Some Characteristics of Life Stories Narrated as Conversion Testimonies by Japanese Christians[1]

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1. Introduction

Narratives of conversion often include information about the narrators' life stories starting from the time they were young or the time they did not have any relationship with Christianity. Their stories continue on to how they started going to church, what changes occurred as a result, and what happened after their conversion, as well as their current situations and hopes for the future. By narrating life experiences, narrators reflect on their lives and reframe these events from a religious point of view. Language plays a central role in this process since it is through the act of narrating that their experiences are examined, evaluated, and put together to make sense (Yamada, 2000).

In the past, linguistic studies of Christians' testimonies (for example, Stromberg, 1993; Meigs, 1995; and Yanagisawa, 2005) tended to be on testimonies narrated orally or through questionnaires. Stromberg (1993) analyzed oral testimonies of conversion by American Evangelical Christians obtained through interviews. Yanagisawa (2005) looked at oral testimonies in daily lives at church meetings, not conversion narratives, in a Japanese speaking church in Hawaii. Many of the studies were also conducted in the U.S., including a Japanese-English bilingual community in Hawaii as in Yanagisawa's study (2005). As an attempt to fill some of the gap in research in this area, this study analyzes written testimonies by Japanese Christians, which are found on the homepages of Japanese protestant churches on the internet.

Research questions asked were as follows:

(1) What linguistic and social characteristics do these testimonies indicate?

(2) What functions do these testimonies on the internet have?

(3) How do these testimonies reflect Japanese culture and society?

As I will show later, these testimonies have multiple functions to serve; it is a place

to share information amongst church members. It is also a tool to introduce the churches to other people by providing personal information about the church members. In addition, the stories of personal experiences might be used to encourage readers to know God better. These functions are reflected linguistically on the way the narratives were written.

I also suggest that there could be narratives which are better labeled as a story of "why I decided to be baptized," rather than "how I became a believer." Even though the boundaries of these two are not clear-cut, and they share many common features, relative focus put on the ceremony and interpersonal relationships with church members (as well as with God) seem to be different, and such differences could be reflected on the narratives.

In the sections to follow, I will first review definitions of testimony and guidelines for writing testimonies. Then, I will discuss some of the characteristics of the Japanese conversion testimonies, their functions, and socio-cultural features.

2.What is a testimony in the Christian context?

2.1. Definition of a testimony in general

Let us first start with definitions of a testimony of conversion. According to *New Christian Life Encyclopedia* [Shin-Kurisuchan Seikatsu Hyakka] (2007:102), *to testify*, or *akashi-suru* in Japanese, is defined as follows:

> 聖書で「あかしする」ということばは、自分が見聞きしたことや体験したことを証言し、それが本当のことであるとうけ合って、必要ならそれを証明し、相手がそれを受け入れて、すばらしいことと認めるようにすることを意味しています。
>
> [In the Bible, the word "testify" means to give a testimony for what one saw, heard or experienced, and to guarantee that it is true, confirming its validity if necessary, so that the other person accepts it and recognizes it as a wonderful thing.]
>
> (Translated by Yohena)

Some church websites also provide their own definition of testimonies. For example, the following is an explanation of testimony given by Higashifukuyama Lutheran church:

> キリスト様との関係で体験した日常生活の出来事とイエス様との出会いの体験を語るものを証しと呼びます。
> [Narrating experiences in everyday lives in relation to Christ and experiences of meeting with Jesus is called testimonies.] (Translated by Yohena)

As these definitions indicate, testimonies, in general, refer to any experiences that the narrators tell and testify as true regarding their relationships with God. And there are two sub-types of testimonies in terms of contents: (1) testimonies of conversion and (2) testimonies of daily-life experiences.

In this study, I will focus on the first type of testimony; the story of conversion as it often provides one's life story of an extended period of time, rather than "what happened to me last week." Such a story can be seen as a part of a life story and it provides rich resources to examine changing identities over time, framed in a religious context.

