

# ETHNICITY AND INEQUALITY IN

# HAWAII

Jonathan Y. Okamura

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# Ethnicity and Inequality in Hawai'i

JONATHAN Y. OKAMURA



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# Ethnicity and Inequality in Hawai'i

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For M. G. Smith

## Preface

I have long wanted to write this book. As a high school student, after my family had moved in 1964 to what would eventually become Silicon Valley, California, I naively offered to write an essay on ethnic inequality in Hawai'i for *Life* magazine. I recall being very disappointed that such a major magazine did not even reply to my letter, especially since my mother had been a faithful subscriber for more than a decade. Forty years, a high school diploma, and two degrees in anthropology later, I am probably better qualified to address the problem of ethnic inequality that not surprisingly is still with us in Hawai'i. Thus, I am primarily concerned herein with how ethnic inequality is maintained in the islands; beyond that research issue, I am personally concerned with how ethnic inequality can be eliminated or at least significantly reduced. I would like to believe that *Ethnicity and Inequality in Hawai'i* provides a means for addressing these two issues, not only as an academic book but also as a work that can contribute to community discussion and action toward fostering a more equal Hawai'i, particularly for those who remain subjugated and marginalized.

I need to acknowledge the contributions of a number of individuals who have enabled me in different ways to complete the writing of this book. I am especially grateful to Michael Omi who urged and encouraged me for nearly a decade to write a book on ethnic relations in Hawai'i. I particularly appreciate his very critical comments, thought-provoking questions, and suggestions for major revisions of my manuscript

that he made in his capacity as one of the editors of the Asian American History and Culture series of Temple University Press. I am also thankful for the useful comments and suggested revisions made by the other (anonymous) reviewer. I was especially fortunate to be able to work with Janet Francendese, editor in chief of Temple University Press, who has been a delight from the very beginning. I am very thankful to her for facilitating a prompt review of my manuscript by the reviewers and the Temple University Press faculty board.

I extend my grateful appreciation to a number of friends who critically read chapter drafts, made comments and discussed them with me. They include several of my fellow Ethnic Studies faculty members at the University of Hawai'i (UH) at Manoa: Ibrahim Aoude, Monisha Das Gupta, Noel Kent, and Ty Tengan. Other friends who did the same are Rick Baldoz, Joyce Chinen, Mary Yu Danico, Rod Labrador, Franklin Ng, and John Rosa. I fortunately was able to draw upon their considerable expertise and knowledge of ethnicity and ethnic relations in Hawai'i and of other subjects as well. In addition to Noel Kent's and Ibrahim Aoude's suggestions regarding this work, I have also benefited from years of ongoing discussions with them on many of the topics discussed in this book. I also would like to acknowledge several other friends of mine at UH Manoa who, while not contributing directly to my writing this book, have nonetheless assisted in its completion through their support of my work in general over the years. They include Leonard Andaya, Candace Fujikane, Christine Quemuel, Karen Umemoto, and Geoff White.

Portions of a few chapters were presented at national conferences, including the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) annual conferences in 2005 and 2007 and the Filipino American National Historical Society biennial conference in 2006. I am especially grateful to August Espiritu for the very helpful comments he made regarding my paper while serving as the discussant of a panel I organized for the 2005 AAAS conference.

As for research assistance, I thank Karen Oki and Pancho Delos Santos for diligently gathering newspaper articles on the arrest and execution of Filipinos from microfilm records. I also benefited from the discussions I had with a few of my graduate students who were doing research on topics similar to some of those addressed in this book. They include Juri Ishikawa, who wrote a fine master's thesis on *yonsei* (fourth-generation) Japanese American women in Hawai'i; Yukari Akamine, who is doing dissertation research in sociology on Okinawan identity; and Brandon Ledward, who completed a highly informative PhD thesis in anthropology on *hapahaole* Hawaiians (those with European ancestry and phenotypic traits).

Finally, I express my appreciation to my wife, Cynthia, for allowing me the time and space to work on this book. I also thank our daughter, Mika, who graduated from college in 2007 with a double major in anthropology and



Asian American studies (neither at my urging), for providing me with insights on yonsei youth culture.

