

## 論文

# Japanese American's Cultural Trauma and Identity

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## 要旨

(日系アメリカ人のカルチュラル・トラウマとアイデンティティ)

アメリカと日本という二つの国の狭間で、歴史的に被害者となってしまった日系アメリカ人。その日系人の歴史をひもとくきっかけとなったのは、ハワイ大学留学時代、著者が日系アメリカ人に対して感じた「違和感」だった。日本という、他国に比べて言語的にも民族的にも単一国家で生まれ育ったため、異なる国の人と接触する際、その言葉と文化、アイデンティティを国籍と同一視していた。しかしながら、見た目は自分と同じ日本人、それなのに話す言語は英語、そして国籍をたずねるとアメリカ人だと答える。一方で仏教精神にもとづくお盆の風習や年末のもちつきなどの文化を大切にしていたりする、そんな日系アメリカ人たちは、現代の日本で生きる日本人よりも「日本人」らしいのかもしれない。第二次世界大戦以前からの、なぜ彼らがアメリカに渡り移民として定着することになったのか、世界大戦中、そして戦後、アメリカという国でどんな立場で生きてきたのかなどの歴史的背景を踏まえながら、日系アメリカ人が、文化、言語、歴史などの観点から自分たちのアイデンティティをどう捉えているのか、それらをいくつかの文献の理論にあてはめて分析した研究論文である。

Keywords: Nikkei (日系人), Japanese American (日系アメリカ人), Hawaii (ハワイ), Cultural Trauma (カルチュラル・トラウマ), Identity (アイデンティティ・

自己同一性), World War II (第二次世界大戦), Acculturation (文化適合), Minority (少数派)

## Introduction

When I first went to Hawaii as an exchange student, I noticed that there were many people with Asian faces, and I found it a little uncomfortable because they belonged to Americans. I was also unsettled by people who had Japanese names. They all looked like Japanese, which made me feel a sense of closeness, but they did not speak Japanese and they behaved differently from the people I had known in Japan. These Japanese-Americans are known as the Nikkei. Nikkei originally means Japanese diasporas who immigrated from Japan and their descendants to other parts of the world (Nozaki, 2007). Since the Nikkei are one of the major ethnic groups of the islands of Hawaii, I had many opportunities to interact with them.

The main reason I am interested in the Nikkei people in Hawaii is that interacting with these people forces me to think about ethnic identity in a way I never had to when I was in Japan. The environment where I grew up in Japan is linguistically and culturally homogeneous compared with other nations, and I have not had many opportunities to contact people of different cultures. Because of this, it was not until I travelled outside of my county at the age of 19 that I started to think about my ethnic identity by seeing people who had different colors of skin, hair, and eyes than me and those I knew back in Japan. It is clear now that I assumed people's identity was only based on their ethnicity. I categorized people based on which countries they were from, their personal appearance, their ethnicity, or their language. However, my classification system did not work on the Nikkei people and I had to rethink how I viewed people's identities.

I have travelled to other countries and viewed different groups of people before, but it was my experience with the Nikkei that really forced me to reassess how I categorize people. I think it is because they are very like the Japanese I know from Japan, and yet so very different. On the one hand, the Nikkei cannot speak Japanese and they are very American in the way they act, despite their Asian appearance. On

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the other hand, even though they are Americans, I can see a large amount of Japanese cultural and linguistic aspects in them.

For example, the Nikkei have Japanese traditions which Japanese people in Japan hardly observed today. One such tradition is the mochi pounding at the end of a year. Another tradition is the bon-dance, which is a Buddhist custom to honor the departed spirits of ancestors. This custom came from the Buddhist belief that the spirits of ancestors return to the ancestral family during a short period of summer holidays and has been celebrated for more than 500 years in Japan. Although most of Nikkei people consider themselves Christians, it seems that they still have a great value on Japanese culture and habits. Yet these practices are rarely practiced in Japan which I think is very sad. Thus, Nikkei people in Hawaii are not very Japanese to some extent, but on the other hand, they are very “Japanese,” and they are sometimes more “Japanese” than people in Japan.

### **Historical background of Nikkei in Hawaii**

In 2008, 25% of the people in Hawaii were ethnically Japanese or had roots in Japan. These people are known as the Nikkei. At one time the Nikkei made up more than 30% of people of Hawaii (Yoshida, 2008). These large numbers of Japanese in the Islands of Hawaii can be traced back to 1886, when Japanese immigrants came to Hawaii as contract laborers for sugar canes and pineapple plantations for the first time. They were called Gannen-mono, which means people who left for Hawaii at the beginning of the Meiji era in Japan. Back in those days, Japanese immigrants planned to go back to Japan with their family after making a certain amount of money. However, for many of them they were never able to return because of the starting of the World War between Japan and the U.S.

