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The Turning Point : Now That the Redress Issue Is Settled, Japanese-Americans Are Confronting Questions on Their Culture's Future

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Jerry Yoshitomi, director of the Japanese-American Community Center, Stanford-educated and married to an Irish-Catholic American, is pondering the cultural fate of his two children, his future grandchildren--the entire Japanese-American community.

He recalls his family's 1988 New Year's Day in Los Angeles: "We woke up in the morning and went to Mass at St. Brigid's, which has a black gospel choir. Fantastic. So we had the Catholic black gospel experience. Before or after, we had coffee and doughnuts somewhere, the typical American thing.

"Then we came (to the center) for the Japanese *Oshogatsu* New Year's program and saw Buddhist archers shoot arrows to ward off evil spirits for the year. Then we ate traditional Japanese rice cakes as part of the New Year's service and saw some entertainment done by a young Japanese-American storyteller. . . .

"On the way home, we stopped in Chinatown for a lunch at King Taco. We didn't plan all this, we didn't think about the cultural context of all this until later, or the need for Alka-Seltzer at the end of the day."

This experience, he says, reflects the healthy cultural diversity of Los Angeles and augurs well for Japanese-Americans maintaining a distinct identity if they choose.

But how are they to make this choice when so many Japanese-Americans, particularly the third and fourth generations, know so little of their history and their heritage?

A 60% rate of intermarriage and the rapid pace of social integration has fueled much soul-searching among Japanese-Americans. Is ethnic suicide, as some term it, the price of assimilation?

The trigger for this collective appraisal has been the often divisive, politically galvanizing issue of redress, reparations to the Japanese-Americans thrown into relocation camps during the war and deprived of property and dignity. President Reagan signed redress legislation this year, authorizing $20,000 in reparations to each of the 60,000 surviving former internees.

“I don’t think we are committing ethnic suicide, but there is evidence in both directions,” says Grant Ujifusa, co-author of “The Almanac of American Politics” and the legislative expert credited with devising the political strategy for the Japanese American Citizens League that led to the President’s signing redress legislation.

“Having successfully lobbied redress, I would hope that it reinvigorates the community, stimulates a sense of pride and achievement in being Japanese and in the power of concerted political action,” he says.

Ujifusa, a Sansei married to a Jewish-American woman, says many third-generation Japanese-Americans’ attitude toward redress initially was: “This doesn’t affect me.”

But as many of the Sansei age, especially those who married “out,” as he did, they will look at their children “and feel a very deep need for some sense of continuity with their heritage.”

He adds that much of the redress effort was led by Nisei (second-generation Japanese-Americans) for obvious reasons: “They were people directly affected.”

Further, they shielded the Sansei, the third generation, “from some of the psychological and other deprivations that occurred,” contributing to a generational gap in the group’s social memory.

How great a gap? Until he was grown, “I thought the camps were this big summer camp everybody went to,” says Victor Shibata, 43, a Los Angeles chiropractor whose parents never told him they were interned before he was born.

Betty Kozasa, a 68-year-old Nisei, has not forgotten. When she speaks, her eyes become a screen of memory:

December, 1941, without warning, thousands of Issei, first - generation Japanese, are taken from their homes and businesses by FBI agents . . . .

*Feb. 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sign*s *Executive Order 9066, authorizing the relocation of 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry into internment camps . . . .*

1946, the last U.S. relocation camp at Tule Lake closes . . . .

Kozasa was forced into a Jerome, Ark., camp with her parents. And she made sure her children knew the story. Associate executive director of Volunteer Center of Los Angeles and a longtime community activist, Kozasa appeared 15 years ago in a network television documentary about the internment.

Many Japanese-Americans criticized her for it. “I had people calling me saying, ‘Betty, why did you have to go on national television and talk about your camp experience? You just go and make it worse for our kids at school.’ ”

Kozasa leans across the desk in her office and speaks with intensity: “I worry we are going to lose our identity. It wasn’t to our advantage to be a visible minority in the past.”

Teaching by Example

Unfortunately, she says, “Japanese are not known to be very articulate” about their feelings. She says her culture stresses teaching by example. “We don’t say our ancestors came from Japan and we have a long history of our own and should bear it proudly.”

