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## Japanese Buddhist Women in Hawai'i: Waves of Change

**Karma Lekshe Tsomo**

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Beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century, successive waves of Japanese Buddhist immigrants settled in the Kingdom of Hawai'i, bringing with them a variety of Japanese Buddhist schools and traditions. Overcoming many hardships, Japanese immigrant women worked with great devotion to help establish numerous temples in the Hawai'i through Buddhist women's associations known as Fujinkai. These dedicated women not only maintained ancestral Buddhist practices but also integrated Japanese Buddhist, native Hawaiian, and other cultural elements in ways that were entirely new. Persevering through the war years and through successive waves of cultural adaptation, they transmitted and protected Buddhist values with humility, generosity, and compassion. This is a story of cultural integration, social transformation, and spiritual resilience told through the lives of women in Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land), the largest branch of Japanese Buddhism.

**Keywords:** Japanese American Buddhism, women in Buddhism, Jōdo Shinshū, Buddhism in Hawai'i, Buddhism in the US

### INTRODUCTION

When the institutional history of Buddhist women in Hawai'i is written, it must by rights begin with Japanese immigrant women. Through their devotion to the Buddha, dedication to their families, and cultural resilience these women overcame great hardships and navigated anti-Japanese xenophobia and propaganda, taking on far greater burdens than Japanese men. Buddhist women's organizations played key roles in maintaining ancestral Buddhist practices while also creating and nurturing an integration of Japanese Buddhist and native Hawaiian culture that was entirely new and, I would argue,

monumental in women's religious history. To get a full appreciation of their contributions to creating cultural hybridity, fashioned out of necessity, it is important to not only conduct archival research but also to interview Japanese Buddhist women themselves. The historicity of Japanese American Buddhist women is part of a larger political resistance that has been under-researched and neglected for so long that the women's struggle as "history" itself, in addition to being a spiritual transmission, is in danger of being lost. In today's context, Japanese American Buddhist women's organizations are challenged to adapt their approach amidst a general waning of interest in what some view as outdated and culturally insular mores. In this contemporary phase of cultural hybridity, there is a risk of erasing from collective memory women's foundational role in transmitting and protecting Buddhist values with characteristic humility, generosity, and compassion.

The history of the integration of Japanese Buddhism in Hawai'i is a classic case of cultural and religious continuity and change. This study seeks to understand the development of Japanese Buddhist temples in Hawai'i in relation to their Japanese ancestral lineages and to uncover the unique stories of their integration into the social fabric of Hawai'i. In exploring these patterns of adaptation to local circumstances over time, special attention is given to the diverse experiences of women over generations. Drawing on both archival research and interviews, this study specifically investigates how Japanese women of the Honpa Hongwanji school (the western branch of Jōdo Shinshū, the True Pure Land school), who immigrated from Japan to Hawai'i, and their progeny helped establish Buddhist institutions, assiduously maintained and creatively adapted them, and simultaneously created a uniquely local flavor of Buddhism.

Not all the Buddhist women pioneers in Hawai'i belonged to Honpa Hongwanji and not all members of Honpa Hongwanji were Japanese, but the largest number of Japanese Buddhist immigrants were affiliated with Jōdo Shinshū.

In creating an institutional framework for Buddhist women's activities, the early members of Fujinkai worked diligently and selflessly to express their faith in Amida Buddha, especially through the recitation of his name, Jōdo Shinshū's signature form of Buddhist practice. Over more than one hundred years, the women of Fujinkai played essential roles in sustaining their spiritual devotion and Japanese cultural identity for the benefit of future generations while creatively adapting

traditional Japanese institutions and practices to the social, cultural, and political landscape in Hawai'i. In the process, they overcame many hardships and challenges, especially the struggle to survive economically and raise their families while engaged in brute physical labor on the plantations as well as the challenges of being ethnically persecuted for being Japanese during the war years that followed the bombing of Pearl Harbor. These hardships and challenges weighed more heavily on women than on men and on Japanese American Buddhists more heavily than on those Japanese immigrants who converted to Christianity. In these exceptional historical circumstances, for generations Fujinkai served simultaneously as a ballast of cultural continuity and a catalyst for change that enabled Japanese immigrant women to keep their spiritual values alive for the benefit of their descendants. Through their suffering, devotion, and dedicated efforts, these Buddhist women created friendship groups that nurtured both their spiritual growth and their sense of solidarity anchored in Japanese cultural identity. As a result of their roles in the historical "institutionalization" of Fujinkai, a new cultural identity of being Japanese in Hawai'i was born.

#### THE EARLY YEARS

The Hawaiian Islands were first settled by Polynesians who are believed to have migrated to the island chain around the fourth century CE from the South Pacific. Guided by the spirits of their ancestors and accompanied by a careful selection of more than twenty species of plants and several species of animals—pigs, chickens, dogs, plus a few stowaway rats—they sailed northward by winds, currents, and stars in double-hulled canoes.<sup>1</sup> The term *kanaka maoli* (native people) denotes the Hawaiians' distinct ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity. The tragic history of their subjugation by foreign powers in the nineteenth century and the vitality of Hawaiian culture that endured, albeit in new forms, continues to be written.<sup>2</sup> Over a span of two hundred years, successive waves of immigration—Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese,

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1. Herb Kawainui Kāne, *Ancient Hawai'i* (Captain Cook, HI: The Kawainui Press, 1997), 12.

2. E.g., as documented in Gavin Daws, *Shoal of Time: A History of the Hawaiian Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968); Kāne, *Ancient Hawai'i*; Jonathan Kay Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio, *Dismembering Lāhui: A History of the Hawaiian Nation to 1887* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2002).

Vietnamese, South Pacific Islanders, and many others—have made native Hawaiians a minority in their own land.

Hawai'i is thus a unique geographical, social, and cultural crossroads of peoples from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. As the Danish scholar of religious studies Jørn Borup has pointed out, "With its manifold transfigurations across time and location ... [and] its long migration history and religious pluralism, [Hawai'i] is an obvious living laboratory for ... investigating ... the relations between religion, migration, transnationalism, pluralism, and ethnicity."<sup>3</sup> Because of the history of Hawai'i as a colonized territory, awareness of social and political justice issues is relatively high. It took the United States government one hundred years to formally apologize for its overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893. The social and political injustices experienced by native Hawaiians as a result of US hegemony continue to the present day and have parallels in the experiences of Japanese immigrants during World War II. It is against this background that Japanese Buddhist women struggled to establish and maintain their Japanese cultural heritage while adapting to life in Hawai'i, as they exchanged their *kimonos* for *mu'um'uu* (a loose-fitting Hawaiian dress) and later for Western dress.<sup>4</sup> Woven into the lives and context of the Japanese Buddhist women who settled in the Hawaiian Islands were threads of social and cultural connection to indigenous Hawaiian history and values, as well as social and cultural influences from many other ethnic groups.

