the construction of the Ginza Road and the relocation following it. However, Palauans evaluate his accomplishment highly and situate it in a cultural context, unlike the narratives by colonizers paying attention to assimilation, civilization, or structurization. The episode of the Ginza Road is situated in a broader success story of chief N, who skillfully survived through the turbulent colonial period.

Chief N was born in 1886. His mother was from the highest-ranking kin group of Ngiwal. When he was born, he was entitled to inherit the highest chief title in the village. The chief had traveled to Yap as a member of troop hired by the German administration in his youth. Upon his return, he inherited the title of the chief, despite his young age. His kin group was facing difficulties with lack of candidates to inherit the title, since the number of population in Palau dropped sharply in the 19th century after the European contact.

As a chief, he joined the first cultural tour to the mainland of Japan. This fact is mentioned in the history textbook for Palauan students, compiled by the Ministry of Education.
of the Republic of Palau (Rechebei and McPhetres 1997). After returning from the tour to Ngiwal, chief N initiated the construction of Ginza Road and the relocation of the villagers. He was appointed as a village headman (sonchō: 村長) by the Japanese administration and collected tax to pay to the South Sea Government. He also supported the activity of the German Evangelical Church and converted to Christianity. The first Evangelical church in Palau was built in Ngiwal. Under the American administration in the later years, he did not hold any official status in the political arena, but his leadership was still vigorous and the newly elected leaders consulted him when they tried to organize the community work. Chief N died in 1969 and was buried with the tombstone with the inscription “Ngiwal mura sonchō” (オギワル村村 長), the village headman of Ngiwal, in Chinese character and Japanese Katakana.

A story from an old man born in 1917 told me that his father had engaged in the labor work for relocation during day time, while fished at night. All the adult men in full force cleared the land along the seashore, leveled out the uneven surface, and carried rocks from the reef to decollate the road. Women did not join the manual labor but prepare food and sometimes helped to level the uneven ground. This old man himself helped with the leveling when he was not in school. All the work for building the road was voluntary, “kinrō-hōshi” (勤労奉仕) in Japanese. The old man said that the newly constructed Ginza Road was much more beautiful compared to how it looks today, with flowers planted around the road and with lamps burning at night. He regarded the time as the golden age of his village.

An old woman born in 1925 did not remember the time of relocation but had vivid impression of the chief. According to her, chief N was very strict, but because of this strictness, the life in the village thrived. Besides, he was smart enough to earn income by selling copra to Japanese. She said that Ngiwal at that time had been the most beautiful because of the well arranged Ginza Road. She also admired the powerful leadership of the chief, and complained that the contemporary chiefs were misbehaving such as fighting over their titles with other candidates. From her perspective, chief N was recognized as the best leader in the history of Ngiwal.

The episode of Ginza Road from these narratives illustrates chief N’s strong leadership and the development of Ngiwal under him. The chief was described as an active leader, or even a cultural hero, who cleverly coped with colonizers and led his village to the right place. I will
go back to this point later.

4. Investigation of the Colonial Documents and Colonial Contexts

Here, I would like to revisit the colonial documents and colonial contexts within which the episode of the Ginza Road is analyzed. In many aspects, the episode of Ginza Road examined above corresponds with the colonial documents. However, closer examination of the documents from the colonial periods revealed that other factors than the cultural tour also led to the relocation of the villagers.

1) Investigation of the Colonial Documents

Chief N is listed in the Japanese Navy records as one of the 22 participants of the first cultural tour organized in 1915. There were three other participants from Palau. All four Palauans traveling to Japan were young sons or candidates of chiefs in their twenties or early thirties. Some of them had previous experiences of staying overseas as soldiers and understood either Germany or English. The participants stayed in Japan for 19 days from July 28 to Aug 15, visiting the Imperial Palace, Yasukuni Shrine, military facilities, industrial factories, museums, entertainment districts, and others. This group photo was taken at the Mitsukoshiba department in the center of Tokyo (photo 2). They were wearing men’s formals consisting of kimono and hakama, some of them holding the Japanese flags. The chief from Ngiwal is in the second line from the front and stood at the third from the left.

Even though there are no precise records of location of houses throughout Japanese rule, the land register record compiled in the 1930s shows that the relocation did happen in Ngiwal. Before the Japanese administration, there were four hamlets in Ngiwal. Initially, houses were scattered around old stone paths leading from seashore to inland (Krämer 2002) (map 2). However, in the 1930s, 39 out of 49 house lots in Ngiwal, were arranged along the Ginza Road (map 3). Some houses in the southern part of the village, where the chief did not exercise his political power in the traditional polity, were not relocated. Then by the 1960s, almost all the houses in Ngiwal seemed to be arranged along the seashore on the flat land. The relocation of houses from the hills to flatland did not occur at once but proceeded gradually over time.
Photo 2: Group photo of the participants of the first cultural tour, taken at the Mitsukoshi department store (from the archives of the National Institute for Defense Studies)

Map 2: Ngiwal in the 1900s (Krämer 2002)
2) Investigation of the Colonial Contexts

The colonial documents from this time generally seem to support the episode of the Ginza Road as a case of indigenous wanting to be more like modernized colonizers. However, there are other factors that led to the relocation of villagers. Firstly, both German and Japanese administrations prohibited warfare among villagers in Palau. When Palauans engaged in warfare prior to the colonial period, they lived on the hilly country for defense. When the warfare was banned, they did not need to live in the inconvenient locations any more. In fact, the relocation became a general phenomenon gradually proceeding all over Palau until the 1960s or 1970s. Nowadays, most of the Palauans’ houses are located on the flat area.

