

# ALOHA AND MAHALO, PAPAALOA HONGWANJI

## Temple Served Big Island's Small Plantation Camps for 118 Years

*Editor's Note: The following article is from the May 2022 Ka Leo Kāhea, which is Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii's statewide newsletter. Originally, the article appeared April 15 in The Hawaii Herald by Gregg Kakesako.*

**By Gregg K. Kakesako**

Special to The Hawai'i Herald

It was a very special, but perhaps bittersweet occasion for 20 solemn members of the Hāmākua Coast's Papaaloa Hongwanji Mission when Rev. Shinji Kawagoe struck its century-old bronze bell with a wooden mallet for the last time in January, signaling the end of an institution, which for the past 118 years served the Big Island's small plantation camps.

### About Papaaloa Hongwanji Mission

Beginning in 1868, when 146 Japanese men, five women and two teenaged boys left Yokohama on the sailing vessel Scioto to work the cane fields in Hawai'i, the number of Japanese immigrants rose to more than 220,000 by 1924, according to the 1971 book "History of the Japanese in Hawaii." Their places of worship also grew.

By the start of World War II, there were more than 180 Buddhist churches and Shintō shrines on O'ahu and the neighbor islands and more than 100 priests.

Like many Buddhist temples, Papaaloa Hongwanji was more than a place of worship. It also was a community center for the immigrant families who lived in the small plantation villages north of Hilo.

However, by Jan. 19, 2022, the day of its final service, its membership had dwindled to 30 where there had once been more than 100 congregants. It is estimated that about 700 people now live in Pāpa'aloa.



The hybrid final service for Papaaloa Hongwanji was conducted in-person and online.

Papaaloa Hongwanji is located on a quarter-acre of land owned by Kamehameha Schools just off Hawai'i Belt Road fronting the old Māmalahoa Highway about 18 miles north of Hilo. The temple hall, with its 10 rows of pews, was erected near the Pāpa'aloa sugar mill, which later was absorbed by the Laupāhoehoe sugar mill. The property slopes eastward toward the Pacific Ocean, allowing the congregation to build a social hall beneath the

temple.

### Memories of Papaaloa Hongwanji

Dr. Warren Tamamoto, who grew up in Pāpa'aloa until he left in 1969 to attend undergraduate and medical classes at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, recalls playing with his siblings and friends in the grassy area behind the church, which ended at a cliff that dropped into the Pacific Ocean.

His mother, Itsue Tamamoto who will celebrate her 99th

birthday on May 4, used to own the town's barber shop located next to a park, gym, tennis courts, theater, soda fountain and store.

"The distance would have been less than a mile from my house to the temple," Tamamoto said. "So, we would often walk down there."

Tamamoto, who has served as the president of Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii in Honolulu for the past two years, said the plantation's machine shop was on the southside of the church with the cliff on the east end and a gulch on the west side.

Rose Broughton, who was a member of Papaaloo Hongwanji for nearly three decades, recalled that the tiny wooden temple survived tsunamis, wars, the decline and closure of sugar plantations and two global pandemics.

The church was built to serve the cane workers of Pāpa'āloa and the half-dozen sugar mills along the coast and was the site of countless wedding, funeral and memorial services along with jūdō, kendō and Japanese-language classes.

#### **Honohina Hongwanji Mission – Papaaloo Members' New Home**

Broughton, the temple's secretary, said the congregation hoped to hold its final service in December ending Papaaloo's 118-year legacy, but was unable to because of conflicts with Bishop Rev. Eric Matsumoto's schedule. The church celebrated its centennial in April 2003, she said.

Pāpa'āloa is part of the North Hilo district that is approximately 355 square miles and includes the residential areas of Ninole, Kapehu, Laupāhoehoe, Waipunalei, and O'ōkala.

"Papaaloo Hongwanji has remained a landmark and gathering place throughout the

years," Broughton added. "It has been the spiritual center for many people from O'ōkala, Waipunalei, Laupāhoehoe, Pāpa'āloa, Kapehu and Kaia'akea."

Rev. Daido Baba, executive to Bishop Eric Matsumoto of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, explained that the current 20 members of Papaaloo will join the congregation at Honohina Hongwanji in Ninole, one of four temples in the northern area of the Big Island.

Rev. Shinji Kawagoe, resident minister of Papaikou Hongwanji, had been conducting services at Pāpa'āloa since 2014. Papaaloo Hongwanji had a temple service once a month, usually held on every first Wednesday.