This book is dedicated to the late Prof. M. G. Smith who was my graduate supervisor in the Department of Anthropology at University College London when I went there in 1972. Prof. Smith's work on pluralism and the plural society was one of the main reasons that I went to London to study social anthropology. I was extremely fortunate to have had weekly tutorial sessions with him as the major part of my training in social anthropology. The theories and concepts developed in his books—such as *The Plural Society in the British West Indies* (1965a), *Stratification in Grenada* (1965b), *Pluralism in Africa* (1969, coedited with Leo Kuper), *Corporations and Society* (1975), and *Culture, Race and Class in the Commonwealth Caribbean* (1984)—have been major theoretical influences on my thinking about issues pertaining to race, ethnicity, and stratification and are clearly reflected in the arguments and analyses presented in this book. Beyond the considerable influence of his prodigious scholarship on mine, I greatly appreciate the personal support and encouragement he extended to me over the years.

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# 1

## Introduction

**A**t a 2005 University of Hawai'i (UH) Board of Regents meeting in Honolulu, I presented testimony in opposition to proposed tuition increases throughout the UH system. My argument was based on knowledge of how disastrous the consequences had been for Hawai'i students, especially ethnic minorities, when tuition was raised substantially in 1996 and 1997. In the three minutes I was allowed to speak before the Regents, I pointed out that after those tuition hikes, enrollment in the UH system plummeted from 50,000 to 45,000 students within three years. At our flagship UH Manoa campus, it declined from 19,800 to 17,000 students and took eight years to recover to the previous level. While all ethnic groups in Hawai'i were adversely impacted by the tuition increases, underrepresented minorities—such as Filipino Americans and Native Hawaiians, the two largest groups in the public school system—suffered much greater losses. I emphasized to the Regents that Filipino American enrollment in the UH system had decreased from 7,500 to 6,000 students within three years and was still more than 1,000 students lower than in 1995.

Spring commencement ceremonies at UH Manoa had been held the previous Sunday, so I told the Regents about an interview I had seen on the evening news with a Native Hawaiian female graduate and her parents. Surrounded by many of her relatives and friends, the lei-bedecked young woman said she was the first member of her family to attend college and

that she planned to continue on to graduate school. Her parents spoke about how proud they were of her and how they wished she would be a role model for her younger siblings who would be encouraged by her example also to attend college. They mentioned how “expensive” they found it to send their daughter to UH Manoa, and I noted that this was the case even though as a Native Hawaiian student she had access to federal financial assistance provided by the Native Hawaiian Higher Education Act. If this family found the tuition costly now, I asked, how much more expensive would it be for them with annual increases of \$816 for six consecutive years?

My allotted time was rapidly expiring, so I concluded my testimony by asking the Regents to review their own policy on “Nondiscrimination and Affirmative Action” before voting on the tuition increase. Since I would not have been surprised if most of them had never read or even heard of this policy, I quoted it as stating: “The University of Hawai‘i is an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution and is committed to a policy of nondiscrimination on the bases of race, sex, age, religion, color . . .” I told the Regents that if they approved the tuition increases, they would be contradicting their own policy to provide equal access to the university, since massive tuition hikes would inevitably result in significantly decreased minority student admission and enrollment.<sup>1</sup>

My arguments, and those of others who expressed their opposition to raising tuition, fell on deaf ears and minds that were very likely already decided. I was not very surprised when, after nearly three hours of testimony, the Regents voted unanimously in favor of the proposed higher tuition. In their comments during a short discussion before voting, most of them noted their concern for the financial stability of the university and maintained that the tuition increases would generate funds needed to replace stagnating appropriations from the state government. Although many of the Regents are corporate executives or have business backgrounds, none of them asked the UH vice president, who presented the administration’s tuition proposal, the basic question of whether students would continue to enroll at their current level if tuition was raised substantially.<sup>2</sup> Or in terms of operating a business, the Regents probably did not ask themselves if customers would continue to buy a product if its price increased 140 percent in six years.