The Japanese immigrants who settled in Hawai'i beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century were largely contract laborers working in the sugar and pineapple industries. Sugar cane (*ko*) was one of thirty useful plants that accompanied the Polynesians who first settled in the Hawaiian Islands between 500 and 700 CE. The first successful commercial sugar production began in 1835 on Kauai, where William Hooper "established a paternalistic model for later plantations, with the company providing food, wages, separate housing based on ethnicity, a plantation store, and a regular workday governed by the plantation bell.... By 1857 it had 100 native Hawaiian and 20

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3. Jørn Borup, "Aloha Buddha: The Secularization of Ethnic Japanese-American Buddhism," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 14 (2015): 23.

4. Barbara F. Kawakami, *Japanese Immigrant Clothing in Hawaii, 1885-1941* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1995).

Chinese field laborers and was producing 200 tons of sugar per year.”<sup>5</sup> The first group of Japanese immigrant workers arrived on the sugar plantations in the late 1860s.<sup>6</sup> The sugar industry flourished to enrich European and American colonizers, to the great detriment of indigenous Hawaiian agricultural practices of carefully regulated water systems for irrigating taro (*kalo*).

Native Hawaiian culture exerted a profound influence on immigrants in all spheres of society, but intermarriage among Japanese immigrants and native Hawaiians or members of other ethnic groups was rare. Although prostitution was prohibited by the Page Act of 1875, sex work, trafficking, and the selling of wives were not uncommon.<sup>7</sup> To address the scarcity of potential marriage partners in the Japanese immigrant population (23,341 males and only 985 females in 1900), an estimated twenty thousand Japanese women were brought to Hawai'i as picture brides to marry Japanese plantation workers.<sup>8</sup> These marriages were typically arranged by the men's parents in Japan:

Parents worked with go-betweens and, if the prospective couple had not known each other, photographs were exchanged. If all agreed, the bride's name was transferred to her future husband's family records in Japan and the *shashin kekkon* (“photograph marriage”) was legal in the eyes of the Japanese government. Then the wives departed for Hawaii.<sup>9</sup>

The practice of importing picture brides was frequently denigrated in Euro-American circles, however; the *San Francisco Examiner* even made an example of the practice to arouse anti-Japanese sentiment.<sup>10</sup> Even though most of the Japanese immigrants to Hawai'i identified

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5. C. Allan Jones and Robert V. Osgood, *From King Cane to the Last Sugar Mill: Agricultural Technology and the Making of Hawaii's Premier Crop* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 17–18.

6. *Ibid.*, 25.

7. Joan Hori, “Japanese Prostitution in Hawaii during the Immigration Period,” *The Hawaiian Journal of History* 15 (1981): 113–124.

8. Barbara F. Kawakami, *Picture Bride Stories* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 2.

9. Tara K. Koda, “Aloha with Gassho: Buddhism in the Hawaiian Plantations,” *Pacific World*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., no. 5 (2003): 246.

10. Kei Tanaka, “Photographs of Japanese Picture Brides: Visualizing Immigrants and Practicing Immigration Policy in Early Twentieth-Century United States,” *The Japanese Journal of American Studies* 15 (2004): 132–134.

as Buddhists, Christian officials initially refused to accept the validity of marriages performed in Japan and required couples to remarry in Christian weddings upon arrival at Honolulu Harbor. Only after protests by the Japanese community did the Territorial authorities allow Buddhist priests to certify marriages.<sup>11</sup>

The first wave of Japanese immigrants to the Hawaiian Islands endured backbreaking working conditions, abuse by overseers (the feared *lunas*), substandard housing, social disorientation, and racial discrimination:

From the perspective of the white ruling class, the fear of the potential “racial menace” was rooted in the numerical dominance of Japanese in Hawai‘i as well as their apparent “foreignness.” Not only on the sugar plantation, but also in the territory in general, people of Japanese ancestry were the largest ethnic group, constituting 43 percent of the islands’ 255,912 residents in 1920. Most spoke only Japanese and retained the values and customs of their home country rather than adopting the culture of the host society. This is not surprising, because many of them came to Hawai‘i as temporary sojourners, hoping to make a fortune and someday return to Japan. Also, the majority of the Issei [first-generation Japanese] were Buddhists. Temples sprang up throughout the islands with Japanese-language schools for the Hawai‘i-born generation.<sup>12</sup>

Living conditions on the plantations were grueling and dehumanizing. “[The laborers] worked very hard from dawn to dusk, an average of twelve hours a day under the tropical sun, for a wage of \$4.00 a month.”<sup>13</sup> Many records of these Japanese immigrants’ lives, including entries written by women, mention the hardships that Japanese Buddhist immigrant women endured on the plantations. These included the more than twenty thousand picture brides who married men in absentia and met them for the first time when they arrived

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11. Tomoe Moriya and Duncan Ryūken Williams, eds., *Issei Buddhism in the Americas* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), xiv.

12. Hiromi Monobe, “Americanizing Hawai‘i’s Japanese: A Transnational Partnership and the Politics of Racial Harmony during the 1920s,” in *Hawai‘i at the Crossroads of the U.S. and Japan before the Pacific War*, ed. Jon Thares Davidann, 119–145 (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008), 125.

13. Kawakami, *Picture Bride Stories*, 2.

in Hawai'i.<sup>14</sup> Ikemi Kikumura Yano, curator of the Japanese American National Museum in the Little Tokyo area of Los Angeles, recounts:

Many mothers, such as Ushii Nakasone, had no choice but to take their infant to the cane fields, lay the baby on a straw mat, where the child was vulnerable to the blazing sun and pesky insects, and work while keeping one eye on the baby. After working ten hours in the field, Mrs. Nakasone returned home to cook, make a fire for the *furo* (tub), wash dishes, tend to the baby, and prepare the next day's lunch, before catching a little sleep and then rising to repeat the routine the following day.

Whether in Hawaii or on the U.S. mainland, issei women's labor was essential for survival, since few fathers and husbands made sufficient wages to support their households. To supplement the family income, women engaged in various enterprises, such as cooking, sewing, doing laundry for the large number of single men, raising chickens or pigs, or growing vegetables and flowers to be sold at local markets.<sup>15</sup>

Anti-Japanese discrimination was rife, and families struggled to survive economically. To cope with these hardships, workers and their families banded together to form small Buddhist communities that reinforced their cultural identity and bolstered their confidence. At the time, Buddhism was a minority religion in Hawai'i and poorly understood. Plantation workers hid their Buddhist home altars and images of the Buddha behind screens for fear of being castigated as idol worshippers.

Among the diverse Buddhist communities that sprang up, Jōdo Shinshū became the largest Buddhist denomination in Hawai'i, as it was in Japan, with both Higashi and Nishi Hongwanji branches represented. In Japan, the two branches are similar in size and membership but, in the prewar period, Nishi Hongwanji sent far more ministers to Hawai'i than Higashi Hongwanji did and it grew far larger.<sup>16</sup> As Japanese Buddhists integrated into Hawaiian life, their lives changed dramatically and Buddhist cultural traditions took on renewed importance. On March 2, 1889, a Japanese priest named Soryu Kagahi

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14. *Ibid.*, 2.

15. *Ibid.*, xi.

