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Japanese Americans

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## Japanese Americans

Japanese Americans identify themselves with the ancestry and the cultural characteristic of Japanese. The group is amongst the three dominant Asian American ethnic groups that settled in America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The group has, however, declined in number thus is currently categorized amongst the minority groups whose population is approximately 1.4 million (An, 2016). The Japanese emigration to the United States was due to the social, cultural, and political changes that took place in 1868 during the Meiji restoration (Matsumoto, 2018). In 1882, there was the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited the absorption of Chinese for labor in industries; thus, the Japanese were mostly preferred to replace Chinese immigrants in industries (Matsumoto, 2018). As such, the number of Japanese immigrants in the US significantly rose. The Japanese survived in the US as laborers and funded their education with income from domestic work. Just like other immigrant groups, the Japanese came to the United States in search of employment and better lifestyle. Some of the Japanese had plans of settling with their families in the US, while others opted for savings from their labor to invest in Japan to better their country. Japanese Americans have been integrated into America, but they still practice their culture that they mix with the western cultures since they are amongst the minority groups in white-dominated states. This essay presents the history and culture of the Japanese Americans, highlighting their enormous contribution to the history, politics, economics, sports, religious landscape, and the transformation of popular culture.

### Economic Traditions and Employment of Japanese Americans

Japanese Americans' main economic activity was farming through which they significantly impact the Agricultural practice of the westernized United States. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century

Japanese immigrants came with sophisticated methods of irrigation that impacted the cultivation of vegetables, fruits, and flowers in the marginal lands in California and Hawaii. Notably, the 1<sup>st</sup> generation of the Japanese Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century lost their farms as they got absorbed into industries. However, Japanese Americans, especially those who live in Southern California, still practice farming as their main economic activity (Erikson, 2019). The Japanese American detainees cultivated desolate lands in places like Poston, Tule Lake, Arizona desert, and California. As of today, the lands have remained productive (Erikson, 2019). They would sell crop products from the farms for family income.

Conventionally, the Issei settled in the US in the 1800s and worked on the West Coast as seasonal agricultural workers, in canneries and construction of railroads (Sandeem, 2018). The working conditions for the Japanese Americans were abysmal due to racism and organized labor pressures; thus, the Issei hardly worked in offices and factories. Most of the Japanese Americans opted for small businesses like restaurants and food joints that would serve their ethnic group (Erikson, 2019). The Issei were organized and united as a family; thus, they depended upon their unity for labor in small businesses. Japanese Americans realized significant economic developments due to their ethnic solidarity. Towards the end of World War II, most of the Seattle Japanese settlers were farmers who produced the majority of vegetables that were sold in Los Angeles. The exclusion of Japanese Americans from working in industries is the main reason for their dependency on agriculture and the formation of the ethnic economy in America.

However, the economic development of the Japanese Americans became a serious threat to the whites who felt threatened since they were the majority, yet Japanese were overtaking them in terms of economic growth. The white backlash unions were anti-Japanese contributing to the California agricultural group's assumption of the leadership roles to limit land use, which led

to the decline in the number of acres of land that the Issei owned. World War II was the main event that marked the most significant economic revolution for Japanese Americans. Before World War II, Japanese Americans were mostly commodified in a self-contained economy as an ethnic group (Ng and Camp, 2015). Notably, the Japanese Americans were initially under internment, which was the most deterrence to their economic status (Ng and Camp, 2015). After the Second World War, a significant number of Japanese Americans were employed in American owned businesses, unlike in the prewar state that Japanese Americans only earned a living through family-owned businesses and farming. The economic situation was hard for Japanese Americans during the internment. Besides, other factors that contributed to the end of the Japanese Americans ethnic economy includes: Racial

prejudice and judicial killings dropped between the 1940s and 1950s (Ng and Camp, 2015).

Japan was previously a geopolitical threat to the United States of America (Erikson, 2019). Most of the Americans developed sympathy on the mistreatment of minority groups. As a result of these developments, Japanese Americans have been assimilated into the larger American economy.

Due to the developments of the economy in post-war years, Japanese Americans experience an equitable representation in the corporate economy and profession. Japanese American university graduates were initially despised, but today they have equal opportunities as Americans. Japanese Americans realize a slightly better income. However, Japanese Americans hardly occupy the top positions in organizations in the contemporary job market in the United States, especially in the management of the public sector (Nagata, Kim and Wu, 2019). The number of Japanese Americans that hold administrative positions in the US is evidence of the

unequal representation of the Japanese Americans in the larger American economy (Nagata, Kim and Wu, 2019). The socio-economic and the economic mobility of Japanese Americans are currently higher in the US than in the past centuries.

### **Politics and Government for Japanese Americans**

The political movements of Japanese Americans are signified by the formation of Labor Association with Mexicans back in the 1900s and farm workers (Erikson, 2019). The labor association was formed primarily to call for a strike for employers to strife for better wages and good working conditions. The membership grew from 700 to 1200 members (Doi, 2019). Japanese Americans used to be paid \$18 per month, but with the incessant efforts of the labor associations, the pay was increased to \$22.5 per month (Erikson, 2019). The Labor Associations formed the most significant leadership for Japanese Americans.