The decision of the UH Board of Regents to approve a hefty tuition hike is yet another example of how and why ethnic inequality is maintained in Hawai‘i. As a publicly supported institution, the University of Hawai‘i should be one of the primary means by which socioeconomically disadvantaged minorities—such as Native Hawaiians, Filipino Americans, and Samoans—can advance themselves. Already substantially underrepresented in the UH system and together constituting a majority of public school students, these groups were further excluded after tuition was raised beginning in fall 2006.

As discussed in Chapter 4, “Educational Inequality and Ethnicity,” I consider policy decisions such as that by the UH Board of Regents to be manifestations of institutional discrimination against ethnic minorities insofar as these groups are subject to unequal or unfair treatment through these policies. It might be argued that all Hawai‘i residents must pay the higher tuition if they wish to attend UH, so how can the Regents’ decision to increase tuition be considered discriminatory, especially if we assume that they did not intend to discriminate against any ethnic group? The reason is that not all ethnic groups have the financial means to meet the higher cost of tuition; consequently, ethnic minorities are impacted much more adversely compared to the more socioeconomically privileged groups such as Chinese Americans, Whites, and Japanese Americans. These groups have the financial resources to pay the increased tuition or to send their children to universities in the continental United States and thus to maintain their dominant social status in Hawai‘i.

In this book, I discuss other ways by which ethnic inequality and hierarchy are perpetuated in Hawai‘i. While ethnic relations clearly have improved since World War II, they have not progressed sufficiently for a substantial proportion of Hawaii’s people who continue to be denied the privileges, benefits, and resources that are enjoyed by the more socioeconomically advantaged ethnic groups. I do not disagree that ethnic inequality in Hawai‘i has become less severe during the past sixty years and that opportunities (for example, in higher education) have been created for ethnic minorities that were extremely restricted—and, for some groups, virtually nonexistent—prior to the war. However, ethnic inequality has not been sufficiently reduced and, since the 1970s, has become further entrenched due to the state’s overdependence on tourism and the ongoing globalization of Hawaii’s economy. Socioeconomic mobility into the middle class that was very possible during the two decades after World War II for Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Korean Americans, all of whom started life in Hawai‘i on the plantations, has become much more difficult for other ethnic minorities to attain.

My purpose in writing this book is both personal and academic. Personally, I am concerned about social equality and social justice for aggrieved ethnic minorities in Hawai‘i. Their continuing subjugation is not being adequately addressed by government, the private sector, and the larger society and, in fact, is being obscured by academic analyses, journalistic descriptions, and cultural representations that glorify Hawai‘i as a unique model of ethnic amity and equality. As someone whose family has had the good fortune to live in Hawai‘i since 1885, I am personally committed to fostering equality, justice, and opportunity for all the people who consider the islands their home. While clearly an academic work, *Ethnicity and Inequality in Hawai‘i* also expresses my personal advocacy and concern for a qualitatively better society in Hawai‘i where ethnicity is not a restrictive barrier to individual dreams and collective goals.

My scholarly reason for writing this book is to provide an analysis of how ethnic inequality is maintained in Hawai'i. I argue that ethnicity, as the dominant organizing principle of social relations in Hawai'i society, structures inequality among ethnic groups in various institutional domains, such as education and the economy. Following sociologists Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro in *Black Wealth/White Wealth* (2006: 23), I view inequality in its "material aspects" as consisting of "disparities in life chances and command over economic resources," such as income and education, among ethnic groups. Through their concept of the "sedimentation of racial inequality," Oliver and Shapiro (5) emphasize how disparities, particularly in wealth between African Americans and Whites, have accumulated over time and thus persisted "generation after generation." As the authors observe, "The cumulative effect of such a process has been to sediment blacks at the bottom of the social hierarchy," while "[w]hites in general . . . were able to amass assets and use their secure economic status to pass their wealth from generation to generation" (53). Similarly, the effects of ethnic inequality in Hawai'i are also cumulative and transmitted from one generation to the next, although with markedly different consequences for dominant and subordinate groups.<sup>3</sup> In addition to differences in wealth, ethnic inequality is evident in the lack of collective social mobility by minority groups and thus the persistence of the socioeconomic status hierarchy among ethnic groups in Hawai'i since the 1970s. Besides operating as a structural principle, ethnicity contributes to the maintenance of ethnic inequality by serving as a cultural representation of ethnic groups; these representations include the ethnic identities that are ascribed to groups, such as through denigrating stereotypes.