16. Michihiro Ama, *Immigrants to the Pure Land: The Modernization, Acculturation, and Globalization of Shin Buddhism, 1898-1941* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 145.



established the first Buddhist temple in Hawai‘i, officially named the Great Imperial Japan Hongwanji Denomination Hawaii Branch. In 1897, members of the Japanese immigrant community sent a formal letter to Hongwanji Headquarters in Japan requesting that missionaries be delegated to Hawai‘i to minister to their spiritual needs. Amidst the cultural diversity of Hawaiian society, the Japanese Buddhist immigrants appreciated the contributions of these missionaries who performed rituals such as funerals and memorial services and also helped maintain Japanese cultural identity and social cohesion.

The Japanese religious traditions that were transported by these immigrants and their religious leaders included Shintō and a multitude of Buddhist schools, such as Jōdo (Pure Land), Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land), Nichiren, Shingon, Tendai, and Zen.<sup>17</sup> These Buddhist schools share many characteristics and historical connections, yet each maintained its own unique heritage and institutional identity as it slowly became rooted in Hawaiian soil. For example, each Japanese Buddhist tradition commemorated their own founders, chanted their own liturgies, maintained ties with their own headquarters in Japan, and followed their own protocols. In the process of their establishment, integration, and eventual acculturation, Japanese Buddhist temples all encountered numerous challenges, while serving important roles in the identity formation, social adaptation, and spiritual development of their members. As “part of the glue binding the Buddhist community together,” the Fujinkai (lit., “Buddhist women’s organizations”) helped create and maintain Japanese culture through their youth groups, chanting groups, classes in tea ceremony and flower arrangement, and a multitude of other activities.<sup>18</sup> Fujinkai had been established by Buddhist women in Japan and were flourishing in the 1890s.<sup>19</sup> The distinctive feature of the Fujinkai in Hawai‘i was their adaptation to local culture and customs, such as the adoption of Hawaiian terms and local

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17. The current number of temples belonging to each of these schools is: Jōdo 13, Jōdo Shinshū 42 (Honpa Hongwanji 37, Higashi Hongwanji 5), Nichiren 5, Shingon 12, Tendai 3, and Zen 10 (Soto 9, Rinzai 1). See George J. Tanabe and Willa Jane Tanabe, *Japanese Buddhist Temples in Hawai‘i: An Illustrated Guide* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i, 2013), 230–231.

18. Borup, “Aloha Buddha,” 25.

19. Jessica Starling, “Neither Nun nor Laywoman: The Good Wives and Wise Mothers of Jōdo Shinshū Temples,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 40, no. 2 (2013): 284.

foodways, translation of announcements and liturgy into English, engagement in social welfare activities, and the use of *leis* (flower garlands) for felicitations.

The ministers who had been dispatched by Honpa Hongwanji headquarters in Japan were poorly paid, and their families were housed in miserable accommodations.<sup>20</sup> In *Immigrants to the Pure Land*, Michihiro Ama notes that ministers sent from Japan (all male) were quite shocked by the low salary and poor housing provided in Hawai'i, especially in contrast with the high salaries and luxurious living conditions of some Buddhist priests in Japan.<sup>21</sup> The ministers who were assigned to ministerial posts in Hawai'i were rarely fluent in English, which created a linguistic barrier between the newly arrived clerics and the younger generation born in Hawai'i, yet they were expected to manage births, marriages, conflicts, illnesses and deaths, as well as Buddhist education.<sup>22</sup> The hardships of plantation life were often felt most strongly by the missionaries' wives, who juggled religious and domestic duties in substandard living conditions.

To gain acceptance for Buddhism in an overwhelmingly Christian environment, a sort of religious accommodation occurred. Pews replaced *tatami* (woven straw matting), hymnals replaced sutra scrolls, priests became ministers, temples became churches, and Dharma schools for children and Sunday services resembling Christian services began. During the years Reverend Imamura Emyo [Yemyo] (1867–1932) served as the chief incumbent of Hongwanji, he made a conscious effort to modernize Buddhism, using Christian churches as a model—methods that Hongwanji had also been exploring in Japan. He installed pews, composed Buddhist hymns, conducted services in English, and carefully curated ethnic Japanese elements in an effort to promote adaptation to the American context. Together with Ernest Shinkaku Hunt

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20. Married clergy were common in Japan after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and even earlier in Jōdo Shinshū, owing to its founder Shinran's renunciation of celibacy. As a consequence, it became normative for the leadership of temples to pass from father to son, with the wives of priests playing crucial supportive roles. For further information about women's roles in Japanese Buddhist temples, see Starling, "Neither Nun nor Laywoman," and Noriko Kawahashi, "Jizoku (Priests' Wives) in Sōtō Zen Buddhism: An Ambiguous Category," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22 (1995): 1–2.

21. Ama, *Immigrants to the Pure Land*, 59–60.

22. *Ibid.*, 61.

(1878–1967), an Anglo convert who ordained as a Hongwanji minister, Imamura developed Sunday schools and a Young Buddhist Association, consciously seeking to adapt Buddhism by adopting Christian standards for religious activities and ritual practices. He was conscientiously dedicated to fostering Buddhism in Hawai‘i, not only among the Japanese immigrant community but also among all nationalities.<sup>23</sup>

Although the temples were open to everyone, the majority of congregants were Japanese or their descendants because services were conducted in Japanese. Thanks largely to Bishop Imamura’s efforts, Japanese plantation workers and their families found solace and a sense of belonging at the local Buddhist temple, which served both as a gathering place for the local Japanese community and a space for religious practice. The simple, practical approach of Jōdo Shinshū, with its emphasis on gratitude and the all-embracing compassion of Amida Buddha, had a broad appeal.<sup>24</sup> The dominance of this school in Hawai‘i can largely be attributed to the fact that a majority of Japanese immigrants came from Hiroshima, Yamaguchi, and Kumamoto prefectures, which were Jōdo Shinshū strongholds.<sup>25</sup>

Hawai‘i provided a welcoming environment for Buddhism, at least among those who were religiously open-minded, despite strenuous opposition from some Christian missionaries. The first known Hawaiian Buddhist was Mary Elizabeth Foster, descended from Hawaiian royalty on her mother’s side and English merchants on her father’s side. When the ship carrying Dharmapāla, a well-known Sri Lankan lay Buddhist, docked in Honolulu following the Parliament of the World’s Religions held in Chicago in 1893, Foster boarded the ship to meet him, reportedly to discuss an anger-management issue, and was so impressed by his advice that she became a Buddhist follower, much to her family’s

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23. Noriko Shimada, “Social, Cultural, and Spiritual Struggles of the Japanese in Hawai‘i: The Case of Okumura Takie and Imamura Yemyo and Americanization,” in *Hawai‘i at the Crossroads of the U.S. and Japan before the Pacific War*, ed. Jon Thares Davidann, 146–170 (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008), 147.

24. In Jōdo Shinshū, as interpreted by the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA), Amida Buddha is an amalgam of Amitāyus, the Buddha of Wisdom and Compassion, and Amitābha, the Buddha of Light and Life (Kaytee Sumida, pers. communication, November 12, 2021).

