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## From a Community Church to a "Commuter Church": Speech Codes and Ethnic Identity among Japanese Americans

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### Abstract

This paper reports some fieldwork findings from observations of a Japanese Baptist church in Seattle, Washington. The ethnographic observation of church services and related community activities by Japanese Americans depicts what may be called a cultural "tug-of-war" between Japanese past and American present. The church, now best characterized as a "commuter church," is a material existence of Japanese American reinterpretation of Japanese past and American present. It is a site in which Japanese Americans re-create their Japanese heritage and reaffirm their cultural identity. In doing so, they transform their past and construct a new, shared ethnic identity. A transformation from a community church, which is defined by its locale, to a commuter church, which, in contrast, is defined by a voluntary community-wide network of people, can be taken as a material outcome of the competing cultural forces Japanese Americans experience. The study also describes a way in which some remnants of Japanese cultural terms and expressions serve as speech codes that invoke a Japanese past in the process of the cultural reinterpretation discussed above.

**Keywords:** Japanese Americans, ethnic identity, speech codes, ethnography of communication, ideology

In many ways, language, communication, and culture are intricately interwoven. Cultural communication gives voice to shared cultural identity by "creating yet reaffirming, individuating yet unifying, and changing yet stabilizing common meanings and members" to borrow Carbaugh's (1990a, 1990b) terms. On the one hand, cultural communication affirms and reproduces the shared cultural and linguistic resources between the interlocutors. Efficacious communication, supported by such shared cultural and linguistic resources, reconfirms membership in a speech community. Cultural communication, on the other hand, can transform the past experience of the community into something new by means of creating new symbols and meanings, which in turn make up new linguistic resources. The dialectical interplay of these opposing cultural impetuses gives voice to members' communal

identity.

The dialectical interplay of cultural communication lends itself well to ideological analyses of the communal identity. It is expected to be an efficacious manifestation of ideologically laden personhood and may reveal a particular position which members of a community take with regard to the spectrum of salient ideological issues (e.g., ideologies of individualism, class, gender, nationality, and profession). For example, Philipsen (1987) argues that "the function of communication in cultural communication is to maintain a healthy balance between the forces of individualism and community (*collectivism*), and to provide a sense of shared identity which nonetheless preserves individual dignity, freedom, and creativity" [*italics added*] (p. 249). Cultural discourse maintains the healthy balance between the forces of individualism

and community by simultaneously reaffirming and renewing members' ideological stake in individual and communal identity. This subtle balancing act is thus accomplished by successfully maneuvering the tensional, dialectical interplay of the opposing cultural forces. Therefore, one can investigate the dialectical interplay of opposing cultural forces in order to account for the ideology of communal identity of a group.

Communal identity is an efficacious site for ideological analyses as well. Cultural communication giving voice to communal identity is consonant with the vested interests in Cormack's (1992) conceptualization of ideology. He defines ideology as follows:

Ideology ... is a process which links *socio-economic reality to individual consciousness*. It establishes a conceptual framework, which results in specific uses of mental concepts, and gives rise to *our ideas of ourselves*. In other words, the structure of our thinking about the social world, about ourselves and about our role within that world, is related by ideology ultimately to socio-economic conditions [italics added]. (p. 13)

Ideology connects individuals and society. According to Althusser (cited in Cormack, 1992), individuals are constituted by ideology, and the embodiment of ideology exists materially in our social life. If individuals and society are so closely linked with each other in their formative stages, studying communal identity of an ethnic group will shed light on accounts of ideology that permeates their lives.

Furthermore, the link between individuals and society is established by cultural communication. Cultural discourse gives voice to communal identity and thus to the ideology that underlies the community life. "What mediates between individual psychologies and social structures," Cormack (1992) argues, "is the realm of communication (involving language, gesture

and imagery, as well as the technological processes of the mass media)" (p. 9). From this line of thinking, one can study ideology by looking at the communal identity which is expressed in cultural communication. Based on the premises that dialectical interplay and communal identity are efficacious phenomena for ideological study, and communication mediates individual psychologies and social structures, I embarked on an ideological analysis of Japanese American discourse in Seattle, Washington. Given the relative paucity of ideological studies in the interpersonal communication field (Lannamann, 1991), an attempt like this study ought to be encouraged for a better understanding of our spoken life and cultural/ethnic identity.

