

# **Palauan Children under Japanese Rule**

**Their Oral Histories**

**Maki Mita**

**National Museum of Ethnology  
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## Good soldiers and bad soldiers

I experienced some unreasonable violence from a Japanese soldier. When we worked for the Japanese navy at the wharf of Ollei, we sometimes carried the supplies of food for soldiers to the storehouse. But until being ordered, we were not allowed to touch the supplies. One day, one of the soldiers looked at the bags still there and shouted, “Why are you not carrying them?!” Then he beat me, and two of my buddies. Because this was senseless, we reported this incident to the military police in Koror. One policeman came with us and he called the soldier who beat us. The policeman berated him, and beat him. In addition to that, he imprisoned this soldier for a week. I have heard that the military police sent an official who was responsible for that incident to Tobi (Hatohebei) Island.

During the war, some soldiers were mean to us, but some soldiers became our friends. For example, one night we went fishing and on our way back home we came across some Japanese soldiers, who took all the fish we caught. In contrast, there was a captain of the navy who was a good person. One day, he told us, “Please don’t come here to work tomorrow, but take refuge.” So we went to the shelter that night. The next day, there was an attack by the Americans. Two Japanese soldiers, Mr. Nishino and Mr. Saito, died in this attack. We buried their bodies in Ollei. Nobody ever came to take their bones to Japan.

*Interview: 6 July 2006, Koror. Conducted in Japanese. Interviewer: Maki MITA*

## Story 30

Mechas Barbara Telams

Born: 1927

From: Koror



Mechas Barbara Telams, with author  
(2006; photo by Takashi Mita)



Barbara in 1939  
(photo: Belau National Museum)

### Memories of my childhood

I was raised by a sister of my biological mother and her husband. My adoptive father was one of the leaders of *Modekngai* (Palauan religious belief). So, many people visited my house which was located by the mangrove, behind today's Yokohama restaurant. Even though there were many Japanese people living in Koror, the residents of that area were mostly Palauans.

I remember there was a Japanese family living in that area. This Japanese man was a ship builder, and he had two daughters. I often played with them. But one day, there was an accident, and one of the girls died in front of me. I cried and asked God to make her come back. It is a sad memory.

Many Palauans who lived in that area believed in *Modekngai*. But the Japanese Government banned *Modekngai*, and when I was about seven years old, my father was exiled by the Japanese to the Southwest Islands. My mother and I also went with him.

It was a strange experience, like a dream. We navigated the vast ocean in a small bonito fishing boat. When I wanted to go to the toilet, my mother held me over the side.

The Southwest Islands were very nice places. On a full-moon night, many sea turtles came to the island to lay eggs. It was very beautiful! Looking at the turtles, I felt

as if I was looking at many human heads. I collected turtle eggs one by one. My mother said to me, “You might not be able to eat such a lot of eggs.” But I said, “Even if I cannot eat them all, I want to collect them, because I like them!”

The turtle eggs are tasty. They are better raw than boiled. Turtle egg shells are wet and soft. I would cut the shell and drink the inside. It doesn’t smell bad, unlike chicken eggs.

The birds brought the seeds of fruits, and there were various trees. The Southwest Islands are truly beautiful. The houses in Sonsorol Island had long roofs. In Tobi Island, people cultivated both *kukau* (taro) and *brak* (giant taro).

## When I was a student

After coming back from the Southwest Islands, I went to Koror *Kogakko* (school for Palauan children). My Japanese name was Haruko (spring girl). My teacher said, “You are always smiling and looking happy, so I name you Haruko.”

I had a Japanese friend who performed very well in her school and was a class president. Her family name was Kakimoto. She was my neighbor, and she kindly taught me Japanese. I was proud of her when I watched her carrying a flag and marching at the head of the students to see off the soldiers. Because my house was downtown at that time, not many Palauans lived around me. So, I played with Japanese children.