2.2. Components of testimonies

Apostle Paul's testimony which appears in Acts 26 is often referred to as a model of conversion testimony, and his testimony can be divided into 7 parts according to *New Christian Life Encyclopedia* (2007:103).

1. self-introduction
2. my situation before I believed in Christ
3. meeting Christ
4. experience of salvation
5. changes after being saved
6. current emotional situation and hopes for the future religious life
7. encouragement for hearers to make a religious decision

(Translated by Yohena)

These seven components are often simplified into three parts in some of the guidelines for writing testimonies. For example, new-testament-christian.com provides the following three components as the general outline of a testimony:

- **Before** I came to know Christ, I lived and thought this way.
- **How** I came to know Christ.
- **After** I came to know Christ, my life changed in the following ways:

These parts are given as a guideline, but each testimony is unique and does not always have all the components. Boundaries among these components may not be clear either.

2.3. Avoidance of religious terms

Further, these guidelines above advise not to use religious jargons, since they may alienate non-Christians. For example, according to new-testament-christian.com, *salvation* is advised to be replaced by *being saved*. As I will show later, however, when these special expressions are used in testimonies, they have different important functions. Since these testimonies on the internet have multiple purposes, the use of an insiders' religious expressions are also seen as a necessary part of the testimonies in some cases.

3. Previous studies on narratives of testimonies

Stromberg (2002) examined conversion testimonies by Evangelical Christians in the U.S., obtained through interviews. He argued that it is through the very act of narrating their conversion that the meaning of self-transformation is created and made effective.

Yanagisawa (2005) studied testimonies in everyday life, not conversion, narrated during a prayer meeting at a Japanese church in Hawaii. She pointed out that testimonies are an important social practice in which communal values among Christians are constructed and shared.

Kawamata (2000, 2002), from a religious sociologist's point of view, offers an interesting account about boundaries around "believers" [*shinja* in Japanese]. He claims

that there are people who have certain connections with a church both actively and passively; some may be attending church actively for an extended period of time, but have not been baptized for some reasons. Some others may be baptized but have left the church and lost contacts with Christianity completely. The boundary between a believer and non-believer may not be clear-cut. Kawamata (2002) also analyzed a pastor's wife's life history, revealing identity conflicts and problems embedded in a social position as a religious leader's wife. He suggests that qualitative analyses of life histories are effective in understanding the dynamics of social identities.

Kurosaki (2004) investigated a Christian mailing list (ML) in the U.S., and claimed that, in CMC (computer mediated communication), re-construction of religious unity is created; because members on the ML belong to different churches in the U.S, they were able to openly discuss problems which they may not want to disclose in their own church. CMC functions as a place that members can talk about their opinions, and request prayers without worrying about damaging interpersonal relationships with someone he/she must see weekly. Thus, it contributes to the creation of religious unity among the ML members.

What these studies show is the importance of creating unity among members of the religious community. These studies also indicate that telling stories and sharing problems and resolutions with others itself has fundamentally important functions in shaping identities. As Stromberg (2002) pointed out, it is by the very act of giving testimonies that the narrators' identities are created and negotiated.

In religious sociology, some further studies on life history and personal experiences in religion were done, comparing different contexts and religious organizations. Kawabata (2011), for example, points out that stories of personal religious experiences can be seen as a part of life history, and that because they are limited in topic and periods of time, these narratives can be used to identify different stages in discourse. Kono (2011) examined narratives of personal experiences written on the internet among 57 religious organizations, including protestant churches. He found that some key words such as *hospital, accident, cancer*, etc. are clustered together at the writers' initial stage of religious experiences, and *thankfulness, joy, smile* tend to be clustered at the ending stage. By reviewing stories of personal history and experiences, these sociological studies

of religion showed that it is possible to identify some common structures of personal experiences narrated in religious contexts, and they provide support for the usefulness of studying testimonies to understand socio-cultural characteristics of Japanese narrators reflected in such religious contexts.