Katsumi Kunitsugu, 63, and also a Nisei, recalls “yellow peril” headlines when she was growing up. In that atmosphere, she says, Japanese-Americans were taught to be “110% American.”

Kozasa, an animated woman with the sound of America’s heartland in her voice, lived in Wisconsin for 10 years. They were her children’s “formative years,” she says, and they had to be taken to Chicago to see other Asians. “They thought they were the only Asians in the world until then.”

She has tried to celebrate Japanese New Year and other traditional holidays so her children would have a sense of their heritage. But her parents practiced “the old accommodation thing--'We mustn’t draw attention to ourselves.’ That is a big part of Japanese culture. When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

And most of them have outdone the Romans.

Japanese-Americans generally are better educated and earn more than white Americans or other Asian-Americans, according to statistics compiled by William Ouchi, a professor in the graduate School of Management at UCLA.

While 86% of Japanese-Americans have high school diplomas, according to the 1980 U.S. Census, 80% of whites have a secondary-school education; 28% of Japanese-Americans have four or more years of college compared with 22% for whites.

Higher Incomes

Based on 1979 Census data, the median income for Japanese-Americans was $16,829, compared with $15,572 for whites. In California, where a large portion of Japanese-Americans live, their 1979 median income was $27,388, compared with $23,543 for whites.

While Asian-Americans are the nation’s fastest-growing minority based on percentage in the overall population--more than 5 million in 1985 or 2.1% and projected to grow to 10 million by 2000 or 4%--the number of Japanese-Americans is small, 766,300 in 1986. By 2000, they are projected to number 850,000.

A recent University of Chicago study compared suburban settlement patterns for Afro-Americans, Asians and Latinos based on 1980 and 1970 Census data. Asians, the study found, have moved into Anglo neighborhoods much more rapidly than blacks or Latinos and have generally bypassed the pattern of first forming ethnic, central city enclaves.

None of this is news to Gene Levine, a UCLA sociology professor: “They are different from other immigrant groups,” he says of Japanese-Americans, noting that despite the existence of Little Tokyos, they “typically never lived in ghettoes.”

They were spread nationwide as farmers, “but mainly in the West Coast from California to Idaho,” says the chain-smoking academic, who headed UCLA’s Japanese-American Research Project from 1962 to 1975, the largest study of its kind.

The camps, he says, were the most “homogenous” environment that Japanese-Americans ever lived in.

The first-generation Issei farmers were relatively well-educated, unlike most European immigrants in the late-19th and early 20th Century. The Nisei were highly educated, “a fifth of them were college graduates,” Levine says. But before World War II, they suffered pervasive discrimination and were forced into certain occupations. “Gardening is the primary example,” he says.

Prosperous 1950s

By the 1950s, however, “we’ve got Eisenhower,” Levine says, “great prosperity owing to the destruction of the Japanese and German industrial machine. The U.S. ruled the world and the dollar was worth something. There was a labor shortage” and much of the overt discrimination toward the Japanese abated.

The Nisei who trained as architects but had to work as gardeners could now design skyscrapers after the war. Their children, the Sansei, went to school. “And who did they go to school with?” he asks. “They went to school with Caucasians. So you have a great deal of intermarriage.”

The Japanese who have immigrated since 1965 “are highly modernized, moneyed and urban people,” he adds. They possess all the qualities that ease the path to social integration and white mainstream acceptance.

But all this has its limits. Japanese-Americans may intermarry with whites at a high rate and they may live in any neighborhood they can afford.

The true test of acceptance without prejudice, however, is what sociologists call “structural assimilation"--inclusion at the highest political and corporate levels where the power is.

President-elect George Bush “has chosen no Asian-American for his transition team or Cabinet,” says Irene Hirano, director of the Japanese-American National Museum, which will be completed in Los Angeles in the fall of 1990. And even if he did, that could be viewed as mere tokenism.

No Corporate Visibility

“There are no Japanese-Americans heading the nation’s leading corporations,” says Ouchi, author of “Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge,” and “The M-Form Society: How American Teamwork Can Recapture the Competitive Edge.”