25. Koda, “Aloha with Gassho,” 242.

chagrin.<sup>26</sup> Support for spiritual diversity also came from the ruling monarch:

The general spirit of accommodation, of aloha, by the Hawaiian monarchy enabled Japanese Buddhism to find its own niche in Hawaii. While initially hesitant over its welcome and later feared because of its strength, Buddhism in Hawaii became the tradition its practitioners needed: one that brought the comfort of the homeland and the dynamic spirit of its new home in the islands.<sup>27</sup>

The aloha was not merely verbal but embodied:

Buddhism received a strong acceptance of legitimacy when Queen Liliuokalani attended the Birth Ceremony of the Buddha on May 19, 1901. Her attendance caused a tremendous amount of interest in Buddhism and her participation was reported throughout the world. It was an unprecedented event in that a non-Japanese had participated in a Japanese group activity.<sup>28</sup>

Queen Liliuokalani's graciousness gave Buddhism quite a boost but, despite Bishop Imamura's ardent efforts, Japanese Buddhist organizations continued to experience discrimination well into the twentieth century. Anti-Buddhism propaganda and xenophobia continued to swirl, and many Christians regarded Japanese Buddhists as "pagans" who disseminated 'idolatry.'<sup>29</sup> During the interwar period, US-Japanese relations were tense and fraught due to the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 (also known as the Immigration Act or the Exclusion Act) that limited immigration to 2 percent of each nationality's population as determined by the census of 1890 and prohibited Asian immigration entirely. The passage of this discriminatory and humiliating act was perceived as a shocking betrayal by the Japanese,

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26. Patricia Lee Masters and Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "The First Hawaiian Buddhist: The Life of Mary Foster," in *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming against the Stream*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, 235-248 (Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 2000).

27. Koda, "Aloha with Gassho," 237.

28. *Ibid.*, 245.

29. Tomoe Moriya, "Buddhism at the Crossroads of the Pacific: Imamura Yemyō and Buddhist Social Ethics," in *Hawai'i at the Crossroads of the U.S. and Japan before the Pacific War*, ed. Jon T. Davidann, 192-216 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 197.

considering Japan's success in modernization and their exemplary citizenship in Hawai'i.<sup>30</sup>

#### FUJINKAI: BUDDHIST WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

The early history of Fujinkai in Hawai'i is documented in a number of sources. The most complete record is the commemorative volume *Hōsha: A Pictorial History of Jōdo Shinshū Women in Hawaii*, published by Buddhist Women of America (BWA) on the occasion of the organization's centennial anniversary. The book summarizes the establishment, development, activities, and status of thirty-six branches that existed in 1989, when the book was published. Toku Umehara, who served as president of the association from 1976 to 1978, expressed a key reason for the publication of this pictorial history: "The youth of today will truly come to understand the unselfish devotion, whole-hearted dedication and humble services rendered by the pioneer Fujinkai women in their endeavor to uphold their temples as well as their organizations."<sup>31</sup> Countering the popular perception that the organization was simply a women's social club, she emphasized, "Fujinkai organizations are unique in that they are religiously oriented, rather than primarily social organizations" and voiced the hope that members listen to the Jōdo Shinshū teachings at every opportunity to become exemplars for the youth so "they will be able to understand that we are always surrounded by the Wisdom and Compassion of Amida Buddha."<sup>32</sup> This sentiment is confirmed in a discussion of the practice of *monpō*, listening to the teaching sincerely and gratefully: "By listening we come to realize that as human beings we cannot escape our own earthly greed and passions. The knowledge of our powerlessness leads us to entrust ourselves to Amida Buddha and his Primal Vow.... Our first and foremost

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30. Nobuo Katagiri, "Hawai'i, the IPR, and the Japanese Immigration Problem: A Focus on the First and Second IPR Conferences of 1925 and 1927," in *Hawai'i at the Crossroads of the U.S. and Japan before the Pacific War*, ed. Jon Thares Davidann, 96–109 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 98.

31. Atsuko Hasegawa and Nancy S. Shiraki, *Hōsha: A Pictorial History of Jōdo Shinshū Women in Hawaii* (Honolulu: The Hawaii Federation of Honpa Hongwanji, 1989), 12.

32. *Ibid.*, 12.

responsibility as Fujinkai members is to make every effort to listen to the teachings.”<sup>33</sup>

There are close historical ties between Fujinkai (Buddhist Women's Association or BWA) in Japan and Hawai'i. During the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), Lady Takeko Kujo (1887–1928), together with her future sister-in-law Kazuko Ohtani (1882–1911), founded BWA in Japan.<sup>34</sup> Kujo was the daughter of Myonyo (1850–1904), who was the twenty-first Monshu (head abbot) of the Honpa Hongwanji branch of the Jōdo Shinshū denomination in Japan, and her brother Kozui Ohtani became the twenty-second Monshu. She was born in Kyoto, grew up at the head temple of Hongwanji, and was a devout practitioner of the *nenbutsu* (recitation of the name of Amida Buddha, *Namo Amida Butsu*), as well as a poet, artist, Dharma teacher, and writer.<sup>35</sup> Studying with children of different social backgrounds as a young child led her to take up social service in her father's footsteps. With tireless energy, she founded Kyoto Girls' School as an institution of higher learning for women grounded on Buddhist principles, Kyoto Women's University, and Asoka Hospital in Tokyo. In 1923, she spearheaded efforts to aid survivors of the Great Kanto Earthquake. Sadly, in 1928 while working with orphans and the poor in the slums of Tokyo, she died of blood poisoning.<sup>36</sup> Memorial services for her are held every year at Hongwanji temples in Japan and abroad, as they are for Eshinni (Shinran's wife) and Kakushinni (his daughter).<sup>37</sup> Buddhist women in Hawai'i have

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33. *Ibid.*, 173.

34. Edythe Vassall, “Lady Takeko Kujo: A Brief Biography,” *Buddhist Churches of America Newsletter*, February 26, 2019. Although it may appear that the founding of Fujinkai in Hawai'i predated the founding in Japan, in fact, the concept of Hongwanji Fujinkai derives from the Saishoko (a gathering of women) proposed by the Hongwanji 22<sup>nd</sup> Shushu Konyo conclave in 1832. In 1904, Hongwanji presented the guidelines for Fujinkai in response to a request by the Meiji Government. In 1907, the headquarters of Fujinkai was established and Lady Kazuko Ohtani assumed the position of president. After her untimely passing in 1911, Lady Takeko Kujo became president. Use of the term “Lady” is a translation of the honorific title used in Japanese.

35. Takeko Kujo, *Muyuge: Flower Without Sorrow* (Tokyo: The Nembutsu Press, 1985); Takeko Kujo, *Leaves of My Heart*, trans. W. S. Yokoyama (New York: American Buddhist Study Center, 2018).

