

## The Shinto lady and my father: The world is very small

June 7, 2016  
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We had a funeral for Kiko Iho Yao a couple of weeks ago. She was an 88-year-old woman from Japan who died in our community. Like most Japanese she followed Shinto, the traditional devotion to spiritual beings via the practice of specific rituals, including the spirits of ancestors. Her daughter and granddaughter are Catholics and members of our parish.

When Kiko was dying the family wanted some prayers for her. Shinto priests being in short supply in Calvert County Maryland, I was summoned.

Although Kiko had been in this country since the 1960s, she had forgotten most of her English after a recent stroke. So when I said prayers, her daughter, Akimi, had to translate the prayers into Japanese. Akimi's words had a gentle sound to my ears and filled everyone in the room with emotion. Kiko's granddaughter, Danielle, held her hand while we prayed. Danielle is a grad student at Catholic University.

I anointed Kiko with oil. We prayed the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm. Then I said a prayer of commendation and farewell. Kiko's veneration of her ancestors was much like our veneration of the communion of saints.

Shinto dates back to the sixth century. Shinto means the "way of the gods." It is a folk tradition more than a structured religion. It is a way of honoring the *kami* (spirits) of everything, especially our ancestors. There are more than 80,000 Shinto shrines in Japan and 85,000 Shinto priests. People often observe Shinto and are members of other religions like Christianity or Buddhism.

Kiko had an unusual history. She was born in 1929 in Saipan.

Although her family was originally from Okinawa, she had been raised on Saipan, part of the Mariana Islands in the South Pacific. Saipan is much closer to Guam than to the Japanese homeland. It is a commonwealth of the United States.

Ethnic Okinawans and Saipanese were considered "low caste" by the class-conscious Japanese aristocrats on the home islands. As such it was thought that they would have a similarly low station in the afterlife.

Saipan was one of the first islands of Japan to fall to the Allies in World War II, on July 1944 after fierce fighting. Nearly 3,000 Americans died and more than 10,000 were wounded in the battle. More than 30,000 Japanese soldiers were killed, the entire defending garrison.

But the most horrible thing about the battle for Saipan was one of Kiko's most vivid memories. She watched as more than 1,000 Japanese committed suicide. The emperor had granted the lower caste Saipanese the privilege of entering the afterlife with the same status as the highest cast samurai if they committed suicide rather than surrender to the Americans. In the last days of the battle 1,000 people went to a place now called "Suicide Cliff" and threw themselves off.

Kiko decided to live. She was 15 years old at the time. Since then, she always carried shrapnel in her back from the bombardment.

It is one of the tragic coincidences of war that I discovered that the American planes which bombarded Saipan took off from airfields in the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia. Those airfields were built and manned by the U.S. Army troops, including my father, Robert. At the time Kiko was enduring the bombing on the island, my father was helping to load the bombs a few hundred miles away. Now his son was saying prayers for her. Small world.

After the war, Kiko and her family moved back to the larger island of Okinawa. Despite disapproval from the locals, Kiko went to work as a typist for the U.S. Marines who were stationed

there after the war. She was given one week to learn how to recognize our alphabet and type in English. She did not understand what she was typing. She just copied.

Eventually she married a Chinese gentleman, a cook named Hungthe Yao. Her family was not happy. The Japanese at the time hated the Americans, but they really hated the Chinese.

Kiko and Mr. Yao (they called him Yo-yo), moved Albuquerque, N.M., where they opened a Chinese restaurant. It's odd: a Japanese lady running a Chinese restaurant in the Spanish southwest. Kiko's daughter, Akemi, married an Air Force officer, Thomas Rogers. Eventually the family moved to rural Maryland. Kiko always wanted her children to be well educated and sent Akemi to Catholic schools in Japan and the U.S. Akemi became a Catholic.

This story tells us something important.

The world is very small. We are all neighbors. No one can afford to have a sense of superiority or isolation about their culture. Even an island culture like Japan is permeated by outsiders, like the Americans. Even a continental nation like the U.S. is filled with people from every culture and background, like a Japanese Shinto lady and her Chinese husband. And even a big church like ours cannot live in religious and cultural isolation. We are called on to minister to everyone in our communities.

When Kiko died, we held a memorial prayer service for her in our parish hall (not the church). We had readings from Proverbs and Japanese poetry. We had some Japanese music, including a lovely nursery rhyme in Japanese. We showed a video of photos of her life, including her days on Saipan and Okinawa. I talked about the similar thoughts on saints shared by our two traditions. We all want to be one with the saints, whoever they are and however they got to heaven.

Thirty years ago, when I was ordained by Cardinal James Hickey, he told me that Canon Law said that I was responsible for the spiritual welfare of *everyone* in my parish, even the non-Catholics. He meant it. I always took that very seriously. I go wherever I am invited.

Two weeks after Kiko died, I was asked to attend to another non-Catholic. A 16-year-old boy in our community committed suicide, hanging himself in the garage. It convulsed the students at our local high school. That evening a police officer came to the parish to find me. More than 500 high school students and parents had gathered on the front lawn of the grieving family. The officer asked if I would come say some prayers and help the family get through the terrible evening.

Some of the boy's relatives were Catholics, and many of his classmates were too. I didn't really know the family, but I went. Together with a deputy and a coach, we led the group in prayer and song.

Somehow the world will always need priests. In every culture there is a need to pray and reach out to the divine, both transcendent and immanent. I see it as a privilege and one of the best things about being a priest.

In a shrinking world, as religions and cultures interact and sometimes react, priests can be instruments of peace beyond their church walls.