“Except for the fluke of Jews in the entertainment industry, America’s major corporations remain . . . Gentile and mostly Protestant” in their leadership, Levine says.

There is further evidence that Japanese-Americans have not achieved total, mainstream acceptance: Look at the status of their mixed-race children, says Harry Kitano, acting director of UCLA’s Asian-American Studies Center and the author of numerous studies on race and assimilation.

Most Japanese-Americans who do intermarry do so with whites. Their children report they are not accepted by either ethnic group, Kitano says: “It would seem that once intermarriage took place, the children would flow right into the mainstream, but that does not seem to be so. That’s why it’s hard for me to tell right now which way the culture is going.”

Racism underlies virtually every aspect of social interaction in the United States, maintains Kitano, who adds that “visibility"--looking different from the white mainstream--is a social liability in such a culture. And until “racism is eliminated,”

the physical appearance of Japanese-Americans and their mixed-race offspring will make it difficult for them to be totally accepted.

Kitano and others say that the high regard in which Japanese-Americans are held is partly due to the international stature of Japan. But that is a two-edged sword, Kitano says. As some of the Asian countries rise and become competitive, there is always the fear of a backlash.

"Feelings always relate to economics," community activist Kozasa says. "There aren't enough jobs now, not enough apartments in Los Angeles. We become easy targets then. It's easy to say it's the Japanese fault. People here, particularly white people, are not able to distinguish between those of us who were born here and the Japanese nationals. They lump us all together."

When she does cultural-awareness talks around Southern California, Kozasa reminds her audience of Vincent Chen, the Chinese-American who was mistaken for a Japanese by white auto workers in Michigan. "He was clobbered to death with a baseball bat. Think of the ramifications, how deep-seated those people's feelings were," she said.

A Fast Acceptance

The apparent acceptance of Japanese-Americans has come so fast, she adds, "I think much of it might be superficial."

A loss of identity could leave some Japanese-Americans with a "distorted and romantic view of what the American society is," Kitano says.

He warns there is a danger that some Japanese-Americans--having lived around whites all their lives, gone to school with them and married them--subconsciously believe they are white.

But many Japanese-Americans would respond that they know who they are and want to retain valuable aspects of their culture in America.

"There is a large group of Japanese-Americans who don't want to assimilate into the mainstream," says Shibata, the chiropractor and community activist whose parents

never told him about the camps. “The ones you don’t hear about, the ones that are into drugs, the ones in the lesser economic communities, they still feel they have pride in their heritage. Everyone thinks Japanese-Americans go to college. There’s a whole segment of the community who don’t go to college.”

They don’t have middle-class dreams of total assimilation, says Shibata, who chose to keep his practice in the Crenshaw district, a predominantly African-American area but one of the first Los Angeles neighborhoods Japanese-Americans lived in.

“I’m interested in treating working people. A lot of the old Issei still live in the neighborhood,” he says.

Roots in Hawaii

But Shibata’s is not the only strategy for staying close to one’s roots, maintaining one’s identity in the face of an homogenizing mass culture.

UCLA’s Ouchi is a Sansei, born in Hawaii and married to a Japanese-American whose grandparents, like his, emigrated to Hawaii from the same Japanese town.

“I don’t fear a loss of identity. I expect that my children won’t marry Japanese-Americans, the odds are against it,” Ouchi says.

What’s happening to Japanese-Americans is a typical “generational progression,” he says.

The first generation is busy “keeping the food on the table and a roof over their heads. They don’t think about ethnicity. They want their children to grow up being American in every way because they are aware their English is not perfect, they eat different food, they dress differently and they look foreign.”

The second-generation grows up feeling they are American in every way; they don’t think much about ethnicity or their ancestors, Ouchi says.

The third-generation, “having complete confidence in their American-ness, develops an interest in recapturing their roots. And that, I think, is what we are seeing with the Japanese-Americans.”