I did not work in the taro-patches and gardens when I was a schoolgirl. In Koror, young girls did not cultivate at that time. It was a job for adult women. Only Veronica, my friend, helped her mother with this work. My mother was impressed with her and said, “Veronica is a very good girl. She helps her mother very well, and works in the taro-patches.” Veronica’s mother was a traditional education-minded mother, and she trained Veronica to cultivate taro and to weave baskets. I did not like to learn traditional Palauan skills. Rather, I liked to do embroidery, and knitting. I learned how to do them from my teacher, and from books.

Veronica was very smart, and also a good girl. She was the top student in the school, and I was next.

## Palauan customs in the Japanese time

It was customary to bury the body under a stone platform at the front of the house. But the Japanese told the Palauans to dig up the graves and move the bones to the cemetery, which they made. This happened only in Koror.

Because my father was one of the leaders of *Modekngei*, there were many traditional medicines in my house. They soaked stems of *siis* [sacred plant] in hot water, and used them to exorcise bad spirits. There was a room called ‘*aden* [?]’, and they kept two big candies inside. One was made from coconut syrup and *amiyaka* [plant], and the

## Story 44

Rubak Lawrence Ierago Sr.  
Born: 1929  
Father: from Merir  
Mother: from Pulo Anna



Rubak Lawrence Ierago Sr., with his wife (2007)

### My childhood

I was born in Echol hamlet on Ngerekebesang Island, and grew up in this hamlet. My father was a carpenter who had learned carpentry from the Japanese. My mother raised taro and tapioca. I learned fishing, especially throwing the net, from my father. Because my parents were from the Southwest Islands, I visited Sonsorol and Merir with my father. At that time, I met my grandparents.

After staying there for about eleven months, I came back to Ngerekebesang Island, and prepared for going to school in Koror. When I was in my hamlet, I spoke my parents' language at my house, but I also learned Palauan.

I was raised in the ethics of Southwest Islands and Palau. My parents did not beat their children, and they did not talk ill of others in front of children. I was always told to act nicely in another person's house. If I acted badly, it would be shameful for my parents. I learned to show respect to others; to lower my head when I passed between people, and to be obedient to the elders.

In my childhood, the seaplane port and dried bonito processing plants were in Ngerekebesang. Many Japanese, mostly from Okinawa, lived in Meyuns hamlet and Echang hamlet. Before the road to Echang hamlet was constructed around 1937, we had to climb the hill to go to Ngerekebesang hamlet. The causeway between Ngerekebesang Island and Koror Island was built when I was in the Southwest Islands; previously canoes were used for transportation. When my mother went to school in Koror, she swam there. When I started to go to school, there was a causeway already, so I could walk to school, and later I rode a bicycle.

### My school days

I started to go to school when I was ten years old. In the first and second grade of the *honka* (basic course), my teacher was Hattori-sensei. She was very nice! In third grade, I had Fukuoka-sensei, and in the *hoshuka* (advanced course), my teacher was Nameta-sensei. The headmaster was Kamata-sensei. I did not think that the teachers were strict.

They told us not to be late for school, to be tidily dressed, keep our hair short, don't be noisy, don't start fights, and so on.

From the second grade, I spoke only Japanese at school. Even at my house, I tried to speak Japanese with my mother and my brothers and sisters. We were sixteen brothers and sisters. Even though the teachers did not watch us at home, our friends might report to the teacher that we did not use Japanese at home. For me, Japanese was the third language.

My teachers called me *Ierago*. It is my real name which was inherited from my grandfather. Laurence is my Christian name. I was baptized when I was born. My parents were Catholics. There was a Catholic church in Merir; I myself went to the church in Ngerekebesang. Father Elias came from Koror on Sunday. He spoke Palauan.

In school, we declared, "We are the children of the emperor!", "We will be devoted [to Japan]!" and so on. I did not understand the meaning of these words very clearly. When I was in the third grade, *Nanyo-jinja* (South Seas Shrine) was built. I went there from school, and prayed. Father Elias did not say anything about that. Later, we did *Kyujyo-yohai* (a greeting to the palace) in the Catholic church in Koror. A senior naval officer came to the church, and after the Mass, we turned to the north and bowed to the emperor. The Catholic Fathers also had to do that. I understood that the emperor was not the deity, but something like a president.

