

Santa Claus, Buddhist Monks and Postwar Japan

In 1979, Japan's second largest newspaper company, Asahi shimbunsha, published a book called *Asahi shimbun 100 nen no kiji ni miru gaikokujin no ashiato* (Traces of Foreigners in the Asahi shimbun Articles Within a Hundred Years) Among politicians, artists, scientists and other celebrities, mentioned in the book, we also find a story of Polish Franciscan missionary, brother Zeno Żebrowski (1891 or 1898 – 1982) and his involvement with *Ari no machi* (Ants Town) - independent community of the homeless in Tokyo.¹ The article carried information which was inaccurate, saying brother Zeno took initiative to build a church for the community while in reality, he only provided them with some food and clothing. But it was yet another attempt to draw attention to the problems of so called *bataya* or ragpickers – homeless people who made their living by collecting and recycling waste. Through brother Zeno, who was then popular with Japanese media, they were trying to regain dignity and social acceptance.²

The article in “Asahi shimbun” was one of some 200 publications on brother Zeno's charity activities that appeared in various newspapers between 1947 and 1978 (in 1978, brother Zeno was hospitalized and retired from active life). According to statistics, provided by Fuji Welfare Foundation (Fuji fukushi jigyōdan), NPO working on commemorating brother Zeno, his charity work was instrumental in helping at least 10.000 people.³ Among them there were not only the homeless, but also war orphans, disabled children and victims of natural disasters. He arrived in Japan in 1930 and stayed until his death in 1982, traveling all over the country, distributing food, clothing and other daily necessities. Brother Zeno became particularly famous in early postwar years when struggle with hunger and poverty was a part of everyday reality.

While he was only one of many missionaries, doing all kinds of social welfare work in early postwar Japan, he seemed to be especially attractive to Japanese media, gaining himself (not necessarily flattering) name of *shimbun shimpu* (newspaper priest). The president of Fuji Welfare Foundation, Edami Tarō, described his personal impression of brother Zeno saying “he was like Mother Teresa of Calcutta and *fūten no Tora san* put together”.⁴ *Fūten no Tora san*, a “lovable vagabond”, was a hero of extremely popular *Otoko wa tsurai yo* TV series, directed by Yamada Yōji and produced by Shōchiku since 1969 to 1996. The key similarity between Tora san and brother Zeno seems to lay in the word *fūten* – wandering around, never settled. I argue that one reason for the missionary's popularity with the press was his immense mobility – a characteristics that made him easily fit into certain patterns familiar to Japanese audience.

These patterns need to be traced back much further than *Otoko wa tsurai yo* series. They go back to the tradition of Buddhist monks, wandering around Japan in middle ages. These monks were collectively known as *hijiri* – “holy men”, ascetic pilgrims who deprived themselves of all belongings including permanent residence. They left their temples and monasteries and traveled around the country, preaching the teachings of Buddha to the people. Among the most famous *hijiri* were Kōya (also known as Kūya, 903-972) who left the monastery on Hiei mountain in Kyoto and lived among common people in the city, engaging in charity work, and Ippen (1239-1289) who

made homelessness his freely chosen lifestyle. The former got known as *ichi no hijiri* (the city holy man) while the latter as *sute hijiri* (a holy man who threw it all away).⁵

According to the testimonies of his fellow Franciscans, brother Zeno could hardly ever be found at his monastery in Nagasaki. They would learn from the newspapers that he “suddenly” appeared at one of main railway stations in big cities (Ueno in Tokyo, Umeda in Osaka and Hakata in Fukuoka are constant theme) to distribute food and clothing to underprivileged children. Apart from his standard route Kyushu – Tokyo, with many stops in cities on the way, the missionary’s records include numerous trips to Hokkaido and Amami Islands (respectively the northernmost and southernmost part of Japan), Fukushima, Niigata, Aomori, Shikoku and Okinawa. In early postwar years, brother Zeno traveled in carriages reserved for Occupation staff and later on, he was granted a special free pass for all tracks from Japanese national railways (Kokuei Tetsudō, commonly known as Kokutetsu). One biography of brother Zeno, written by a freelance reporter Ishitobi Jin, was published under the title *Kaze no shisha Zeno* (the messenger of the wind) and another one, written by Matsui Tōru, is entitled *Zeno shinu hima nai* (Zeno is too busy to die).⁶

In many press releases on brother Zeno, his trips around Japan are described as *angya* (pilgrimage). This term originally referred to Buddhist pilgrimages, meant to develop oneself spiritually and to deepen one’s religious practice. In the press sources as well as letters of his fellow missionaries, we also find a surprising amount of testimonies about his cooperation with Buddhist monks. We can see a Buddhist monk bringing war orphans to Franciscan monastery, asking to take care of them, a powerful Higashi Honganji temple in Tokyo, letting brother Zeno have a party for poor children on its grounds, Buddhist monks letting him stay in temples overnight and even helping to distribute images of Virgin Mary. A Buddhist monk who appears in animation movie on brother Zeno, made in 1998 (*Kagiri naki ai*, 1998, directed by Chiba Shigeki and Ui Takashi, produced by Zeno san no eiga o tsukuru kai), helping the hero out in various situations, is a compilation of many such figures that actually existed.

