Cultural Maintenance and Ethnic Intensification in Two Japanese-American World War II Internment Camps

by

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Perhaps because of the preconception that the Japanese are particularly talented at being assimilated into other cultures, there has been relatively little scholarly study of the retention of cultural traits among Japanese immigrants to other countries. Yet one of the most interesting and challenging sources of insight and perspective on the dynamics of Japanese culture can be found not in Japan itself but in the countries to which Japanese people have migrated in great numbers. As is the case with other migrating cultures, the Japanese do not immediately lose or abandon all their cultural traits, but rather retain some features while changing or dropping others. We find people of Japanese ancestry (Nikkei) more or less assimilated into the political and social life of most countries in the so-called Pacific Rim, from South America to the United States to Canada, and they provide us with a lively set of examples for cultural analysis, for issues such as bilingualism, culture conflict, ethnic identity, and minority relations remain central to daily political realities in all of the American countries. Of greater interest to the scholar of Asian studies, however, is the fact that for several reasons, a tremendous wealth of Japanese cultural tradition is still present in both the vernacular and the elite expressions of the later immigrant generations, and it is to the discussion of these ongoing elements of Japanese-American culture that this essay turns its attention.

In addition to the various and complicated processes of assimilation and accommodation, and in fact running counter to them in many cases, is the lively observance of older Japanese customs, the use of archaic forms of the Japanese language, and the maintenance of earlier genres of cultural expression. Here I do not speak of the widespread practice of taking lessons in ikebana or cha-no-yu or okoto from modern teachers brought in from Japan, but to the custom of learning these and other distinctively Japanese forms of expression from others within the community of Japanese-Americans. In the language used by many Nisei, for example, are forms and vocabulary which come from the Meiji-style speech of their Issei parents. It was common in the 1940s and 1950s to hear "California" referred to as "Ca-shu", while people in Japan had already adopted the word "California."
Similarly, Los Angeles, known familiarly in the United States as "L.A.\(^{\text{c}}\), was referred to by American Japanese as \textit{ra-fu} (literally, "LA-city"); the term is seen in the title of a Japanese-American newspaper still published regularly in California, \textit{Ra-fu Shimpo}. In addition to language archaisms, there was a continued transmission of old songs, lullabies, legends, and proverbs in the oral traditions of Japanese-American families; the children's song, \textit{Naranda}, which describes the French army in red hats lined up like tulip-soldiers (\textit{tsuripu-no heitai-san}), apparently comes from the late 19th century, but it is still common in America as a lullaby, while it has virtually died out of oral tradition in Japan. (Figure 1)

![Figure 1](https://example.com/figure1.png)

Several processes account for this situation, but probably three are the most prominent forces at work; for practical purposes here they may be called a) peripheral distribution, b) ethnic identity, and c) cultural intensification under stress.
This essay will focus on the last process primarily, but the first two will be explained briefly for the part they play in the whole picture.

Peripheral [or marginal] distribution can be simply described, although its phenomena are not fully understood. As illustrated above, immigrant peoples far from their homeland have a tendency to retain some cultural features with great tenacity and conservatism. Indeed, out on the periphery or margin of a cultural area—that is, in those groups who have moved farthest from their homeland—those features usually change more slowly than they do in the cultural center. In the case of Japanese language, for example, usages changed more slowly in America, on the periphery, than in Tökyö, at the center.

Ethnic identity is created when a distinctive group of people develops an awareness of the ways in which they differ from surrounding populations. Often focusing on language or food customs or dress—as well as many other celebrative customs like dance—people develop a way of recognizing other "insiders" by the way they express themselves in contexts which are culturally significant. Japanese people from Japan consider themselves nihonjin, even when they are visitors in someone else's countries; that is, even when they travel in other countries, they are never gaijin [foreigners]. But Japanese people who are citizens of the United States are not Japanese nationals, nor do they participate daily in full Japanese culture; they are neither Japanese nor gaijin, but they have become Americans of Japanese ancestry. When speaking Japanese among others of the same background, they refer to themselves generically as Nikkei, or as Nihonjin ("Japanese people"), but reserve the term Nihon no hito ("person of Japan") for those who come from the old country. Otherwise, especially when speaking to other Americans in English, they classify themselves by their generation: Issei [first generation], Nisei [second generation], Sansei [third generation], and Yonsei [fourth generation]. We notice in the latter term that although the reference is to Americans of Japanese background, there is still the culturally significant avoidance of the term Shisei, which would also mean fourth generation, but which uses the phoneme shi which also means "death" and is thus not used when referring to humans.

