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A SHORT HISTORY OF
JAPANESE ORTHODOX MUSIC:

ST NIKOLAI'S MISSION, CONGREGATIONAL SINGING,
AND THE BESSARABIA-BUKOVINA TRADITION

Orthodoxy was preached in Japan by a Russian hieromonk, Nikolai (Kasatkin). After the Japanese Mission was established in 1871, until Nikolai's repose in 1912, it received over forty thousand converts.¹ After Nikolai, that number decreased, because of the Russian Revolution and the Second World War, and at the moment it is estimated at 10,000. There are three dioceses, two bishops, twenty-seven priests, and eighty churches and chapels. The icons, interior and exterior designs of buildings and music have generally preserved the atmosphere of nineteenth-century Russia. At larger city churches, amateur four-part choirs sing music based on the St Petersburg Court Chant. In smaller provincial churches, we use monophonic congregational singing. In fact, monophonic chant and congregational singing have contributed much to Nikolai's missionary success and still support worship in local churches. This presentation will focus on this tradition of congregational singing in the Japanese Orthodox Church.

Nikolai was a realistic and practical person. He often said that he preached not "Russian Orthodoxy" but "Orthodoxy". He did not hesitate to utilize anything that looked useful for the mission, even if it was not common in the Russian Church. For example, he introduced short course education and congregational singing in monophony, which were not popular in Russia at that time. Where did he get these ideas?

There were two key persons who assisted Nikolai: Archimandrite Anatoly (Tihai) and his brother Iakov Dmitrievich Tihai, a church musician. Especially the latter translated many hymns into Japanese, and these formed the basis of Japanese church singing. Both Tihai brothers were born in the Bessarabia-Bukovina borderland. It was probably the Tihais who shaped the Japanese tradition of church congregational singing.

BACKGROUND

Nikolai first came to Japan in 1861, to the post of priest for the Russian Consulate chapel in Hakodate. Besides celebrating the Liturgy, he spent much time

1 Petr Shibayama Junko, Protopriest, *Daishukyō Nikolai-shi jiseki* (Tokyo: Nihon Seikyōkai Sōmukyoku, 1935), 136.

studying Japanese language, religion, culture, and classical Chinese to prepare for the future mission. This was on the advice of St Innokenty (Veniaminov) of Alaska, whom he had met in Nikolaevsk before embarking for Japan.



Fig. 1. Hieromonk Nikolai (Kasatkin)



Fig. 2. Hieromonk Anatoly (Tihai)



Fig. 3. Iakov Tihai



Fig. 4. Pavel Sawabe

Seven years later, when Christianity was still officially banned in Japan, Nikolai secretly baptized three Japanese samurai. One of them, Pavel Sawabe Takuma, who later became the first Japanese priest, began to sing together with the chapel reader, Vissarion Sartov. First the Japanese *Shu awaremeyo* replaced the Slavonic *Gospodi pomilui*, then other hymns were added. Sawabe would later recall that Russians could barely hold their laughter after hearing his strange Cherubic Hymn,² since the Japanese musical background was completely different in scale and vocal articulation. His Cherubic Hymn is now unknown, but his Psalm 103 was recorded. It is a Russian-Greek melody transformed into Japanese folk song mode, *Yo-senpo*, using a pentatonic scale.

EXAMPLE 1.1. PSALM 103, RUSSIAN-GREEK CHANT



EXAMPLE 1.2. PSALM 103, JAPANIZED MELODY BY FR PAVEL SAWABE³



Foreseeing the imminent legalization of Christianity in Japan, Nikolai made a trip to Russia from 1869 to 1871, to establish the Japanese Mission and to canvass support. At that time, he bought a lithograph printing machine for

2 *Seikyō Shinpō* (official magazine of the Orthodox Church in Japan), No. 318, 01 March 1894.

3 The original refers to Fr Pavel “Watanabe” (presumed misprint for “Sawabe”), harmonized by Dimitry Lvovsky. Kato Naoshiro, ed., *Seika-fu Tetsuya-tō* (Osaka: Osaka Seikyōkai, 1966), 9.

publication. On the return trip, in Kiev, he met Hieromonk Anatoly (Tihai). Fr Anatoly was born in Tarasoutsy, Khotin district, Bessarabia (now Tarasivtsi, Chernivtsi Oblast, Ukraine),⁴ near today's border between Moldova, Ukraine and Romania. He studied at Chisinau Seminary, became a monk at the Zograf (Bulgarian) monastery on Mount Athos and studied at the Kiev Theological Academy. He arrived in Japan at the end of 1871. In 1873 or 1874 his younger brother Iakov, a master musician who had studied at Chisinau Seminary and joined the St Petersburg Imperial Court Chapel Choir, arrived to teach church music.⁵

In 1872, Nikolai entrusted Hakodate to Anatoly and moved to Tokyo to expand the mission. Soon he opened the *Denkyō gakkō* (Catechist school) and the *Eitai gakkō* (Cantor school) in Hakodate,⁶ teaching catechism and liturgics, reading and chanting. Singing in Japanese was encouraged. According to the 1874 report, a chant book for the Liturgy had been printed, the all-night vigil translated, and Japanese converts sang at the service. As Fr Pavel Sawabe wrote, "Thanks to Iakov, real Orthodox singing began."⁷

In Tokyo, too, besides a six-year seminary course to train priests, Nikolai also started a catechist school and a cantor school, as in Hakodate. Iakov was transferred to Tokyo. The curriculum of the catechist school included catechism, Bible, Bible history and church history, reading and chanting and so on. At the cantor school, under Iakov's direction, students mainly learnt chanting, reading, liturgics and attended the classes of the catechist school.

At the same time, Nikolai printed the *Shoka-fu*⁸ (*Monophonic Chant Book*) for the Sunday vigil, Liturgy, Pascha, Book of Needs, major feasts and thanksgiving prayers (*moleben*). Young graduates were sent forth throughout Japan with this chant book in hand. They preached the Gospel, taught new members how to sing and led the services. In the nineteenth century, compared to other countries, the Japanese literacy rate was extremely high (in cities such as Edo, more than 50%), and not only the samurai upper class but also many ordinary people including women could read. Therefore, singing hymns effected direct theological study and contributed greatly to the success of the mission.

4 Василий Кудриновский, ред., *Труды бессарабского церковного историко-археологического общества, вып. IX, в память столетия Кишиневской епархии, 1813. VIII.21 – 1913* (Кишинёв: Епархиальная типография 1914), 160.

5 П. А. Лотоцкшй, *Список и краткия биографии окончивших полный курс Кишиневской Духовной Семинарии за сто лет ея существования (1813-1913 гг.)* (Кишинёв: Епархиальная типография 1913), 51.

6 The cantor school was also known as *seika gakkō*. The official Russian terms were, respectively, *katekhizatorskaia shkola* and *pevcheskaia shkola* (or *prichetnicheskoe uchilische*). See Nikolai's letter to Synod 6 October 1867 (РГИА, f. 796, o. 160., d. 944, y. 1897, 1.3-3 re).

7 *Seikyō Shinpō* (official magazine of the Orthodox Church in Japan), No. 318, 1 March 1894.

8 Sometimes called *Seika-fu*.