The organization of the Japanese Americans in their social ethnicity was a security threat to Americans. Americans thought that Japanese Americans were loyal to their country than to America because they did not abandon the Japanese cultural practices like Buddhism (Doi, 2019). As a result, Japanese Americans were relocated to concentration camps in 1942 following a decree of president Roosevelt (Ng and Camp, 2015). Japanese Americans were settled in Camps in the remote areas of the Western States. The housing of the Japanese Americans was Spartan and consisted primarily of tarpaper. The families usually dined together at a community mess hall. Children went to school as adults provided cheap labor to industries and farms for \$5 daily (Doi, 2019). The US government expected the interns to make farms in the settlement camps productive since they had settled them in arid soils, which were the biggest challenge for the Japanese Americans to cultivate. The Japanese Americans in the settlement camps elected

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amongst themselves spokespersons who would meet the government officials to present the grievances of Japanese Americans.

The Japanese Americans engaged in recreational activities as a pass time activity. The interns volunteered to fight in the US all-Nisei army and were later recruited into battle. Notably, Japanese Americans' life in the camps was hard because the camps had unfavorable weather conditions; they were too cold in the winter and during summer were too hot. Food was produced in masses like the army style to serve the families (Doi, 2019). They lived in fear knowing that any attempts to flee they would be shot to death since there were armies around the clock watching over them.

### **The film, Music, And Entertainment for Japanese Americans**

Japanese Americans organized recreational activities to pass the time. During this time, they performed traditional music, especially folk songs. Also, there were renown sociologists and artists amongst the Japanese Americans like Philip Kan Gotanda (1949) who is known for the playwright, music producer, and director who composed music about the experience of Japanese Americans and their family life in the settlement camps. Some of the plays that are seen in the contemporary screens that were produced by Philip Kan Gotanda includes the following: *Yankee Dawg You Die*, *The Dream of Kitamura*, *The Avocado Kid*, *Song for Nisei Fisherman* and *Bullet Headed Birds*.

There was also Sessue Hayakawa (1890-1973) who produced silent films that themed around the lives of Japanese Americans. He is known for co-producing and directing *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Also, there is Hiroshima, a Sansei pop music group that blended the traditional Japanese instrumentals into Jazz music.

Japanese Americans were rich in the art which they practiced in the camps before World War II. The common musical genres amongst the Japanese Americans was Kabuki, Naniwa bushi which is known as the narrative music, biwa (narrative music accompanied by a lute-type instrument), the Nagata which vocal music that is mostly accompanied by shamisen. The Kabuki was also a popular form of entertainment for the Issei. The inmates/ interns collaborated in acting and divided responsibilities into areas like acting, narrating, stage production, script writing, and dance coordination. Japanese plays were popular in the camps. They produced their costumes from Hawaii and handmade some from locally available materials like the bamboo rings and soy sauce barrels. They made hair from manila ropes and dyed them to serve the theme color cording according to the event.

Another significant item for entertainment was the Japanese Classical dance; *shakuhachi* and koto. The dances were popular amongst the Japanese Americans before the war. There were Nisei teachers who taught in dance classes for different age groups. Children would be taught to dance from the age of three years. Teachers were paid a monthly salary for the dance classes.

Music is symbolic for the Japanese Americans and was performed on specific occasions to mark the purpose of the event. For instance, the *Ondo* (Bon dance) is a type of Japanese folk music and dance that was only performed to console one of their own when they lose a family member. Music served the socialization need of the inmates as encouragement of overcoming the shared hardships. The music was primarily made in the Japanese language to reflect a Japanese mentality amongst the Issei.

Japanese music was later focused on promoting Western classical and popular culture. This can be illustrated by the introduction of ballroom dance and the introduction of lessons for learning western instruments like violin and piano (Cha, 2016). Japanese Americans today



participate in choirs and jazz bands. The Nisei youths were particularly interested in ballroom dance. The Nisei have currently become the mainstream of the popular American culture. The young Japanese Americans consciously affirm their identity and Americans.

### **Family and Religion for Japanese Americans**

Japanese Americans were Buddhists, and this is the reason why the majority of the Japanese Americans were singled out for settlement in the camps in 1942 following the Executive Order of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The War Relocation Authority and FBI claimed that Buddhists were the main threat to America since they have a higher likelihood of helping Japan than America because of their loyalty for their country and the faith they stood for. Buddhist priests were the most targeted group because they were thought to resist assimilation into American culture (Han, 2017). Because of the harsh treatment of the Buddhists, a significant number of Japanese Americans had to convert to Christianity.

While in the camps, Buddhists maintained community and family ties by practicing their religious rituals in honor of their ancestors. The rituals included burial of the dead community/family members, marriages and erection of monuments in honor of the dead, especially their heroes who died while fighting for the US (Spencer and Draper, 2018). They believed that Buddha was the sole protector of their loved ones. The American Buddhists still found resistance and a refuge in their traditions. The Japanese Buddhists had to profess their loyalty for the United State, which was the only way of ending captivity. The interned Buddhists formed a resistance against the government oppressive policies but developed mixed reactions because of the harsh conditions in the US and their loyalty for their Japanese heritage. Today, there are both



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Buddhist and Christian Japanese Americans (Han, 2017). There are currently Pan- Asian churches that birthed Japanese-American churches with own doctrinal basis and theology.

In conclusion, Japanese Americans have a rich culture that significantly influences the popular culture in America today. The Japanese Americans have dominant social trends in America, which could be described as dispersed, middle-class, and assimilated Japanese to the popular white culture. Japanese Americans intermarry with the whites and other minority groups like African Americans. In their current settlements, Japanese Americans still hold to the traditional setup of family/community-based unions. This is evident in the way they live closer to one another in their homesteads in Hawaii. While Japanese Americans intermarry, the majority of them marry non-Japanese. There is also unlikelihood of holding onto the ethnically discrete orientations and institutions since most of the Japanese Americans are assimilated.

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