According to United States law, anyone born in the U.S. is potentially a citizen; during the years in which immigration from Asia was restricted and when citizenship was denied Asian applicants, it was common for Issei non-citizens working in America to have children who were U.S. citizens by birth, but who were taken to Japan for their upbringing. These people, culturally more up-to-date with respect to current Japanese culture than were their parents and grandparents, were called kibei when they returned to the U.S. (this is a relatively new coinage based on kaeru, to return, and the first syllable of Beikoku, America). In Japan, the nihonjin are in the majority (so much so that drivers' licenses do not need to indicate
hair color and eye color, for example). But in the United States, the Japanese-Americans of all generations have been a minority, and thus they developed nolens volens a sense of separate ethnic identity, based in part — of course — on biological ("racial") differences, but rather more fully founded on awareness of cultural differences between themselves and all others, including other Asian-Americans.

*Cultural intensification under stress* can occur in a number of ways; for the Japanese-Americans it came early in 1942, when they were forcibly removed from their homes along the west coast of the United States and Canada and interned in "relocation camps" surrounded by barbed wire because their Japanese ancestry made them suspect as potential spies and saboteurs during World War II. Suddenly, it was their Japanese-ness which was decisive: not their American citizenship or their ethnic identity. Indeed, their American citizenship counted least of all here, for it is technically illegal to deprive an American citizen of liberty without a separate trial on specific charges. Yet, under the fears of war — fears fed by a racism that assumed the Japanese-Americans would of course aid their distant relatives — the U.S. government broke its own law and imprisoned more than 110,000 Issei, Nisei, and Sansei, most of them U.S. citizens. In camps, they were regarded by their government as Japanese, not as Americans; in the camps (unlike in their home communities) they were surrounded almost entirely by others like themselves — and these others included *kibei*, who, raised more recently in Japan, often had more of a sympathetic attitude toward Japan’s position in the war. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that the people developed an intensified sense of being culturally Japanese in contradistinction to other possible identities. In this situation, Japanese cultural arts, both elite and vernacular, flourished more than they had previously. Distance from Japan functioned in nostalgic ways, and *Nikkei* awareness of themselves as culturally distinct, plus the sudden pressure of dislocation from the larger society of which they had become an ethnic minority part, all worked to intensify and vivify their sense of shared tradition. Even so, a close inspection shows that while some cultural expressions developed in all ten of the Relocation Centers, there were also great differences among the centers as to which kinds of traditions predominated. The present essay looks at only two of these Centers as a way of showing the range and variation of Japanese cultural traditions which came about as responses to those trying times.

A brief history of relevant events will help to provide a framework for understanding the issues discussed here. Following the December 7th (1941) attack by Japan on United States facilities in Hawaii, the U.S. government began arresting leaders of Japanese-American communities along the west coast. Not only were Japanese aliens arrested, but American citizens of Japanese ancestry as well: principally judo instructors, Buddhist priests, language teachers, music teachers, and the like, apparently in the government’s belief that they represented a pro-Japan
(and therefore anti-American) element in the population. Moreover, since many of these people were fishermen, the government feared that they would be able to observe American ship movements and report them to Japanese authorities.

By January 6, 1942, raids and confiscations were being carried out regularly against Nikkei citizens and aliens alike, in violation of the Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (which prohibits unreasonable searches and which requires search warrants to be based on real evidence). On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which declared all persons of Japanese ancestry, regardless of citizenship, subject to removal from the western defense area, that is, the Pacific Coast. In February and March of 1942, the government froze the bank accounts of individuals who had assets in the U.S. branches of Japanese banks (these assets have still not been returned to their owners, mainly because the government wants to compute the payments according to the present Yen exchange rate, while the Japanese-Americans have wanted to use the pre-war rate, plus interest). On March 2, 1942, the first notices were posted in public places, ordering all persons of Japanese ancestry to leave the coastal areas, and on March 24, 1942, an order was issued for the general evacuation of all Japanese-Americans from the states of California, Oregon, and Washington.

Evacuees were taken by armed soldiers to assembly centers (usually racetracks and fairgrounds, where the evacuees slept in converted animal stalls). When "permanent" quarters were made ready inland, they were transported by automobile, bus, and train to ten "relocation centers," sometimes called "camps," in Arizona, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, Colorado, and Arkansas. Two of the camps, Manzanar and Tule Lake, were located in remote desert areas of California because of the heavy population of Japanese-Americans in that state. Tule Lake camp was then converted into a facility for internment and processing Japanese nationals who wanted to return to Japan, plus Japanese-Americans who refused to sign an unconditional loyalty oath to the U.S. government, Japanese-American cultural leaders who were believed to be potentially anti-American, and "problem" prisoners from other camps (these included rule-breakers, as well as disgruntled internees who simply refused to cooperate with government officials). Fuller accounts of this painful moment in United States history will be found in the books cited in the bibliography.

