

Japanese Influences on Kapingamarangi

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Abstract

On Kapingamarangi Atoll, an “outer island” municipality of Pohnpei state in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), some Japanese “loan” words are used-common Kapingamarangi words which seemed to be borrowed from the Japanese language, words such as “*sensei*” for “teacher”, “*kuruma*”, Japanese for any “vehicle”, and many others.

Prior to and during World War II, the Imperial Japanese Navy deployed a weather squadron in Micronesia. The Japanese used Kapingamarangi Atoll as a seaplane refueling station on the aerial route from Pohnpei to Rabaul, New Britain, in the former German Northeast New Guinea, south of the Equator in what is now Papua New Guinea. From 20 to 30 Japanese soldiers were stationed at Nunakita Island. The initial construction crew was larger, perhaps 50 men, but about 30 men stayed on afterwards for operations. The radio communications and weather observation station were at Nunakita Island. At Hare Island, there were additional living quarters, the fuel depot, a seaplane ramp and up to ten aeroplanes, including seaplane fighter bombers.

There is considerable physical evidence remaining, including one gravestone, some old Dai Nippon Brewery Company glass bottles, a concrete tower, the foundation posts of military barracks, abandoned water tanks, a sunken Japanese ship and a sunken American plane in the lagoon, some propellers and plane parts debris, also some rusting fuel drums.

There is a single Japanese-language gravestone located on Matiro Island (three islets south of Touhou Island) in Kapingamarangi Atoll, marking the burial of the mortal remains of “Arugani Rokuro,” referred to as “Roturo Monop” by Lena, senior citizen and sister of the decedent, who said it was the grave of her older brother, a Kapingamarangi man.

The tombstone, the old Dai Nippon Brewery Company glass bottles, the remains of the concrete tower, the foundation posts of the military barracks, the abandoned water tanks, the seaplane landing ramp and refueling depot, the propellers and plane parts debris, the rusting fuel drums, and even the bomb craters and sunken vessels, still stand as visible, tangible evidence of the Japanese presence on this distant and remote atoll. The ample physical evidence which Japan left behind on at least three islets of Kapingamarangi Atoll, on the reef, and even sunk in the lagoon, is manifest more than 60 years later.

Furthermore, the more intangible evidence of numerous loan words which Kapingamarangi speakers adapted from the Japanese speakers, and the more than ten Japanese personal names now in use, is no less real, and no less important. The fact that no fewer than 25 Japanese words are still being used two generations later may constitute an even more substantial legacy, with a greater and more lasting impact,

than the tangible ruins which continue to erode more with each passing day.

Key words: Federated States of Micronesia, Imperial Japanese Navy, Japanese governance in Micronesia, Japanese language loan-words, Kapingamarangi, World War II

Introduction to Kapingamarangi

During the spring of 2007, I spent a semester teaching elementary school and helping develop a school community library on Kapingamarangi Atoll (population about 600), an “outer island” municipality of Pohnpei state in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). At just one degree north of the Equator, low-lying, luxuriant Kapingamarangi is the southernmost landfall in the FSM as well as a “Polynesian outlier” island within Micronesia (Fig. 1).

It was not my intention to learn the Kapingamarangi language as part of my sabbatical leave project, but I became interested once on the island, where I was surrounded by Kapingamarangi speakers and inundated in Kapingamarangi culture. I noticed some Japanese “loan” words—common Kapingamarangi words which seemed to be borrowed or adapted from Japanese words, such as “*sensei*” for “teacher,” and others. “*Kuruma*,” Japanese for any “vehicle,” especially “automobile,” became “*kulumaa*,” meaning “wheelbarrow” in Kapingamarangi, since wheelbarrows (and bicycles) are the only wheeled vehicles on Kapingamarangi (Fig. 2). “*Liakā*” the actual Japanese word meaning “wheelbarrow,” is also used less frequently in Kapingamarangi