Language has always been an important part of education of Nikkei people. In 1890, worrying about the increasing Americanization of their US-born children, Japanese immigrants set up the first Japanese language school with the purpose of preserving language and culture. By 1920, 98% of all Japanese children in Hawaii attended Japanese schools. It is reported that the number of Japanese schools were 163 before the World War II. (Tamura, 1994) During the World War II, they were all closed down because teaching Japanese was considered the act of betrayal during the

war. After the World War II, some Japanese language schools reopened. However, the conflicts between Japan and the U.S. came to be disadvantageous to the situation of Japanese language schools. For the 1st and 2nd generations, they were planning to go back to Japan, and they were eager to learn and keep their native language and culture. Even though 2nd generations were born in the U.S., they could have the access to the native language and culture from their parents. However, for 3rd and after generations, they were born in Hawaii and they grew up as an American citizen. Besides, during and after the World War II, those pressures of the U.S. society pushed them to insist that they were American, not Japanese. In fact, they considered themselves American citizens and tried hard to show their loyalty for the U.S. Nikkei people that I can currently see in Hawaii, are mostly 3rd, 4th, and 5th generations. They all look like Japanese, but their native language is English which makes me feel different. Even though they have the same kind of faces as me, they cannot even speak Japanese and they go to a church on Sundays. They are American, not Japanese. However, Nikkei people still hold traditional Japanese customs and beliefs. In addition, some of them still go to a Japanese language school on weekends. These are the reasons why I became interested in Nikkei people in Hawaii.

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During the World War II, being Japanese American (Nikkei people) meant being suspected of betrayal as the United States and Japan were at war (Yasui, 2007). The reasoning behind this suspicion was basically physical: the Japanese Americans had a Japanese face. In reality, the Japanese Issei (first generation) parents who were born in Japan did have a strong attachment to their homeland. (Watanabe, 2001). However, those Nisei children who were born in U.S. and grew up as U.S. citizens, while they felt close kingship with Japan also called the United States home. Even so, they were still regarded as a hostile spy or “tekikoku gaijin” (potential enemy). They found themselves in the difficult situation of being between their Japanese parents and American selves. This tension of identity was a major reason why a lot of Nisei joined the military as a soldier or as a language translator to show their loyalty to the U.S. (Watanabe, 2001)

In the wake of Imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, approximately 110,000

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Japanese nationals and Nikkei people were forced to live in a concentration camp known as the "War Relocation Camp". This internment of them was applied unequally throughout U.S., as Japanese Americans residing on the West Coast of the United States were all interned, whereas in Hawaii, where the 150,000 Nikkei people composed nearly a third of that territory's population, only 1,200 to 1,800 Japanese nationals Nikkei people were interned. Of those interned in Hawaii, 62% were U.S. citizens (Yasui, 2007). During this period, they had to give up anything that linked them to Japan and the Japanese emperor, forcing them to give up most of their physical belongings and even activities that represented Japanese culture.

There are many examples of Nikkei people's cultural trauma and their ambiguous feeling (especially Nisei and Kibei Nisei). Nisei and Kibei Nisei have totally different backgrounds when it comes to culture and language, although they are the same generation. Because the Kibei were sent to Japan and received education in Japan, they grew up in a different environment and experienced the language differently than the Nisei. However, both groups had a strong attachment to Japan, because it was their parents' homeland. Both groups grew up with Japanese food, language and customs and had direct access to their parents, who lived with them in the United States. Also for both groups discrimination was very harsh due to the war situation and also general discrimination in the United States against Japanese during this time period (Watanabe, 2001). Much of this discrimination was due to the fact that Japan was an emerging world superpower, and many felt threatened. If Japan had been a weak country, Americans' anxiety over the future control of the territory would likely have been much less dramatic, but Japan's visibly growing military strength and aggressive foreign policy, and especially the large size of Japanese population in Hawaii caused many of the Caucasians in the country to feel a great deal of anxiety (Tamura, 1994). Under those situations, their identity formation can be seen from the perspective of Becker's Terror Management Theory.