Honohina-Papa'āloa Hongwanji's first service was held on Feb. 19 at the Honohina graveyard because of the pandemic and to maintain social distancing, Kawagoe said. The Honohina-Papa'āloa congregations may have monthly service on Saturdays, Kawagoe added.



Top left: Warren Tamamoto plays the harmonica, recollecting the Sunday School Harmonica Band days. Lower left: Harold Uyeno (Honohina Hongwanji, President) who was the master of ceremonies for the final service presents a certificate of appreciation to Papaaloo Hongwanji President Jerry Broughton and his wife, temple secretary Rose Broughton. Right: To ensure safety and maintain social distancing, Honohina-Papaaloo Hongwanji conducted its first service at Honohina Hongwanji Cemetery.

#### **The Family of Honpa Hongwanji Temples in Hawai'i**

Besides overseeing operations and services at Papaaloo Hon-gwanji, Kawagoe is responsible for three other temples in the area — Honomu, Honohina and Papaikou Hongwanji missions — serving about 300 families.

The oldest son of a family of ministers, Kawagoe, came to Hawai'i in 2013 and was first assigned to Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin for 10 months.

Baba said the last church to close was the Kahuku Hongwanji in 2013. In 1998 on Kaua'i, Waimea Hongwanji, Koloa Hongwanji and Hanapepe Hongwanji were consolidated and a new West Kauai Hongwanji Mission was established. West Kauai Hongwanji Mission is using the old Hanapēpē temple facilities.

There are now 13 churches on the Big Island, 11 on O'ahu, four on Maui, three on Kaua'i and one on Lāna'i, Baba said. Statewide, his church now has approximately 4,000 members. The first





Buddhist priests from the Honpa Hongwanji sect, in the south-western part of Japan where most of Hawai'i's Issei emigrated from, came to the islands in 1897.

Broughton recalled that when she and her husband, Jerry, joined the church in 1996, there were "maybe 80 to 100 members and many more friends of the church. There were always large gatherings like Obon and New Year's services where the downstairs dining hall would be filled with overflow to the covered lanai. (They) have pictures taken in the 1950s with at least 100 members and children."

She estimated that the congregation had as many as 150 members, but the numbers have steadily been declining. In 2021, the church lost seven members, and all were in their 90s, she said, but none were COVID-19-related deaths.

Amy Marutani Kubota, 96, said her father, Itsukichi Marutani, was originally from Pāpa'aloa but moved to Hilo after finishing the eighth-grade because he didn't want to work in the family business, Marutani Store.

"Once a month, he would drive our family to Pāpa'aloa to visit his parents, my grandparents," Kubota said. "We stayed overnight since it was a long drive home on the old Māmalahoa Highway, and on Sunday morning, my grandmother, a devout Buddhist, would take us kids to the temple for service."

The church's keyboard, which was used during its last service, was donated in memory of her parents, Itsukichi and Shika Marutani.

"One of my fond memories of Papaaloe Hongwanji in the late '20s and early '30s, was participating in the 'chigo' (children's) parade," Kubota said. "We were splendidly outfitted in the formal



Shown, Mrs. Amy Kubota and Mrs. Itsue Tamamoto

chigo hakama (formal pleated trousers), slippers and headdress. We marched from our Marutani family store, down the street to the temple. My sister Alice's headdress kept slipping forward causing her to cry while our mother kept repositioning it as they marched in the parade."

Amy's husband, Sadaichi Kubota, was born in 1921 in 'Amauulu Camp near Hilo. He served as a technical sergeant with 3rd Battalion's I Company in the 442nd Regimental Combat team and received a battlefield commission in 1944 to second lieutenant.

His awards included the Silver Star, Bronze Star and Purple Heart medals. Sadaichi Kubota was promoted to captain in 1947 and served in the Military Intelligence Service. He died in 2004.

### **History of Papaaloe Hongwanji Mission**

The idea for Papaaloe Hongwanji was initiated in 1902 by Bishop Rev. Yemyo Imamura, who had established congregations on all major sugar plantations, according to a history of the church compiled by Broughton.

Rev. Imamura wanted it built at Laupāhoehoe Point, but because

there was already a Jodo mission there, it was moved to its present location. The cornerstone for the new church was laid in April 1902 and a dedication ceremony was held in the fall, according to chronology of the church's history. In 1903, Rev. Joei Abe arrived as the church's first minister.

Under Rev. Imamura's leadership, the number of temples on the Big Island grew from six in 1898 to 14 in 1905 as every plantation camp had one of their own, Broughton said.

