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by Tanaka Nobumasa

The singing of Japan's national anthem Kimigayo, an ode to the emperor, and the flying of the Hinomaru flag, both evocative of Japan's colonial era, have become flashpoints of conflict in recent years as the Japanese government presses to reincorporate these controversial emblems in a variety of public events. Nowhere has the conflict been more intense than in the public schools. The struggle by music teacher Sato Miwako to preserve her conscience in the wake of a 1999 national flag and national anthem law offers insight into issues of colonialism, war, and historical memory as well as contemporary nationalism. It also addresses both ethical and constitutional issues. This article appeared in Sekai, November 2003, pp. 38-46. Tanaka Nobumasa is a Japanese journalist.

The underground passage (known as the "Abyss") beneath the central stage in the gymnasium is so narrow people can barely pass by one another, and they often line up twelve or thirteen deep. Soon after playing the opening piece, Sato Miwako (b. 1957) switched positions with a newly hired teacher and found herself walking through the underpass. When she had walked about halfway through the passageway, she heard "Kimigayo" (the national anthem praising the emperor and emblematic of wartime nationalism) with piano accompaniment echoing from the front stage above, and the voices of adults singing reached her ears. Sato lost all strength and was overcome by a sense of utter helplessness. Unable to walk another step, she crouched and sat down amid the darkness. "Kimigayo" lasted about forty seconds.

"I was immobilized. 'Kimigayo' played on the piano has been increasingly incorporated into school life like this. Why, you might ask, wouldn't I play the national anthem?"

A large Japanese flag (Hinomaru) hanging in front of the stage came into her mind. Prior to April 6, 2002 the entrance ceremony held in the gymnasium of Number Two Elementary School of Kunitachi City had left an unbearable taste in the mouth of Sato, a music teacher who had always declined to provide piano accompaniment to "Kimigayo."

In April 1999 Sato transferred to the school from another elementary school in Kokubunji City within the greater Tokyo area. In the years since her initial hiring in April 1977, she had become a veteran teacher guiding children in the appreciation of music. In August 1999 a national flag and national anthem law was enacted, and thereafter the pressure and attacks on public schools which did not fully implement this new law became fierce. The promise in the Japanese Diet not to make it compulsory was ignored, and the Japanese constitution, which ensured freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, was effectively subordinated to the 'Guiding Principles in Education.' There emerged here and there on the horizon a situation resembling "legal insubordination."

Kunitachi City became engulfed in this torrent and, in no time at all, the Hinomaru and "Kimigayo" were brought to all eleven of its elementary schools. In the process, human rights were smashed.

"My feeling was that the Hinomaru and 'Kimigayo' had been made mandatory which was unthinkable. Postwar Japan was supposed to be a country of laws. This was unbelievable." And, yet, the realization of the "impossible" advanced inexorably. For Sato, "it was as if my life was being crushed."

In this gloomy atmosphere, two days later on April 8, Sato went to attend the entrance ceremony at Aoyama Gakuin University where her eldest son had passed the entrance examination. The ceremony was carried out like a missionary school's prayer service beginning with instrumental organ music and the singing of hymns. There was no Hinomaru and no "Kimigayo." The daughter of a Christian pastor, born and raised in the church, Sato had undergone baptism during middle school; whenever "Kimigayo" was played at the entrance or graduation ceremonies for the elementary or middle schools of her two children, they always took their seats. Making "Kimigayo" mandatory was intolerable; as a Christian, it marked a "negation of her life," a "denial of her individuality."

At her son's entrance ceremony, Sato heard words that sank deeply into her heart. This occurred during a prayer by Pastor Suzuki Yugo of the Religion Department and brought Sato a ray of hope.

"I am not one who fears corcion from powers that I can see, but I do fear that power which I cannot see." This was Pastor Suzuki's general point.

"Inasmuch as I was opposed to the compulsory enforcement of the Hinomaru and 'Kimigayo,' I was very fearful of sanctions. I have been equally fearful that an order will be issued for there to be piano accompaniment with 'Kimigayo.' In other words, I fear that I myself will be crushed under foot."