Terror management theory (TMT) emerged from the field of the social psychology and was supported by Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, while Ernest Becker linked the theory to empirical science. This theory is concerned with the implicit emotional reactions of people when confronted with the psychological terror of knowing that they will eventually die. It also could be described as an awareness of mortality; a trait unique to humans. There are two hypotheses included

in the TMT research: the mortality salience hypothesis and the anxiety buffer hypothesis. The mortality salience hypothesis says that if cultural worldviews and self-esteem provide protection from the fear of death, then reminding people of the root of that fear will increase the needs of individuals to value their own cultural worldview and self-esteem. On the other hand, the anxiety buffer hypothesis provides the rationale that self-esteem is a buffer which serves to escape humans from the fear of death. TMT is a psychological framework that explains how we as human beings defend against anxiety and existential terror with having those two hypotheses (Salzman, 2001).

This theory suggests that there are two factors which the individual must sustain in order to maintain psychological calmness and composure. The first is “culture”. People can buffer anxiety by giving themselves up entirely to their cultural system of values and to the meaning that exists in their culture. This absorption in a culture with a worldview actually helps to buffer an existing terror. Therefore, culture is an important aspect of human beings which could provide a potential buffer against the terror (Salzman, 2001). The other is “Self-esteem”. Self-esteem are culturally related feelings which could be obtained by satisfying its cultural standard. People combine themselves with the achievement of those cultural standards, which actually leads to self-esteem. Then, it in turn leads to lower anxiety and positive adaptive behavior. Therefore, in Terror Management Theory, existing terror and fear against death motivate people to commit and sharpen their egos to a cultural standard. To put it another way, culture can diminish people’s psychological terror by providing meaning, organization and continuity to their lives. In addition, compliance with cultural values enhances one’s feeling of security and self-esteem, provided that the individual is capable of living in accordance with whatever particular cultural standards apply to him or her (Salzman, 2001).

Applying this theory to the Nissei during World War II, it is clear that the Japanese Americans, in the process of shaping their national identity at that time, were always affected by an external terror. Political power and oppression forced them to form a national identity. The more the political power tried to control Japanese Americans, the more energetic the Issei and Nissei people tried looked to their own value, culture and language for support and consistency. “Ironically, prejudice against the Japanese helped sustain Issei loyalty to Japan and encouraged

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Nisei to view Japan as a place of refuge from racial and social discrimination” (Tamura, 1994). As TMT implies, Japanese American people, especially the Issei parents and the parts of the younger Nesei generation followed its psychological frame work in which those existing terror and mortality motivated people to be loyalty to Japan. During these difficult times they looked to their own culture to diminish the psychological terrors by providing meaning, organization and continuity to their lives. As a result, it encouraged them to view Japan better than the United States “as a place of refuge from racial and social discrimination” (Tamura, 1994).

However, some of Nisei started to hate or deny their own culture and ethnic roots when they faced discrimination against “those Japs”. Official prejudice and discrimination ruined the careers of many young Japanese Nisei who were “honorable enough to admit that she loved the country from which her parents came” (Tamura, 1994). This tendency was more evident among a lot to Japanese American in the mainland, because Japanese in Hawaii were one of majority groups of this island (Yasui, 2007). Their large numbers and importance in the workforce meant that, early in the war, they didn't really experience the harsh discrimination those in the continental United States had to face. However, much of this changed with the bombing at Pearl Harbor, which deepened the fear and outrage against the Japanese Americans and weakened their position in the U.S. society (Yasui, 2007). During the internment period in the concentration camps, the Japanese Americans were treated like spies, and though some Issei parents encouraged Nisei to keep their loyalty to Japan, most of the parents didn't do so. Instead, they encouraged their Nisei children to adopt American practices to be seen as loyal, and even to enlist as volunteers in the military and fight against their parents' homeland. Many of the Issei saw this as the only way for their Nisei to improve their social position after the war.

### **U.S. Reaction to Japanese American during WWII**

Without a doubt, one of the most significant events affecting Nikkei people's identity was the American government reaction to Imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent war. The later experiences of the Issei and Nesei in the Internment camps and even in battle against their ancestral country provoked many

different responses.