I discuss ethnic identity construction as a potential means that ethnic groups can employ to alleviate their unequal social status in Hawai'i. Some groups, particularly those that are politically or economically disadvantaged such as Native Hawaiians, create and articulate distinct identities for themselves in order to advance their political or economic interests. In contrast, other ethnic minorities—such as Filipino Americans and Samoans—encounter great difficulty in employing ethnic identity formation as a way to promote their collective concerns because of the stigmatizing stereotypes and other representations that tend to dominate their identity in Hawai'i. Furthermore, the privileged ethnic groups—such as Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans—do not have to resort to constructing particular ethnic identities for themselves since they have other means and resources to maintain their dominant economic and political status in society.

With regard to theoretical perspectives that inform my analysis of ethnic inequality in Hawai'i, race theorist Howard Winant in *The New Politics of Race* (2004: ix) contends that, "Race is situated at the crossroads of identity and social structure, where difference frames inequality." Winant's provocative argu-

ment derives from his and race relations scholar Michael Omi's concept of racial project insofar as such projects perform the "ideological work" of establishing links between representation (of which identity is a major form) and structure (Omi and Winant 1994: 56). The second part of Winant's 2004 argument is also based on the distinction and linkage between representation and structure, since difference can be culturally represented and inequality is socially structured. Along these lines, Omi and Winant (1994: 57) have maintained that "race continues to signify difference and structure inequality." If ethnicity is substituted for race, this latter assertion has much relevance for my argument concerning the relation between ethnicity and inequality in Hawai'i. Ethnicity certainly signifies difference in Hawai'i, particularly cultural differences that are evident in the diverse and changing ethnic identities of island groups that can be considered cultural representations, either by the ethnic groups themselves (as asserted identities) or by other groups (as assigned identities). Ethnicity also structures inequality in regulating differential access to resources, rewards, and privileges among ethnic groups.

Adapting Winant's argument (2004: ix) to the Hawai'i situation, I contend that ethnicity is situated at the intersection of ethnic identity and social structure where ethnic difference frames inequality. Ethnicity is operative at this conjuncture since it serves as both cultural representation and structural principle. As a form of cultural representation, ethnicity—particularly ethnic identity—signifies difference among ethnic groups that hold unequal status in the social structure of Hawai'i society. In this sense, ethnic difference demarcates or frames inequality; that is, socioeconomic inequality in Hawai'i is understood predominantly as ethnic inequality because ethnicity is the primary structural principle of social relations. In a society in which race or class is the dominant organizing principle, racial or class difference frames the inequality among its constituent groups (that is, races or classes) and socioeconomic inequality is viewed as either racial or class inequality.

The intersection of ethnic identity and social structure reinforces each other, and thus ethnic inequality, by enhancing the framing of inequality based on ethnic difference. However, this conjunction has differential consequences for different ethnic groups, depending on their relative social status in society. It serves to maintain the socioeconomically advantaged groups in their privileged position, while sustaining the subjugation of the socioeconomically subordinate groups. Ethnic identity construction provides a means for the latter ethnic groups to contest their disadvantaged social status by seeking to disrupt the intersection of ethnic identity and social structure by representing themselves with identities of their own making. Ethnic identity formation thus can be employed by at least some groups to subvert the maintenance of ethnic inequality in society.

My analyses concerning the nature of ethnicity and ethnic relations differ

substantially from those of other scholars who contend that Hawai'i is truly the "Aloha State," distinguished by its egalitarian, tolerant, and harmonious ethnic relations. Such arguments only perpetuate the ethnic status order and thus the power and privilege of the dominant groups—Chinese Americans, Whites, and Japanese Americans—and conversely the subjugation of Native Hawaiians, Filipino Americans, Samoans, and other ethnic minorities. In advancing my understanding of ethnic inequality in Hawai'i, one of the major obstacles I have encountered is the prevalent view of the islands as a virtual paradise of ethnic relations and as a multicultural model for other racially and ethnically diverse societies. But before discussing the "Hawai'i multicultural model," I need to explain my emphasis on ethnicity rather than race in analyzing inequality in Hawai'i.

