Sisters of St John of God Heritage Centre

They’ll put you with the Japanese in Heaven, Sister.

Perhaps the speaker intended to embarrass Sr Antonio when he warned her that she would be with the Japanese in heaven. She gave an unexpected answer: I hope so. (Margaret Zucker, page 72)

This quote indicates the level of respect between the Sisters of St John of God and the Broome Japanese community.

First Contacts with Japanese

The relationship between the Sisters and the Japanese Community in Broome began the day Sr Antonio O’Brien and Sr Benedict Courtney first arrived in June 1908. Archival records tell us that the Sisters went to the Japanese merchants who had shops in ‘Jap Town’ and they were given cooking utensils, stretcher beds and other items which they used to set up their home in a small hut.

Within two weeks the Sisters started a school using the church for a classroom. Noreen Jones states that Young children could attend the State School but most of the Japanese parents opted for the Catholic School until the children were old enough for arrangements to be made to send them to Japan (page 71). In 1911 the local community decided it was time to build a Catholic School. The minutes of their meetings show that the Japanese Community contributed financially, and that the school was built by a local ship builder, Hori Gorokitchi.

Bonds were strengthened as many from the Japanese community attended evening classes where the Sisters taught English, bookkeeping and music. A number of Japanese were interested in Christianity and there were some converts.

The Japanese Hospital

In 1910 the Japanese Club had raised funds to build their own hospital and Dr Suzuki arrived with his wife from Japan. However the governing body at the time, Broome Roads Board, required that the hospital be staffed by European nurses who were not readily available in this remote town. Dr Suzuki approached the Sisters who agreed to take on the nursing with one of them as matron. This enabled the hospital to open. Sr Immaculate Leahy SSJG, one of the young Sisters contracted typhoid while nursing a patient and died in 1912. A large stone Celtic cross above her grave was donated by the Japanese community in gratitude. The Sisters continued to nurse in the Japanese Hospital until it closed in 1928.

Hori Gorokitchi, the Builder

In 1925 the Sisters were fundraising to build a larger convent for themselves. Archival records show that the Japanese Community of Broome donated £134 toward this building which is now State Heritage listed and part of the Broome Heritage Centre. The convent was designed and built by Hori Gorokitchi and contains examples of Shinkabe external framing. This was an obvious and distinguishing feature of many Japanese built structures in Broome at that time.

Relationships Today

The early Sisters formed close friendships with members of the Japanese community and this has continued over the years. Today St Mary’s College educates a large number of students who have Japanese ancestry. Displays at the Relationships Exhibition acknowledge the Japanese people in the areas of health, education and friendship. Sisters and volunteers (some with Japanese heritage) at the Relationships Exhibition welcome the bi-annual exchange group from Taiji and so this special story continues to be shared.

REFERENCES