Nozaki referenced four negative images of the Japanese prior to and during WWII: that the Japanese were (1) Highly un-American, (2) Inferior citizens, (3) Sexually aggressive, and (4) An international menace. These stereotypes may come as some surprise, however, when viewed in light of the manner that the Nikkei seemed to accept the internments and other travesties to them without much trouble. Most of the people at a concentration camp were Issei parents, their kids Nisei, and Kibei Nisei. Nearly all these people grew up immersed in Japanese culture and language at home, especially Kibei Nisei were educated in Japan. One would assume that these Japanese Americans would have many of the same traits as those Japanese still back in Japan. However, most of the perspectives given by Sansei today mention totally opposite characteristics of Japanese people to Nozaki's stereotypes; instead of aggression and menacing behavior the Nikkei at that time were often known as the very opposite. In fact, Sansei Nikkei are now wondering why their Nisei parents entered into concentration camps without any resistance, even though they were U.S. citizens. Their very constitutional rights were trampled on, as the action used on them was against the ideal of freedom and equality of the United States Constitution (Nozaki, 2007). Some reason the Japanese American went so quietly into the concentration camps was due to the fact that they were amenable, mild-mannered and quiet (Nozaki, 2007).

I still remember that I was very shocked to watch the movie *Do the Right Thing* (Lee, 1989) for the first time in a seminar class while I studied at Aichi University. The movie documents very aggressive and hateful action of people with each other. Before seeing this movie I had never seen and experienced conflicts between different races and social classes. I didn't even know that there was such serious discrimination in the U.S. society, although I did know that slavery was considered acceptable at one time in the past. I had learned that the United States was a multiethnic country in high school, but I never knew conflicts between races still exist in the U.S. society. I felt sorry for the black people of the film, because physical appearance such as color of skin is not something a person can chose. I have never experienced the difficulty of being discriminated against because of my skin color in Japan, and I was struck speechless when I realized it happened in the United States and still occurs in some ways even to this day.

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Yet, the same type of thing actually happened to Nikkei people during WWII, and we can see the visible racial discrimination in the U.S. society that occurred with the Japanese internment camps. What is ironic here is that the United States claimed to be a country of freedom and equality, yet this was a case of blatant discrimination against one particular group of people based entirely on their race. Most agree that sending those Japanese Americans to the concentration camps is a tarnish on the history of the United States. (Yasui, 2007). When I thought about those two facts I even felt anger at the U.S. society which at times is only saying itself officially as a country of freedom and equality, but it was actually acting as a country dominated by only one type of people.

Though most of the Issei planned on returning to Japan, there were several factors that made them stay in the United States. John Ogbu (1978) mentions two kinds of minority groups: Immigrant minorities and involuntary minorities. Minority groups have been placed into their various societies either voluntarily or involuntarily. Those who have been incorporated voluntarily are immigrants, and those who were brought into their present society through slavery, conquest or colonization have been considered involuntary minorities. Nikkei people best fall under the involuntary immigrants' classification because they considered their life in the U.S. as temporary, without plans on being actual immigrants to the United States.

Ogbu found the two types of minority group have significantly different attitudes toward the host society. Immigrant minorities generally moved to their present societies because they believed that the move would lead to more economic well-being, better overall opportunities or greater political freedom. These high expectations continually influenced the way they perceived and responded to treatment by members of the dominant group. This is similar to these early Nikkei people; however, these parents to the Issei didn't diffuse into the U.S. society greatly. On the other hand, involuntary minorities usually resent the loss of their former freedom and they perceive the social, political and economic barriers against them as part of their underserved oppression, as was the case for many of these early Nikkei. One reason among many was the California Alien Land of Law which prohibited "aliens ineligible for citizenship" (Watanabe, 2001). The Nikkei saw such laws as economic oppression by the white majority who were worried about financial success

that many of the Issei people were having.

Ogbu also mentioned a dual frame which is used to compare the present situation of minority immigrants with their former. Immigrant minorities have a positive dual frame of reference which allows them to develop or maintain an optimistic view of their future possibilities. They think they will or can overcome problems they are facing with the passage of the time, and they are better off in their host society than they would be in their homeland. On the other hand, involuntary minorities have different perception and use a different dual frame from immigrant minorities. Because they do not have “homeland” with which to compare their present situation, they compare their status with that of the members of the dominant group. Involuntary minorities have a negative dual frame compared with voluntary minorities. They cannot see their situation as temporary, and they tend to interpret the discrimination against them as permanent and institutionalized (Ogbu, 1978).