Sato chose to understand the words of Pastor Suzuki as saying: There is nothing to fear when the power of the state is a creation of men. "Perhaps it was self-conceit, but his words gave me extraordinary courage. I, too, began to feel as though I could go on living." Sato's delicate voice became as thin as a single thread.

For the next three years, Sato adamantly refused to bow to pressure from her principal to play the piano accompaniment to "Kimigayo." For this reason, she was on occasion criticized by name by some in the media and by individuals who took the state as supreme and ridiculed her

stance of conscience. Nonetheless, Sato remained firm -- unimaginably so when you actually see her delicate frame and serene voice -- that she "would not play 'Kimigayo.'" In the summer of 2003, she came upon something which made her even more resolved. This was a transcript of the testimony of the fourth son of Pastor Su Ki-ch'ol who had died in prison after refusing to pray at a Shinto shrine during Korea's colonial era.

Arrested by the police in P'yongyang, Pastor Su was "tortured by being beaten with a bamboo sword" in front of his wife, son, and mother. After being beaten severely, red water -- water into which fine red pepper had been dissolved -- was poured into his nose and mouth. The police sat on the pastor's stomach, forcing a thick red water to spout up from his mouth, nose, and eyes. Then they proceeded to torture his wife. Compelled to watch the torture of both of his parents, his son lost his ability to speak. Until the bitter end, Pastor Su refused to pray at a Shinto shrine, and after seven and one-half years in prison he died in April 1944.

When she read this document, Sato thought of a pianist by the name of Ch'oe Son-ae, a Korean in Japan who had fought and refused compulsory fingerprinting for twenty years, whom she had come to know through the Hinomaru and "Kimigayo" issue. "At that time, Sato came to the realization that the root of the mandatory prayers at Shinto shrines and of compulsory flying the Hinomaru and playing "Kimigayo" were identical. Thus, her resolve not to play the latter was strengthened. "I will never play 'Kimigayo' -- under no circumstances."

"Violation of the Obligation to Persevere in Work" with a Single Ribbon

On August 23, 2000, Sato Miwako was summoned before the Kunitachi Board of Education and received a written admonition.

At the graduation ceremony on March 24, Sato had "violated the obligation to persevere in her work" which constituted item 35 in the law governing local public servants by virtue of "doing such things as wearing a ribbon on one's clothing expressing opposition to" the hoisting of the Hinomaru. Six teachers at Number Two Elementary School and two teachers at Number Five Elementary School were similarly reprimanded. In all some seventeen teachers including Sato were punished in 2003. Cases in which teachers were punished for the wearing of a ribbon have clearly been exceptional.

At a faculty meeting that began at 2:00 p.m. on March 22, 2000, two days before the graduation ceremony, the school principal proposed "raising the flag on the [school's] roof" in connection with the national flag and national anthem at the graduation ceremony; this, he had been informed by the city school board, constituted "appropriate enforcement" of the regulations. However, inasmuch as he offered his idea close to the meeting's end, the matter was tabled until the staff meeting the following day, the 23rd.

At that meeting, the principal stated that the flag would be raised on the roof at 7:30 a.m. the following morning. Sato and others felt they had no choice but to question why and for whom this was being done. "If you insist that we raise the flag, you must at least explain things to the graduating students tomorrow morning." To the demands of Sato and her colleagues, the principal replied in effect: "It will be a chance for the students to learn just what the Hinomaru is." By 11:30 that evening, no conclusion had been reached.

At 7:00 on the morning of the graduation ceremony, a provisional staff meeting convened with growing numbers of people standing on a narrow public street outside the eastern gate of Number Two Elementary School. It was late in March, and spring was in the air, although the cherry blossoms in the school courtyard had yet to bloom. In addition, it was a chilly, melancholy morning with a light rain falling. Entering the school, the principal locked the teachers out. A few moments later, the Hinomaru rose over the third floor roof. It was now around 8:00 a.m., as Sato remembers it. In fact, this very day was the elementary school graduation ceremony for Sato's eldest daughter. From the previous day, the young girl had been agonizing over whether or not to take her seat during the playing of "Kimigayo" which had become part of the ceremony. However, because of the problem of the school where Sato herself was teaching, she could not fully attend to her daughter's worries. All she could do was leave behind a letter in which she wrote: "Have the self-confidence to reach your own conclusion. It's best that you decide for yourself."