Papaaloe Hongwanji's Fujinkai (Buddhist Women's Association) was organized in 1906 by Rev. Tessho Toda, followed by its first Sunday School in 1915 by Rev. Ryukei Uehara. Rev. Hakuai Oda started a kendo and jūdō club in 1924.

World War II shuttered Papaaloe Hongwanji from 1942 through 1945 when its minister, Rev. Kakusho Izumi, was arrested and sent to an incarceration camp in Texas during the roundup of 2,270 local Japanese American leaders, ministers, teachers, principals, businessmen, journalists and other prominent Issei citizens considered security risks after the attack by the Japanese Imperial Navy on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor.

The Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii records show that 51 Buddhist priests were incarcerated. Tomo Sakado, who lived in the minister's quarters, maintained the temple even though it was closed under martial law until Rev. Izumi returned in 1945 and reorganized its various clubs, renovated the temple, and built its columbarium.

A Japanese language school was begun by the church in 1952, with major renovations to its kitchen and refurbishing of its altar in 1979. More renovations to the temple were done between 1983-1994, including building a 508-square-foot covered entry to the church to allow people to congregate and be protected from the weather. Other improvements included building a conference room, office, and bathrooms, and dismantling the minister's living quarters, which was damaged by termites.

In 1996, Pāpa'aloa's 16th minister, Rev. Kevin Kuniyuki, arrived to preside over the four temples of Papaikou Hongwanji, Honomu Hongwanji, Honohina Hongwanji and Papaaloa Hongwanji and created the Four Temple Hongwanji Council, developing a strong bond among the churches.

In 2004, soil from three abandoned Japanese cemeteries at Kapehu, Pāpa'aloa and 'O'ōkala was relocated to the grounds of Papaaloa Hongwanji and a memorial stone was placed in front of the church to commemorate those interred.

Papaaloa Hongwanji did not own the temple building and adjoining conference hall and did not own the surrounding land. The landowner is Kamehameha Schools, which is determining future uses for the

land and assets, an official said.

The 13,500-square-foot parcel and building was part of properties in the Hāmākua Sugar Co. bankruptcy proceedings. Hāmākua Sugar Co., then the state's second largest sugar plantation with more than 800 employees, went out of business in 1992, facing more than \$1 million in debts.

In filing for bankruptcy protection, the company blamed lack of capital, low sugar production and inability to reach agreement with union employees on wage concessions.

About 30,500 acres of its plantation was bought by Bishop Estate (now known as Kamehameha Schools) for \$21 million in 1994.

In 1900, there were 59 sugar plantations in Hawai'i, 26 in 1959 when Hawai'i became a state, dropping down to five in 1997. Hawai'i's last sugar mill, Hawaiian Commercial and Sugar Company in Pu'unēnē on Maui, closed in 2016.

On April 1, 1946, a magnitude 8.1 earthquake near the Aleutian Islands unleashed the most devastating tsunami in island history that killed 160 people, including 24 Laupāhoehoe School students and teachers, and wiped out its buildings.

One of the students was 14-year-old Mitsuji Tamamoto, Warren Tamamoto's uncle. The congregation still plans to hold its annual service at Laupāhoehoe Point Beach Park on the peninsula that juts out 1,500 feet from the coastline to honor the victims of the 1946 tsunami at a memorial erected by Izumi. **'Everything Changes'**

Rev. Baba said Papaaloa's altar and other church fixtures will be distributed to other temples. Its 100-pound bronze bell, which was cast in Japan in 1919, will



Rev. Kawagoe strikes the century-old temple bell calling the start of the final service.

find a new home at Honohina Hongwanji. The ornate bell went missing for a week in October 2015 and was found in a semi-secluded spot between Pāpa'ikou and Pepe'eko. The culprits were never found.

"Throughout the years," Broughton said, "the Hongwanji has slowly melded and found itself immersed in western culture and changing needs from its membership. As we now try and look ahead, we wonder what will be the future of our churches. Is it only a remnant of the past, or will we find a way to become a vital part of our changing world?"

In his remarks at the January farewell service, Tamamoto, 70, concluded:

"We are at the end, but we are also at the beginning. The Buddha said, 'Everything changes, nothing remains without change.' The only constant things are change, the Dharma and the Buddha's compassion for each one of us."







Following the final service, members and friends gather out on the temple lanai, reflecting on the temple's history. Below, a group photo taken in front of the temple before Papaaloe Hongwanji closed its doors after nurturing the community for 118 years.



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