First, I will briefly review the history of the Japanese American Baptist community in Seattle in order to historically situate this study. Theoretical issues and methodological procedures are then explained. The study is theoretically grounded in Yanagisako's (1985) theory of cultural transformation and adapts Cormack's (1992) analytical categories for ideological studies. The next section elaborates on major findings and analyses of ideological issues and presents two primary arguments. This paper argues that the church is not only a religious institution but also an embodiment of Japanese American communal ideology, a place for cultural transformation. This study also demonstrates that some remnants of Japanese language among Japanese Americans have been transformed into a speech code that "calls forth" Japanese American ethnic identity.

### **Japanese Americans Community in Seattle<sup>1</sup>**

The communal life of Japanese Americans in Seattle, Washington presents one representative case of cultural assimilation. The well-documented history of Japanese Americans provides a good cultural text for ideological analysis. The Seattle community

originated in the 1890's with the immigration of young and, for the most part, unmarried men who came primarily from the prefectures of southwestern Japan. Most of the first immigrants were farmers and entrepreneurs. The number of entrepreneurs in Seattle was characteristically larger than those in other West Coast cities during the same decade. The typical businesses run by Japanese Americans were hotels, groceries, grocery stands, produce houses, restaurants, green houses, laundries, and door-to-door sales.

In 1921, the State of Washington passed its version of an Alien Land Law denying foreign-born Japanese the right to lease or own land. The citizenship of the immigrants was rejected by the US Supreme Court, partly due to rising anti-Japanese sentiment. Three years later, the Immigration Act of 1924 halted immigration from Japan and further crippled the Seattle community's economy. Since then the population of Japanese Americans grew solely by the births of new generations.

With the outbreak of World War II, all Japanese Americans were forced to move to relocation camps because of an unfounded fear that Japanese Americans presented a great risk to US military security. The property of Japanese Americans was forcibly confiscated and entire neighborhoods were destroyed. This tragic history had a tremendous impact on the historical continuity of the Japanese past. As one informant<sup>2</sup> explained, "My parents were told not to speak Japanese. Their parents wanted them to learn English fully so that they wouldn't go through the same difficulty their parents went through."

After World War II, self-employed entrepreneurs were forced back to unskilled, low-paying jobs. However, their children moved predominantly into wage-earning and salaried occupations. In the 1970's, Seattle's Japanese Americans evidenced the high educational, occupational, and income levels that have made Japanese Americans a favorite tale of American

social mobility.

As my anxiety grew during the initial encounter with Japanese Americans, similarly intense anxiety or uncertainty permeated the Japanese Americans whom I met at a church in Seattle. The subtlety of the way people acknowledge and validate their preferred identity, as it is reflected in their omission of the hyphen between "Japanese" and "American," and writing their given names first or last,<sup>3</sup> was overwhelmingly difficult to discern for an outsider. Moreover, the preference of ethnic identification varied across individuals. Kendis (1989) explains that high ethnic Japanese Americans--those who choose to socialize mostly with other Japanese Americans--reprimand low ethnic people who don't see particular merit in socializing exclusively with other Japanese Americans, preferring to build networks across ethnic boundaries. My native Japanese background seemed to pose inexplicable difficulty for the churchgoers. Although I possessed identical physical features, I was profoundly "Other" (Rabinow, 1977) to them. In their eyes, I was not middle class mainstream Americans nor did I belong to any other major ethnic group in the US. A woman reflected later in the fieldwork: "There is something different about people who are not Japanese American. I could tell right away that you were not a Japanese American." What follows is an attempt to unravel the ideology that underlies such an ineffable sense of communal self. The informant's comment embodied a key to my substantive questions: What is the cultural product--text and/or event--which is equivalence to "material existence of ideology" in the Japanese American ethnic community? How do Japanese Americans "call forth" their communal identity or subjectivity and maintain the status quo of ideologically imbued communal structure?

