

## The birth of Tenri City, the “City of Religion”: Its problems and its meaning in the history of Japanese municipal mergers and dissolutions

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The “Great Merger of the Showa Era” (Showa no Daigappei 昭和の大合併) was modern Japan's second nationwide policy of municipal mergers and dissolutions (*haichi bungo* 配置分合), conducted for several years from October 1953 onwards. All municipalities (*shichoson* 市町村) in all prefectures were supposed to take part in order to reduce the total number of municipalities to one third as a measure to solve the postwar fiscal crisis being faced at the local administrative levels. During this “Great Merger” many new cities were established, one of which was Tenri City in Nara prefecture.

Tenri City, which was founded on 1 April 1954, initially incorporated six towns (*cho*) and villages (*mura*): Tanbaichi-cho, Nikaido-mura, Asawa-mura, Fukuzumi-mura (all from the district of Yamanobe-gun), Yanagimoto-cho (Shiki-gun), and Ichinomoto-cho (Soekami-gun). The name “Tenri” was derived from the newly rising religious sect, Tenrikyo, founded in 1838 and headquartered in the Mishima area of Tanbaichi-cho, which was the home of the sect's founder Nakayama Miki. Since Tenrikyo is a religion which demands and encourages pilgrimages to its headquarters, since it is also the main sanctuary, Tanbaichi had enjoyed economic prosperity since the end of the 19th century. Therefore, the “Great Merger” presented Tanbaichi with an excellent opportunity to found a new city with the town and the Tenri Sect as its center.

*The Revised History of Tenri City (Kaitei Tenrishi-Shi* 改訂天理市

史), which was published in 1976, does not describe the municipal merger which created the city in much detail, but has chosen rather to present an overview, implying that no problems were encountered during the process. To the contrary, there were indeed several major problems which threatened to prevent the newly merged municipality from obtaining city (*shi* 市) status, as described in such contemporary sources as official documents and news coverage, which have not been included in the *Revised History's* five separate volumes of source materials. For example, Nikaido-mura and Ichinomoto-cho did not at first wish to be merged into Tenri City; and in order to use the term “Tenri” as the name of the new city, the Tenrikyo Sect would have to give its permission, which at the beginning was not a certainty, as the protocols of the merger commission indicate.

This article discusses the role of Tenrikyo during the merger process in more detail within the context of the above mentioned problems, then goes on to discuss the significance of the Tenri City incorporation for the “Great Merger” program in general. Although the research to date on Japanese municipal mergers and dissolutions has not considered religion as a factor, this article shows that in the case of Tenri City religious aspects cannot be ignored entirely.