After school, I worked as a *renshusei* (trainee). At first, I worked for Mr. Nomura who worked for the weather observatory, and later, I worked for a Japanese policeman. At first, the payment was 5 sen a day, but by the time I graduated from school, it had been raised to 10 sen a day. I deposited a part of my income, and I bought Japanese snacks with the rest of the money. My favorite was Japanese crackers! After working as *renshusei*, I went home and helped to do domestic chores: collecting firewood and tidying the garden, for example.

On New Years Day, we went to school to celebrate the New Year. We sang a song entitled '*Toshino Hajime*' (The Beginning of the Year) together, and we were given Japanese *mochi* (rice cake). It was very tasty! In the New Year, sometimes we could get *mochi* for free on the streets of Koror. I also liked Japanese rice very much. Sometimes, we bought rice and ate it with soy sauce. I liked soy sauce too!

At that time, we played baseball, football, *sumo* (Japanese wrestling), hide and seek, and so on. Sometimes we played with Japanese children. Of course we fought sometimes. But it is natural, we were children at the time! Occasionally, we experienced discrimination from Japanese. At that time, Palauans were scared of Japanese people. I felt that the Japanese were '*kokumin*' (nation) and different from '*tomin*' (islanders).

## Days in Mokko

After graduating from *kogakko*, I went to *Mokko Totei Yoseijyo* (Mokko carpentry

apprentice school). At first, I wanted to study in the carpentry course. But I was assigned to the mechanical engineering course. So, I told my teacher I wanted to give up studying in *Mokko*. Kamata-sensei came and asked me, "Why don't you want to study in the mechanical engineers' course?" I told him, "I want to study carpentry, because my father is a carpenter. I think that studying engineering is useless for me." He said, "Is your father a carpenter? Then, how about staying in *kogakko* for another year? Then, I will let you study in next year's carpentry course." I said, "No," Then he said, "How about studying for six months in the mechanical engineering course? And if you still want to be transferred, I will let you change to the carpentry course." So, I agreed to his plan.

The first thing I learned in the mechanical engineering course was forging. I made a short sword, a knife, and with teachers watching, I made a Japanese sword. Making a Japanese sword is very difficult. We divided the hot iron, put a wire inside, and two of us hammered the iron to make it flat. Later, I learned about being a mechanic; we dismantled a Toyota car, cleaned it, and reconstructed it. I also learned to drive a car. Six months later, Kamata-sensei came to me and asked, "Do you still want to study in the carpentry course?" I said, "No, I don't want to transfer any more." He said, "Really?" Studying mechanical engineering was very exciting. I am impressed by the fact that Kamata-sensei remembered the promise.

I lived in the dormitory when I was in *Mokko*. The students came from a variety of islands; Yap, the Marshalls, Ponape, Saipan, Truk (Chuuk), and Palau. Only my cousin and I were from Sonsorol. We stayed together, and it was great fun. When the war was coming, we prepared for the war. We learned how to carry the injured and how to treat them.

## The war

When I was in the second grade of *Mokko*, the first air raid came. It was terrible! I saw fires here and there. Fuel tanks in Malakal, vessels, everything was destroyed. Our school was also attacked. We took refuge in our shelter. Palauan students went back to their parents, but I stayed with my friends from other islands.

When the second air raid came in July, I was in a place called 'Ringyo' in Aimeliik. We, the students of mechanical engineering, worked for Hachimaru troop. Because this troop was in charge of distributing food, we were able to get some food supplies. My duty there was to collect fish which were killed with dynamite by the others. At night, we went to Ngerekebesang Island, Ngeremlengui and other places to collect fish, and we brought them to Aimeliik. This troop did not have problems getting food.

One day, we were making hoes beside the road. Because of the smoke from the iron, the Americans spotted us and attacked. I was blown into a hole. Soon after that, someone else jumped on me. After the shooting had stopped, this person told everybody to come out. I found that he was a Captain. Seeing that we were under attack, he dashed

to us. Fortunately, none of us died in this attack. People don't die so easily!