## Theory of Cultural Transformation and Ethnic Identity

Before I speculate on the above questions, it is crucial to understand Japanese American ethnicity--its conception, development, and current state. To this end, Yanagisako (1985) provides an interesting perspective. She contends that Japanese Americans constructed their ethnic identity from the eclectics of their folk models of "Japanese" past and "American" present. She concludes:

In placing what they conceive as Japanese culture and American culture in symbolic opposition, the Issei [first-generation Japanese Americans] and even more so the Nisei [second-generation Japanese Americans] have reinterpreted symbols, norms, and forms of action from each culture as the opposites of those from the other. In doing so, they have created a new system of meanings in which the elements of the "American" present are as much a product of this *dialectic of reinterpretation* [italics added] as are the elements attached to the "Japanese" past. (p. 243)

When the symbols, norms, and forms of action from each culture are symbolically transformed through discourse among Japanese Americans, they emerge as new symbols of communal identity, distinct from those of original Japanese or Americans. The symbolic discourse, for example, transforms communal-individual tension, simultaneously satisfying the needs of communal functions or shared cultural identity, and provides a new position on the axis of communal-individual dialectics.

Yanagisako looked at the meanings of cultural metaphors and symbols such as "family," "work," "duty," "love," "Japanese," and "American" between Issei and Nisei in order to account for kinship change. The kinship change was brought in by transforming their past, consisting of their "folk models" within a

historical process. This paper, on the other hand, discusses the relationship between symbolic discourse and communal ideology. Unraveling a way of speaking and cultural speech codes which manifest themselves in the symbolic and metaphorical discourse among the Sansei (third-generation Japanese Americans) will illuminate the role of speech in ideological structure.

Let me highlight two examples from Yanagisako's study in order to demonstrate how folk models of Japanese and American traditions are transformed to create a new version of cultural symbols, and hence a new ethnic identity, through the dialectic of reinterpretation. Even though the symbols may be a reinterpreted version of the reality of Japanese and American lives, they are compellingly "real" to Japanese Americans.

Perhaps one of the most revealing examples is a transformed notion of sibling relationship between the Issei and the Nisei. Partly because of the sheer scarcity of Isseis, the Issei notion of siblings encompassed not only the *kazoku* (family) but also *shinrui* (relatives) which further included neighbors, *kenjin* (prefectural group members) and friends as variations on the same theme of secondary relations. However, as a stem-family system transferred into a conjugal family system, a change in the conception of sibling took place. By replacing *kazoku* with the English, "family," the Nisei term hovered around the domain of family and the domain of relatives, in which different sets of people enter depending on the occasion. In effect, married siblings are now classified as both members of different families and members of the same family depending on the occasion. The kinship change from stem-family system to conjugal family system took place by placing the symbolic "Japanese" past in opposition to the "American" present because Japanese Americans claimed to perpetuate "Japanese family tradition" through the transformed version of family (pp. 246-7).

Another interesting example is the decontextualization of cultural terms such as *giri* (duty; moral obligation<sup>4</sup> [Miyahira, 1984]) and *ninjo* (individual feelings). The Issei used the terms not as symbolic opposites of each other, but rather as a mutually complementary unit. However, among the Nisei, due to the relative normative priority of *giri* in Japan and individual feelings (*ninjo*) in America, the two terms became embedded in the folk models of Japanese and American history. Thus the Japanese folk model quintessentially stresses *giri*, and the American folk model highlights *ninjo* or individual feelings (p. 249). Yanagisako further explains:

If an event, practice, or setting is perceived to be "American" as in the case of listing one's relatives or choosing one's spouse, then "American" values, social units, and modes of action are called for. If an event, practice, or setting is perceived as "Japanese," as in the case of *koden* exchange, then "Japanese" values, social units, and modes of action are called for. ... Being Japanese American entails being able to alternate between these contrastive cultural orders and above all, to integrate opposed elements within oneself (p. 249).

A conceptual link between the transformation of these cultural symbols and communal identity is the creation of new normative forces which place Japanese Americans in a relative position on the axes of two "folk models." The newly created cultural force pulls them and pushes them in both directions. The transformed culture is a new entity, and "locating a culture on these axes reveals a partial truth about it, a kind of cultural snapshot." (Philipsen, 1987, p. 245).