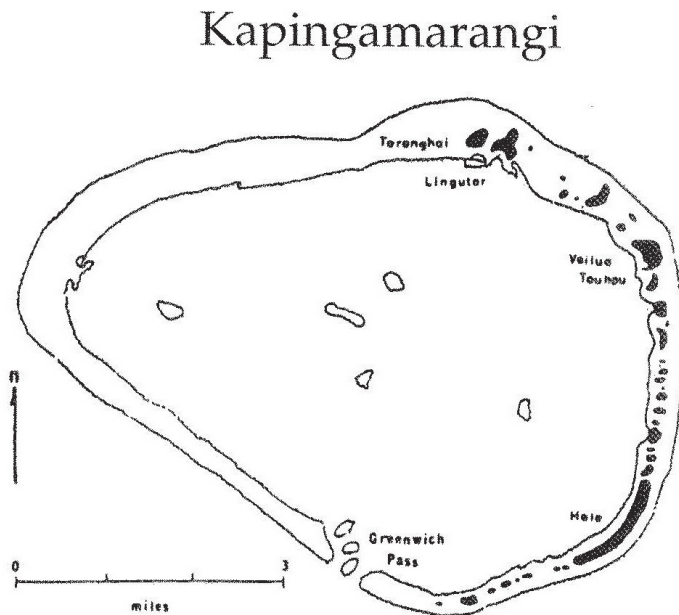


Fig. 1. Kapingamarangi Atoll.

as “*liaga*”.

While the construction crew built the library room on top of the school, I was a volunteer teacher in the elementary school. During February and March, I team-taught the combination 4th-5th grade class with Sensei Kiosy (Fig. 3A). During April and May, I team-taught the 6th grade class with Teacher Merfilynn. On several occasions I substitute-taught the 1st graders. The students used both the Japanese word “*sensei*” and the English word “teacher” interchangeably (“*sensei*” is the Japanese word for “teacher”). Also, Sensei Kiosy had made a list of the “Classroom Rules” in the Kapingamarangi language and had posted it on the wall in the combo 4th-5th grade classroom at Kapingamarangi Elementary School (Fig. 3B). The first “rule”-“*Hagalongo gi sensei*”-means “Listen to the teacher”. This was how the first of many Japanese influences on Kapingamarangi came to my attention. Later on, I noticed other Japanese language words in use by Kapingamarangi speakers.



Fig. 2. “*Kuruma*”, Japanese for “vehicle” or “automobile,” became “*kulumaa*” meaning “wheelbarrow” in Kapingamarangi-since wheelbarrows (and bicycles) are the only wheeled vehicles on Kapingamarangi. Here six-year – old Vincent uses a “*kulumaa*” to transport debris (A). There are no automobiles on Kapingamarangi Atoll, except for these toys “cars” carved from palm tree branches, which youngsters race around the walkway with a stick and a string (B).

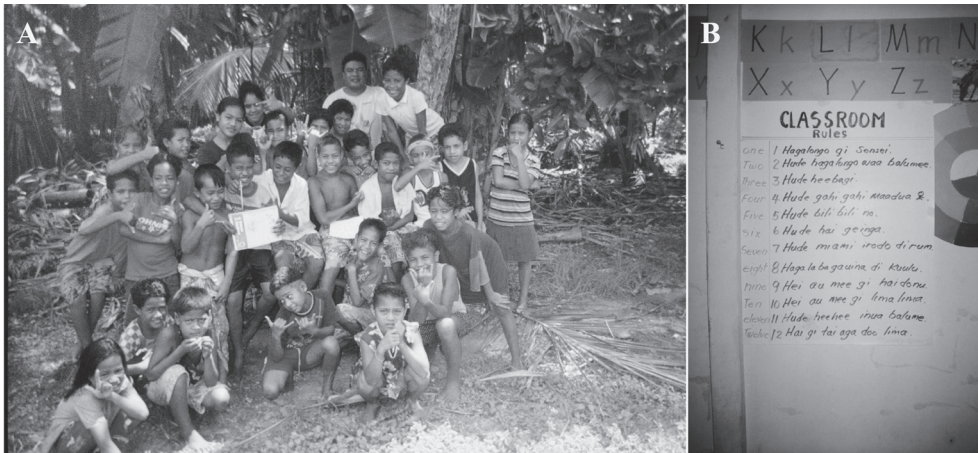


Fig. 3. During February and March 2007, I team taught this large class, a combination 4th-5th grade, with Sensei Kiosy (A). Sensei Kiosy posted these “Classroom Rules” on the wall in the combination 4th-5th grade classroom at Kapingamarangi Elementary School. Notice the first rule – “*Hagalongo gi sensei*” or “Listen to the teacher” (“*sensei*” is the Japanese word for “teacher”). Also, in rule 8, see the word “*kuulu*” from the English word “school” (B).