4. Data Collection

Testimonies were collected on the internet, from homepages of protestant Christian churches in the summer of 2011. First, I put such key words as *akashi* [testimonies] or *kyoukaiin-no akashi* [testimonies of church members] into the research engines on the internet. This provided testimonies from different denominations. I also looked at homepages of churches which belong to the United Christian Church of Japan (UCCJ, Nihon Kirisuto Kyodan, the biggest church association in Japan), in Tokyo and Kanagawa districts. Then, testimonies of conversion were selected. These provided 34 testimonies. Some of them seem to have been written to be read on the day the writers were baptized, and then placed on the homepages. Some others were written for special church events or for Sunday schools. Although there was a wide variety of testimonies from various denominations and contexts, they all shared the following two features:

(1) in terms of the content, these testimonies center around the writers' conversion
(2) in terms of the media, the narratives were presented to the public through homepages of churches on the internet.

5. Some characteristics of testimonies by Japanese Christians

5.1 The beginning of the testimonies

One of the characteristics of Japanese testimonies is the indication of whether the writers' parents were Christians or not. When the narrators tell that they are from non-Christian, "ordinary" or "regular" Japanese families, such a declaration is used to position the authors as one of "many" who are not different from other Japanese. In other words, it positions the narrator as "one of us" in a country like Japan where the Christian population is very small and therefore it is rare to be born into a Christian home. The following examples are the beginnings of testimonies written by male writers, who belong

to an Evangelical church, Y. In the examples in this study, I use initials of each proper noun, even though these narratives are made public on the internet.

Example 1

私は、普通のサラリーマンの家庭に生まれました。（両親はクリスチャンではありません。）(male, church Y)

[I was born in an ordinary salary man's family (my parents are not Christians.)]

Example 2

私はクリスチャンの世界とはまったく縁のない家庭に育ちました。

(male, church Y)

[I was raised in a family which was not Christian in any way.]

This kind of introduction can be a good introduction to stories of how they come to know Christ, if they did not learn about Christianity from their parents. Therefore, it seems important for the narrators to mention it.

5.2. Negative nature before knowing God

Many people indicate negative events / circumstances / emotions before they become Christians. Even the "good" things such as graduating from a famous university, having a large income, having prestigious jobs are sometimes seen as negative factors. This is because the writers see their identities before becoming Christians as negative; for example, they confess being proud, being confused about their true purposes in life, having unhealthy interpersonal relationships, etc. Recognizing one's initial state of experiences as negative is in accordance with Kono's (2011) study in which he identified negative words (in relation to health and financial problems, etc.) tended to be clustered and often used at the initial state of narratives of religious experiences.

5.3. Personal connections with church members / pastors mentioned

Japanese conversion narratives also mentions personal connections between the

narrator and the pastor / church members frequently. Appreciations for the church members for inviting them to church or for encouraging them to be baptized are mentioned. Specific references to these people are made sometimes by mentioning their names, even though those names may not mean much to the outsiders of the church. In example 3, after the writer described the fact that he lost his daughter and was depressed, he mentions meeting with Rev. K. In the examples, personal names are changed to just the first letter of their names, even though actual names are used in the testimonies.

Example 3

そんな時、A教会のK先生と出会い、「Mちゃんは死んだのではなく、神様の国に連れていってもらったのです。幼な子のようでないと天国に入れません。今は神様のところで幸せにしています」とのお言葉を聞き…（男性、A教会）

[At that time, I met Rev. K of church A, and I heard him say, "M did not die, but she was taken to God's kingdom. No one can enter God's kingdom without becoming like a little child. She is living happily there." …. (male, church A)

Such mentioning of specific persons seems to indicate the importance of personal connections. By expressing their appreciation to pastors / church members overtly, such relationships are further reinforced so that the narrators are accepted by the Christian community of their churches. In other words, such public acknowledgments of appreciation to the "insiders" of the church make the narrators insiders of the church community as well, since it certifies social networks in the narrators' organizations.

