From the Plantations They Grew: Japanese Arrival and Prosperity in Hawai'i

Hawai'i—the Hawaiian Dictionary explains that in Hawai'i, this term has no meaning (Pukui 62). But for many Americans, it is a tropical paradise that one can escape to, without having to deal with troublesome visas and not having to worry about communicating in a different language. For people visiting from the western direction, Hawai'i is getting the best of America with sunshine all year around and at the same time, experiencing that same “tropical paradise” that the Americans also dream about. For fellow Pacific Islanders, it is also about getting to the States, however, without having to travel such a lengthy distance from home. However, for locals, Hawai'i is a place that is not only called “home,” but of a land and a people that had gone through many drastic changes, mostly not for the better. These locals, or rather, the Hawaiians are indigenous people of Hawai'i, but can also refer to Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese Hawaiians—those of whom had immigrated to the land of Aloha during the plantation years to find better lives for themselves. What they found however, were many years of hard work and little pay, discrimination, and disappointment. Particularly, the Japanese who arrived in Hawai'i, although expected to be a humble and loyal people, went through a century of rising through the ranks through protests, strikes, and oppression.

The original people of Polynesia had originally come from the Malay archipelago as seafarers and settled in these new lands while establishing new island societies. In particular, the island of Hawai'i had created a hierarchy consisting of the ali'i (chiefs/ruling class), kahuna (priests/experts), maka'ainana (commoners), and the kauwa (outcasts/slaves). Additionally, the Hawaiians developed a system of kapu, which is defined as the “restriction, consecration, separation, or forbearance.” This kapu system was apparent in every aspect of everyday life—it was seen in relationships among the
people, gods and humans, and the people and the land. Based on this system, the Hawaiian society was
described by Captain Cook as “superbly harmonious” (McDermott 5-6).

On the political aspect of the kapu system, contact between the ali'i and the maka'ainana were
strictly observed, as the ali'i were viewed as manifestations of the gods (Kuykendall 8). For instance, in
the presence of an ali'i, the surrounding maka'ainana would have to lie stretched out on the ground with
their faces down so that they would not be able to look at the ali'i. In instances wherein the belongings
of the kapu and the person transporting these possessions were in transit through the presence of the
maka'ainana, the maka'ainana would be required to sit down on the ground until it was out of sight.
Additionally, if the shadow of the maka'ainana would somehow touch the shadow of the ali'i, that
maka'ainana would suffer severe punishment. The consequence of disobeying the kapu system involved
the death of the disobedier by either being “burned, strangled or stoned” (Merry 55-56).

Kapu within the family structure also existed but was not as extreme as in the political context.
Within the family, if a female were to wear a garment from one of her male relatives, this was
considered kapu, and the family would have to perform rituals in order to show penance to the gods.
Such offerings included the offering of pig, fish, 'awa and tapa. After prayers were offered, the family
would then partake in the 'awa and the pig. Within the community, if a wrongful act was committed
among the maka'ainana, “apology and forgiveness” along with “restoration and repatriation” were
common resolutions (Merry 59).

Although Cook observed how the native Hawaiians interacted with one another as impressive,
it would be his presence, along with his crew and other early “foreigners” to the Hawaiian islands
which contributed to the disappearance of the kapu system and a massive decline in the native
population. Believing Cook was the Hawaiian god “Lono,” the native Hawaiians revered him and his
crew and interacted with them by offering gifts of food and other necessities for a crew of sailors
(Nordyke 13).

It has been recorded in Cook's documents that he understood the importance of segregating his
crew and that of the Hawaiian people as his journal states that he had given orders for the boats to refrain from occupying the islands by not allowing boats to “go on shore.” He had done this because he was aware that the men of his crew carried diseases that could be fatal to a people who had no immunity from them (Nordyke 16). Regardless, his orders were disobeyed and thus chicken pox, measles, leprosy and venereal diseases dispersed among the Hawaiian people (McDermott 6-7). These diseases resulted in a population that had been estimated to be around 300,000 to 400,000 drastically declining to about 40,000 (Kotani 8).

By this time, the Hawaiian islands had become a territory of the United States and members of the U.S. government were debating on how the islands could benefit the continental U.S. as a “friendly neutral state” (Rice 271). Thus, the Reciprocity Treaty of 1876 was introduced and permitted “Hawaiian sugar free access to the U.S. market” (Kotani 8). With the introduction of this treaty, the development of an “economic and eventually political satellite” originated for the islands of Hawai’i (Paterson 184).