Japanese Micronesia

This did not come as a complete surprise, since Micronesia was a Japanese territory during the period between World War I and World War II, under a League of Nations mandate, when Japan established its government operations centers in Micronesia at Saipan, Northern Mariana Islands, at Koror, Palau and at Kolonia, Pohnpei. Besides a military presence, there were public infrastructure projects, such as road building, as well as various commercial enterprises, such as fishing and agriculture, involving a transmigration of Japanese soldiers, civil servants, civilians, traders and merchants, as discussed by ASHBY (2003), LEVY (1997), LIEBER (1994), PEATTIE (1988), POYER *et al.* (2001), and others. Micronesia constituted only a portion of Japan’s Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

The first direct Japanese intervention at Kapingamarangi occurred in 1918 after a three-year-long drought on Kapingamarangi resulted in the deaths of approximately 90 Kapingamarangians. The Japanese evacuated some 90 Kapingamarangi residents to Pohnpei island, where they developed the cliffside settlement now known as Porakiet, on the western periphery of Kolonia town, and were employed, in jobs such as fishing, copra and tobacco production, and road building (LIEBER 1994, POYER *et al.* 2001, ASHBY 2003). Although about half of those resettled died of dysentery within one year, the village of Porakiet thrives today. According to Andrew Lucky, the Kapingamarangi coordinator at Porakiet, and Senator Edgar Lickaneth, the elected Pohnpei state legislator who represents Kapingamarangi, Porakiet village now has more than 1,000 Kapingamarangi inhabitants – far more residents than Kapingamarangi Atoll itself.

There are also a few Kapingamarangi transplants intermittently at Oroluk Atoll, also part of Pohnpei state – the number varies – as well as a small diaspora on Guam, in Hawai'i, in the “Mainland” United States and elsewhere.

Crowds of people travel back and forth between Kapingamarangi and Pohnpei on every field ship, for high school and college attendance, for medical attention, for work, and to visit relatives. A field ship calls approximately quarterly, delivering and receiving passengers, mail, supplies and cargo. In Jan. 2007, I traveled from Pohnpei to Kapingamarangi on the *Caroline Voyager*, a trip which took three nights and two days. When the next field ship appeared on the horizon in March, the news spread quickly on the grapevine, and children dashed jubilantly to the island's shore to track the ship's approach. I returned from Kapingamarangi to Pohnpei in June on the *Micro-Glory*, the flagship and workhorse of the ferry system, and a gift from the government of Japan to the FSM. That voyage lasted four nights and three days.

The Japanese at Kapingamarangi

However, direct Japanese involvement in Micronesia was confined primarily to the three district centers of Saipan, Palau and Pohnpei, and most outlying islands were not greatly affected. Therefore, it was somewhat surprising to learn that the Japanese military used Kapingamarangi Atoll as a seaplane refueling station on the aerial route from Pohnpei to Rabaul, New Britain, south of the Equator in what is now Papua New Guinea. Outer islands of the former German Northeast New Guinea colony, an Australian League of Nations mandate, were occupied by Japan at that time. Kapingamarangi is actually about 100 miles closer to Rabaul than it is to Pohnpei island proper (ASHBY 2003), but since there's almost nothing else in-between, Kapingamarangi served as a convenient refueling “midpoint” (corroborated by POYER *et al.* 2001).

There is considerable physical evidence remaining, such as one gravestone, some old brown and blue Dai Nippon Brewery Company glass bottles (turned upside-down for use as grave markers), a concrete tower, the foundation posts of now-destroyed military barracks, abandoned water tanks, a sunken Japanese ship and a sunken American plane in the lagoon, some propellers and plane parts debris (from where the Allied Forces later bombed the Japanese seaplane fuel depot), also some rusting fuel drums.