From about 9:00 the graduating pupils began entering the school. The children saw the raised Hinomaru and, Sato sensed, most of them reacted with surprise. A certain number of graduating students came to inquire. "Sensei," one asked, "does the raising of the Hinomaru mean that they'll sing 'Kimigayo,' too?" It seems that they thought that the raising of the Hinomaru without prior explanation meant that "Kimigayo" would also be coming. Sato suddenly realized that the children understood the Hinomaru and "Kimigayo" as a set piece. "Go back to your classrooms," she explained to them. "There's not going to be any 'Kimigayo.' I wanted to convey to them the message that they can't make you do it. I attached a ribbon to my clothing while praying for peace."

To the graduation ceremony Sato wore a small, pale blue, hand-made ribbon with a white-as-snow corsage attached to the breast of her black one-piece dress. This year it was not a "peace ribbon" which a group of townspeople made to express their opposition to the compulsory recognition of the Hinomaru and "Kimigayo," but simply Sato's own "peace ribbon." After the ceremony, many of the graduates gathered in the schoolyard from about noon and questioned the principal. Why, they wished to know, was the Hinomaru which had not been raised heretofore raised this year. The principal replied that it was so written in the "Guiding Principles in Education," that its absence in the past was out of the ordinary, adding that there are some things that one simply cannot explain to children. The students, however, were not persuaded.

They said that they wished the Hinomaru to be lowered. When it was brought down, they asked for an apology. The principal apologized to them. Sato stood to the side listening to the exchange between the graduating pupils and the principal which continued until after 2:00 p.m. The principal retained suspicions that the students had been incited by someone. "There's no reason to believe," he is said to have averred, "that the pupils could have asked such questions on their own."

They continued to pelt the principal with questions. Did the principal not know that the "Convention on the Rights of the Child" contains such items as "freedom of the expression of views" (item 12), "freedom of information" (13), and "freedom of thought, conscience, and religion" (14)?

Details of the exchange between the students and the principal at this time appeared in the April 5 edition of the Sankei shinbun newspaper under the headline: "30 graduating students bring the national flag down and demand the principal prostrate himself." This report diverged widely from the facts of the case which Sato had witnessed with her own eyes. From that day forward, though, Number Two Elementary School was subjected to ferocious protests and attacks. At a meeting of the teaching staff on the morning of the fifth, the principal said: "Please, no ribbons at the entrance ceremony tomorrow."

For the life of her, Sato could not comprehend how the ribbon which she affixed with thoughts of peace and in opposition to the compulsory Hinomaru and "Kimiyago" constituted a violation of the rule obliging her to persevere in work. On the day of the graduation, Sato was leading the fifth-graders' ensemble; and when they were singing the school song in unison, she accompanied the students on piano, playing

"Tomorrow" which the fifth-graders sang as the graduating pupils left the stage. Indeed, she was "persevering" in the thought that these children would have a rosy future. What in fact was a "spiritual" violation of the obligation to persevere in work? What was a person thinking about with a single, small ribbon on which nothing was written? The spying of public authority into her inner thoughts and then judging or conjecturing what they were were things absolutely not to be done in a democratic society. However, Sato's inner thoughts were spied upon, inferred, and sanctioned. This would have been appropriate in the repressive prewar and wartime eras under the Law of Public Order.

