

The Author



Yukari Takai

Department of History, York University

Contact

For further information on this research, please contact Yukari Takai at yukaritakai7@gmail.com

Gendered World of Issei Women and Men in Japanese Hawai'i, 1880s–1910s

A lynch pin for the Japanese immigrant communities?

Japanese immigrant women (and men) have long been portrayed as a lynchpin for the building of the family-centred, community-oriented Japanese immigrant society. Through my SSHRC-funded research on marriages and divorce among Japanese in Hawai'i, I propose a new and refreshing way to understand the social and gendered world of Japanese *issei* women and men in Hawai'i from the 1880s to the 1910s.

I use the term *issei* to refer to Japanese-born, first-generation migrants from Japan. Hawai'i was the destination of the largest number of *issei* immigrants until the early twentieth century. A majority in Hawai'i worked on sugar cane fields in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

Why study marriage and divorce practices among *issei* in Hawai'i?

I examine three practices: temporary marriage or *karifūfu*, wife sale and wife brokerage. These practices are difficult to capture and previously little studied. But they are important because they show the complexities of social and gendered worlds that ordinary *issei* women and men constructed. They shed light on the boundaries of legal and societal norms. They reveal a great deal about the plural meanings of what was considered modern. They demonstrate the extent of civil and state control. They illuminate the transnational consequences of enduring social values and shifting practices. Most importantly, for the purpose of my research, they challenge the familiar assumptions among historians and the general public about Japanese migrants as the builders of “stable, insular and self-sufficient households.”¹ In doing so, they spur us to strive for a better understanding of the rich and complex stories of Japanese migrations across the Pacific Ocean.

Marriage and gender relations of ordinary *issei* men and women—mostly of rural origin with modest means who comprised the overwhelming majority of this group of migrants—were far more complex and at times less settled than previously understood. Many *issei* women and men married more than once. Marriage lasted for a lifetime for a good number of Japanese migrants. But others ended their unions to get remarried more than once. Some married another partner even before ending their first union. These practices urge historians to reassess the assumption of *issei* women's



Bronze statue of Japanese sugarcane workers in Maui, Hawai'i. The statue was erected on the centennial anniversary of the first Japanese government-sponsored immigration to Hawai'i from 1885 to 1894. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue_of_Japanese_sugarcane_workers_in_Maui_Hawaii)

Asia Research Briefs

Asia Research Briefs provide short summaries or perspectives based on research by YCAR Associates. Their purpose is to share insights from academic research with journalists, policy analysts, community leaders and interested members of the public. For further information, or to subscribe to the series, contact: ycar@yorku.ca.

About YCAR

The York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR) is one of Canada's largest and most active communities of scholars working on East, South and Southeast Asia as well as Asian migrant communities around the world.

The Centre includes faculty, graduate students and research associates from the social sciences, humanities, fine arts, education, law and business.

YCAR facilitates and supports research projects, knowledge exchange and graduate student training, as well as engagement with wider communities in the conduct or dissemination of research. YCAR is located on York University's Keele campus.

For more information:

www.yorku.ca/ycar



compliance with the powerful, normalizing ideology of "good wife, wise mother" that Meiji government officials, intellectuals and social reformers promoted in full force. They also encourage us to re-examine their husbands' ability to uphold this ideology.

Matsuda Kama: A Temporary Spouse

Given the delicate and elusive nature of the practices relating to temporary marriage, wife sale and wife brokerage, I draw on accounts culled from a wide range of sources and archives in the Japanese and English languages. Among a number of primary source materials that I have examined, I found an unusual personal notice in *Nippu Jiji*, the largest Japanese newspaper in Honolulu at the time. On 13 October 1937, Matsuda Kama, a sixty-year-old issei woman from Okinawa, at this time a Honolulu resident, announced in this newspaper her departure for a visit to Japan on the same day. She acknowledged her gratitude to Shimabukuro Kiyoshi, the owner of a Japanese immigrant hotel, for having obtained a permit from the US federal government for her re-entry into the country on her return from the imminent trip to Japan.

Matsuda stated that she had arrived in Hawai'i in 1908 under the pretense of being the spouse of an unnamed Japanese man who travelled with her from Japan. She was then thirty-one years old. She openly admitted that she travelled across the Pacific with a pseudo-husband posing as a married couple and together performing temporary marriage. Like Matsuda and her fellow traveller, an unknown but significant number of issei women and men from Japan crossed the Pacific Ocean under similar arrangements only to end the marriage upon landing in Hawai'i. While Matsuda was silent on the reasons for putting the notice in the newspaper, it illuminates the malleable and practical nature of marriage among issei women and men at the turn of the century. This reveals the powerful culture of ordinary Japanese immigrants. Moreover, it suggests a world apart from the one based on the Meiji-era ideal of womanhood that Japanese and American officials promoted and sought to impose. Through my research I seek to shed further light on the malleability of marriage practices among issei women and men in Hawai'i and the power and limitation of the Japanese state, in collaboration with the American state, to impose its gender ideals.

Endnotes

¹ Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality and the Law in North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 7.

One of several papers produced on this topic is "Recrafting Marriage in Meiji Hawai'i, 1885–1913," published in Gender & History (Volume 31, Issue 3) in 2019. This article received the 2020 Canadian Committee on Migration, Ethnicity and Transnationalism Article Prize, awarded by the Canadian Historical Association.