Only Touhou and Werua islands are inhabited permanently. Tiny Touhou Island, “a rather crowded 11-acre islet” (ELBERT 1948) (reported elsewhere as ten acres, or even nine acres in WIENS 1956), is entirely residential and houses the main village (population approximately 350), where the dock, the city hall (“*Hale Oobidi*”-the “office house”), the dispensary or clinic, and the church (United Church of Christ) are located (Fig. 4). Much larger Werua Island, a sort-of suburb (population about 250), houses the school and library, and more than a half-dozen taro patches, and is connected with



Fig. 4. Touhou Island Village is viewed from Taringa Island immediately south. In the background, the lagoon and other northern islands are on the left; to the right, ocean surf crashes endlessly on the reef (A). A Kapingamarangi voter casts a ballot in the FSM national election on Tuesday, March 6, 2007 in the “*Hale Oobidi*” (“office house”) or city hall. The church can be seen through the windows. The dock, city hall, dispensary and church are all located on Touhou Island, where most of the people reside (B). Kapingamarangi has politics, the same as everywhere else. These posters broadcast the slogans of candidates running for office in the FSM national election of March 6, 2007 (C). Inside Touhou’s United Church of Christ, the women sit or stand on the left, men on the right. Couples do not sit together (D). Harvey Lohete and June Gamson were married in a civil ceremony by the Chief Magistrate, Solomon Lowson, at the “*Hale Oobidi*” or city hall on Feb. 13, 2007 (E).

Touhou by a permanent, reinforced concrete pedestrian bridge (Fig. 5). The other 31 mostly minuscule islands of Kapingamarangi Atoll are uninhabited, but are utilized for cultivating taro, for harvesting breadfruit, coconuts and bananas, for gathering pandanus thatch (for roofing and weaving), for camping, and for burials (Fig. 5).

While walking the reef and exploring the uninhabited islands, I came upon a single Japanese-language gravestone located on Matiro Island (three islets south of Touhou Island) in Kapingamarangi Atoll. Kesia George (Fig. 6A&B), wife of the school principal, told me that this was the grave of “Hiroku Monop”, the younger brother of her grandfather, or her great-uncle. But via an interpreter, Lena, senior citizen and sister of the decedent, said it was the grave of “Roturo Monop” (her older brother, a Kapingamarangi man) (Fig. 6C). Elder Ersin also remembered his name as “Roturo Monop”. Dr. Yukiko Inoue, University of Guam professor of education (from Japan), translates the tombstone inscription as “Here lies A-ru-ga-ni Ro-ku-



Fig. 5. A permanent, concrete footbridge links Touhou Island (right) with Werua Island (left) as viewed from the lagoon. Because most of the people reside on Touhou Island, and the school is located on Werua Island, most students walk across the bridge four times a day – going to school in the morning, returning home for lunch, going back to school after lunch, then walking home in the afternoon (A). Only Touhou and Werua are inhabited. The other 31 mostly minuscule islands of Kapingamarangi Atoll are uninhabited, but are utilized for cultivating taro, for harvesting breadfruit, coconuts and bananas, for gathering pandanus thatch (for roofing and weaving), for camping, and for burials. Here, Parakahi (left) and Hukuniu (right), as seen from Werua, are sometimes used for foraging pigs (B).

ro (male name), 1940” (Fig. 6D). After “Arugani Rokuro”/“Roturo Monop” passed away on Pohnpei Island, his body was returned to Kapingamarangi for interment. The fact that Arugani Rokuro’s remains were transported from Pohnpei back home to Kapingamarangi for burial indicates that he was a privileged son of a wealthy family. His younger sister (Lena) is now 70-or-80-some years old, more than 65 years later, so Arugani Rokuro died as a teenager or as a young man in his early 20s. This grave (“*talunga*” in Kapingamarangi) serves as material evidence of the Japanese era on Kapingamarangi, and lies alongside several others with English-language inscriptions.