36. Vassall, “Lady Takeko Kujo,” 85.

37. Patricia Kanaya Usuki, pers. communication, September 16, 2021.

helped realize Kujo's dream of inspiring Buddhist women to practice the *nenbutsu* and bringing them together to benefit society. Although the activities and organizational structures of Fujinkai in Japan and Hawai'i differ considerably, members of Fujinkai in Hawai'i continue to welcome Japanese BWA presidents to their shores and help organize exchanges among members at international Fujinkai conferences. Visitors from Japan appreciate that some Buddhist traditions, such as Obon celebrations, may even be more authentic than those in Japan.<sup>38</sup> The Fujinkai members from Japan far outnumber those from any other branch at these international exchanges.<sup>39</sup>

In Hawai'i, Reverend Honi Satomi, the first bishop of the Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, gathered women together to establish a Buddhist women's association in 1889. Fujinkai was formally established by Bishop Yemyo Imamura in 1903, and his wife Kiyoko Imamura was elected to be the first president that same year.<sup>40</sup> Under Kiyoko Imamura's leadership, the members of Fujinkai were active in social welfare projects, sports events, hospital visits, and other charitable activities. The active engagement of women from the earliest stages of the Hongwanji mission is reflected in a photo taken in 1916 when the cornerstone was laid at Honpa Hongwanji Betsuin (Headquarters) on Pali Highway in Honolulu. The photo of the ceremony shows the audience packed with Fujinkai members dressed in matching kimono.<sup>41</sup> The construction of Betsuin, completed two years later, provided a venue for numerous Fujinkai activities, including memorial services, Sunday school classes, New Year's services, Buddhist talks, and social welfare work. Members came together for events such as commemorating the founding of Hawaii Hongwanji and the 700<sup>th</sup> Memorial Anniversary of Shinran Shonin (1173–1263). Over the years, Fujinkai members assisted substantially in fundraising for renovation projects at the temple and a Fujinkai Hall that was completed in 1964.<sup>42</sup> When Pearl City Hongwanji temple and priest quarters burned to the ground in 1936, they organized bazaars to raise funds for its reconstruction.

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38. Borup, "Aloha Buddha," 28.

39. Patricia Kanaya Usuki, pers. communication, September 16, 2021.

40. Hasegawa and Shiraki, *Hōsha*, 22, 25.

41. *Ibid.*, 26.

42. *Ibid.*, 26.

At the Ministers' General Conference in 1916, the influential Emyō Imamura, who served as the Bishop of Honpa Honganji Mission of Hawaii for thirty-two years, voiced his concerns over the future propagation of Buddhism in Hawai'i. He described the qualifications of an ideal minister, including a reexamination of one's own faith, an understanding of the situations faced by immigrants and the importance of *nisei* (second-generation Japanese) education, and the need to learn about the United States. He also advised the ministers in attendance what to emphasize when instructing their congregations, among them the qualifications of a good wife:

To foster the virtue of wives, the importance of pious obedience to her elders, single-minded devotion to her husband and love and self-sacrifice for her children's sake, must be dwelt upon in your sermons. These are the three cardinal virtues of a good wife in every good home. In connection with material prosperity, habits of thrift and industriousness ought to be emphasized. Thrift reduces expenses; industriousness brings larger income. Drive every kind of idle luxury out of your plantation.<sup>43</sup>

Whether and to what extent the women of Fujinkai took these "three cardinal virtues of a good wife" to heart is not known. Bishop Imamura had specific ideas about the ideal qualifications of a minister's wife. In his view, she would be:

Educated enough to be a leader in the Buddhist Women's Association or Young Buddhist Women's Association.

More welcomed if she is acquainted with the Japanese arts, including flower arrangement or tea ceremony.

More welcomed if she has the basic knowledge in music as she can teach Buddhist hymns.<sup>44</sup>

The principles reflected in the Fujinkai women's own statements reflect somewhat different priorities than "pious obedience" to their elders and "single-minded devotion" to their husbands. For example, from its inception, when a woman became a member of Fujinkai she recited this Buddhist Women's Pledge:

As a person of Buddhist faith, I will follow Shinran Shonin who sought to live the life of truth; appreciate fully the blessing of human

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43. Ama, *Immigrants to the Pure Land*, 62–63.

44. *Ibid.*, 64.



existence; thoroughly hear the Primal Vow of the Buddha; and diligently strive to live the Nembutsu as a Buddhist woman.

Earnestly listening to the teaching, I will live my daily life embraced in Amida's Light.

Building a home fragrant with the Nembutsu, I will nurture a child of the Buddha.

Following the teaching of "One World," I will spread the circle of Dharma friends.<sup>45</sup>

The Buddhist understanding and expansive aspirations of Fujinkai members are also revealed in the objectives set forth by the Hawaii Federation of Honpa Hongwanji Buddhist Women's Associations in 1954:

To unify, assist, and cooperate with all United Hongwanji Buddhist Women's Associations in the State of Hawaii. To assist in the perpetuation and expansion of Jōdo Shinshū (Pure Land Sect) in the State of Hawaii. To assist in the establishment, progress, and development of Buddhist women's organizations in the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii. To plan for the advancement and promotion of Buddhism throughout the world, both as a movement and as a way of life. To cooperate with the Buddhist women's organizations of the world and coordinate activities through active participation, and work for world peace.<sup>46</sup>

Insight into the historical development of Fujinkai and the gradual reorientation of its members can be gleaned by reading the principles formulated in the late 1800s alongside the revised objectives formulated in 1954 at the founding of the Hawaii Federation of Buddhist Women's Associations. In the early days, the camaraderie that developed among the women of Fujinkai helped to mitigate the hardships of plantation life. Branches of Fujinkai sprang up in virtually every Hongwanji temple in Hawai'i, with members setting their own agendas for the benefit of their local communities. Gradually, the outlook of members expanded to include Hongwanji branch temples throughout the Hawaiian Islands and Buddhist women's organizations throughout the world. These Fujinkai branches had parallels elsewhere in North America: "With the establishment of Buddhist churches in the 1930s, the activities of the *fujinkai* (the Buddhist Women's Association, BWA)

45. Hasegawa and Shiraki, *Hōsha*, 13.

46. *Ibid.*, 13.

also expanded. As one of the early organizations, the BWA, often led by the resident minister's wife, had operated in the background in nearly all churches."<sup>47</sup> One thing that unites these women over time is their religious devotion. Unlike many other temple organizations, the BWA meetings always begin with a service and *nenbutsu*.

#### THE WAR YEARS

The Japanese Buddhist community in Hawai'i suffered further hardships during and after World War II. Immediately after Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7, 1941, FDR's Executive Order 9066 led to the forced relocation and incarceration of roughly one hundred twenty thousand Japanese, both permanent residents and United States citizens, including more than two thousand in Hawai'i.<sup>48</sup> The incarceration affected Japanese Buddhists differently than detainees of other religious affiliations: "The religious designation of Buddhist/Buddhism and the racial/ethnic category of Japanese were commonly viewed as synonymous and membership in either was cause for suspicion and internment."<sup>49</sup> The extent, timing, and religious implications of this unconstitutional incarceration have not been widely acknowledged, even though the United States government formally apologized and granted a modicum of reparations to those incarcerated who were still alive in 1988. Five years before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt endorsed a plan to investigate Japanese Buddhists in Hawai'i, California, and elsewhere to assess their loyalties and the extent of their assimilation relative to Japanese Christians, and to identify "dangerous" and "potentially dangerous" individuals. The FBI and ONI (Office of Naval Intelligence) did so: "The studies had concluded that Buddhists were more likely than their Christian counterparts to identify with Japan and less able to properly 'Americanize.'"<sup>50</sup>

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47. Ama, *Immigrants to the Pure Land*, 82. Vivid visual images of Fujinkai's transformation over time can be seen on the Hawaii Federation of Buddhist Women's Associations website, [hawaiibwa.org](http://hawaiibwa.org).