Based on these categories, the Issei (Nikkei 1st generation) people would have more similarities with involuntary minorities, although there could be doubts if they missed the life back in Japan. Those first generation Issei came to the U.S. because they thought it easier to make money in a foreign country, not in Japan. Based on Ogbu's model, if Nikkei Issei are categorized into involuntary minorities, they would also think it impossible to overcome the discriminatory situation by themselves. This would mean they would have a negative dual frame of their status in the U.S. society. In his research, Ogbu explores other involuntary minorities such as Blacks in Stockton, American Indians in Utah, and other minority immigrants from Asia. While these immigrants had their own difficulties acculturating with society in the United States, it seems that the original Nikkei people may have felt a greater sense of inferiority. This can be claimed as it was only the Japanese immigrants that were actually targeted by the Immigration Act of 1924 that was put in place to specifically get rid of Japanese community from the U.S. society (Tamura, 1994). It seems that the Nikkei had an extreme example of harsh discrimination from very early stages in their work in the United States. Thus the Issei were not immigrants who voluntarily went to the U.S., but they were forced to stay in the United States through social and economic barriers and other forms of oppression.

## **To become a good “American”—Americanization and Acculturation**

Before WWII, the term of democracy often can be replaced as “Americanization”. During the war, most saw Americanization as the Nisei giving unconditional loyalty to the United States and discarding all vestiges of Japanese culture. (Tamura, 1994) Many Caucasian Americans took to Americanizing the Japanese people, with the result that some of Nisei started hating their own looks, along with their cultural and ethnic roots. This Americanization continued with the Nisei themselves, many of whom did not teach Japanese to their children, the Sansei, so that they would fit into U.S. society better (Yasui, 2007). The Kibei Nisei were also placed in a difficult position. Though they were born in the U.S., they were educated in Japan, and many of them had a hard time to adjusting themselves into the U.S. society after the war. This was due in large part to their strong national pride and identity that they gained through the time spent in Japan. However, when they returned to the U.S., they also saw the reality of life under discrimination (Yasui, 2007). As a result, the Kibei Nisei also had feelings of both love and hate towards Japan. Consequently, they were neither American nor Japanese. They had lost their social position both in Japan and the United States, finding they did not fit in either.

Religion provided difficulties as well. Because Japanese immigrants to Hawaii were Buddhists, Buddhism rather than Christianity spread throughout Japanese communities dotting the islands of the territory (Tamura, 1994). Both Nisei and Kibei Nisei were mostly Buddhists, and some claim that part of the motivation which supported the Japanese people under the harsh working conditions of the plantation was their Buddhist belief that people attain enlightenment after they endure hardship (Tamura, 1994). However, many of the Caucasian Americans were Christians who rejected the “alien religion” on the grounds that Buddhism was incompatible with American ideals (Tamura, 1994). Eventually this pressure from the dominant culture in America through the process of Americanization, many of the Nikkei people laid aside their Buddhist beliefs and became Christian.

However, many Buddhist practices still exist today, and I find it very strange to see Christian Nikkei do the mochi pounding and bon dance which are from Buddhism and Shintoism. This brought up a question: What does being Christian actually mean for these people? Here is a perfect example. One of my friends’

grandparents who is Kibei Nisei told me her story about becoming Christian late in life. It was not a natural change for her because she grew up in Japan, where it is normal to consider oneself a Buddhist. However, my friends' grandmother had two sons and one daughter who were all Christian and she was concerned that it would be a burden for kids to take care of her after she died in a Buddhist manner. In Buddhism, people have to take care of the deceased in certain intervals such as 49 days later, 1 year later, 3 years later and so on. Though she converted she still shared with me that she wanted to be buried in the land of Japan after she died. This idea is a very Buddhist way of thinking; people in Japan believe that a soul and a body are separated after they died and the soul goes back to where the borne is buried. Though she was a Christian, she still held on to her Buddhist beliefs, and I see her decision to be a Christian as one form of assimilation of a Nikkei to adjust to the local culture and community.

The Nikkei people tended to assimilate quickly into a local culture and community, a stark difference to other Asian people in the same places and time periods. One reason for this might be the cultural belief and practices that it is best to live in harmony with other people. But more than that, the discrimination and pressure from the government against Nikkei people forced them to accelerate their Americanization, which in turn caused much of their language and cultural heritage to wane as subsequent generations passed.

When it comes to discussing the Second World War, I must confess that I always feel a little guilty. Japan made huge mistakes and enacted some or bad actions on different countries and this makes me feel a little ashamed of my country's history. However, studying Nikkei's background and their effort in its history during the World War II somehow awakens myself to the fact that I truly love my own country Japan no matter what it has done in the past.

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