

CULTURAL RELATIVITY AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

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CURRENT RESEARCH

My current interest in the social anthropology of the Asian American community in Hawaii sprung from a friendship I developed when I was a student at Princeton University. During my college years I spent a considerable amount of time working in the cafeteria. Since I had heavy student loans and the scholarship that I received was inadequate for covering Princeton's tuition, I chose a line of work that had as little to do with academics as possible. Perhaps I was simply trying to minimize the stress of studying in a sea of Valedictorians. In any case, it was good to take some time off from reading and meet people outside of the university.

I clearly recall that on my first day I was assigned garbage duty. As I eventually got the hang of things around the kitchen, I joined the serving crew. One day as I was stacking up dishes from the assembly line, I met a worker who introduced himself as "Tak." I must have looked confused since he said, "Actually my name is Takuya, *not* Tak. I go by Tak since nobody can remember my name."

I replied in Japanese that it wasn't an unusual name

at all, but he didn't seem to understand a word of what I was saying. While washing dirty dishes he explained that he was from Oahu and the only Japanese words he knew were *ojiichan*, *ofuro*, and *onigiri*. Takuya certainly knew more than he was letting on but I played along since he didn't seem to want to share much about his Japanese American identity. After I told him that I had lived in Kyoto for many years, he lowered his guard and told me that he was a real "banana" – a term I wasn't familiar with. The fact that Asian Americans are sometimes called "bananas" seemed quite inappropriate, but I became curious about how such slang developed. We had plenty of time to talk since nobody was keeping an eye on us as we washed dirty dishes. Takuya's family background stimulated my curiosity. I was particularly fascinated by his account of why his family decided to leave Yamaguchi and how they worked as laborers on the infamous sugarcane plantations.

After he told me about his family's experience in the internment camp for Japanese Americans, I started doing some research on the subject. I had not realized the complicated position Japanese Americans had been placed in during the Pacific War that began in Hawaii.

Since the United States and Japan are allies today, it is difficult to imagine the discrimination and ethnic tensions that existed on both sides of the ocean, but one of my classmates from Princeton has written a best-selling study called *Japan 1941 : Countdown to Infamy*.

History is often regarded as an obscure field, but almost everyone is interested in who their ancestors are. Although it is not visible, I have Native American ancestors on my mother's side. Myths of homogeneity may persist but anyone who delves into the past will find that we are all mixed. The history of Hawaii is tainted by colonialism. Social inequalities will continue to persist in the near future. Acculturation is not an inevitable process and ethnic tensions exist even though Hawaii's tolerance toward cultural diversity is famous throughout the world. I am looking forward to interviewing 2nd, 3rd and 4th generation Asian Americans in Hawaii and examining the oral history archives. In order to understand their views on Asian cultural heritage, I will have to spend a consider amount of time traveling between each of the islands but sociological research is far more stimulating for me personally than always being cooped up in the library.

BACKGROUND

I have always been fascinated by individuals who have been able to transcend the boundaries of gender, age and nationality. In the case of the United States, some of the greatest artists have been Jazz musicians. Despite centuries of racial prejudice and economic inequality, these Afro-American musicians were able to overcome obstacles and create a new style of music that was radically different from the European Classical tradition.

Although we are familiar enough with Blues and Jazz today, in the 1930s and 40s this musical style seemed scandalous to many conservative listeners. For

high society connoisseurs, composition was something that gifted individuals attempted slowly and deliberately in a quiet setting with a piano. One needed to play several instruments and understand the subtleties of counterpoint. The new generation of Jazz musicians proved all these assumptions to be irrelevant. Not only could they come up with harmony and melodies that were just as complex as those of the Classical masters, they could create riffs on the spur of the moment during live performances.

Armchair theorists tend to study Jazz harmony mathematically as if a thorough analysis of chord progressions is absolutely necessary to produce complex melodies. But as Tchiakovsky pointed out, melodies are not produced simply by rigorous study. They come to you at the least expected moments. Although Jazz improvisation may seem dissonant at times since artists rarely play their repertoire in exactly the same way twice, they stick to certain principles while musically negotiating with the bass or the horn section. More importantly, whether one was playing in a Jazz trio or a big band orchestra, there were frequent conflicts and readjustments. These deeply personal relationships produced some of the greatest sounds in music history. That is precisely why biographical studies are essential. Knowing how Prohibition, the Great Depression and the Civil Rights Movement affected these musicians cannot be overshadowed by music theory.

Perhaps I am stating the obvious, but for incoming students, I cannot emphasize enough that college is a special time for broadening one's horizons. No matter how many assignments you have, do not forget to read books, explore art and deepen your spiritual understanding of the universe! I am the head of a volunteer network called SOCIAL ACTION, so if anyone would like to get involved in community projects, please feel free to contact me anytime.