Nearby, also on Matiro Island, is another small cemetery where old Japanese bottles are used to mark several graves. The burial sites are outlined in rectangular borders of concrete, covered in coral rock gravel, with the corners marked by some old blue-and brown-colored sake and beer bottles from Dai Nippon Brewery Company turned upside-down. Though these and numerous other graves are not identified with inscribed gravestones, they are probably not anonymous. The lot owners and family members usually know which ancestors are buried on their property (personally identifying information on burial sites could also be on record in the *Hale Oobidi*). Except for the two most southerly islands of Matukerekere and Pumatahahi, which are communally owned by the municipal government, all the other dry land of the other 31 islets of Kapingamarangi Atoll is privately owned – each island is divided into lots owned by individual families. Several entire islands are owned outright (land ownership and related economic topics are detailed by EMORY [1965]; see also WIENS [1956] and CROCOMBE [1987]).

Twelve islands further south of Matiro, the Japanese seaplane refueling depot was located on Hare Island, also referred to as “Long Island” because it is slightly

longer than one mile long. The silhouettes of what are said to be an American airplane and a Japanese ship sunken in shallow water can be seen clearly from the lagoon surface west of Hare Island. More than one informant mentioned that a Japanese plane



Fig. 6. Kesia George, wife of the principal, is the great-niece of the late Arugani Rokuro (A&B). The arrival of the Honorable Joseph Urusemal, then-President of the Federated States of Micronesia, on February 5, 2007 was an exciting occasion. The entire community turned out to welcome the president and his retinue of cabinet members. Here, senior citizen Lena (sister of the decedent, "Arugani Rokuro"), is seated on the right waiting for the visiting dignitaries to disembark from the president's boat, which can be seen at anchor in the lagoon (C). "Here lies A-ru-ga-ni Ro-ku-ro (male name), 1940". This grave ("*talunga*" in Kapingamarangi) is located on uninhabited Matiro Island (three islets south of Touhou Island) in Kapingamarangi Atoll (D).

crashed and sank to a watery grave in deeper waters near the lagoon passage, though there was disagreement on this point, and I did not personally see this wreck. Besides living quarters, airplanes and the seaplane landing ramp, there was also storage of fuel, bombs, weapons and ammunition (POYER *et al.*). There are several bomb craters on Hare. Explosions from bombing the site of the fuel depot created one crater pit or depression on Hare Island so large that it is still used more than 60 years later as the official municipal garbage dump. There are also the rusting remains of numerous 50-some-gallon steel fuel drums, other bombed-out plane debris, and additional rusty metal wreckage. I saw several plane propellers stuck in the sand elsewhere on the beach of Hare Island. Other propellers had been cut and filed for use as homemade machete blades by industrious, frugal, practical Kapingamarangi dwellers. It seems likely that other material evidence was scavenged in the intervening years and put to useful purposes, or even washed away by tidal wave action or storm surges.

North of Touhou, on Nunakita Island, rows of rotting concrete foundation posts of now-destroyed military barracks still stand in silent witness as evidence of the Japanese occupants of a previous age. Located near the ruined barracks are the remnants of several concrete water tanks in disrepair, still containing hundreds of gallons of rain water. The lookout watchtower (perhaps doubling as a machine gunners' nest) still stands along the lagoon's edge, in ruins (the tower is noted on a map in NIERING [1956, Fig. 13]). The concrete tower could have served as a weather data collection facility, a radio communications station, a sentry lookout post, or a machine gunnery base. I recognized at least one bomb crater on Nunakita (also noted in NIERING [1956]). In addition, there is some metal wreckage rusting away on the reef, northeast (oceanside) of Nunakita Island. Presumably these metal hulks once comprised some sort of equipment or machinery used by the Japanese soldiers while stationed on Nunakita – perhaps a water tank or boiler, pipes, and related appurtenances. The 1943-44 Allied assaults on Japanese positions from Pohnpei to Rabaul are chronicled variously by CRAVEN and CATE (1951), DENFELD (1992), FALGOUT *et al.* (2008), HINZ (1995), MILLER (1970), MILNER (1971), MORISON (1962, 1964), POYER *et al.* (2001), SMITH and MEEHL (2002), WILLIAMS (1960), and elsewhere.