"I want many people to know that I was punished for wearing a little ribbon as a token of opposition to the compulsory laws. If I just accept this unfair punishment, it will plant a poisoned root in the soil of freedom of thought and conscience." After being perplexed for awhile, Sato decided that she would seek to secure a place for free expression by bringing suit demanding state compensation. In order to convey this intention, on October 15, 2003 she sent by certified mail a "call notice" to Kunitachi municipality, and she added a document describing her "thoughts," roughly 10,000 characters in length. In it she mentioned the Korean pastors who had refused to worship at Shinto shrines and paid for it with their lives.

Amid Confusion and Unease

Sato's father, Takeuchi Yoshio, was drafted in November 1943 while studying at Tokyo Theological College and was taken prisoner by the British army in Burma. He was repatriated after the conclusion of the war in 1946. He was a minister, as was her mother's father, younger brother, and younger sister. Sato often heard her father tell stories of the war and talk about peace. In particular, his Christmas sermon the year before he retired from the ministry left a lasting impression.

This took place on December 23, 1995, the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end, at Tokorozawa Church; the date corresponded to the birthday of the present emperor. "The greatest thing, I believe, about the end of the war is that the emperor ceased to be a deity," she said. "Before and during the war, it was absolutely forbidden for Christians to worship on the emperor's birthday.... There were pastors who were imprisoned for simply saying that Christ was a deity." While listening that day to her father's sermon, Sato for the first time became aware of the fact that Christian belief and the emperor system were incompatible, and she thus understood the linkage between the war and the Japanese emperor system. "Was I alone the problem standing in the way of things? Was I acting selfishly? I wanted to say that it was for religious reasons, but was it appropriate to bring that to the fore? It was as if a voice were whispering in my ear: It'd be best if you played."

In December of 2000, the principal proposed that "there be piano accompaniment to the national anthem performed by the music department" at the March 2001 graduation ceremony. There had been no forceful opposition voiced to it at the time of the 1999 graduation ceremony or the following year's entrance ceremony. Sato decided that "for religious reasons she absolutely could not perform" "Kimigayo," celebrating as it did an era in which the emperor had been revered as a deity. Musically, "Kimigayo" was quite elegant by itself, and a piano accompaniment did not, she attested, go well with it. However, she continued to worry if it was appropriate to state publicly that her reasons were religious as the major foundation for her being "absolutely incapable of performing" it. If she were not to actually say this, she at least wanted it understood. Preserving the freedoms of thought, conscience, and religion of the children who did not wish to sing it and who did not wish to stand up when it was played was, she believed, the duty of a public school teacher. At the inaugural meeting of "the hotline opposed to compulsory Hinomaru and 'Kimigayo,'" founded in the city on February 17, Sato expressed her disconcerting thoughts. Sawafuji Toichiro, a lawyer who heard her, advised as follows: "Ms. Sato, it is certainly best to explain the religious circumstances pertaining here. By expressing yourself in this manner, if you are confronted by a bureaucratic order or punishment, it will constitute a major issue and will provide an excellent example of freedom of conscience."

At a faculty meeting on February 21, Sato stated that her unwillingness to play the piano in this case was not simply a musical issue: "I would like to explain my personal reasons" as well. The principal then ruled: "There will be no personal reasons enunciated!" Two days later on February 23, she read aloud in the principal's office a statement describing the reasons why she could not play "Kimigayo" and then passed the text to him. The Christian faith and "Kimigayo" are incompatible; "I bear a strong resistance to performing" it, she explained, "for religious reasons, and circumstances were such that performing clearly intruded on my freedoms of conscience and religion."

Sato's declaration of her unwillingness to play was delivered to the "Network of Christian teachers, pupils, and citizens opposed to the mandatory Hinomaru and 'Kimigayo'" which was formed in December 1999. Christians throughout the country responded to this Network's call, and in all some forty or fifty postcards and faxes declaring that she should not be compelled to perform were sent to the principal. "The principal got very angry at this, but I realized that the problem I was carrying inside me was not mine alone. At the point of total frustration, I was thus emboldened."

For the graduation ceremony in March of 2001 and the entrance ceremony in April, the piano accompaniment was handled by an audio tape. But at a committee meeting in October 2001 to plan for the next graduation ceremony, the principal said: "This year they will be led in their singing, and we shall have piano accompaniment at the ceremony itself." Sato was dragged back into the gloomy mood of the previous year.