I was with this Japanese troop until the end of the war. I learned that the war was over in a message from Ngatpang headquarters. I felt relieved to hear that.

After the war was over, I was ordered to go to Angaur by the Americans. I still thought that going to Angaur was dangerous. I did not trust the Americans at that time. But when I went to Angaur, I met my parents. My family had taken refuge in Ngemelis Island, and fortunately, soon after that, they were discovered by the Americans and captured. But one of my younger brothers died from a sickness in Peleliu.

*Interview: 5 February 2007, Ngerekebesang. Conducted in Japanese. Interviewer: Maki MITA.*



## Story 51

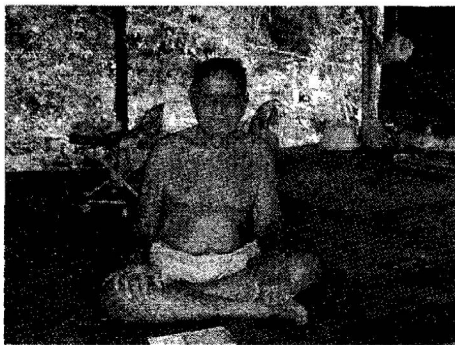
Rubak Patris Tahemaremaho

(Suketaro Yoshino)

Born: 1930–1932

Father: from Japan

Mother: from Tobi (Hatohobei)



Rubak Patris Tahemaremaho (2006)

### My parents

My biological father was Japanese. At first, he worked for *Nanyo-boeki* (South Seas Trading Company), and later his company was combined with *Nanyo-kohatsu* (South Seas Development Company). He got together with a Tobian woman, and they had a baby; that was me. But my mother was a Catholic and my father was not, so they did not get married. When I was still a baby, they separated. My Japanese father went to Koror and got married to a Japanese woman. Later, my mother married my foster father.

### Tobi (Hatohobei) in the 1930s

During the Japanese time, there was a phosphate mining business in Tobi. People from Japan, Okinawa, Yap and Palau worked there. The population of Tobians was small.

There was a Catholic church in Tobi, and the Catholic priests, including father Elias, came to Tobi from Koror once a year. I was baptized when I was very young, and after I came to Koror, I attended the Catholic church in Koror.

### My school days in Koror

I came to Koror from Tobi when I was six or seven years old. My mother and I boarded the *Kokkou-maru*, a boat which belonged to *Nanyo-boeki* (South Seas Trading Company). It was a week's journey from Tobi to Koror. We landed at Medalaii, and went to Ngerekebesang by bus. The causeway between Koror and Ngerekebesang was already constructed. It was my first experience of riding in a car. I did not understand fully what was going on. It felt as though the trees were running behind us.

At the end of Ngerekebesang, the road divided into two. One road led to the Japanese naval airfield, and the other led to Ngerekebesang hamlet. My mother and I stayed at my uncle's house in Ngerekebesang. My Japanese father visited us sometimes, and he gave me food and clothing. Not only Palauans, but people from Tobi, Sonsorol,

Merir and Pulo Anna also lived there. Even though we had different languages, we could communicate with each other. Sometimes Japanese visited Ngerekebesang to play on the beautiful beach.

I went to school on foot from my uncle's house in Ngerekebesang. Sometimes I used the bus, and it was 5 sen from Ngerekebesang to school. There was also a taxi at that time, but it was too expensive to use; it might be 1 yen for the same distance. If we were late arriving at school, our teacher would shut us out, and we had to stand outside the school for an hour.

I remember Yoshino-sensei, Okuhara-sensei... and other teachers. Yohei-sensei was Palauan, and he translated Japanese into Palauan for the first grade students. But students from Tobi could not understand Palauan, so we learned Japanese without any help. Two or three students, including me, were from Tobi, and there was one student from Pulo Anna and Merir respectively.