While seeing brother Zeno as a kind of “20th century *hijiri*” can be one explanation for his popularity in early postwar Japan, another one is his identification with Santa Claus. Almost every press release on brother Zeno was inevitably accompanied by a picture, featuring his long white beard and big smiling face. No matter how much substantial food he would distribute to the poor, the sweets (*okashi*) would always be stressed. He always appeared “suddenly” (*hyokkori to*)⁷ and distributed presents generously (*dossari*).⁸ The amount of press publications on the missionary’s actions grew significantly at the time of Christmas. Santa Claus image was extremely attractive as an element of celebrating Christmas, which in postwar Japan came to symbolize modern, affluent, Western style of life. “The most popular Saint in the world” was also associated with children and nostalgia for lost childhood has long been a dominant trace in Japanese mass culture. Brother Zeno, with his humorous attitude and simple, broken Japanese (he had trouble learning the language, despite more than fifty years spent in Japan) was also perceived as a childish figure. Despite a long beard, his face was described as a “childish face” (*dōgan*).⁹ Many a picture showed him playing with children, running and acting like a child. In fact, in his image we can find almost all the

features of so called *kawaii* (cute) style that were to dominate Japanese culture from the 70s until late 90s: simplicity, innocence, purity, sincerity, weakness.^{1 0} His identification with poor children, described as *kawaisō* (pitiful) made the image complete.

Finally, Santa Claus image has also been used for purposes which can be described as moralistic or educational. Brother Zeno would often ask for donations at schools, appealing to the children's compassion for their poor counterparts. It would be impossible without the support from the teachers and also parents. They used this opportunity to introduce values such as generosity and unselfishness, which are highly praised in many cultures including Japanese.^{1 1}

¹ *Asahi shimbun 100 nen no kiji ni miru gaikokujin no ashiato*, Asahi shimbunsha, Tōkyō, Ōsaka, Nagoya, Kitakyūshū 1979, pp. 301-302.

² „Ari no machi ni jūjika. Shimpu san ga ichiyaku. ‘Kyōkai no yume ni’ kotaeru”, „Asahi Shimbun”, 14.11.1950.

³ „Zeno-kagiri naki ai ni nyūsu” No.0, Fuji fukushi jigyōdan, Tōkyō 1998 (brochure). See also Fuji Welfare Foundation website: www.fujifukushi.com

⁴ In an interview given to NHK BS World News, 1998.07.15.

⁵ Detailed information on *hijiri* can be found in: Horii Ichirō chosaku shū, dainankan: *Minkan shinkō no keitai to kinō*, Miraisha, Tōkyō 2002; Horii Ichirō, *Folk Religion in Japan. Continuity and Change*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1974; Dennis Hirota, *No Abode. The Record of Ippen*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1997.

⁶ Ishitobi Jin, *Kaze no shisha Zeno*, Shizenshoku tsūshinsha, Tōkyō 1998; Matsui Toru, *Zeno shinu hima nai*, Shunjusha, Tōkyō 1998.

⁷ See for example: „Hyokkori Isahaya-e Zeno shimpu”, „Nagasaki Minyū”, 1953.05.17; “Hyokkori Numazu ni. „Ari no machi” no Zeno shimpu san otzururu”, „Asahi Shimbun”, 1958.11.09; “Hyokkori Numazu e. Hashishita no sumibitotachi o imon”, „Numazu Mainichi”, 1958.11.09.

⁸ See for example: “Mimaihini o dossari. Zeno shimpu kyō imon ni raiken”, „Kahoku shimpō”, 1956.07.20, “Gohōbi dossari shimpu san no undōkai. Zeno shimpu Nishinomiya no bataya buraku e”, “Kōbe Shimbun”, 14.11.1955. „Zeno-shimpu, ninenburi „Midori no machi” e dossari Kurisumasu purezento”, „Sandeishimbun”, 37.14.12.1962.

⁹ „Minna ga kami no ko ne. Zeno shimpu ga messēji”, „Asahi shimbun”, 1958.09.08.

^{1 0} Sharon Kinsella, *Cuties in Japan, [in:] Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*, edited by Lise Skov and Brian Moeran, Curzon Press, Richmond, 1995, pp. 220-254.

^{1 1} More information on Santa Claus theme in Japan can be found in: Klaus Kracht, *Katsumi Tateno-Kracht, Kurisumasu dō yatte Nihon ni teichaku shita ka*, Kadogawa shoten, 1999