### Why Ethnicity, Not Race?

My concern is with ethnicity and ethnic relations in Hawai'i rather than with race and race relations. In focusing on ethnicity, I do not argue for the declining significance of race in the United States, nor do I support the ethnicity paradigm that seeks to reduce race to an element of ethnicity (see Omi and Winant 1994: 20). Instead, I emphasize that in Hawai'i, ethnicity, as opposed to race (or class), is the primary structural principle of social relations. This is because the groups that comprise island society—for example, Filipino Americans, Samoans, Whites, and Puerto Ricans—are socially constructed as ethnic rather than racial groups. In other words, people in Hawai'i attribute greater social significance to the presumed cultural differences that distinguish groups from one another than to their phenotypic differences such as skin color. As ethnic groups, they are believed to differ culturally in terms of their respective values, practices, beliefs, and customs, although these differences have diminished markedly over the generations.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, much of the traditional culture, particularly language, that was practiced by Native Hawaiians or brought by immigrant groups during the period of plantation labor recruitment (1852–1946) has been lost by their descendants, and assimilation into "local" and a generalized American culture has occurred.

In contrast, phenotypic differences, including skin and hair color, are not considered by Hawaii's people to be as socially significant as cultural differences in distinguishing groups from each other.<sup>5</sup> This is probably because there is a considerable overlap in skin color and hair color among most of the non-White ethnic groups that makes using such physical indicators problematic as defining criteria, even if those phenotypic differences are subjectively perceived rather than objectively defined. Even Haoles or Whites, the largest "racial" group in Hawai'i, are believed to differ from non-White groups primarily because of cultural differences more than because of their skin color.



This understanding is evident in the long-term distinction made between Haoles and locals insofar as the former are perceived as nonlocal to some extent because they do not practice local culture, and particularly because they do not speak “pidgin” or Hawai‘i Creole English.

Another reason for the comparative nonsignificance of race in Hawai‘i is that its constituent groups—Japanese Americans (25 percent), Filipino Americans (23 percent), Native Hawaiians (20 percent), and Chinese Americans (15 percent)—are major segments of island society compared to their counterparts in the continental United States (Hawai‘i Department of Business and Economic Development and Tourism 2003b). In California, these four groups constitute 1.2, 3.2, 0.2, and 3.5 percent, respectively, of the population (Lai and Arguelles 2003: 124). In Hawai‘i, the much larger proportion of the state population that is represented by Japanese Americans, Filipino Americans, and Chinese Americans is the primary reason why Asian American is not commonly used as a racial category. As major political and economic groups with differing interests, power, and resources, they have less of a need and desire than their continental counterparts to establish alliances with each other specifically as Asian Americans. This argument is not to deny that historically these ethnic groups did form coalitions among themselves (and with other ethnic groups), such as in the rise to power of the Democratic Party in the 1950s, but they did not do so consciously as people of Asian descent. Similarly, the substantial percentage of Hawaii’s population that is represented by Native Hawaiians (20 percent) and to some extent by Samoans is also a factor that explains why those and other groups are not racialized collectively as Pacific Islanders and are viewed as culturally distinct.

My contention that ethnicity rather than race is the dominant organizing principle of social relations in Hawai‘i is also supported by my discussion and analysis of socioeconomic and educational inequality (Chapters 3 and 4) which demonstrate that ethnicity structures unequal access to opportunities and benefits. Ethnic inequality, rather than racial inequality, thus prevails in Hawai‘i, as evidenced by the widely differing social status of ethnic groups that ostensibly belong to the same racial category, such as Japanese Americans and Filipino Americans. Furthermore, other ethnic groups—such as Chinese Americans and Whites—share a similarly high socioeconomic status, despite belonging to different racial groups.

## Multiculturalism and the Hawai‘i Multicultural Model

Both academics and the general public primarily perceive ethnic relations in Hawai‘i as distinguished by their tolerance, equality, and harmony. This long-standing, widespread view was first advanced in the 1920s by Romanzo C.