In 1944, as the war began to move toward its conclusion, and after the Nisei volunteers in the U.S. Army had distinguished themselves in European combat (the all-Nisei 442nd regiment was the most-decorated unit in the U.S. armed forces in World War II), the camps were slowly closed and the internees allowed to return to their home areas, even though in many cases their homes and property had been vandalized or had passed into other hands. Not until 1976, during the U.S. Bicentennial, was Executive Order 9066 formally repealed by the government. In
the 1980s, a "Reparations Act" was discussed by Congress, which proposed to award $20,000 in legal damages to each surviving relocatee; that is, the government had decided to settle for a legal "punitive" fine against itself, rather than to entertain the idea of repaying the Japanese-Americans for their actual losses of land, property, houses, businesses. In 1989 the funding was secured, and $1.5 billion was set aside for "Redress" payments which will take place over a period of three years. Sadly enough, about half of the approximately 110,000 internees have died in the meantime.

The War Relocation Authority, the newly-created government agency which was put in charge of the relocation in March of 1942, quickly issued a series of pamphlets for the sole use of its personnel. These mimeographed publications (many of which are stored at the Bancroft Library in California, the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and in regional archives such as the Special Collections of the University of Utah and of Utah State University) reveal how fully the government expected the Japanese-Americans to be essentially Japanese. The pamphlets provide a rather accurate account of Japanese cultural practices and beliefs; they give detailed information on Buddhism and Shintoism; they discuss Japanese "superstitions," and attitudes toward the emperor; and they suggest the means by which the camp officers could deal with the Japanese culture with the least difficulty. Nowhere in these pamphlets is there a recognition of how different the Japanese-Americans were from one community to another, between urban and rural backgrounds (in the U.S. as well as in their families' origins in Japan), and no apparent awareness of the extent to which most of the Nisei had been acculturated. How much Japanese culture was still being used? Which cultural expressions were still important and why? Were the Japanese-Americans really totally Japanese in their cultural orientation? The answer to the last was assumed to be yes, and that "fact" was thought to be grounds for potential sabotage. The other questions could have been answered no doubt by any relocatee, but of course no-one was asking the Japanese-Americans anything, for the government used essentially the same stereotype subscribed to by many Euro-Americans: one never really knows what an Asian is thinking. This "Inscrutability Factor", actually a part of European-American folk belief, played an important role in the political and social policies of America during the war.

Among other kinds of information provided in these pamphlets (marked "not for publication – for staff only") is the following list of Japanese festivals which government officials expected all Japanese would want to observe, along with the comment that the people should be allowed to celebrate – but only after regular working hours:

January 1: Shogatsu (New Year)
January 15: Koshogatsu ("Small New Year")

February 1: "Day of the Horse," calculated by Asian zodiac calendar; also a festival for Inari

February 11: Kigensetsu (Empire Foundation Day; not celebrated by Japanese in the U.S.)

March 3: Girl's Day, Hinamatsuri (Doll Festival)

March 21: Spring Equinox Festival (Shunki Korei Sai for Shinto; Higan for Buddhists)

April 3: Jimmu Tenno Sai (Death of Emperor Jimmu)

April 8: Hanamatsuri (Buddha’s birthday)

April 29: Tencho Setsu (Emperor’s Birthday; probably will be celebrated in homes)

May 5: Tango no Sekku, or Koi Nobori (Boys’ Day)

July 7: Tanabata (holiday for stars Veda and Altair)

July 15: Obon

September 5: Moon Festival

September 23: Shunki Korei Sai/Higan (Fall equinox)

October 17: Harvest Thanksgiving for the Deities of Ise (Kanname Sai)

November 3: Meiji Setsu (Emperor Meiji’s Birthday)

November 23: Niiname Sai (Harvest Festival of the Imperial House)

November 22–28: Goshoki (remembrance of St. Shinran in Shinshu Buddhist Churches)

December 8: Bodi Day (Buddhist holiday in honor of Bodhidharma, founder of Zen Buddhism)

December 14: Anniversary of the raid on Lord Kira’s residence by the Forty-seven Ronin

December 25: Death Day of Emperor Taisho (not usually observed in U.S.)

The pamphlet takes pains to point out that regional and prefectural organizations (such as kenjinkai) are to be trusted in any festival preparations, but that judo instructors and Japanese language teachers are to be viewed as Japan-nationalists who might use any holiday celebration as the basis for a protest action or escape attempt.

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1 Japanese Relocation World War II papers, Ms. 144: box 1, folder 2, Special Collections Department, University of Utah Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
In actuality, the festivals most celebrated in all the relocation camps were the ones which had already been culturally selected by the Nisei and their Issei parents before the war: Buddhists of course observed the principal Buddhist holidays, Hanamatsuri, Bodi Day, and Obon; because of the community-orientation of Obon, moreover, almost everybody took part in the celebration regardless of church membership. And of course, nearly everyone celebrated Oshogatsu, as was the case before the war, and is still the case today. Fears by government officials that the Japanese ritual calendar might somehow undermine the order in the camps were not fulfilled: the few incidents which did occur—such as the Manzanar riot—were totally independent of the cultural calendar.