However, because the Hawaiian population had declined significantly, it was necessary to find labor from abroad. Chinese workers had been imported to the islands for the intention of becoming plantation workers, but these groups of people eventually grew astray from the plantations and established communities and businesses. Portuguese workers were also imported but the price of bringing these workers to Hawai’i became costly and as a result, operations relating to the Portuguese ended (Kotani 8).

As Roland Kotani, author of *Japanese in Hawai’i: A Century of Struggle*, explains, “Japan's peasants had been crushed by the burden of the government's land tax” after the country had established the notion of “private property” causing taxes to rise and making it difficult for the people of Japan to afford while having to deal with “unstable rice prices and bad harvests” which resulted in many of these peasants selling their land (9). Thus, as traveling to Hawai’i to seek for work became an option for these peasants, in turn, they were a “godsend” for the labor-less sugar plantations in Hawai’i
In 1868, the arrival of 148 individuals from Japan, the “Gannen Mono,” or “People of the First Year,” marked the beginning of the Japanese immigration to Hawai‘i (Kimura 3).

However, this first installment of Japanese workers proved to be insufficient for the labor force that was needed to successfully operate the plantations. Consequently, the government of Hawai‘i urged Japan officials to allow more of the country's people to find work in Hawai‘i. Eventually, after years of negotiations, meetings, and debates, this notion became successful (Kimura 4). Seventeen years after the first group of Gannen Mono, a total of 945 more Japanese workers immigrated to Hawai‘i in 1885 (Kotani 8).

Unlike the first installment of Gannen Mono, this second group was under government contract. Under this contract, the workers were subjected to twenty-six days of work a month, ten to twelve hours a day. For this amount of work per month, males received $9 and women $6. Consequently, it was the responsibility of the Hawaiian government to transport these workers from Japan and provide medical services, housing, and wood for cooking at no price (Kimura 4).

In addition, these Japanese contract workers also had to follow rules under Japan's government. Such rules included “never disgrace your homeland with shameful acts,” being “faithful” to one's employer by never taking part in “thoughtless acts,” regarding coworkers as “parents and siblings” in order to create harmony with one another, prohibition of gambling and drinking alcohol since “drinking makes your mind loose,” and lastly, “never handle money carelessly” (Kimura 5).

From the rules provided by the motherland of such a people, it was obvious to see that the priority of the Japanese was to be loyal under any circumstance in order to avoid such “disgrace” that might occur as a cause of disobedience. However, this loyalty would soon be tested as the lives they found in Hawai‘i were not as expected. For the life of the plantation worker, at the early hour of 4:30 AM, a siren awoke the workers of the plantation marking the start of their workday. After a quick breakfast, they would immediately travel to their work site which they should reach before six o'clock. At this hour, field work would commence and continue for the rest of the day. Kotani expresses the
hardships of field work by explaining, “Although mill workers faced 12 hours of labor in the steamy, hot confines of the sugar mill, they were envied by the field workers. The hardships of plantation field labor were almost unbearable.” Additionally, a worker who claimed to be ill but provided no doctor's certificate was physically punished, usually by being forced onto the fields by the whip of the planter, or someone who looks after the plantation fields and its workers (19-20).

Yasutaro Soga, who later became one of the four strike leaders, served as a translator at a plantation office in 1876 and recalled many instances wherein plantation workers would make themselves sick by drinking large amounts of soy sauce in order to get a day off the plantation. Regardless, these workers and others who were ill of natural causes were sent to work, many of whom died. In one instance, Soga recalls a man who had a high fever and went to the doctor to get a certificate, but instead was sent to work in the fields and died later that same day (Kimura 7-8).

As dreadful as the working conditions were, so were the living arrangements. With workers from other countries also living and working in the same plantations, housing was “overcrowded” with “closet-like” living areas that measured “six feet high and seven feet square.” Within these closets consisting of newspapers as wallpapers and mats for furniture, the tenants were expected to cook in such confined spaces. As a result, their homes became even more “unliveable” as the smoke soiled the rooms. Additionally, the outcome of these home-cooked meals consisted of “rice and some fish and cooked vegetables, shoyu and sugar” (Kotani 21-22).