It’s good to know that some Sansei are interested in preserving their culture, Levine says, but sociological data indicates that the “Little Tokyos of America are going to be ‘ornaments,’ for tourists to visit. They’ll be places for old people and women who outlived their husbands. I’m not a futurist, sociology is not a predictive science, but one can make sensible projections.”

Japanese-Americans don’t form a cohesive community and “they never did. How can one say now, let alone 10 or 20 years from now, there is going to be a strong Japanese-American community characterized by close bonds and mutual support? No.”

How one perceives the future of Japanese-Americans also may depend on the model of assimilation one uses.

Increasingly, ethnic minorities--especially nonwhites--do not want to blend into the white American mainstream. Contemporary notions of assimilation also have been influenced by foreign and domestic politics.

Beginning with Indian independence in 1947, the struggles to end subjugation of people of color and dismantle colonial empires spread the ideologies of Third World intellectuals, Asian and African scholars who challenged the cultural superiority of Europe and Euro-America, Kitano says. Domestically, the black consciousness movement of the 1960s also led the way for other ethnic pride movements.

What does it mean today, Ujifusa asks, to be “fully American?” Does it mean “I have now adopted the values and the life style of the New England Yankee?”

The real American, Ujifusa says, “is not the Anglo-Saxon WASP, but this other remarkable creation which is white, black, yellow, red. I know that exists in Southern California--that is the real America. And the people who are part of it are the real Americans.

“What you’ve got in California is the World State,” says Ujifusa, who credits San Antonio Mayor Henry Cisneros with coining the term. “I buy into that. If you say, ‘Here is an American and here is a Japanese-American, are they separate categories?’ ” He doesn’t think so.

Paraphrasing President Reagan, he says: “All these groups make contributions to what is finally the American culture and to the extent that we all share in that we are American.”

Not a Melting Pot

The melting pot is no more. It never really was.

“I think the idea of the melting pot is not in our national best interest,” Sen. Daniel Inouye (D.-Hawaii) says. “I think America became great because of the contributions made by all of the various ethnic groups, and that these groups have been able . . . to retain their identifiable differences. I prefer the idea of a stew where you have a blend of identifiable parts that you can see and taste.”

However one labels cultural pluralism--stew, rainbow, patchwork quilt--what will the unique Japanese-American contribution be? Who, as the Issei die, will be here to remember? And how can the Sansei remember what many never knew?

One way is to identify the “intangible values” of the culture, says Yoshitomi, the 40-year-old Sansei married to a “fifth-generation Irish-Catholic (who also is) trying to hold on to her own cultural traditions as well as transmit them to our children.”

“I don’t think anyone is saying that my grandchildren’s Japanese-American-ness is going to be like my grandparents,’ ” he says.

Rather, it’s important for his children--who attend Catholic catechism school on Tuesday and Japanese-language school on Saturday--to know where they come from and maintain certain values key to Japanese culture, “responsibility to parents, family, bearing one’s ordeal,” he says.

He also says it is important for Japanese-Americans to preserve their past with oral histories, some of which have been collected sporadically at the Japanese-American center in Los Angeles.

Take the stories of the lives of the stereotypical Japanese-American gardener. “There is this romantic ideal of what it is to be a gardener, how they cared for this lush vegetation of Southern California. And how good they are with their hands,” he says.

The stark facts are that gardening was one of the few jobs Japanese-Americans were allowed to have. They chose it because they “could basically be self-employed and they could work 18 hours a day if they needed to. They didn’t have to rely on whether a white person hired them or gave them their next raise,” Yoshitomi says. “They had control over their own destiny. All they needed was a lawn mower and a pickup truck.”

How, he asks, “do you take the values that encouraged the Nisei to become the gardener--independence, pragmatism, commitment to the survival of the family--and carry those values into a 1990s context?” What, he asks, “is the next form of the gardener?”

It may well be Japanese-Americans who have stayed in the professions, Yoshitomi says. “They have a certain amount of latitude in being able to be as Japanese or not Japanese as they want to be. It’s not like they are part of the corporate structure and have to act a particular way.”

The future will not inevitably bring a cultural death to the Japanese-American, Yoshitomi says: “Motivated either by responsibility or guilt, there is least a desire among Sanseis to retain culture.”