In fact, far more important than festivals to most Japanese-Americans in the camps were the everyday problems of courtship, marriage, child-rearing and school. Group toilets and showers nearly destroyed the Japanese customs of personal privacy; and another element of the crowded conditions was that there was also no privacy for courtship. Several internees remembered (in interviews conducted after the war) that the only place to be alone with a member of the opposite sex was in the guard towers. Those who had good relationships with the guards, or with the community police force (after the army no longer used the guard towers) were able to control who in the camp might be alone with whom. Moreover, as one anthropologist noted, many of the Nisei internees became more consciously "japanesey" not for political or national reasons but because they were in a society now consisting mostly of Japanese-cultured persons, and they felt the need to act more Japanese and to brush up on their Japanese language ability so that the parents of prospective mates would look favorably upon them. As had been the case before the war, everyday issues surrounding normal human interactions—especially in connection with the family—were the living contexts for cultural expressions. While the War Relocation Authority expected an outburst of Japanese nationalism, what in fact occurred was a continued series of cultural events that intensified ethnic identity within the community, related individuals more culturally to their ethnic group, and strengthened the pre-existing cultural ties within families.

Under unique pressure, such as at the Tule Lake Center, Japanese folklore became a more intense and dramatic form of cultural expression. As noted above, Tule Lake Center in northern California (in operation from 1943 until 1946) became a "Segregation Center" where Issei, Nisei and Kibei were interned who were thought to be security risks, or who seemed to be in any way pro-Japan. Many

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were sent to Tule Lake from other camps for apparently renouncing their U.S. citizenship on the infamous "No-No" document.³

At its peak, Tule Lake held a total population of 25,000, of whom 19,000 were inmates of the Segregation Center. The other 6000, classified as "loyal," were sent to other camps by train. Because the government considered the internees at Tule Lake to be potentially more dangerous, the camp was surrounded by two barbed-wire fences, and inmates were told that anything seen moving between the fences would be shot by the guards (according to Charles S. Palmerlee, a teacher in the Tule Lake School, the guards would occasionally shoot a dog or cat between the fences just to show the internees that the threat was a serious one).⁴

With this kind of physical stress around them and with increased tension arising from greater numbers of inmates who were either Japanese nationals or disappointed Japanese-Americans questioning their U.S. citizenship, Japanese cultural references became an intensified medium of symbolic communication. Marvin K. Opler, an anthropologist doing research under government auspices at Tule Lake, was able to observe how the feeling of stress increased and how the people in the camp consciously and unconsciously dramatized their Japanese culture: first of all, their culture became a way of expressing shared fears and anxieties in distinctively Japanese ways (they were sharing the stresses because of being Japanese in ancestry, and they were expressing their emotions about their internment by using ethnically meaningful genres). Secondly, their folk culture provided them with a "dignified" way of resisting and critiquing the authority of the U.S. government.

Because some of the Nisei in Tule Lake said that they had experienced very little of Japanese folklore before internment, and because Nisei after the war re-

³ In early 1943, the government distributed a questionnaire to Issei men and to Nisei men and women; on it were forty-two questions. Question #27 asked them if they were willing to serve in the U.S. armed forces in combat, no matter where they were ordered to serve. Question #28 asked if they would swear "unqualified allegiance" to the United States, and formally renounce allegiance to Japan or to any other foreign power or government. Since the Issei had not been allowed to become citizens in the first place, and since they were now faced with the possibility of deportation to Japan, of course they answered "no" on #28, not wanting to become stateless persons. Many Nisei, not wanting to be separated from older family members, also answered "no" on #28. Some Nisei, angered at having been illegally put into concentration camps, answered "no" to both questions. Of the 20,000 men eligible to serve in the military in all camps, more than 5000 answered "no"/"no," and were referred to in camp slang as the "no-no boys." It turned out that many had answered "no" to #27 only because they thought it referred to the army, and they had preferred to join the marines or the navy. Others were angered by the implication in #28 that they had sworn allegiance to Japan; since they had never done so, they felt they did not need to renounce it. This episode is well-discussed in virtually every study of the relocation camps, and became the basic theme of at least one novel, John Okada's No-No Boy (Rutherford, Vermont: Charles Tuttle Co., 1957; reprinted Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1976).

⁴ Charles S. Palmerlee, interviewed by B. Toelken, Eugene, Oregon, October 1967. As a conscientious objector to combat service, Palmerlee had been assigned by the government to teach in the Tule Lake school.
ported that they no longer observed the phenomena which had become common in the camp (discussed below), Opler concluded that the folk expressions had blossomed and flourished primarily in response to the pressures of the relocation situation. For this reason, borrowing Ralph Linton's term "nativistic movement," Opler accounted for the dramatic appearance of Japanese folklore at Tule Lake as a device for modifying the group's psychological environment while at the same time acting as a means for expressing—sometimes magically—their shared sense of pressure.5

Opler's conclusions need to be reviewed carefully, for they leave out some important considerations. First, Tule Lake was inhabited by a group of people who were more likely to bring active Japanese folklore with them. In contrast to the population of Topaz camp (discussed below), the people at Tule Lake were largely rural—the Nisei had been farmers in California and the Issei had been farmers in Japan; many had been fishermen in both countries. In other words, many of the people at Tule Lake came from cultural environments where folk traditions were still very much alive and functional. As well, those who were Kibei, having been raised recently in Japan, would of course have brought with them a more contemporary set of Japanese cultural assumptions; it would have been surprising if it had not been so. Since many of the Tule Lake inmates were outspokenly pro-Japanese, they probably acted more overtly Japanese in their deportment and cultural bearing.