An average working day on the plantation usually ended at 4:30 PM followed by all the workers gathering in bathhouses that were shared among the plantation community. One plantation worker explains how he would force himself to run to the bathhouses in order to be the first person to clean himself. This is because if he was one of the last to take a bath, he would reach a bathhouse consisting of dirt-filled water which would then make it useless to take a bath at that point, since he would still come out dirty (Kotani 21).

In response to the unfair treatment from planters, the Japanese plantation workers composed
songs of lament, referred to as “hole hole bushi.” Examples of hole hole bushi that were composed during the plantation era are as follows: “Wonderful Hawaii, or so I heard. One look and it seems like Hell. The manager's the Devil and his lunas are demons,” and “My husband cuts the cane, I do the hole hole. By sweat and tears, We get by” (Kotani 19-20). Eventually, as a result of harsh treatment from planters, the Japanese plantation workers performed other acts of rebellion such as ho'ole hana, refusal to obey orders, and ha'alele hana, or desertion. With acts such as these and future events, that first impression of the loyal and patriotic Japanese appeared to be a thing of the past (Kotani 24).

As the Japanese community in Hawai'i increased, Japanese-owned establishments grew with the community as well. Japanese entrepreneurs provided grocery stores, locally made tofu, small restaurants, and laundry services. Schools and temples focusing on Japanese culture, language and beliefs were also founded (McDermott 75). Japanese-language newspapers were established, in order to create communication among the Japanese communities throughout the Hawaiian islands. In the year of 1908, publications of unfair treatment among the Japanese were apparent in newspapers, stirring up distress and dissatisfaction among the plantation workers which encouraged more rebellious acts in order for better treatment (Kotani 33).

Eventually, the Japanese-established newspapers began to talk about higher wages for plantation workers and as a result, the Higher Wage Association was formed with Yukichi Ishii as president, Frederick Kinzaburo Makino as vice-president, Motoyuki Negoro as secretary, and Matsutaro Yamashiro as treasurer. Although Ishii pulled out making Makino the president of the HWA, this did not discourage the men and their efforts to improve their countrymen's livelihoods in Hawai'i. The HWA caught the attention of plantation workers and the need for change by hosting daily meetings and obtaining a vehicle which they drove through the plantations in order to preach to the plantation workers in person to encourage them to think about the notion of higher wages. Finally, the HWA decided it was time for the Japanese to strike (Ogawa 158-159).

The Great Japanese Strike of 1909 occurred on May 9 and consisted of O'ahu plantation
workers walking off their plantation. This strike was organized so that only the O'ahu plantation workers would experience first-hand the impact of the strike as they would be the ones to physically protest the plantations while Japanese plantation workers on the neighboring islands supported them financially. By the following month, a total of 7,000 workers had left their plantations in O'ahu (Kotani 36).

On the other hand, the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association did not give in to the protests of the HWA as they believed that these protestors consisted of only those who were incapable of performing a “substantial day's work” (Kotani 36). Thus, the planters responded to the strikes by hiring strikebreakers who varied from Chinese, Korean, Hawaiian and Portuguese ethnicities and were awarded wages of $1.50 a day. Naturally, this disgruntled the workers on the plantations who were of the same ethnicity mix and yet getting their usual low wages. As a result, these plantation workers demanded that they be paid the same as the strikebreakers, threatening to leave the plantations to become strikebreakers of another plantation (Kotani 38).

The Great Japanese Strike lasted for a total of four months of passionate strike leaders and supporters challenging the plantation system in order for the betterment of the workers and their families' livelihood. The supporters of the strike had gone to great lengths to carry out the strike successfully, facing the consequences of no work and pay and homelessness. Additionally, others not directly involved in the strikes sacrificed their time and efforts to care for the strikers and also in donating foodstuffs, money, and other provisions. However, due to an unfortunate event of a Maui delegate attacking and stabbing Sometaro Sheba, a Japanese man who was on the opposing side of the strike and attempted to bring down Makino and his supporters, Makino and his colleagues declared the end of the movement and asked for the workers who had left their plantations to return to work. At this time, Makino and the others were on trial for their efforts related to the strike. Because of the unfortunate event that occurred to Sheba, the men were “convicted of third degree conspiracy and sentenced to 10 months in prison and a fine of $300.” Fortunately, four months after their imprisonment
in 1910, they had been pardoned of their sentences since the HWA was no longer active. Although the
Great Japanese Strike was defeated in the end, the strike leaders were seen as heroes within the
Japanese community, as conditions on the plantations improved, wages increased by $4, and the
planters had lost a significant amount of money as a result of the strike (Kotani 39).