Secondly, Sugiura Ken’ichi, an anthropologist conducting his research in Palau in the 1930s, pointed out that Palauans started to leave traditional house lots, since the extended family (telngalek) system was dissolving after the population decreased in the 19th century and
monetary economy penetrated the island. Each nuclear family (ongalek) became the unit of daily production and consumption, after the German administration imposed the plantation of coconut trees and the taxation (Sugiura 1944). Therefore, it was becoming common for each nuclear family to live in its own household and move to seashore.

Thirdly, the public hygiene policy at that time seemed to have contributed to the relocation. In the pre-colonial era, the traditional house lots were both the place for living and the place for burial. The dead bodies of a kin group were buried next to the house where the members of the extended family were living. The burial places were called odesongel and were paved with stones. However, the Japanese administration prohibited burying the dead bodies in the house lots and commanded that the public cemetery should be constructed in each village. This policy must have shaken the foundation of social life in Palau.

Forth, the South Sea Government at that time organized many public work projects. Especially, young Palauans’ groups called seinendan (青年団) in Japanese were engaged in these colonial projects without pay. Their work was called kinrō-hōshi. These projects included the construction of roads all over Babeldaob Island, supposedly connecting all the villages by roads. In addition, the roads were alleged to have been set up well so that people could circle the island by bicycles. A popular Palauan song describes the scene of the construction of the road connecting Ngiwal and its next village, Melekeok (Tellei et. al. 1998). Even though it is not clear whether the construction of the Ginza Road was part of the colonial project or not, at least it is certain that young Palauans were often mobilized to public work organized by the Japanese administration.

5. The Creativity through the Mimesis of Colonial Others

The relocation then occurred due to various factors such as the ban of warfare, socio-economic changes, public hygiene policy, and public work programs. Even though the chief’s participation in the cultural tour could have initiated the relocation, it was not the determining factor. Rather, it is a rhetoric taken by both Japanese and Palauans to use for their own purposes. The administrators produced a caricature of “primitive people” who longed to be civilized in order to legitimize the cultural assimilation policy. The indigenous people produced a story of
the heroic chief to reclaim their agency that has been subjugated by colonialism.

From the administrators’ perspective, the story of the Ginza Road satisfied the demand of colonial policy to assimilate the indigenous people. The impact of the cultural tour was referred to as the evidence of the permeation of administrative power. The image of indigenous people imitating the Japanese was useful to prove the superiority of civilized Japanese. The indigenous people were represented as if they had suffered from “dependency complex” (Fanon 2008).

Palauans, on the other hands, convert this story to fit in with local context. They never underestimate the agency of chief N. Rather than describing the chief as one of the aping “primitive people,” Palauans give a positive meaning to his achievements in his life. The chief’s participation in the first cultural tour and the construction of Ginza Road are considered as the highlights of his career. He is regarded as a creative figure among Palauans, rather than as a passive or obedient figure as reflected in the colonial discourse, even though he reproduced what he had seen in Japan.

Here, the reflection by Homi Bhabha on the “mimic man” under the colonial situations is relevant. According to Bhabha (1994: 123-126), the colonial administration constructed the subordinate subject through the “partial reform,” which transformed indigenous people to the mimic man who, for example, were “Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in moral and in intellect.” At the same time, when the administrators are confronted with the excess of unexpected mimesis, the mimic man would appear threatening to them. Bhabha said that “the effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing.” The mimic man is “the figure of doubling,” reversing in part “the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the colonizer’s presence.”

In Palauans’ narrative of the Ginza Road, the agency of chief N is recovered, and the vertical relationship between Japanese and Palauans is reversed. Chief N is given the role as the main actor who wisely appropriate Japanese culture, thus trivializing the existence of Japanese administration. His mimesis is not intended to assimilate himself into Japanese but to secure the Palauan identity through the appropriation. Thus, the mimesis is resistant enough to spoil the colonial desire to assimilate the indigenous people. Paradoxically, Palauans’ identity is saved through imitating colonial other (Taussig 1993).
6. Conclusion

Japan had appropriated Micronesia in various ways during the administrative era. They exploited natural and human resources, claimed a large portion of lands as public land in small islands, sent huge number of Japanese immigrants to these islands for economic developments, and constructed the image of Palauans as “primitive people” to be culturally assimilated to Japan. Through these processes, the colonial subject called tomin with a derogatory connotation was constructed. At the same time, Micronesians also appropriated Japan in their own ways. Researchers, especially Japanese researchers, encounter “Japan” in Micronesia to this day. It is not Japan as it is, but “Japan” modified for indigenous needs and demands. The Micronesians’ appropriation of “Japan” has been ignored or distorted till now.

Historical revisionists in Japan sometimes insist that Palau is the country with strong pro-Japanese sentiment. They say that the similar design of national flag of Palau to the Japanese flag, older Palauans’ fluency in Japanese language, and incorporation of rich Japanese vocabulary in Palauan language are the evidence of pro-Japanese sentiment. Their logical structure of argument is similar to the discourse of administrators who were looking for the image of aping natives to prove that cultural assimilation policy was effective. Even anthropologists and historians have not been free from the haunting colonial discourse. Accepting the previous discourses without questioning, they have reproduced the image of aping natives who were overwhelmed by or longed for civilization. The agency of indigenous people is completely neglected.

It is true that Palauans’ oral histories resemble the colonial discourse on the surface, but what Palauans assume as actors in local history was not aping natives but a cultural hero whose leadership led his people throughout the turbulent era. When chief N invented the image of Ginza Road in his imagination, he tried to recover his leadership endangered by the colonial situation. Besides, it is not the past story belonging to the Japanese era. When contemporary Palauans positively tell the episode of the Ginza Road, they are still trying to recover the agency of the chief, and thus agencies of themselves. If anthropologists and historians investigate the local history in detail and with accuracy, attention should be paid to such creative imagination behind the apparently passive reactions.
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