48. Linda Nishigaya and Ernest Oshiro, "Reviving the Lotus: Japanese Buddhism and World War II Internment," *Social Process in Hawai'i* 45 (2014): 174.

49. *Ibid.*, 173.

50. Duncan Ryūken Williams, "Complex Loyalties: Issei Buddhist Ministers during the Wartime Incarceration," *Pacific World*, 3rd ser., no. 5 (2003): 256; Duncan Ryūken Williams, *American Sūtra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the*

The war years affected all people of Japanese origin in Hawai'i, but Japanese nationals experienced the period differently from Japanese Americans. Those who were born in Hawai'i but had spent time in Japan and returned to Hawai'i (*kibei*), and those who were born on the mainland (continental United States) but migrated to Hawai'i (*katonk*, the sound of a coconut falling on their unsuspecting heads) had very different experiences; Buddhists and Christians, young and old, all experienced the times differently, depending on social and political location, language ability, educational background, religious affiliation, and even the identities, professions, and activities of their kin. The wives of some Buddhist ministers in Hawai'i were left in charge of temples while their husbands were incarcerated in camps; fortunately, some of them, such as Shigeo Kikuchi, have left written records of their experiences.<sup>51</sup> While many factors determined how people of Japanese descent were treated during WWII, the more closely one associated with Buddhism, the more suspect one was.<sup>52</sup>

Duncan Ryūken Williams writes about the role religion played in this massive confinement. For example, Japanese language teachers and Buddhist priests were summarily taken into custody and confined, and large numbers were sent to special detention camps on the mainland for indefinite incarceration, without trial. As Williams notes, no Christian ministers were among them.<sup>53</sup> He tells the story of a Buddhist nun named Ryūto Tsuda (also known as Shinsho Hirai), a US citizen born on the island of Hawai'i, who was arrested because she had spent four years studying in Japan and was suspected of being a national security threat. She was one of over two thousand people of Japanese descent who were incarcerated in Hawai'i. In contrast to the mainland US, where more than one hundred ten thousand people were incarcerated as a result of Executive Order 9066, mass incarceration was not feasible in Hawai'i, where more than one-third of the population had Japanese ancestry, having increased from one hundred nine thousand in 1920 (42.7 percent of Hawai'i's population) to one hundred

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*Second World War* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), 35–38.

51. Shigeo Kikuchi, *Memoirs of a Buddhist Woman Missionary in Hawaii* (Honolulu, HI: Buddhist Study Center Press, 1991).

52. Williams, *American Sūtra*, 35.

53. *Ibid.*, 41.

fifty-eight thousand in 1940 (37.3 percent). In the camps, the statutes of the Geneva Convention that ban forced labor and guarantee the freedom to practice one's religion were frequently transgressed or ignored. Tellingly, "Authorities deemed it legally risky to transfer any American citizens arrested without due process to the continental United States, where the Constitution was still in effect."<sup>54</sup>

Just as Japanese Buddhists suffered more than Japanese Christians, Japanese women suffered more than Japanese men. Although women of Japanese descent in Hawai'i were incarcerated less frequently than men because the arrests focused on priests, Japanese language teachers, and prominent business leaders, who were typically male, the incarceration of Buddhist priests left their families in a precarious position, bereft of financial support as well as personal guidance. Tomo Izumi tells the story of her family's experience after her father, Kakusho Izumi, an ordained priest of the Nishi Hongwanji branch of Jōdo Shinshū and Japanese language teacher, was abruptly arrested and taken on the night of December 7, 1941.<sup>55</sup> The family of eight was living at the Papaaloa Hongwanji Mission on the island of Hawai'i. Her father had returned that afternoon from a meeting in Hilo that was attended by priests from the various branch temples and suddenly adjourned when they learned about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. When two FBI agents and the Captain of Police from nearby Laupahoehoe arrived with an interpreter to take him into custody, he donned his clerical robes and went with his wife and children to make prayers, first in the temple and then at the family's home altar. Tomo later learned that her father had performed his own funeral, expecting to be shot to death that night. When he arrived at the camp, he found that the other ministers, thinking they would return home that night, had simply thrown a jacket over their pajamas. Having their father suddenly taken away in the night, not knowing where he had been taken or what would happen to any of them, threw their mother and the six children into deep despair and anxiety. The family's happiness and security was shattered by the sudden loss of their kind, ever-cheerful father. Suddenly, he and tens of thousands of others of Japanese

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54. *Ibid.*, 51–52.

55. Tomo Izumi, *The Crystal City Story: One Family's Experience with the World War II Japanese Internment Camps* (n.p.: Tomo Izumi, 2016).

descent were being locked up in detention camps and required to carry Enemy Alien Registration Cards, with photos, at all times.

Later, after months of uncertainty, Tomo and her family were reunited at Crystal City Internment Camp in Texas. Even as a young child, while washing clothes by hand, she took consolation from her father's advice to recite the name of Amida Buddha in order to be reborn in Amida's Pure Land, Sukhāvātī. She remembers attending Bible studies classes in the camps, which she would have preferred to avoid. When the family returned to Papaaloa after four years in the camps, she noticed that while the ministers were in the camps and the temples were closed, most adults remained Buddhist but some of the children became Christians. The arrests of the Buddhist clergy had other detrimental effects as well; communities were deprived of counselors who could perform funerals and advise members in times of grief, anxiety, and other personal struggles. During their absence, temple wives or members of "the temple's Ladies Club [Fujinkai]" often performed these services, with great kindness. Adapting to circumstances and helping others deal with the difficulties of life is a common theme in the history of Buddhist women in Hawai'i.<sup>56</sup>

#### CHANGE, THE ONLY CONSTANT

Another common theme in the adaptation of Japanese Buddhism to the Hawaiian landscape has been a shift in language from Japanese to English in homes and temples throughout Hawai'i. The shift in language mirrors the shift in the socialization process and the degree of adaptation to local culture across generations. It is significant that the commemorative volume *Hōsha* is written in English, the primary language of most of the contemporary generation of Jōdo Shinshū practitioners. It is also significant that a synopsis in Japanese is included.<sup>57</sup> The three-page synopsis in Japanese encapsulates the history of Fujinkai, offers words of encouragement for the future development of the Buddhist Women's Associations, and expresses appreciation for the strength, efforts, loving kindness, and teamwork of members over generations.

Cultural accommodation and eventual assimilation entailed a gradual shift from Japanese to English among the Japanese American

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56. Izumi, *The Crystal City Story*; Hasegawa and Shiraki, *Hōsha*.