The Nisei at Tule Lake, although they shared the rural background with the others, were already a part of that American ethnic minority which had given up much of the original culture in favor of a few intensified customs, festivals and observances. Thus, Nisei interviewed during and after the camp experience might very well have noticed that the Japanese culture in the camp was much more extensive than it had been in their experiences before and after. What makes this problem quite difficult to research is the fact that Japanese-American families had tried to "fit in" with their surrounding white neighbors, and so they had celebrated most of their folk traditions in the privacy of their homes and churches (with the possible exception of Obon, which was usually done in public). They were not therefore accustomed to the conscious, dramatic, cultural display of Japanese traditions that they were to experience in Tule Lake Center; nor have they had any reason to maintain their traditions at that same high emotional pitch after the camps ceased to operate.

Nonetheless, in general, Opler's observation is certainly valid: under extreme pressure, the Japanese and the Japanese-Americans became more conscious of

their culture and its role in their situation; consequently, their folklore became an increasingly important medium of perception, interpretation, and expression of cultural realities. At Tule Lake, Opler observed among other traditions a vigorous circulation of legends and personal experiences concerning hitodama, the fireball representing a human soul, and of the related phenomenon called hidama, a fireball which may arise from rice which has been treated with disrespect. Inmates of the camp used burned rice as an omen of ill luck – which sometimes extended to certain cooks or specific dining areas. Ghost stories abounded, with the Nisei referring to the hitodama as a phenomenon foretelling death and the Issei retaining the older idea of the hitodama as a ball of fire which appeared only after someone had died. As tension in the camp increased at the time of citizenship renunciation, all generations were observed for the first time to be avoiding the crematorium and the graveyard. Such distinctive behavior is what led Opler to correlate the increased cultural stress with the apparent increase in superstitions.

There were also many rumors and anecdotes of people in the camp being possessed by animals. Although there are no foxes in the surrounding countryside, several women were said to have been involved with kitsune-tsuki, fox-possession. Other stories of nekogami (cat-spirits), inugami (dog-spirits), and inugami mochi (female witches) circulated widely, especially at the time of citizenship renunciation or in connection with persons whose citizenship decision was in some kind of doubt. In addition, stories about ninjitsu experts were widely popular. In these narratives, the typical theme concerns a hero who is mistreated in his youth and who then goes into an apprenticeship under the direction of a famous swordsman or monk; he returns unexpectedly to take vengeance on the powerful lord who was responsible for his (or his family’s) mistreatment. Opler suggests that while outside the camps such a topic would not have been considered interesting by the Nisei generation, in the camps the stories were extremely popular because their motifs of unfair suffering and revenge were "congenial to the real flesh and blood, mistreated Nisei" (p. 392). While the function of such stories in the camp context cannot be denied, Opler was perhaps unaware that among Nisei, Japanese films depicting such stories had been indeed very popular before the war; as well, videotapes of samurai stories and ninjitsu masters are still standard items in Nisei and Sansei households in the U.S., perhaps for very much the same reasons: the undercurrent vulnerability of ethnic minority status in a competitive society (along with related fantasies of triumph over the oppressive system).

As pressure increased in the Tule Lake Center, so too did the common reference to omens of death and bad luck. Marriage arrangers tried to avoid marrying persons whose ages varied by four, seven, or ten years. The number seven, the northeast direction, and whistling were considered unlucky. Picking up a comb (kushi = comb; homophone = suffering) with the teeth facing oneself was bad
luck. Pointing at a funeral procession, sleeping with one's head pointing north (kita makura), hearing a crow crying, were among the omens and causes for death. Equally abundant were beliefs and customs concerning pregnancy, childbirth, and infancy; included in this category was the persistent belief that more girls than boys are born during wartime, and that this fact eventually brings about peace. In 1944, people in the Center observed that there were more and more girls being born, and that this could only be interpreted as a sign that peace would return soon.

At least three kinds of Japanese chiryo (traditional therapeutic systems) were in use at Tule Lake: anma (a kind of massage), mogusa (burning a moss-like material on specific vital spots on the body), and hari (a version of acupuncture). Indeed, there were 75 active practitioners of chiryo in the camp in 1945. Opler's theory notwithstanding, there are today a number of chiryo practitioners still in California, and especially the burning mogusa treatments are well-known among Nisei of the present generation. Although the situation at Tule Lake was different from the other camps because of the segregation of "dangerous elements" in the Nikkei population, the general range of folk custom, belief, and practice which appeared within the camp is consistent with what we would expect in an intensified group of farmers, fishermen, and Japanese nationals: conservative retention of minzoku, that is, the everyday, common-person vernacular tradition of early Twentieth-Century Japanese people.