At lunch time, I visited my Japanese father's house and ate lunch there, since my father lived near the Koror *Kogakko*. Sometimes my father gave me money, so I bought caramels and other sweets. Sometimes we children found money on the street. If it was a big amount, we brought it to the police station, but if it was 5 sen or 10 sen, we kept it in our pockets. We did not spend a lot of money at that time because there were few things to buy. Even notebooks and pencils were supplied to us at school.

Going to the movie theater was prohibited by the teacher. I think that the films shown there were sometimes not good for children; such as showing a naked woman or something like that. But when Japanese national films regarding the war were shown, the teachers brought us to the movie theater.

When I was in school, the students helped construct *Nanyo-jinja* (South Seas Shrine). I helped with construction, but I did not go there to pray. The Christian priests did not allow me to pray to the stone in *Nanyo-jinja*. If they found that I had been there, they would have punished me by refusing Holy Communion.

## War experiences in Tobi

After graduating from school, I went back to Tobi. My Japanese father wanted to take me to New Guinea with him and make me go to school. My Japanese father did not have a child with his Japanese wife, and he wanted to raise me as his child. But my mother did not agree to this request. World War II had already started by that time, so my mother was scared to let me go to New Guinea. Even after going to New Guinea, my father visited Tobi and tried to persuade my mother. I don't know if he died in New Guinea or if he survived.

I was in Tobi when the war came. It was a terrible experience. The British<sup>19)</sup> dropped bombs on the plants and boats, and they shot at running people. We thought that we would die, because everything was destroyed by bombs! The British raided in

the morning, but it was quiet in the afternoon. We went out to sea to fish, and cooked the catch inside the caves. We were scared during the bombing, and at the same time, we were angry at the Japanese, because the Japanese brought the war to Tobi!

During the war there were many Japanese in Tobi, but many of them died at that time. They did not have enough food, so they even ate their own excrement! Unlike Tobians, the Japanese did not go out fishing because they were scared of sharks. We shared our food with Japanese servicemen, but it was not enough. I felt very sorry for them.

I have a Japanese friend named Takeo Tomono. He came to Tobi as a medical officer during the war, and my mother fed him even when he was sick. He greatly appreciated my mother's help, and he came back to Palau in 1976 and looked for her. We became friends at that time.

*Interview: 18 August 2006, Koror. Conducted in Japanese and English. Interviewer: Maki MITA.*

- 9) Two Palauan troops were sent to New Guinea. The first unit recruited in 1942 was *Chosa-tai*, and the second unit formed in 1943 was named *Teishin-tai* (Higuchi 2003). *Kirikomi-tai* units were formed for operations within Palau. From this, it would seem that Toshio Kyota would have been a member of *Teishin-tai*.
- 10) In 1933 the South Seas Development Company started to mine phosphate in Peleliu. (Nanyo Kohatsu Kabushikigaisha 1941)
- 11) Most informants who mentioned this person remembered his name as 'Elmano', but Hezel's book (Hezel 1991) has him as 'Emilio'.
- 12) Rubak Ubal Tellei wrote of his experiences and those of other Palauans who went to work with the Japanese military in "Remembering the Pacific War" (White 1991).
- 13) Later, schools for Japanese children were referred to as *kokumin-gakko*.
- 14) Hearing that, Belenges said, "It sounded like 'prrrrrrrrrrrr...'. Then, we all jumped into the holes which we had dug."
- 15) Mr. and Mrs. Daido's son, Mr. Isao Daido, visited Mechas Barbara in 2006 with his older brother Mr. Yutaka Daido. Mr. Isao Daido was cared for by Mechas Barbara when he was a baby.
- 16) Some informants mentioned a Namita-sensei, and others a Nameta-sensei. It is possible that they were the same person.
- 17) Adoption was common in Palau and may account for this age gap.
- 18) It is a common usage in Palau for grandparents to call children 'son' or 'daughter', and to be called 'Mom' or 'Dad'.
- 19) The informant said that 'the British' attacked Tobi. According to Dr. Black, an American anthropologist, many Tobians testified that the British attacked Tobi soon after the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941 (Peter Black in conversation with the author).

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