

CHAPTER 31

ETHNICITY

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“Are race relations in Hawai‘i getting better or worse?”

We aren't getting along as well as we used to, largely because we tend to ignore certain ethnic pressure points.

Brief history. We started out as a thriving society of native Hawaiians; then came contact with the West, colonialism, the arrival of immigrants from Asia, Europe, and North America, and eventually statehood. It was the critical addition of immigrant workers for the sugar industry, beginning in the mid-1800s, that created modern Hawai'i's multiethnic complexion. By the late 1800s, their numbers had changed the demographics of the Islands forever. During most of the 1900s, there was a Caucasian power elite symbolized by the Big Five and Republican rule, but everyone was part of a demographic minority.

World War II and the postwar changes in Hawai'i shifted some of the power. Japanese and other Asian Americans banded together to propel the Democratic party into power. Coupled with the dramatic rise of organized labor, especially the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), this new element radically changed electoral politics.

“Made in America.” In this multicultural setting, isolated from Asia and the U.S. mainland by the Pacific Ocean, Hawai'i has evolved

into a unique society. Yet, as different as we may be, Hawai'i is still "made in America." Our educational system and the media are two powerful factors in our socialization. What we are taught and how we are taught (our teachers' methods, our textbooks) and what we see on TV (the cartoons, the news, the sitcoms) are very much like those in California or Iowa or New York. With this socialization come negative values, including racism. So you find many of the same stereotypes and prejudices here—toward Caucasians, Asian immigrants, African Americans, and native Americans.

Yet, perhaps because we're an island society and have lived together in a confined space, or because our plantation past taught us to coexist in multiethnic communities, we've learned how to live together better than people in other places. Then again, maybe it's just the natural consequence of a uniquely welcoming host society.

Visionary leadership. We also had the good fortune of visionary leadership from individuals who understood the critical value of creative public policies that were mutually respectful of Hawai'i's ethnic groups. During the years just before, during, and immediately after World War II, the Islands benefited from the joint efforts of military, private sector, and public sector leaders who took a look at Hawai'i's society as a whole, studied the pressure points among the ethnic groups that could fractionalize the community, and with great care and thought anticipated and addressed problems.

Out of this effort, three individuals—Shigeo Yoshida, Hung Wai Ching, and Charles Loomis—emerged as remarkable leaders who were able to talk to different ethnic groups, as well as to leaders in the military, government, and private sector, and thereby influence public policy in ways that addressed the concerns of the diverse community. They were part of the military's "morale section" that was formed to maintain the morale of the civilian population during the war. Their basic approach was to talk about ethnic issues openly and in constructive terms. The long-term result was that a fairly harmonious Hawai'i emerged from the war better prepared for the changes that were to follow.

Island stew. Today people from different ethnic groups are thrown together all the time: a mix of family and friends gather for a graduation party—or, more likely a wedding. The largest and fastest growing

ethnic group in Hawai'i, according to veteran state statistician Bob Schmitt, is the mixed-race group. Schmitt calculates that approximately 60 percent of the children born in 1992 were the offspring of interracial unions. Membership in this "hapa" group will continue to grow, not only in size, but as a percentage of the entire population.

There is a general notion that having large numbers of interracial people eliminates prejudice, stereotypes, and racism. Hawai'i is proof that this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find individuals who hold negative images of ethnic groups that are part of their own backgrounds.

The truth of the matter is that ethnic tension in Hawai'i is growing and a tradition of tolerance tends to mask this.

Pressure point 1. We have difficulty, as a society, with newcomers to the Islands, whether they're highly trained, predominantly white professionals who come here to enter the private sector, new immigrants from Asia who are highly educated but speak English with an accent, or the working-class groups from various islands in the Pacific.

The Caucasian newcomer often resents the "haole" label and is also unprepared for the degree of Asian or "local" influence and the extent to which nonwhites wield power. Too many anticipate a move to Honolulu as being no different than a move to any other U.S. metropolitan area and refuse to learn or accommodate. And Hawai'i residents tend to view this group with suspicion and mistrust. But this is a large, powerful, and growing population; our ability to interact in a positive fashion will help determine how they fit and participate in the community.