World War II on Kapingamarangi

Several adults told me stories they had heard from their parents or relatives. Through an interpreter, senior citizen “Uncle Noah” told me his personal recollections about the Japanese soldiers he remembered from his teenage years. Also, Ersin, a retired teacher, provided me with his remembrances in English during several conversations over lunches. The information they related is consistent with an account provided by ASHBY (2003). Noah recalled “plenty” of Japanese soldiers – from 20 to 30 – first stationed at Nunakita Island. Ersin thought the initial construction crew was larger, perhaps 50 men, but that about 30 men stayed on afterwards for operations.

The radio communications and weather observation station were at Nunakita Island, including the lookout watchtower (and possible machine gunnery emplacements), barracks, and cistern-style concrete rainwater storage tanks. According to Ersin, there were additional living quarters at Hare Island, the fuel depot, a seaplane ramp and fewer than ten aeroplanes, including seaplane fighter bombers. After the seaplane fuel depot at Hare Island was bombed out, the Japanese retreated north to Nunakita Island (consistent with POYER *et al.* [2001]), then later on, relocated further north to Ringutoru Island, where there may be more bomb craters (NIERING [1956, Fig. 17] also notes another bomb crater on Taringa Island). Ersin and Noah recollected that, since the Japanese lived and worked on separate islands from the Kapingamarangians, each group saw the other “over there”, but there was little interaction between the Japanese and the people of Kapingamarangi, and that the Japanese did not bother or harm the Kapingamarangians (corroborated by KRAUSS [1988]). Also the Japanese soldiers did not father any children to abandon when they departed. The independent recollections of Lena, Noah and Ersin, via separate interviews, and those of other informants, corroborate interviews in POYER *et al.* (2001). The Japanese left Kapingamarangi in July of 1944 (ASHBY 2003).

No Kapingamarangi residents were injured or killed during the war, by either the Japanese overseers or the Allied bombers (ASHBY 2003), although two Kapingamarangi men fishing on Pohnpei died when they detonated a Japanese mine set in a mangrove swamp (POYER *et al.* 2001). Ersin and Noah were teenagers during the war, so they were not impressed into labor and relocated to Pohnpei as 50 men from Kapingamarangi were (ASHBY 2003). When an Allied torpedo sank a Japanese ship outside the lagoon near Kapingamarangi in 1942, about 50 Japanese survivors washed up in two lifeboats at Namuluk Atoll, about 350 miles northwest, an outer island of neighboring Chuuk state (POYER *et al.* 2001).

An occasional Japanese or Australian yacht, circumnavigating the globe, or crossing the Equator, will stop at Kapingamarangi to find anchorage and enjoy a respite – though no yacht stopped by while I was there. A few years ago, one Japanese yachtsman, returning from having crossed the Equator, ran aground on the southern reef, near the lagoon channel. With the high tide, his yacht floated and departed under its own power. There are two unrelated shipwrecks (located in close proximity to one another) on the northwestern Kapingamarangi reef, postdating World War II and not connected to the war (though one of the shipwrecks may be Japanese). Considered here are the physical manifestations I came across during my five months on the atoll. I only surveyed about half of the 33 islets, so there may be other physical evidence which I did not discover or recognize.

Unfortunately, I ran out of film half-way through my five-and-one-half-months-long project. I took photographs of the classroom rules sign (on Werua) and the Japanese-language gravestone (on Matiro), during my first months, but I did not capture the images of the Japanese military barracks and other ruins (on Nunakita, on Hare and elsewhere), discovered later on.

On Pumatahahi Island, there is an open-air warehouse left behind by American sailors, dating from after the war. What remains is a leaking corrugated metal roof, held up by metal posts, covering a concrete floor – but without walls. Officially this island and the warehouse are owned by the municipality and the building is used for dry storage. When I was at Kapingamarangi, the chief magistrate utilized the warehouse temporarily to store excess cargo arriving from Pohnpei on the field ship. This covered space on Pumatahahi, about four miles south of Touhou village and near the lagoon channel entrance, is occasionally used by local fishermen to take shelter from inclement weather or rough waters.



Fig. 7. On Touhou Island, these are the graves of the last two kings of Kapingamarangi. On the left rest the remains of King Duiai Mateak (died Dec. 1958) and on the right are the remains of King Tevet (David) Nangar (died Dec. 1949). King Duiai could speak some Japanese.