Topaz

Topaz, named for Topaz Mountain (some thirty miles away to the northwest), was also built in a sparsely populated area of the desert. By early 1943, its population was 8800, which made it Utah's fifth largest city; its high school was the second largest in the state at that time. Although they were allowed to garden and plant trees, the residents of Topaz – like those of all the other camps – had no running water or toilet facilities in their apartments; each person was allocated a space approximately two by six meters in size; while there was some electricity and some heat, people had to take group showers, and in the summer there was no air conditioning (one must bear in mind that in this area, summer temperatures are as high as 44° C. and winter temperatures range from 0° C. to –20° C.). (Figure 2)

Probably the greatest differences between the inmates of Topaz and those of Tule Lake were based on the fact that the people in Topaz were almost entirely Nisei and urban; they had been brought from the San Francisco/Berkeley/Oakland vicinity (called "The Bay Area" by most Californians). They were well educated and were largely professionals in education, business, medicine, and art. They included the well-known landscape painter, Professor Chiura Obata, of the Univer-
sity of California, Toshio Asaeda, a photographer and botanist, and Miné Okubo, a European-trained artist who had just escaped from war in Europe, where she had been studying on an art fellowship. There was also Toshio Mori, son of a prosperous plant nursery owner, who quickly became the camp historian. Within a day or two of their arrival at the barren camp, the inmates began to arrange for a tri-weekly newspaper called the Times, and an occasional literary magazine entitled Trek (cmp. german trecken). Obata, Mori, and Okubo joined in these efforts and helped to provide a vivid record of the cultural feelings of the people interned in Topaz. (Figures 3–9)

Their involvement is mentioned here because it is typical of the different stance at Topaz, where ethnic and cultural awareness was expressed quite differently than at Tule Lake. While some Japanese vernacular traditions were in use, and
while the usual festival occasions were observed (Figure 10), the people at Topaz focused mainly on classical, "elite," and popular genres rather than on traditional expressions such as those which became so common at Tule Lake. At Topaz, the inmates studied Japanese classical dance, played the shakuhachi, the koto, and the samisen, and engaged in writing poetry (haiku, tanka, and senryu). They did calligraphy and wood carving, they took up bonsai and bonkei, did the tea ceremony and flower arranging, engaged in weaving, ceramics, and even – there in the desert – Japanese gardening.⁶ (Figure 11)

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19, 1942 – shortly after their arrival in the newly finished camp – contained the following presentations:

1. Folk Dance (Sanbaso) ................................. Miss C. Kihara
   Dance representing welcome to the audience
2. Folk Song (Shina Musume) ......................... Miss F. Kunisawa
   (Akai Suiren)
3. Nozakimura (Osone) .................................. Miss Sumi Ashizawa
4. Harmonica Band ......................................... Suzuki's Harmonica Band
5. Folk Dance (Shime no Musume) ..................... Miss C. Kihara
6. Three Mask Dance ..................................... Miss Sumi Ashizawa
7. Ballad (Naniwabushi) .................................. Mr. T. Suzuki
8. Comedy (Fufu no Kushin) Comedy of family Life ...... Mr. Ogomori
   Mr. Matsuguma, Mr. Onizuka, Mr. Gyotoku
9. Play (Yoshino ichi) Tragedy ............................ Mr. Nakagawa,
   Mr. Yoshimura, Mr. Harada, Mr. Tsumura, Mr. Tanaka

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7 Topaz papers, Utah State University Special Collections Division, Merrill Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.
Even the items labeled "folk" on this program are the recital pieces which had already become common on festive evenings in the American Buddhist churches, and they continue that way today. Rather than representing vernacular traditions transmitted through everyday cultural interactions, they are in the same category as piano and voice recitals common among middle class people of all ethnic backgrounds – with the exception that the materials are almost entirely Japanese, not taken from an international repertoire. (Figure 12) Thus, while these cultural expressions are indeed reminders and re-experiences of a common Japanese background, they reflect quite a different social context than do those more vernacular expressions of the Tule Lake camp. Among other things, such contrasts – even as brief and as superficial as this one – demonstrate a greater complexity and variation in the nature of "Japanese cultural/ethnic identity" than was ever recognized.
by the U.S. government at that time. The government’s view, and thus its policy, was very well if crudely summed up by the comment of Lt. General John L. DeWitt, commander of the Western Theater of Operations: "A Jap is a Jap." ⁸