Another case in point is illustrated by the ethnographic study conducted by di Leonardo (cited in Kellog, 1990). Italian-American kinship and family patterns, viewed as a symbolic system, are somewhat different from that of nonethnic, white, middle-class

Americans. As many informants emphasized that Italian-American families are "close," closeness bears symbolic importance to them of what was and is distinctive about Italian-American families, as well as an expression of what they see as a basic function of the family (p. 35). Such cultural "terms for talk" (Carbaugh, 1989) may manifest themselves in symbolic discourse between Japanese Americans, and symbolically construct their shared ethnic identity.

To investigate the dialectic of reinterpretation and specific questions delineated above, I set out to do an ethnographic observation of a Japanese American community in Seattle. Data were gathered during and after my interaction with informants at a church, over dinners, at some recreational activities such as volleyball, hiking, cycling, and tennis. Cormack's (1992) analytical categories (content, structure, absence, style, and modes of address) were used to analyze the data.

### **Church as Material Existence of Ideology**

On the first day at church, it gradually became clear to me that there was a clear boundary between those who preferred Japanese and those who preferred English. It was marked by the color of the choirs' dress, particular places each group chose to sit, and the styles of clothes during the rare occasion of a joint service. Normally, the church offers a service in Japanese at 9:30 in the morning and an equivalent English service at 11:00 later in the morning. A joint service is offered quarterly through the year.

Their clothes and the interaction of congregation members with one another indicated a boundary in "a matter of comfort" (Kendis, 1989), a comfort in sharing and validating their varying models of "Japanese" past and "American" present. This separation showed a semblance of the symbolic opposition between the Nisei and the Sansei. The latter created their own version of ethnic identity

which is more immersed in the mainstream, middle-class American culture and somewhat different from that of the Nisei. "It's a typical Sansei attitude," one informant exclaimed, "not to be concerned about finding a *Japanese* assistant minister for the church." "They don't mind if a *hakujin* (Caucasian American) assumes the position." The physical separation of Nisei and Sansei is rooted in such a difference of attitudes. One is more "comfortable" with others who share similar attitudes.

The separation also indicates different ethnic identifications. A binary opposition underlying the Nisei terms, *hakujin* and *Japanese*, expresses Sansei ethnic identification (or subjectivity to borrow Althusser and Cormax's term), which is strongly juxtaposed with their folk model of *hakujin*. The comment also shows that the symbolic opposition is less compelling to the Sansei. Their ethnic identity is constituted by their folk models of "Nisei" past and American present, and thus is immersed more in mainstream American identification. This identification gap between Nisei and Sansei, however, is amended partly by the church practices that drew them into a domain of shared community activities.

The church service and other practices that center around the church pull them back to a communal identity that is constituted by their folk models of "Japanese" and "Nisei" past. Everyone is a participant in this cultural practice; people take turns doing ushering, reading verses for the members and volunteering to moderate Sunday services. Various interests groups meet after the service. Members volunteer to teach small children. They play volleyball and basketball on the weekends. These events may be popular at any church, but the Japanese church and other ethnic church practices are strongly ideological because the membership of the church depends predominantly on the ethnicity of its people. During the fieldwork, non-Christians comfortably joined

weekly Bible studies and sports events. As long as a communal value of "Japanese" and "Nisei" past is reinforced, diversity is accepted. The church serves not only as a religious institution but also as a place where Japanese American communal ideology is successively carried over to next generations.

At the end of his sermon, the minister asked all visitors to introduce themselves in a very direct and explicit mode of address. It was a public inauguration of newcomers by an influential figure, which is intended to homogenize them into the communal ideology.