African Americans, like others, are a diverse group, ranging from student athletes to retired military personnel to business professionals and laborers. There are stories of successful accommodation—John Penebacker came to Hawai'i with the military, subsequently attended the University of Hawai'i where he was a basketball star, eventually became a school board member, and is now a state administrator—but Hawai'i can be brutally racist in its treatment of this particular minority.

Many of the new Asian immigrants come to Hawai'i from different backgrounds than those who came as contract laborers for the plantations. They're urban, educated professionals in the countries of their birth. They resent being treated like second-class citizens just because of their accents and refuse to accept our attitude that they should "wait

their turn” to rise on the economic, social, and political ladder.

Pressure point 2. We are facing social problems created by an economy that employs a large number of less-educated immigrants and newcomers in the tourist industry, who often work more than one job for wages on the low end of the pay scale. This economic situation leaves a younger generation often unsupervised while parents and older siblings work long hours to make ends meet. This is related to the troubling presence of youth gangs.

In the days when Hawai‘i was not as urbanized, when parents were working long hours on the plantations, there were institutions such as language schools, the YWCA and YMCA, and churches to serve as caretakers for the children of laborers. Today these organizations need far more assistance.

Pressure point 3. A new and still developing tension is fueled by the changing image of the Japanese American in Hawai‘i. Since World War II, most have enjoyed a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, defended the status quo, and expected education and upward mobility to be as much a reality for their children as sun and surf. As a result, they suffer from the “model minority syndrome”: people expect them to be perfect, cooperative, productive citizens. Japanese Americans expect the same of themselves. But, like any other group, they have crime, failure, and dysfunction. This doesn’t fit their image.

Just as entrenched is the image that they run this place: that an enormous Japanese American elite and bureaucracy control the inner workings of government. Japanese Americans, as a result, become the logical target as a group that has overstayed its welcome, taken more than its fair share of power and glory—and the historical explanation of how they got there doesn’t much matter.

Every ethnic group has its own perspectives and concerns, but the case of the Japanese American is especially critical because they have dictated, in so many ways, the status quo. If they feel threatened, they will respond by circling the wagons. Like most groups under siege, they will become defensive, protect their steadily diminishing areas of influence, and succumb to the temptation to use more nepotism rather than to become more egalitarian and inclusive. Because of their sizable population and political influence, this could further fractionalize the community in considerable ways.

Pressure point 4. The movement for Hawaiian sovereignty is kindling a range of emotions. It has the potential to put people into "us versus them" camps since the issue can be perceived as threatening to other ethnic groups, large or small.

Although this is a pressure point, the native Hawaiian community is the one group that has seen things change for the better recently. This momentum may have gotten its kick start with the Hawaiian renaissance of the 1970s and the surge of pride in native culture and arts. Since then, native Hawaiian groups have organized and mobilized politically as well as culturally. They've seen that education and community participation can make a difference, and that they can be active players in determining their future.

Need for policy. There is much more to this complex story, of course, and some of the statements here are overgeneralized and simplified. The crucial point is to recognize the existence of some positive ethnic and racial patterns; the persistence of some long-standing negative ones; the threats imposed by new developments; and, most important, the need for policy considerations to protect and enhance our ability to tolerate and respect different heritages and aspirations. Perhaps it's time to establish a modern-day morale corps to address these pressure points. For sure, every large institution in the Islands (military, universities, hospitals, etc.) should provide "orientation" for newcomers. It might be as simple as a reading list or perhaps a video that constructively addresses the unique qualities of Hawai'i, including an honest airing of ethnic pressure points.

Race relations aren't as good as they used to be, and for them to improve we and our elected officials need to recognize this area as crucial to the future of Hawai'i.



"NEVER MIND THE...UH, KISS, FELLA..."