The people of Topaz were well aware of their unique demographic situation. Children who had always been a visible minority in the public schools previous to relocation were suddenly in the majority and enjoyed the experience of attending a school in which all the student officers were Nikkei. At a recent reunion of 100 members of the Topaz High School graduating class of 1945, held in San Francisco, many of the former internees were interviewed, and their comments were mostly positive; while they recognize the trauma of having been torn from their homes, they also insist the experience had a positive effect on their lives, for it built a greater sense of community, solidified and intensified friendships with other Nikkei, and it led many of them to professions in which they have subsequently been successful. Almost no-one remembered Japanese vernacular customs having been important to their life in the camp. ⁹ What they did recall vividly was the nature of their common dilemma and that instead of expressing it in dramatically traditional genres such as those of Tule Lake, they had articulated it graphically in the form of a demographic tree (Figure 13), an image created to show the population of inmates in Topaz by the number of people in particular age groups (0–2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–12, etc.) and divided almost exactly equally by gender. This image became the "shield," or logo of Topaz, and it was circulated in mimeographed format accompanied by the following statement:

Topaz had no trees during its primary months; they had to be transplanted from surrounding regions. When the hardy trees unfolded their leaves in their new and strange environs of this City, the people expressed their appreciation with bucketsful of water. Now that we have nurtured the trees of nature, another one has been adopted, and it, too, has blossomed forth, the tree of the people.

The Topaz Shield is the symbol through its outlined form graphically representing the population of this center. This shield is actually a breakdown of our center residents of 8500 and the figures denote the various age groups. From the small of the middle to the spire, the bulk of the issei is represented. Most of the nisei, who comprise the majority of the residents, are in the continuously expanding lower

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⁹ Interviews with the Topaz High School Class of 1945 were conducted by Miss Akiko Tohmatsu (a graduate student in American Studies at Utah State University) during their reunion in San Francisco, July 20–21, 1990. I am also indebted to her for finding the mimeographed explanation of the "Topaz Tree" among the miscellaneous Topaz papers in the USU Special Collections.
branches and trunk. The design was drawn up as the official shield of Topaz in January, 1943.\footnote{The Topaz shield, or tree logo, is among the Topaz Papers, USU Special Collections.}

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\caption{Figure 13}
\end{figure}

It is impossible to overlook the optimistic parallel between the flourishing of transplanted trees and the flourishing of a transplanted population, as well as the metaphorical insistence on the \textit{Nisei} as the expanding and central life force of the community. Not surprisingly, the Topaz High School yearbook cover featured a logo showing an outline of the state of Utah, an arrow pointing to the location of Topaz, an encircled diagram of a typical block of internment buildings, and the Topaz Tree (Figure 14). Inside the book, the tree is reproduced on every page.
The process of Relocation received a tremendous amount of attention, debate and news coverage (although there are Americans who will say today that they believe the operation was carried out in secret). There are a number of books available on the subject; the most informative – in the view of this writer – are listed in the bibliography, and each of them gives further complete bibliographical lists. The political, social, and demographic realities of the relocatees as viewed by both insiders and outsiders are thus available to us in great quantity. But interestingly enough, the cultural realities, the expressions from everyday life which might reveal what the inmates felt about their own identities during the experience itself – these matters are strangely lacking from the existing literature.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11} The principal exception to this avoidance of the cultural dimension in camp life is Allen Eaton's \textit{Beauty Behind Barbed Wire}, mentioned previously.
Virtually none of the books gives more than a brief mention to matters of tradition, folklore, culture, festivals (whether celebrated or not), traditional foodways, music, dance, art; scholars have been content, in other words, to define and describe the Relocation from the standpoint of observable "data," rather than from the more dynamic and expressive vantage point of the culture itself.

There may be several reasons for this omission. For one thing, it is very likely that the *soto/uchi* (outsider/insider) syndrome so noticeable in other areas of Japanese expression is functioning here: inmates who shared cultural events, with all the attendant emotional and personal associations brought forward by those events, may simply feel that it is inappropriate to discuss these matters with outsiders. There is also a tendency in the English language to associate the word "folklore" with rural backwardness and illiteracy, although this is certainly not the meaning of the word. The journalistic mis-use of the term may have actually encouraged many Americans — not only the *Nikkei* — to be embarrassed about family traditions that might brand them as backward. And there may be a more sinister reason for the omission of this topic in the standard works: acknowledging that the people interned in the camps were not only human beings with numbers, but were active participants in a dynamic and complex culture makes the illegality of their internment even more clearly inhumane. Also, *Nikkei* folk tradition itself may provide still another reason for an unwillingness to talk openly about the warmest and liveliest aspects of life — that is, one's own living culture: many *Nikkei* were deeply embarrassed about the Relocation and feel it is a further embarrassment to talk about any of the deepest levels of what it meant to them. Indeed, the most widely used proverb among *Issei* and *Nisei* during the Relocation process was *shikata ganai* — there's nothing to be done about it (implying, bend with the wind). Even thoughtful *Nisei* scholars of Relocation may have neglected the subject of culture because of the "triviality barrier": everyday occurrences, because of their familiarity and commonness, are often viewed as trivial, and thus do not get the serious attention they deserve. Indeed, if something is very common and recurrent in a culture, it must be important.

