BEING
JAPANESE AMERICAN

The Evolving Japanese American Identity

BY JANE H. YAMASHIRO

Have you ever thought about what it means to identify as Japanese American? Why do some people use the term "Nikkei American" instead of "Japanese American"?

Over the past 60 years, Nikkei American demographics have been changing significantly. These changes include low immigration rates from Japan (leading to a decreasing Nikkei American population relative to the rest of the Asian American population), an aging population, an increase in interracial marriages, and a move away from Japantown and urban centers to the suburbs. The younger generations are more multiracial and more mixed generationally, provoking ongoing discussions about the future of the community and what it means to be Japanese American.

The community has had national conversations about how we might rethink what it means to be Japanese American. The Nikkei 2000 National Conference was held with the goal of "actively meet[ing] the challenges of the Japanese American community's evolving needs." Eric Tate, who co-founded one of the first hapa student groups at the University of California, Berkeley, in the early 1990s, recapped the conference findings in the conference's booklet, *Nikkei 2000 Summary and Analysis*:

> "We have to begin by getting rid of the old notions of who is a Japanese American...I know at various times, only persons with a Japanese surname could play basketball, or a woman had to have a certain blood quantum to be a Cherry Blossom contestant. This broader inclusiveness applies to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons, disabled or handicapped persons, those who are Japanese-speaking, those who have one Japanese parent or grandparent or no Japanese parents or grandparents, and basically anyone else who doesn't fit the traditional notion of a JA. Again, these are just examples, but my point is that we need to change the rules. Because yesterday's rules do not apply to today's game, and if we keep playing by the same old rules, we will lose."

"Nikkei" has become a term that includes not only people of later and mixed generations, but, as Tate asserts, "anyone who doesn't fit the traditional notion of a [Japanese American]." For this reason, many individuals and organizations have shifted from using the term "Japanese American" to the term "Nikkei American" to be more inclusive.

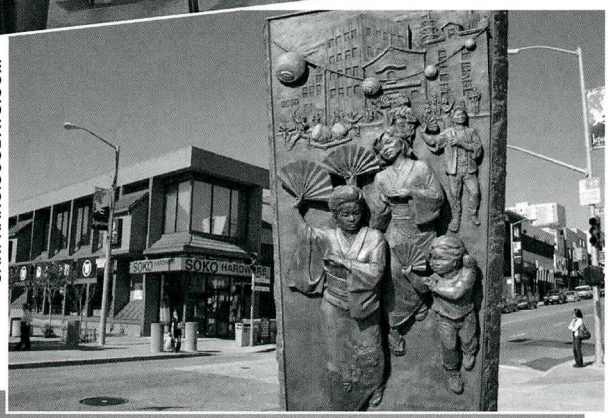
"We have to begin by getting rid of the old notions of who is a Japanese American... we need to change the rules. Because yesterday's rules do not apply to today's game."
– Eric Tate

On a personal level, while I have always identified as Japanese American and felt enmeshed in community, I have also felt the narrowness of who and what it has referred to, not having grown up participating in mainstream Japanese American community activities. Growing up in Berkeley, I often helped out at my father's store (Richard's Jewelers in Albany), where most of his customers were Japanese American. As a Nisei born and raised in Berkeley then incarcerated at Topaz as a teenager, my father knew Japanese Americans both from the neighborhood where he grew up and from camp. He also participated in Japanese American bowling and golf clubs and brought my family to the local annual bazaars. Between the customers who gathered at the

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The few remaining urban enclaves of Japanese American culture and identity (top to bottom): Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, Japantown in San Francisco, and Japantown in San Jose.

store and the community events that we attended, I took for granted that we were part of the community.

Yet, at the same time, I never played basketball and we did not regularly attend a church, so my connections to the community have never been the same as my Japanese American peers who were involved with these activities. As a result, I've always had mixed feelings about my place in the community. I take for granted that I am part of it at the same time that I do not share many of the experiences that seem central in defining it, namely, participation in Japanese American sports and religious institutions.

How different is a Japanese American identity centered around speaking Japanese and visiting Japan regularly and one centered in Japantowns, basketball leagues, and U.S.-based Japanese American culture?

I reflected on this often while conducting research on U.S.-born and raised Nikkei Americans who live in Japan as adults. As I conducted interviews asking people about their experiences growing up and how they identified, a number of people said that they did not identify as Japanese American. Their reasons shed some light on where the boundaries of being Japanese American lie and how they might shift in the future.

Not a Minority in Hawai'i

Rick was born and raised in Hawai'i on the island of O'ahu. He grew up not using the term "Japanese American." He reflected that,

> "...growing up in Hawai'i, you don't say Japanese American, usually you say Japanese... in Hawai'i, especially after the '50s, being Nikkei was kind of, you know, you're part of the ruling class, right? So you kind of get a little resentment from the other ethnicities there because of that. Kind of like being white on the mainland, I think."

Rick's comments were characteristic of most Hawai'i Nikkei I spoke with who said that when growing up they never thought much about their ability to blend in and feel included as part of mainstream society in Hawai'i—a stark contrast to many Nikkei on the mainland. Of course, Nikkei were not always well-represented in politics or mainstream society in Hawai'i. But as a "local" culture has developed, and as Nikkei have become more well represented, their experiences are generally different from those of Nikkei who are minorities on the U.S. continent. And while Nikkei in Hawai'i do not have access to all the same kinds of privilege that white people enjoy on the mainland or, indeed, in much of the world, Rick suggests that, by some measures, they might be better compared to whites on the mainland than to Nikkei on the mainland.