As it has been pointed out by many researchers (for example, Doi, 1984; Hamaguchi, 1982; Suzuki, 1973, etc.) one of the characteristics of the Japanese self-identity is its strong influence of interpersonal relationships on shaping identities and social positionings; Japanese identity is, in a sense, defined in terms of relative positions one takes in relation to others (Ishikawa, 1995; Doi, 1984; Hamaguchi, 1982; etc.). This can be reflected on the way narrators told their stories of conversion also. The relationships with pastors and church members play important roles in the narrators'

changing identities, and therefore these relationships also influenced the content and the way the conversion testimonies were told.

5.4. Ritual expressions at the beginning and ending

Some narrators use rather fixed expressions for the beginnings and endings. For example, *Shu-no mina-o sanbi-shimasu* [I praise God's name] and *Hallelujah* may be used at the beginning as in Example 4.

Example 4.

主の御名を賛美致します。

「わたしが来たのは、義人を招くためではなく、罪人を招くためである。」マタイ 9 章 13 節（女性、Y 教会）

[I praise God's name. "For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matthew 9:13 (English Standard Version)] (female, church Y)

Such phrases often "mark" the writer as Christians who are actively involved in Christian communities. *New Christian Life Encyclopedia* (2007) gives an instruction not to use in-group religious expressions which may alienate non-believers as "outsiders." However, these fixed expressions indicate the writers' familiarity with Christian culture, and reinforce their memberships in a Christian community.

The use of the Bible verses is also a popular way of beginning and ending testimonies. This again functions, among many things, to indicate the writers' knowledge about the Bible and familiarity to the Christian culture; it is appropriate for them to refer to God's words and thus acknowledge the validity of the Bible in their community.

Yanagisawa (2005) points out that such ritual phrases constitute what Gee (1996) called Discourse with a capital D which refers to an integration of what to say, what to value, and what to believe. In other words, they meet the shared community expectations. Yanagisawa (2005:5) also argues that testimonies mark the narrator's awareness of the communal expectations as Japanese Christians by stating this:

The narrator marks his/her awareness of the communal expectations regarding his/her account of the story by monitoring his/her telling for inconsistencies with these expectations.

Even though Yanagisawa's data comes from oral testimonies in the narrators' everyday lives, her claim holds true also for written testimonies in this study. Their testimonies serve many different functions on the internet; in one sense, it is used to create a particular church community where the writers and the readers know each other by name, and interact regularly at church. Writing the testimony to meet the communal expectations by using familiar religious expressions and customs is considered appropriate.

6. Testimony of "why I decided to be baptized"

While there are many testimonies which tell about their experiences of conversion, some narratives seem to be more appropriately labeled as narratives of "why I decided to be baptized." Narratives of "how I became a Christian" and "why I decided to be baptized" can, of course, share many aspects and include common information such as their description of life before going to church, some turning point in their life, or experiences of learning about Christianity. In a sense, many of the stories of "how I became a Christian" include the information about "why I decided to be baptized" and vice versa. My point here is to suggest that there might be some differences in relative emphasis put on baptism and their recognition of their relationships with God or church members. The way this is expressed may vary as well.

Following is an example of a narrative which I classify as a narrative of "why I decided to be baptized." In this testimony, the writer mentions a negative event (his daughter's death), depression and how he overcame his sadness by mentioning his gratitude and thankfulness to the pastor.

Example 5 "Losing our daughter"

male, church A (UCCJ, Nihon Kirisuto Kyodan)

The first contact with a church was when I was five years old. My close friend attended Sunday school, so I went, too. But it was like I went there just to play with others, rather than to learn about God.

After that, I lived a life with no relationship with a church. I got married, our daughter was born. She fought with her disease, but finally she used up all of her strength, and died. I knew her death was coming, but when I actually saw her death, I felt that she was born only to suffer, and it was very hard for me. I felt my powerlessness as I could do nothing for her, and she was taken away to a far place where I could no longer touch. I was deeply depressed.

At that time, I met Rev. K of A Church, and he said, "M-chan (my daughter's nickname) did not die, but she was taken to God's kingdom. No one can enter God's kingdom without becoming like a little child. She is living happily there." Her short and piteous life was saved, and the distance which once felt extremely far became close, and my own sorrow was healed.