Further data from the fieldwork demonstrate the point well. Church scouts marched with the American national flag and the Christian flag. The absence of Japanese flag can be explained by the transformed reality of Japanese American community. The ethnicity embodied in the church (i.e., "Japanese" and "Nisei" past) is transformed and now manifests itself in the subtle ground symbolized by the "American" national flag and the Christian flag. In a similar vein, the church disseminates the folk model, "Japanese" past, by stressing the history of the church. The church, being as old as the history of Japanese American immigration, symbolizes the entire history of Japanese Americans, and their ethnic identity is inscribed in its name, *Japanese Baptist Church*. Members decided against a proposed name change of the church and maintained its historical continuity. At a dinner, the church hall was decorated with pictures and personal albums depicting "the old days." Almost all the pictures were related to various church activities, such as sports clubs, scout teams, women's clubs, and successive ministers. Japanese American communal identity is thus ideologically produced and reproduced at the church; the church invents ethnic identity and simultaneously maintains the old ways intact.

Perhaps a metaphor, "commuter church," best describes this ideological, history-sustaining yet

renewing function of the church:

Joe: People have spread out in the greater Seattle area, and our church is no longer a community church. It's more like a "commuter church."

Alan: Uh, I like that term, a "commuter church."

Joe: We can only get to know six or seven people really well. How can we develop fellowship with so many people? Maybe all we can do is to be friends with several people and through them get to know others.

Alan: Yeah, that way we can form an informal network of people.

Beth: Different kinds of study groups or clubs are helpful. There used to be a men's breakfast club at the church. What happened to it?

Joe: I don't know but at this time of the history, maybe we are ready to form a new breakfast club.

The current economic and demographic forces of American society encourage Japanese Americans to adopt the norms, beliefs, and values of individualistic culture as opposed to the intensely collective and familial orientation of their "Japanese" past. However, they are still pulled to the communal activities mainly sponsored by the church. Interestingly, the church has transformed itself from a community church to a "commuter church," providing a common place for Japanese Americans to reaffirm and renew their communal ideology through their symbolic discourse. The next section turns our attention to analyses of the symbolic discourse.

### **Japanese as a Cultural Speech Code**

One day at the church, when I looked at a flyer written both in English and Japanese, a woman who

sat next to me said, "I can't read Japanese." It was an unsolicited comment but her disclosure clearly suggested that she strongly identified with the "American" present. On another occasion, when I told a man in his late 60's that I attended a Japanese service instead of a more popular English service on that day, he asked me if I understood the sermon. Informants resented the fact that their parents were penalized if they used Japanese after World War II, and that the children never learned to speak Japanese. From these field data, I argue that Japanese language--especially those remnants of Nissei speech fossilized in everyday discourse by Sansei and subsequent generations--became a code among Japanese Americans that invokes their communal ideology.

The speech code proposed here is related to Basil Bernstein's (1970) elaborated and restricted codes in a crucial way. He argues that the genres of social class are carried through a communication code that social class itself promotes. In this paper, Bernstein's social class is replaced with the Japanese American ethnic community, and the speech code represents the speech variant they have adopted. Furthermore, the type of code pursued here entails a speech variant with formal and informal grammatical variations and the variations of speech usage that are equivalent to those in Hymes's (1967) study. Therefore, speech code is used as an umbrella term that characterizes the speech patterns of Japanese Americans from multiple dimensions. Philipsen (1992) uses code as a generic term for way of being, saying, and hearing:

These codes are systems of symbols and meanings, about the cultural domain "communication." They consist of resources for talking about and thematizing spoken life in particular contexts. ... Such systems are not only about communication but are as well about what it means to be a person, how persons are and can be united in social relationships, and how



communication can be and is used to link persons as social beings. Thus, they provide, for their users, a distinctive way of being, saying, and hearing. (p. 102)

In the historical continuity of Japanese Americans, Japanese language became less dominant. Only a limited number of people speak Japanese fluently, though many people use a limited number of topic-specific vocabulary (e.g., food, cuisine, traditional customs, etc.). It has been symbolically codified to invoke their communal identity. To illustrate, an excerpt from my fieldnotes is introduced below.

During a reunion dinner held in the gym annexed to the church, a master of ceremonies, Mr. Yamamoto was looking for a volunteer to sing a karaoke (sing-along empty orchestra) song. The next person who sang was a Japanese American woman of average height, with short curly hair, about 50 years old. She moved up to the front of the gym with a tape in her hand. She said, "I'm gonna sing a Japanese song. The song is by one of the great Japanese stars, *Misora Hibari*. This is one of the last songs she sang in her career. It's called '*Kawano nagare no yōni*.'" Then Mr. Yamamoto asked her publicly, at the microphone, "What does it mean?" She was getting ready to sing, probably assuming that most people would know what it meant. Mr. Yamamoto asked loudly again, "What does it mean?" Then she replied, "Like a river flows." I was struck by how insistent he was.