57. Hasegawa and Shiraki, *Hōsha*, 19–21.

population in Hawai'i. First-generation (*issei*) parents generally spoke Japanese at home and often spoke limited English. Their second-generation (*nisei*) children, who were born in Hawai'i and attended compulsory English-medium schools, were fluent in English and, while most were able to understand the language of their parents, often felt more comfortable responding in English or pidgin, a creole that emerged among diverse language speakers in Hawai'i, especially laborers on the plantations.<sup>58</sup> To foster intergenerational communications, maintain Japanese cultural identity, and instill moral values, most *issei* parents sent their children to Japanese language schools after class and on Saturday mornings. These patterns of linguistic accommodation over generations were reflected in changes in the terminology used in Japanese Buddhist temples. In response to racism and xenophobia in US society, Japanese Buddhists made a concerted effort to adapt to an overwhelmingly Christian social environment. "Partly due to the 'otherness' of Buddhism as seen by Christians, together with the connection between Buddhist institutions and Japanese language schools, anti-Japanese activists considered Buddhists to be unassimilable. In order to overcome a sense of marginality, Shin Buddhists tried to conform to Protestant practices."<sup>59</sup> "Temples" became "churches," Buddhist "priests" became "ministers," and the honorific term of address became "Reverend." Sunday Schools and Little League baseball teams were instituted in an effort to maintain young people's involvement with their religious heritage and instill Buddhist ethical principles and Japanese cultural mores. In some cases, cultural accommodation shifted the significance of the event. For example, the Obon festival was a deeply religious event in Japan to honor one's ancestors, with extensive decorations and offerings on the altar (*butsudan*) at home and in the temple. Obon is still widely celebrated at Japanese Buddhist temples in Hawai'i with traditional music and dance (*bon odori*), but the social aspects of the event, the merriment and snacks, generally outweigh the religious aspects.<sup>60</sup>

Another major shift in Japanese Buddhist circles has been the ordination of women ministers. The different levels of ordination are

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58. Kent Sakoda and Jeff Siegel, *Pidgin Grammar: An Introduction to the Creole Language of Hawai'i* (Honolulu: Bess Press, 2003): 3–13.

59. Ama, *Immigrants to the Pure Land*, 3.

60. Koda, "Aloha with Gassho," 249.

differentiated by Japanese terms that equate to ranks, and traditionally in Jōdo Shinshū all these levels of ordination were conferred at Hongwanji headquarters in Kyoto. The first level, *tokudo*, is commonly received by the wives of ministers (*bōmori*) and temple staff, including Sunday School teachers and the head abbot. The next level, *jyo-kyōshi*, is a minister's assistant, a rank specifically for women. The next level, *kyōshi*, is a teacher who is qualified to serve as a temple's resident minister. The term *kai-kyōshi* denotes a minister who is prepared to teach abroad, that is, to do missionary work. Jessica Starling describes the stages of ordination for Jōdo Shinshū women in her article "Neither Nun nor Laywoman."<sup>61</sup> The first female priest in Hawai'i was Eishin Irene Matsumoto (b. 1929), who was ordained in the Tendai tradition in 1936 in Japan and currently serves as president of Palolo Kwannon Temple in Honolulu.<sup>62</sup> Ruth Tabrah (1921–2004), a scholar, painter, and prolific author of books about Buddhism and Hawaiian culture who was not Japanese, was ordained as a Jōdo Shinshū priest in Kyoto in 1982.<sup>63</sup>

#### NEW WAVES OF CHANGE: REFLECTIONS AT A CROSSROADS

In April 1954, the Hawaii Federation of Honpa Hongwanji Buddhist Women's Associations formed to unite all the Fujinkai in Hawai'i. *Hōsha* documents five conventions organized in Hawai'i every four years, from 1969 to 1985, focusing on themes such as gratitude, harmony, and the sustaining power of the *nenbutsu*.<sup>64</sup> Members of the Hawaii Federation also attended international conventions of the World Federation of Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji Buddhist Women's Association (BWA) held from 1961 to 1986 in Kyoto, New York City, Honolulu, San Francisco, and São Paulo. In 1989, the Association was comprised of thirty-six branches. Since then, the number of branches has decreased. The Kahuku branch closed when Kahuku Hongwanji Mission shut its doors in February 2013, after serving the community for 111 years. The Waialua BWA is no longer in existence, although Waialua Hongwanji

61. Starling, "Neither Nun nor Laywoman," 285–288.

62. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Women in Buddhist Traditions* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 95.

63. Ruth M. Tabrah, *The Monk Who Dared: A Novel About Shinran* (Kailua, HI: Press Pacifica, 1995); Ruth M. Tabrah, *The Monk's Wife: A Novel About Eshinni* (Honolulu: Buddhist Study Center Press, 2001).

64. Hasegawa and Shiraki, *Hōsha*, 192–193.

Mission near the Old Waialua Sugar Mill is still maintained and opens on special occasions. The Kailua branch has also withdrawn from BWA, although the temple, now renamed Windward Buddhist Temple, is thriving, primarily under the leadership of women. Three temples on Kauai, in Hanapepe, Koloa, and Waimea, have joined together under the name West Kauai Hongwanji. There are many smaller temples on the island of Hawai'i but the precise number of women involved in BWA today is uncertain.<sup>65</sup>

The declining number of active Hongwanji temples reflects the changing demographics of Japanese Americans in Hawai'i. The sugar industry that had flourished for almost 150 years began to wane in the late twentieth century. The number of sugar companies in the islands declined precipitously from twenty-eight at the beginning of 1970 to only four in 2000;<sup>66</sup> the last one, Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar Company, ceased operations in 2016. With improved education and employment opportunities, many in the younger generation migrated to the cities for more desirable jobs. Unsurprisingly, the decreasing number of active Hongwanji temples has resulted in a decrease in the number of active branches of Fujinkai.

Despite the decreasing numbers of Fujinkai branches, the contributions of Fujinkai members as pioneers in the founding of Jōdo Shinshū temples and as humble, diligent workers dedicated to the perpetuation of these temples is well-recognized in Japanese Buddhist circles. One example of Fujinkai's contributions is a student exchange program initiated in 1971 that selected two young women, Gail Mamura and Jan Aratani, as the first participants to visit Japan. Another outstanding example is Project Dana, founded in 1989 by Shimeji Kanazawa and Rose Nakamura at Moiliili Hongwanji to provide care for the frail and elderly. This project has grown into an alliance of more than thirty churches and temples, training compassionate caregivers for the community and gaining national recognition for the selfless service of its volunteers. The capacity of Fujinkai members to build this interfaith coalition demonstrates the enormous potential of Buddhist women for social transformation.<sup>67</sup>

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65. Donna Higashi, pers. communication, April 21, 2021.