Upon baptism this time, I was hesitant because the period I attended the church was short, but I thought our daughter had led us to this, so I decided to be baptized. From now on, I hope to live each day according to God's will.

(Translation by Yohena)

As the author himself writes toward the end, "so I decided to be baptized", the events were connected so that they highlight his baptism. His daughter who was at first positioned as "only to suffer" comes to take a central role to lead the narrator to baptism ("I thought our daughter had led us to this").

One of the characteristics of this type of conversion narrative is that it does not necessarily describe one's recognition of sin or being "saved" overtly, but these aspects are inferred indirectly. For example, in the above testimony, the father refers to the sad incident, his pastor's help, his hesitation to be baptized, and overcoming that hesitation about baptism. What is described here is the process that the author took in order to decide to be baptized. His personal relationship with God is only mentioned at the end as his hope to follow God's will in the future.

Another characteristic is that it often makes specific references to church members, pastors and missionaries in order to explain and reconstruct social networks in the church community. As mentioned above, to refer to the people who helped them overtly builds personal connections with them. When narratives of "why I decided to be baptized" are written for the purpose of being read at the ceremony of baptism, the original audience or readers of such testimonies are the church members. Therefore, it is natural that the key people at the church were mentioned and thanked for specifically.

7. Conclusion:

This study examined narratives of conversion found on the internet through websites of Japanese protestant Christian churches. At the beginning, I posed three research questions:

(1) What linguistic and social characteristics do these testimonies indicate?

(2) What functions do these testimonies on the internet have?

(3) How do these testimonies reflect Japanese culture and society?

As a partial answer to (1), it was found that the narrators often mentioned whether they were born into a Christian family or not. The disclosure of such information was effectively used to position the narrators as "ordinary" Japanese, building solidarity with many readers who also do not have Christian parents. Negative events and evaluation about oneself are also mentioned when referring to their life before becoming Christians. Further, pastors and friends at church are frequently mentioned, sometimes using their personal names. Ritual expressions and quotations from the Bible verses may also be used to begin or end testimonies.

For (2), it was shown that these testimonies on the internet had multiple functions such as claiming the narrators' memberships in the church community, introducing the church to non-members, encouraging non-believers to know God and so on. These multi-functions are reflected in the way the narratives were told. Use of ritual expressions can be seen as a claim of the narrator's familiarity to Christianity and thus contributed to the reinforcement of their memberships in the Christian community. Mentioning of personal names of the church members and pastors also function as their acknowledgement of

these people's help. Overt indications of relations with these people reflect the social networks of the narrators.

Then, how do these characteristics reflect Japanese culture and society (research question 3)? One way they reflected Japanese culture and society is the relative importance of interpersonal relationships shown in the testimonies. The small percentage of the Christian population in Japan may have influenced the way narrators referred to their situation or identity before coming to know God. Claims about oneself as "having no interest in Christianity" or "being raised up in a Buddhist family" were often made. When the narrators mentioned that they were not from Christian families, these descriptions positioned the narrators as "an ordinry member" of the Japanese society. Further, frequent mentioning of pastors, missionaries and friends at church also seems to reflect the importance of social networks among Japanese.

These characteristics may also be analyzed as differences in relative focus put on the ceremony of baptism and a relationship with church members and God. In this regard I suggested a possibility of two subtypes of conversion narratives; (1) "how I became a Christian" and (2) "why I decided to be baptized." Even though their boundaries are not clear-cut, and they surely share many common aspects, different weights put on the ceremony and/or the interpersonal relationships with members of the community seem to influence what should be included and what is not necessarily crucial in the testimonies.

Language use in religious institutions needs to be examined more. Even among Christians, different denominations, gender, age, and original contexts in which these narratives are written, etc, influence the way people tell their experiences. It is hoped that these aspects will be examined further in the future. Conversion narratives offer a rich resource to explore how people understand their changes in identities, how they claim their memberships in a particular sub-culture, how narrators describe their relative positioning to the receivers of the stories and so on.

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