This episode depicts a ritual of invoking communal identity among the Nisei; however, interestingly, for Sansei who hardly speak Japanese, the ritual seemed to fail. Mr. Yamamoto attempted to mediate the gap between the Nisei and the Sansei by asking for a translation. In this respect, Japanese is a codified speech which is highly sensitive to the Nisei Japanese Americans. The use of Japanese speech is

appropriate for a ritual event such as the above that calls forth "Japanese" past and that simultaneously pays homage to the shared communal heritage. However, the opposing cultural force--one may characterize it as "American" present--demands a transformation of the past. What is depicted here is a ritual of cultural transformation, a way to re-make and negotiate a particular people's sense of communal life.

Furthermore, traditional Japanese cultural artifacts, especially those difficult to translate into English words, preserve their native forms and are still used by all generations of Japanese Americans. As one informant resisted eating *mochi* (Japanese rice cake), and another refused to do *shōrō nagashi* (a Buddhist ceremony in which paper lanterns are floated in a river), these terms became salient symbols of "Japanese" past. Thus, the Japanese language and secondary artifacts such as stories and songs are symbols of their ethnic identity which is constituted by the communal ideology. The Sansei's rejection of traditional Japanese artifacts symbolizes their ideological departure from "Japanese" and "Nisei" past. However, interestingly, on another occasion, a group of teenage youth (Sansei and Yonsei; fourth-generation Japanese Americans) sang a Japanese song which celebrated love and communal life, thus paying homage to the Nisei and avowing their communal identification. Thus, the communal ideology is recursively shaped by the dialectical interplay of avowing and renewing shared communal symbols of "Japanese" past.

## Conclusion

This paper illustrates the relationship between culture and communication and the ideology that underlies the relationship by describing and analyzing the communal life of a group of Japanese Americans in Seattle. Symbolic discourse is a medium of cultural transformation that is enacted by the symbolic

opposition of "Japanese" past and "American" present. A church in Seattle serves as a place for cultural transformation where the symbolic discourse shapes the subjectivity of Japanese Americans beyond the boundaries of generations and Christian religious background. In this sense the church is an embodiment of Japanese American communal ideology.

Similarly, the paper argues that Japanese language is a code used to invoke shared ethnic heritage. Japanese cultural terms and expressions embedded in their English discourse are ideological resources that shape the ethnic identity of Japanese Americans. The symbolic discourse binds the members of this ethnic group not by the locale but by the informal interpersonal network that can be glimpsed in a native phrase, a "commuter church."

This paper describes only a part of the complicated system of ethnic culture. A more comprehensive account of culture may support or disprove what is reported here. However, on a positive note, the paper illustrates that the communal culture--"a material manifestation of ideology" (Cormack, 1992, p. 26)--is produced and renewed at a "commuter church" through the codified discourse among Japanese Americans.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The data introduced in this section are based on Sylvia J. Yanagisako (1985) and other local sources of information collected from the exhibit, Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, at Wing Luke Art Museum, Seattle, WA.

<sup>2</sup> For the confidentiality of informants, all names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> Yanagisako (1985) explains that hyphenated ethnic categories continue to be associated in some minds with divided national identities and loyalties. The absence of the hyphen, on the other hand, leaves no ambiguity that the participants in her research are

Americans of Japanese ancestry. Similarly, stating one's name in Japanese order (surname first) or in American order (surname last) has implications regarding ethnic identity. Although the first generation of Japanese Americans uses both orders depending on the context, the second generation uses an American order almost exclusively (p. v).

<sup>4</sup> Miyanaga contends that Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* missed a major characteristic of giri, or moral obligation, as she treated it independently from *ninjo*. Giri and *ninjo* are clearly a dichotomy which conceptualizes the native epistemology of human nature by establishing two oppositions which, on the surface, appear to contradict each other.

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