Japanese Prostitution in Hawaii During the Immigration Period

Joan Hori

In the history of the Japanese in Hawaii the picture bride who toiled on the plantation and raised her Japanese-American children is the stereotypical immigrant woman. Yet scattered references in the literature also portray the immigrant Japanese woman as a prostitute. This is an aspect of ethnic history that has only recently been explored.

The 1900 census of Hawaii provides some little known details of the Japanese community in Hawaii. In Honolulu, among the Japanese carpenters, laborers, clerks, gardeners, servants, and housewives also resided the following people: Toshie—Japanese female, 19 years old, occupation prostitute; Kimi—Japanese female, 18 years old, occupation prostitute; Fuki—Japanese female, 19 years old, occupation prostitute; and Saki—Japanese female, 18 years old, occupation prostitute. All were boarders at the household of a 42-year old Japanese male named Yokoyama, a carpenter by occupation. In another household headed by Chio, a 22-year old Japanese female whose occupation is listed as prostitute, were boarders Yoshihara, a 34-year old Japanese male who was a clerk; Chino, 24-year old Japanese prostitute; and Kahn, 23-year old Japanese prostitute. The prostitute Kiona, aged 29, headed still another household of the following boarders, all of whom were Japanese prostitutes: Iwa, 18 years old; Siono, 19 years old; Mina, 18 years old; Akie, 17 years old; and Take, 24 years old.

At that time in Honolulu these prostitutes were not an isolated few. In 1900 Henry E. Cooper, Attorney General of Hawaii, reported a large increase among women earning their living by prostitution, with the Japanese accounting for a large part of the increase. He provided statistics on the number and nationality of registered prostitutes in Honolulu during December 1898 and December 1899. In 1898 there were 26

Joan Hori is a reference librarian at Sinclair Library, University of Hawaii.
Hawaiian prostitutes, 5 "half-caste", 8 French, 2 British, 1 American, and 115 Japanese. Among identified prostitutes in 1899 there were 19 Hawaiians, no "half-caste", 20 French, 2 British, 2 Americans, and 226 Japanese. In the seaport society of Honolulu where men outnumbered women more than two to one, and where prostitution was a flourishing business, the "Act to Mitigate the Evils and Diseases Arising from Prostitution" had been passed in 1869. This was an effort to fight the spread of venereal diseases, and it required that all prostitutes in and around Honolulu register and submit themselves to periodic physical examinations. The Act was included in the Revised Laws of Hawaii of 1905.

Hawaiian and immigrant women did not constitute even 50% of their racial communities in Hawaii. In 1866 the percentages of women to men were Hawaiian 47.05% and Chinese 9.17%. In 1878 the percentages were Hawaiian 46.75%, Chinese 3.9%, and Portuguese 13.3%. In 1890 they were Hawaiian 46.67%, Chinese 5.09%, Portuguese 44.55%, and Japanese 18.45%.

The proportion of Japanese women to men immigrants was of continuing concern to the men, the sugar planters, and the Hawaiian and Japanese governments. There were never enough women brought from Japan, beginning with the first group of Japanese immigrants in 1868, which included 146 men, 5 women, and 2 teenage boys. In negotiations between the governments the required percentage of women fluctuated from no more than 25% to 40%. The Hawaiian government allowed into Hawaii never more than 25% women, although the Japanese government proposed 30 to 40% at different times.

Another concern of the two governments regarding women was the kind of women sent to Hawaii. One of the arrangements negotiated by Inouye Kaoru, the Japanese Foreign Minister, and R. W. Irwin, agent in Japan for the Hawaiian Board of Immigration, for the 1886 Convention which was to control Japanese immigration to Hawaii until 1894 was article 13, which stated that "No prostitutes be permitted. Any Japanese woman plying such trade in Hawaii to be returned to Japan. No volition on part of woman." In a letter to Irwin, Inouye assured him, "... immorality, drunkenness and gambling among Japanese subjects are suppressed by the strong arm of the law and that the guilty parties are not permitted by their Continued [sic] presence in Hawaii to Contaminate [sic] the better element among the emigrants." A document titled "Instructions to Japanese Laborers While under contract to Bd of Im" from the Hawaiian Government Board of Immigration warned that gambling, drunkenness and immorality were forbidden by
Hawaiian law. It added that severe punishment would be the fate of women engaging in prostitution as well as of husbands who consented to the prostitution of their wives.\(^6\)

However, because Hawaiian Foreign Minister Walter Murray Gibson felt that a provision to return prostitutes to Japan belonged in the contract rather than in the Convention, this article was eliminated. He wrote to Irwin that such an article would be contrary to the spirit of the Hawaiian Constitution. Prostitution was included in the penal code, which he considered adequate to meet the case of Japanese.\(^7\)

Possibly motivating this eagerness of the Japanese government to assure the Hawaiian government of the morals of its women was its desire for equal treatment from other governments of the world. Large numbers of Japanese women had been smuggled to China and Southeast Asia for prostitution, to the embarrassment of the government. In 1872 it attempted to ban prostitution in Japan.