There are graveyards and burial sites on Touhou, and – south of Touhou on Tarlinga, Matiro, Ramotu, Hukuhenua, Tangawaka, and Hare islands, and – north of Touhou – on Werua, Nunakita, Ringutoru, and Torongahai islands. Some graves are marked with gravestones with inscriptions – a name, sometimes dates and other information. The gravestones are homemade with concrete and often are painted or otherwise decorated. Most graves are well tended respectfully (Fig. 7). Some graves are outlined in rectangular borders of concrete, and covered in coral rock gravel, but the buried remains frequently are not identified in writing in situ. These are the graves of the ancestors of the Kapingamarangi people.

Enduring Japanese Impact on the Kapingamarangi Vocabulary and on Kapingamarangi Personal Nomenclature

Adapted Japanese personal names chosen by Kapingamarangi parents to name their children include: “Yosimoly,” an elder elevated to the traditional high priest (“*ariki*”) position; “Kiosy,” a teacher (see Fig. 3A); brothers “Kisiro” and “Koisimi,” elected members of the Kapingamarangi Municipal Government council; “Yosko,” my dear neighbor on Werua; and “Kiomi,” a youngster and student.

Additionally there are the numerous Japanese loan words which Kapingamarangi speakers have incorporated into their language and still use today. Based on information conveyed from several Kapingamarangi informants, I drew up a list of Kapingamarangi words still in use, probably borrowed, derived, or adapted from the Japanese language, also a list of Japanese personal names still in use, souvenirs of the time when the Japanese were in Micronesia and Kapingamarangi. Although elders

Ersin and Noah, who were teenagers during the war, remembered there having been little interaction between the Japanese and the people of Kapingamarangi, there must have been considerable interaction nonetheless, since so many Japanese-language words are still in use at Kapingamarangi to this day.

Most of the loan words still in use denote objects of material culture, objects likely new at the time to the people of Kapingamarangi. The following Tables 1 and 2 convey anecdotal evidence and casual observations only and thus, ought to be considered exemplary and illustrative, though not necessarily exhaustive, definitive or complete.

Since the Kapingamarangi language is spoken by probably fewer than 2,000 speakers, on only three or four small islands, and there are no printed books in Kapingamarangi, the orthography or spelling has no standardization or normalization.

Table 1. Some Kapingamarangi language words (in current use) probably borrowed, derived or adapted from Japanese language words (not an exhaustive listing).

Kapingamarangi language words	Japanese language words	English language equivalent meaning
baligang	barikan	hair clipper
Budaa	Būda	Buddha
deehuguroo	tebukuro	gloves
denbo	denpō	communication
denwa	denwa	telephone
empitu	enpitsu	pencil
hagioi	yakyū	baseball
higoti / higoodee	hikōki	seaplane bomber
kapanga	kaban	suitcase
keedaa	geta	wooden zoris
kokupanga	kokuban	chalkboard
komi	gomu	rubber band, also goma (Spanish)
kulumaa	kuruma	wheelbarrow (Kap.), vehicle or automobile (Jap.)
kunggang / gunggang	gunkan	warship
liaga	liakā	wheelbarrow
loeaa	rōya	jail
loobuu	rōbu	cross
sambang	sampan	boat, sampan (Chinese), also sampao (Thai)
sasumii	sashimi	sashimi
senggii	denki	lightbulb
sensei	sensei	teacher
sentoki	sentōki	fighter plane
soiu	shōyu	soy sauce
soorii / toorii	zōri	zoris / flipflop footwear

Thus, two different speakers may spell – and even pronounce – a word two different ways. Who’s to say which spelling is correct?

Whatever language the word may have been borrowed or adapted from, and however it is spelled in Kapingamarangi, in the Kapingamarangi pronunciation, the final vowel is almost always silent (also noted by ELBERT [1948]). As to why the unpronounced final vowel is even written at all, this writer cannot answer that question. It may simply be a matter of word origin, etymology, history, custom and tradition. The phenomenon signifies and illustrates a hearty, dynamic language undergoing evolutionary change.

Another note on pronunciation: in Kapingamarangi, the sounds represented by the letters “B” and “P” are frequently used virtually interchangeably, and likewise for the letters “D” and “T”, “G” and “K”, and “L” and “R”, also sometimes “T” and “S”.