Another obstacle that the Japanese of Hawai'i started to face at the turn of the twentieth century
was that of “Americanization.” With the events of World War I, a panic swept through the nation in
order to rid America of any foreign-like peoples that were living within its borders. Particularly, the
numerous ethnic groups living within this American territory in the Pacific seemed to be a threat to the
continental U.S. and thus, the Asian Americans of Hawai'i felt the pressures of this “Americanization
Fever” (Tamura 54).

An editor of the Pacific Commercial Advertiser (which later became the Honolulu Advertiser)
by the name of Edward P. Irwin attacked the Asian people living in Hawai'i by criticizing their physical
appearances, challenging the American public to reconsider incorporating a people of “small stature”
with “yellow or brown” pigmented skin into the “American body.” In other words, Irwin was implying
that the Americans should not sacrifice their looks at the hands of the Asians and thus, it was important
to avoid any relations with them. Apparently, because the Asians were substantially different in
appearance from that of the American and Europeans Caucasians, they were deemed unable to be
Americanized (Tamura 56).

Moreover, because the Japanese population was increasing and becoming of the the larger
ethnic groups in Hawai'i, they were viewed as more of a threat to the American society and were
constantly attacked about trying to “Japanize” the islands. Eileen Tamura, author of Americanization,
Acculturation, and Ethnic Identity: the Nisei Generation in Hawai'i, explains that along with the
increase in a ethnic group's population size comes the threat that a people might takeover the nation
they occupy. She explains that when the Chinese were the dominating immigrant group in Hawai'i, the
government had looked down upon the Chinese and commended the Japanese since they were a
smaller group regarding population density. Furthermore, the exact opposite occurred when the Japanese population exceeded that of the Chinese population in Hawai‘i. Additionally, when the Japanese were on strike and the Chinese were utilized as strikebreakers, the Chinese were praised for their efforts to help regulate the “rebelliousness” of the first generation Japanese in Hawai‘i (59).

Despite the accusations against the Japanese in Hawai‘i, there were many supporters of the idea of Americanization and assimilation within the Japanese community. Of these supporters was Reverend Takie Okumura who acted as the leader of the assimilation movement. In response to the attacks that were made on the Japanese which were reasoned by disloyalty to the American nation, the Hawaii Japanese Education Society was established. One of the first objectives of the society was to revise the Japanese textbooks used in the Japanese schools to better accommodate and instill aspects of American life in Hawai‘i, by eliminating sections that contained any notion of loyalty to Japan and the Emperor replacing it with locally-concerned topics (Tamura 61).

Nevertheless, these endeavors intended to prove American loyalty from the Japanese communities in Hawai‘i seemed inadequate when the bombing of Pearl Harbor struck these communities with shock and disappointment in their ethnic country. As a result, the Japanese in Hawai‘i were judged more brutally and suffered greater oppression with the abolishment of Japanese language schools and other culturally-related matters (McDermott 78). By this time, many American-born Japanese, although possessing Japanese cultural values, also had strong American patriotism and thus, regardless of the discrimination against them, supported their American country by organizing volunteer groups to aid the war effort against the country of Japan (McDermott 77).

Many rumors also circulated belittling the allegiance of the Japanese Americans as a result of the events of Pearl Harbor. Such rumors indicate that the Japanese Americans aided the attack on Pearl Harbor as “Japanese drivers caused a traffic jam on the road from Honolulu to Pearl Harbor, closed trucks and driven up to the gates of the naval base and dropped their sides, revealing Nisei [second generation] troops who opened up with machine guns on U.S. Marines.” In another instance, Japanese
plantedation workers were believed to have “cut huge arrows in the cane fields to direct Japanese planes to Pearl Harbor” (Kotani 82).

Although there were many willing Japanese Americans who were ready to join the warfront, they had been re-classified from Americans of Japanese Ancestry (AJA) to “non-draftable alien,” also referred to as 4-C. One AJA recalls that although he had never viewed himself as a “Jap,” a term that the Japanese were referred as during the war, it was only until he had been kicked out of the Hawaii Territorial Guard (HTG) that he realized he was, in fact, one of those “Japs” (Kotani 88). It was only until later within the war that the American military began to see that the Japanese could be trusted and thus, the recruitment of the AJA began and resulted in over 12,000 AJA who had joined the war effort (Kotani 112). Of this 12,000, one third were volunteers, and 80 percent of those killed in the war from Hawai'i were AJA while another 88 percent were wounded (Kotani 116).