Many Shin-Nisei (children of postwar Japanese immigrants) on the U.S. continent do not identify with being Japanese American because to them it suggests a history of incarceration and cultural distance from Japan.



PHOTO COURTESY NJAHS

Family life at the Santa Anita "Assembly" Center in Arcadia, California, 1942 (photo by Clem Albers/Department of the Interior War Relocation Authority, National Archives).

In addition, Rick notes how Japanese American is not a term commonly used in Hawai'i. Several Hawai'i interviewees related that the term "Japanese American" is used by the government or academics, but not by most people in everyday conversations in Hawai'i. People of Japanese ancestry in Hawai'i more commonly describe themselves just as Japanese. This may be because ethnic Japanese are not a minority in Hawai'i and it is commonly understood that they can be "local," in contrast to Nikkei on the continent who are often assumed to be immigrants.

Connected to Japanese Society and Culture

Many Shin-Nisei (children of postwar Japanese immigrants) on the U.S. continent do not identify with being Japanese American because to them it suggests a history of incarceration and cultural distance from Japan. For those whose parents came from Japan after World War II, their family history of the war was from the Japan side, not the U.S. side. Rather than experiencing incarceration, close relatives may have experienced the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, the Battle of Okinawa, or other bombings in the Japanese archipelago.

Tracy grew up in California with a mother from Japan. She reflected, "I feel like the Japanese American community bonds solely over internment. It would be nice to find something contemporary." At the same time, she recognizes the importance of teaching incarceration history because she says that "things happening today show that we haven't learned from it," alluding to the racist and xenophobic treatment of Muslim Americans. So Tracy is not saying that incarcation history is unimportant. Rather, she wonders if there is a more contemporary experience and identity that can bring Nikkei Americans together.

Sara was raised in the Midwest and also has a mother from Japan. In her mind, "Japanese American" refers to being born and raised in the United States, and not growing up with contemporary Japanese language or culture. She explained that "they seem to have a superficial sense of being Japanese" because "they talk about Japan like it's a class or something; it's not a lived experience for them." This contrasts with her knowledge of Japanese culture and language and her experiences visiting Japan with her family. Sara has been the recipient of a Japanese American Citizen's League (JACL) scholarship and has attended their events, but feels distant from them and the Japanese American community.

Mixed Heritage

Naomi, whose mother is from Japan and father is a white American, explains that, "I usually think of Japanese American as someone of 100% Japanese descent, so I never really identified that way." Since she associated Japanese American with people who are not of mixed heritage, she did not think it included her.

Martin, whose mother is a white American and whose father is from Japan, said he does not like associating with the term "Japanese American" for several reasons. First, he doesn't like racial terms and doesn't want to be categorized in a racial or ethnic way. Second, when attending an international high school in Tokyo, other "half American and half Japanese" never referred to themselves as "Japanese American." Third, by college he already had a



PHOTO COURTESY THE FIELD MUSEUM, CHICAGO

Organized by the Japanese American National Museum, "kip fulbeck part asian, 100% hapa" began its traveling exhibition in 2008 and ends this year at the Nikkei National Museum and Cultural Center in Burnaby, BC, Canada.

Over the past 15 years, we can see many community organizations becoming more inclusive. For example, organizations like the Japanese American National Museum and NJAHS have held exhibits focusing on the experiences of mixed-race Japanese Americans.

nationality-based identity. So although he is a U.S. citizen of Japanese ancestry, Martin identifies not as Japanese American but, rather, as Japanese and American. He is more focused on his two national parentages than on his racial or ethnic backgrounds. Instead of seeing himself in racial or ethnic terms as white and Japanese/Asian, he sees himself in national terms as half American and half Japanese. His upbringing outside of the United States encouraged him to see himself in this way.

Many mixed-race Nikkei Americans whom I interviewed feel excluded from identifying as Japanese American based on phenotype (physical characteristics) and other racial connotations. "Japanese American" is an ethnic term that is usually seen as part of the pan-ethnic grouping Asian. But Asian is a racial category that implies phenotypical differences from whites and blacks, such as eye shape and skin, hair and eye color. What, then, does it mean if Nikkei Americans don't look Asian?

Addressing Diversity

Even though my interviewees may not be representative of the larger Nikkei population in the United States, their perspectives do illuminate some aspects of how people currently understand being Japanese American.

For one, they reveal how central the incarceration and prewar immigration experience in the United States is to current constructions of the Japanese American community. There are numerous legitimate reasons for this. But when we include more about modern Japanese and Hawai'i history in Japanese American historical narratives, (without undermining the importance of incarceration or prewar history), a wider population might be better able to relate. Some Japanese American history books include the experiences of postwar migrants from Japan and people in Hawai'i, contextualizing incarceration in a larger history of ethnic Japanese experiences that transcend the U.S. continent during those particular years.

I think it is most useful when these pre- and postwar histories are recognized as distinct yet overlapping, rather than as somehow woven together. When woven together as a single narrative, it is common to see discussions of Hawai'i plantations, then incarceration, then postwar Nikkei political successes in Hawai'i. Instead of this, subgroups within the Nikkei American population could be identified and each of their histories recognized separately, intersecting as people migrate from one place to another. The audience could develop a better sense of how Nikkei experiences have differed yet overlapped as people have migrated between Japan, Hawai'i, and the U.S. continent, among other places.

There is also rich material to explore by comparing how different groups of Nikkei Americans have experienced certain events or time periods. When we look comparatively at something like the incarceration (and non-incarceration) of Nikkei in Hawai'i and on the U.S. continent, we get a deeper understanding of both communities. When immigration history looks comparatively at Japanese migration to the United States in both the prewar and

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18