Each one of the 33 islets of Kapingamarangi Atoll has a name, which all Kapingamarangians can recite from memory with ease. However, even Kapingamarangi speakers differ concerning the correct pronunciation, and the spellings vary considerably in the literature. For example, Solomon Lowson, the chief magistrate, and his wife, Ehda, each pronounced “Ringutoru” distinctly differently. Such matters also may depend on whether the writer is Japanese, American, or islander. “Touhou,” the population center, is sometimes spelled and pronounced “Souhou.” “Werua” may be found as “Ueru” or “Veilua.” “Ringutoru” is also seen as “Lingutor,” which bears a closer resemblance to its actual pronunciation. “Hare,” the 1.2-mile-long island, is also written as “Hale” – the Kapingamarangi and Hawaiian word for “house” or “home.” I have used the spellings found in NIERING (1956), and emulated by EMORY (1965) and subsequently, although these spellings sometimes bear little resemblance to the actual local pronunciation – at least to the ear of the uninitiated.

Table 2. Some Kapingamarangi personal names (in recent past and current use) probably borrowed, derived or adapted from Japanese personal names (not an exhaustive listing).

Kapingamarangi personal names	Japanese personal names
Keigo	Keiko
Kindaro	Kintaro
Kiomi	Kiomi
Kiosy	Kiyoshi
Kisiro	Kishiro
Koisimi	Koizumi
Kosaki	Kosaki
Nanami	Nanami
Roturo	Rokuro
Yosimoly	Yoshimori
Yosko	Yoshiko

Summary and Conclusions

Thus, although the Japanese governed the Micronesian islands for only from 25 to 30 years, and even though a small contingent of Japanese military men was stationed on Kapingamarangi for only a brief interlude of perhaps five years, the ample physical evidence which Japan left behind on at least three of the Kapingamarangi islands, on

the reef, and even sunk in the lagoon, is manifest more than 60 years later. Remains of the barracks, water storage tanks, watchtower, and seaplane refueling depot, though in disrepair or ruins, and even the bomb craters and sunken vessels, still stand as visible, tangible evidence of the Japanese presence on this distant and isolated atoll.

Furthermore, the more intangible evidence of numerous loan words which Kapingamarangi speakers took up, borrowed, and adapted from the Japanese speakers, and the many Japanese personal names now in use, is no less real, and no less important. The fact that no fewer than 25 Japanese words are still being used two generations later may constitute an even more substantial legacy, with a greater and more lasting impact, than the tangible ruins which will continue to erode more with each passing day.

The knowledge transfer of this adapted Japanese vocabulary from the second to the third generation since the war demonstrates that these loan words have already been incorporated as an essential part-and-parcel of the Kapingamarangi language. The fact that common words, such as “*sensei*” for teacher, “*kulumaa*” for wheelbarrow, “*kokupanga*” for chalkboard, “*empitu*” for pencil, “*sasumii*” for sashimi (Fig. 8), and many others, are now being taught by today’s teachers, and learned and employed by contemporary schoolchildren, to identify and describe material objects in their insular environment ensures that this considerable intangible legacy of Japan’s heritage overseas will continue indefinitely into the future.

The present investigations began inadvertently and serendipitously. Once on the atoll, I comprehended the evidence, both intangible and tangible. I asked the officials, the teachers and the elders some questions and noted the answers. In my five-months-long stay, I only surveyed about half of the 33 islets of Kapingamarangi Atoll, so there may exist additional material evidence of the Japanese era for future researchers to uncover. What’s more, the Polynesian language of Kapingamarangi may contain still more loan words with Japanese etymological roots than I was able to ascertain during my brief sojourn. Additional investigation and further field work are warranted.



Fig. 8. Kapingamarangians are first and foremost people of the sea. In this subsistence society of seafarers, fishing is all-important. Kapingamarangians love to eat fish, prepared many different ways, including “*sasumii*”.

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Kapingamarangi map used with permission from Asako Ashby, widow of Gene Ashby, author of Pohnpei, an Island Argosy. Expanded Edition. 408 pp., Rainy Day Press, Kolonia, Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia.

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