Today, the presence of the AJA in Hawai'i is more prevalent than ever. With numerous establishments in the islands such as Zippy's Restaurants, Times Supermarkets, City Mill hardware stores, Kaimuki Dry Goods, Fukuya Delicatessen and Catering and many more, it is obvious to see that the AJA have prevailed through difficult times. The existence of such long-standing establishments perfectly portrays the survival of the essence of the Japanese cultural through immigration, Americanization, and assimilation (Sigall 15).

As the Gannen Mono moved directly from Japan to Hawai'i, they brought with them their culture in which they passed down to the next generation. The characteristics of this culture involve a people who have a sense of “group-belonging” rather than an individual existence. They are also proud in the way that they compose themselves as “cleanly” peoples that act in “orderly behaviors” while also displaying endurance for pain or hardship under certain circumstances. Also, the concept of a hierarchy is of high significance to them, as this exhibits respect and harmony within any type of group setting. Additionally, it has always been important among the Japanese people to be able to assimilate, and flow with the waves of Westernization harmoniously. Moreover, it is important to note how the
characteristics of the culture survived through many years of oppression and change (McDermott 82-83).

Contrastingly, although certain Japanese values and characteristics had been passed down through the generations, the AJA no longer felt a belonging or an obligation to the “mother” country. Instead, as Dr. Dennis Ogawa states, the Japanese considered themselves as locals of Hawai‘i indicating that they share with other locals certain characteristics that cannot be identifiable with foreign peoples. Among these characteristics would be that of a “special language, a special mode of behavior, a special value system, and a special racial experience” (Ogawa xxii).

Particularly, for the elderly locals in Hawai‘i, this shared culture refers back to the plantation years, when they would tell of stories consisting of phrases such as “Us, Japanese” or “our days.” When talking about “Us, Japanese,” they are referring to the type of lifestyles, customs, and traditions they grew up with in a Japanese plantation home, involving “strictness in moral training” and a “sense of belonging in institutions” which are a couple examples of the traditional Japanese teachings that had survived within the Japanese community throughout the years. Also, these elderly Japanese locals shared experiences that could only have occurred to a Japanese American, such as becoming victims of discrimination during the war (Okamura 4).

Accordingly, when the elderly Japanese use the term “our days,” they refer to the “plantation days.” Considering the fact that these elderly are of the second generation, when speaking of “our days” they are referring to the differences and similarities between them and the first generation Japanese in Hawai‘i as this was a significant time when the Japanese started to assimilate and become more familiar with American ways. In reference to “our days,” the elderly generally are looking at two lives they have had the experience of living, back in the early days of traditional Japanese ways and then living more immersed in the American society (Okamura 15).

The story of the Japanese in Hawai‘i has been depicted as one consisting of hardships from the beginning as their country's poor economy forced them to depart from their motherland to new lands in
hopes to find a better life. As loyal citizens of Japan, their initial intentions were to travel to this foreign
country, earn money and travel back to their homeland. However, this was the not case for many of
these plantation workers as many of them stayed in Hawai‘i and established new homes in the islands.
Additionally, the work that they were performing was difficult, and the workers were not compensated
fairly. Thus, in order to fight for higher wages for the purpose of improving their lifestyles, these
Japanese began to strike. Although they were defeated, conditions did begin to progress for the better.
Meanwhile, as the Japanese population in Hawai‘i increased, the Japanese community became a
“threat” to the American government, as they feared that the Japanese had the intention of taking over
the islands. With this and along with the occurrence of WWII, the Japanese community of Hawai‘i,
although many were considered Americans, experienced discrimination and prejudice for having
Japanese ancestry. Regardless of all the struggle, the Japanese of Hawai‘i were able to establish
themselves among the Hawaiian community as locals, as they shared with each other and with other
ethnic groups the process of becoming a people of Hawai‘i that had grown triumphantly from the
plantations.
Works Cited


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**Meta-commentary**

As the author of this paper, I intended to leave out personal views on the topics throughout my writing in order to give the audience room for creating analyses of their own. My intention of this paper was to make the audience aware of a certain aspect of Hawaiian history, other than the accounts of the native Hawaiians. Because it was apparent to me that many Americans of Asian ancestries populated the islands, I wondered why this was so. Thus, through my class and my research, I was able to find out the answers on my own.

Sorry I'm late.