But for serious scholars of cultural history there is still another fascinating aspect of the subject: as is the case with many colonized or defeated or exploited peoples, the most abundant and "reliable" information about them is gathered, archived, interpreted, and published by those in power. For example, virtually everything we know about the American Indians defending their land during the colonial and pioneer periods in the U.S. — even the words of famous Indian leaders' speeches — come to us from records of the U.S. Army. In the case of the Japanese-Americans, as soon as the arrests and evacuations were begun, the federal authorities confiscated all cameras, even from those who had been professional photographers. While the ostensible reason was to prevent sabotage, another practical
result for the scholar to consider is that almost every piece of empirical evidence which one might use to understand the phenomenon better comes to us through the filter of formal U.S. government control. There were of course a few secret photographs taken within the camps by inmates and school teachers, but these were strictly forbidden and were considered contraband. What sorts of material are available to us, then, if we want to know more about the situation from "the inside" or "from the ground upwards?" Mainly a few newsletters and literary magazines, oral histories collected from the inmates, and a few novels, short stories, and poems. What we desperately need is a deeper look into the cultural events and expressions at all levels, from elite to vernacular. The oral histories and the folklore can come only from the former internees themselves, even though some of it can be pieced together inferentially such as this brief overview has attempted to do. We know that folklore was — and is — actively in use. Those interested in the ethnic retention and intensification of Japanese traditional expressions under pressure as well as those interested in knowing more about the Relocation itself, would do well to consult the living library represented by the approximately 55,000 survivors of this difficult and traumatic period in American history, for they can provide cultural information and perspective which will otherwise be ignored.

In 1989 and 1990, forty-five years after the end of the war and the end of Relocation, the U.S. government acknowledged that it had broken its own laws in the removal of American citizens without due process. The first redress checks, presented to the most elderly of the survivors, were handed over in a public ceremony by government officials who knelt on the floor before the recipients (who, for their part, bravely fought back their tears). But an even clearer articulation of this miscarriage of justice had already appeared in the February 1943 issue of Topaz's Trek magazine: a young evacuee boy had been overheard telling his parents, "I don't like it here. When are we going back to America?" Such comments from everyday life, taken together with the live cultural values which give them life and substance, provide us with perspectives and insight which can be obtained in no other way. When it takes forty-five years for formal authorities to acknowledge what a young boy can say in two simple sentences, we can more fully appreciate the chasm of time and knowledge which results from ignoring or underestimating the living vernacular record.

**Bibliography**


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**Illustrations**

Figure 1 The *Utah Nippo*, a hand set monthly paper still in publication in Utah. Photo by Barre Toelken.

Figure 2 The latrine, bath, and laundry building in one block of the Topaz Relocation Center. Utah State Historical Society, Peoples of Utah Collection.

Figure 3 Cover of the December 1942 issue of *Trek*, the Topaz camp's literary magazine. The picture by Miné Okubo shows a Nisei family celebrating Christmas in their cramped living unit; the father is
dressed as Santa Claus, and there is a bonsai Christmas tree on the table. USU Special Collections, Merrill Library, Utah State University.

Figure 4 Cover of the February 1943 issue of Trek, showing a typical family scene in the communal mess-hall. USU Special Collections.

Figure 5 First page of "Tomorrow is Coming, Children", in the February 1943 issue of Trek. The story, written by Toshio Mori, was later published outside the camp in Mori's collection of essays and short stories, Yokohama, California. USU Special Collections.

Figures 6–9 A series of vignettes and drawings by Professor Chiura Obata, titled "Evacuees' memory of the Last Eight Months", from Topaz Times, January 1, 1943. USU Special Collections.

Figure 10 A group of internees at the Topaz camp pounding mochi, the glutinous rice served and used for decoration at New Year's time. Utah State Historical Society, Peoples of Utah Collection.

Figure 11 One of the housing units at Topaz, decorated with a Japanese garden and lanterns. Utah State Historical Society, Peoples of Utah Collection.

Figure 12 A public performance of Japanese classical music at the Topaz camp: four okotos, three samisens, and one shakuhachi. Utah State Historical Society, Peoples of Utah Collection.

Figure 13 The Topaz "tree" shield or logo, created from the distribution of camp inmates by age group and by gender. The top segment (ages 41–45 and higher) represents the bulk of the Issei population at Topaz; the middle part (from the 13–15 line to the 31–35 line) contains most of the Nisei; the lower portion is made up mostly of Sansei. Note that the very bottom of the tree, showing babies born in the camp, indicates an increase in birth rate. USU Special Collections.

Figure 14 The cover of the Topaz High School yearbook for 1943, showing an outline of the state of Utah, a circle showing a typical camp housing block, an arrow indicating the location of Topaz in the state of Utah, and the camp logo – the Topaz "tree." USU Special Collections.