66. Jones and Osgood, *From King Cane to the Last Sugar Mill*, xiii.

67. See Project Dana, [www.projectdana.org](http://www.projectdana.org).



Writing in 1989, Toku Umehara, then president of the Hawaii Federation of Honpa Hongwanji Buddhist Women's Association, expressed the hope that women would become more active and prominent in Hongwanji overall: "I expect the image of the Fujinkai members to change as women are becoming educated and they will become important members of the temples. Undoubtedly, we shall see more women as officers of their respective *Kyōdan* [administrative bodies]."68 In 1975, during her tenure, the membership of Fujinkai burgeoned to 6,400 women. She clarified that the purpose of greater involvement in the administrative functioning of the temples would not outweigh the importance of spiritual practice, which is the core of Jōdo Shinshū:

However, as our Fujinkai organizations are unique in that they are religiously oriented, rather than primarily social organizations, the members should always bear uppermost in their minds that they should live the life of the Nembutsu. In order to know and understand the life of the Nembutsu, it is imperative that we listen to our Jōdo Shinshū teachings at every opportunity afforded to us. Then we shall be an example to the youth, that they, too, should listen to the teachings. In this way they will be able to understand that we are always surrounded by the Wisdom and Compassion of Amida Buddha.<sup>69</sup>

She emphasized the valuable roles that women have played in establishing and maintaining Buddhist temples and continue to play in modeling spiritual practice for future generations. The question today is whether the younger generation of Buddhist women in Hawai'i will truly understand and continue to emulate the selfless devotion, dedication, and hard work that the pioneering generation of Fujinkai women humbly offered their temples.<sup>70</sup>

The dedicated efforts of Japanese Buddhist women have not always been sufficiently recognized or acknowledged. Harkening back to the introduction to *Hōsha*, the pictorial history of Fujinkai:

Since olden days, women have always been called the "power behind the scenes" (*enno shitano chikaramochi*). Notwithstanding the intended compliment, it is unfortunate that the Hongwanji women have been relegated for such a long time to the background, for their great contributions to the Hongwanji and its programs, their pivotal role in

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68. Hasegawa and Shiraki, *Hōsha*, 12.

69. *Ibid.*, 12.

70. Patricia A. Kanaya Usuki, *Currents of Change: American Buddhist Women Speak Out on Jōdo Shinshū* (Berkeley: Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2007).

holding the family together, and their compassionate and skillful nurturing and educating of their children have been responsible for the continuing vitality and growth of the Hongwanji in Hawaii.... It is significant that, although belatedly, the importance of the women in the Sangha is now being recognized by their male counterparts. Apart from their Fujinkai responsibilities, more and more women are being tapped to serve as temple leaders, including the president's position in some cases. The women's associations, furthermore, are taking increasing interest, not only in their local affairs, but also in statewide and international programs.<sup>71</sup>

This admission that Hongwanji women have been relegated to the background and the acknowledgment that their efforts have only belatedly been recognized by their male counterparts are significant examples of contemporary Japanese American Buddhist women's self-reflection. The important roles that women play in the family, especially "their compassionate and skillful nurturing and educating of their children," are understood to be important contributions to the growth and development of Buddhist institutions, and rightly so, in that they give rise to future generations who embody the values espoused in the Buddhist teachings. Through the supportive networks of Fujinkai, women's contributions were appreciated and opportunities for social change expanded.

Some feel that, as women become recognized for their leadership and teaching skills in Hongwanji and Buddhist institutions more broadly, the need for BWAs distinct from the administrative center of power in these institutions will become less relevant than it was at the raw beginnings of Buddhist communities in Hawai'i. Women will no longer find their place only on the periphery, as a vital support system for Buddhist temples and as the source of future generations of faithful Buddhists, but will take more visible leadership roles in temples and religious forums throughout the islands. Acts of cultural and political resistance in the face of overwhelming power need not be overt. The formation of Fujinkai in 1889, concurrently with the founding of the Hawai'i branch of Hongwanji, may have been a subtle form of resistance against attempts at religious domination by the Christian majority. By steadfastly asserting their Buddhist identity as well as their Japanese ethnic identity, despite the potential political and social

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71. Hasegawa and Shiraki, *Hōsha*, 17.

costs, Buddhist women in Hawai'i made a powerful statement of religious integrity and independence.

Since the celebration of Fujinkai's centennial, remarkably documented in the commemorative volume *Hōsha*, Jōdo Shinshū women in Hawai'i have witnessed many changes. Smaller families and greater involvement in the workplace, sports, music, and other pursuits have left them with less time for temple activities. Whereas earlier generations of women felt strong ties to their Japanese heritage and depended on temple activities for social networking and cultural enrichment, women today have many more options to choose from. Jōdo Shinshū temples are becoming more ethnically diverse, attracting members through marriage and the ideal of compassion in everyday life. Dharma schools for children and programs for young adults have been established at most Hongwanji temples, but young women from Japanese Buddhist families often associate Fujinkai with their mother's or grandmother's generation. Jōdo Shinshū women in Hawai'i still acknowledge and are grateful for the *nenbutsu* and the Buddha's teachings, but unless they have close personal ties there, many in the younger generation have not been able to find a comfortable place within the existing Japanese temples, which may appear dated and culturally exclusive. Gradually, many young Jōdo Shinshū women drift away from the temple and only return when they have children of their own, to gather for special events such as Obon festivals and mochi making, or contribute to social service activities such as sewing masks.

Exact BWA membership figures were not available at the time of this writing, but a general decline in numbers is widely acknowledged. When the national Federation of Buddhist Women's Association (FBWA) set out to understand the gradual attrition away from Fujinkai, they found that younger women often identified Fujinkai with their mothers' generation and also struggle with cultural and linguistic differences between ministers sent from Japan and female congregants born and raised in Hawai'i.<sup>72</sup> Contemporary Japanese American Buddhist women reject the traditional division of labor taken for granted by their mothers and earlier generations whereby women work in the kitchen while men do repairs or gardening.<sup>73</sup> To help bridge these gaps, Fujinkai changed its name to BWA, but the name change has not resulted in

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72. Patricia Kanaya Usuki, pers. communication, September 16, 2021

73. Kanaya Usuki, *Currents of Change*.

many new members. Japanese immigrant Buddhists enthusiastically supported the temples, but times have changed: As one Fujinkai leader observed, “The Issei [first generation] would give their last five dollars to the temple, whereas young people want to see what you’re going to do for them. They are educated and we have to respond. If not, we will lose them.”<sup>74</sup> She advocates for strengthening Fujinkai and using its influence to effect change. To appeal to the younger generation and a broader demographic, some Hongwanji temples are now incorporating meditation practice and the types of classes on Buddhism that have become popular and meaningful for many people today, regardless of their religious background. Whether these new approaches will appeal to the current generation sufficiently to spark renewed interest in the existing Buddhist Women’s Associations remains to be seen.

Jōdo Shinshū’s place in the religious fabric of Hawai’i is assured, since there are funerals to be performed, the bereaved to be consoled, and values to be imparted to future generations. For more than a century, Jōdo Shinshū women have been an indispensable aspect of this fabric, and their roles and responsibilities have continuously evolved to stay abreast of the times. With roots in Japan and branches in Hawai’i and around the world, BWA as it currently exists is the most recent phase of this historically significant Buddhist women’s organization. Part of BWA’s legacy, born of Japanese immigrant women’s struggles and spiritual fortitude, is awareness of social injustices—an awareness that continues to inform Japanese Buddhist women’s lives to the present day. The Hawaii Federation of Buddhist Women’s Associations participation in the 2020 Martin Luther King, Jr. parade in support of the Black Lives Matter movement and support for the LGBTQ+ community under the banner “Just as you are: HFBWA supports Pride Month” are symbolic of this legacy. Their work may best be expressed by the time-honored Jōdo Shinshū benediction, “We are a golden chain of love that stretches around the world. May every link be bright and strong. May we all attain perfect peace. *Namo amida butsu.*”

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74. *Ibid.*, 97.