At the end of October, she found herself depressed and in something of a daze. It was the evening of November 3.

"Did I have to go through all these emotions every year? I resisted with all my strength, but as long as I had no perspective on the changing circumstances, could I continue the fight for long? I had to be ready for the possibility that at some point I would have to perform 'Kimigayo.' But this was like killing my very spirit. I love music and the children, but the choice before me was to resign."

Later in December of that year, the principal unexpectedly summoned Sato to discuss a "transfer" in class level responsibilities. "If I wished to continue teaching in the special music program, he was essentially saying, I would have to perform 'Kimigayo.'" This actually served to give Sato renewed "energy to fight on." She informed the new principal of Number Two Elementary School, Kawashima Nobuo, of the reasons for her unwillingness to play a piano accompaniment to "Kimigayo," and offered a statement supporting a ban on compulsory participation.

Resisting a "Denial of Life"

Sato is now determined to pursue her lawsuit about wearing the ribbon, and insisting that mandatory piano accompaniment to Kimigayo violated freedom of thought and conscience and freedom of religion. "As far as I am concerned," she said, "it is a denial of life, a denial of humanity and individuality." In the spring of 2001 when her refusal to play piano accompaniment to Kimigayo on religious grounds was made public, numerous postcards were sent to the school's principal. Among them was one which read simply: "Don't kill someone!" Although a rather startling way of expressing a feeling, Sato met with the pastor who had written it during the summer of that year. He quietly said: "Playing 'Kimigayo' for a Christian is a lethal act." To play "Kimigayo" which venerates the emperor, he claimed, denied what it means to be a Christian. "'Don't kill someone!' put into words well and reinforced the main point of my father's sermon at the Christmas service prior to his retirement. Even for people who have no such religious belief, if something is absolutely unacceptable, it would amount to the same thing."

On August 31, 2003, Sato had to add another item to her earlier declaration for human rights redress. Toward the end of October 2002, she taught the Korean-language song "Kohyang e pom" (Spring in my hometown) which was included in the music textbook for fifth-graders. She did this as a way of welcoming the visiting pupils from the Korean Autonomous Region of Yanbian in China with a song all Koreans would know.

When Sato read the accompanying explanation of the song in the text which noted that "hang'ul is the written language on the Korean peninsula," voices among the students in class were raised: "North Korea," "kidnappers," "cowards." This was right at the peak of the press accounts of the kidnappings of Japanese to North Korea, but Sato was still stunned by the the harsh response of the students.

She thus proceeded to offer an extremely simplified account of the facts of Japanese colonial rule over Korea, how Koreans were forcibly turned over to the police, and how they had their language and their names taken from them. "Don't you think we can do them the courtesy," she asked the students, "of carrying a song in hang'ul in our textbook?" However, in response, "I had an anonymous phone caller who said: 'Are you saying that Japan did the same thing as the kidnappings committed by the North Koreans?'"

The newly added declaration for human rights redress "urged that, because of leading the chorus of a Korean-language song and mentioning Japan's colonial rule in Korea, Sato not be treated unfairly."

However, it was becoming increasingly difficult for Sato. At the graduation ceremony over the past three years the Hinomaru and "Kimigayo" had been added and the speaker's platform was set up so that the students were looking up to the Hinomaru and the principal. An Investigative Committee for Educational Reform of the Kunitachi schools established by the Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education issued detailed "educational normalization" guidelines.

She still hasn't mentioned the suit to her husband. "As far as I am concerned, on this issue alone I will die before giving in, and I believe he understands." Sato is one of a number of people who continues earnestly and determinedly to resist. Under pressure to perform "Kimigayo," she is reminded of a Bible verse she much admires:

"Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." (Matthew, 6:34, King James translation).

It is like meeting with a kernel of strength that can continue on without shrinking in the least.

Translation by Joshua A. Fogel.

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