Among the 3,726 Japanese women who arrived in Hawaii by 1900 were probably some prostitutes. Others turned to prostitution after they came to Hawaii. According to tradition, a Mrs. Nakamura of the first group of Japanese immigrants to Hawaii in 1868 was the first prostitute to Hawaii from Japan.\(^8\)

Soon after women began arriving from Japan, some Japanese men began to profit economically from the women. It was discovered by Board of Immigration President L. A. Thurston that Japanese interpreters were charging the Japanese men $40 extra for the passage of their women to Hawaii. In a letter of May 9, 1888 he admonished Inspector in Chief of Japanese immigrants, G. O. Nacayama, that it was the Board that paid the total passage fare of $30 for the women, and that the extra charging by the interpreters should stop.\(^9\) It is not known when this extra charging had been started, but between February 1885 and December 1887, 711 women had arrived in 4 lots. Sixty-three women had returned to Japan, and 15 had died.\(^10\) Clearly the interpreters had profited from their scheme.

In an earlier letter of that month Thurston had requested that Nacayama summon Inspector S. Kimura of Hilo to appear in Honolulu in order to answer a charge that he had collected a fee of $38.40 when a certain Tatemoto Iokutaro of Waiakea had sold his wife to a Japanese at Onomea for $100.\(^11\) Wife selling was common. In 1892 E. G. Hitchcock, the sheriff of the island of Hawaii reported, “I wish to call your attention to the fact, more or less prevalent on this island, of the Japanese selling their wives or mistresses to each other.”

The 1896 report of Attorney General William O. Smith pointed out
that the number of Japanese prostitutes entering the islands had increased and prostitution in Honolulu was growing, but that the Police Department was only able to prevent the trade being carried on in public. Prostitution conducted in private was uncontrollable because of the difficulty of obtaining evidence. In 1901 the sheriff of the island of Maui wrote:

Traffic in Japanese Women

In connection with Japanese the custom they have of trafficking [sic] in their women, buying and selling their wives is an evil that should be looked into, and if there is a remedy, it seems to me it should be earnestly sought and applied with a vigor, that would make practices of this nature, which are demoralizing and an outrage in a civilizied [sic] community, impossible. [sic] Again there is little doubt that this is a fruitful source and to which cause might often be traced the motive of the most violent crimes that have been committed by Japanese on our Island. In support of this we have the case of Sagata, the wife and child murderer, who was actuated to commit a crime the most revolting of which we have any record, because he had only received one-half the price for his wife that had been agreed upon.

He reiterated these sentiments in his report of 1904 and urged a law to stamp out wife selling.\textsuperscript{12} In the story \textit{Sachie; a Daughter of Hawaii}, women who had been picture brides reminisce at a wedding, and recall that some men sold their wives to other men for profits of $100 or $200. "Why would anyone want a second-hand wife?" asks someone, and the reply is that buying a woman already in Hawaii was more certain than waiting for a picture bride from Japan.\textsuperscript{13} Another explanation of the practice of wife-selling among the Japanese points to Nacayama as the originator, when he began to collect $50 from men returning to Japan without the wives who had originally accompanied them. The money was to provide for the wife's possible return to Japan at a later time. Many of the wives had already left their husbands for other men, and the original husbands collected from the new husbands the $50 which they had paid to the officials. The amount collected by the husbands rose from $50 to $100 or even $1,000, when some wives were bought to resell to brothels.\textsuperscript{14} Profits such as these resulted in more wives being brought to Hawaii to sell. Some wives were sold to pay gambling debts. On June 8, 1901, the Protective League of Honolulu rescued Yoshi Nonogawa, who was being held by pimps for a debt of her husband. The pimps had threatened to send her to Iwilei (the red light district of Honolulu) if the debt of $165 was not paid.\textsuperscript{15} Not all wives sold or prostituted were victims and economic commodities; some ran off with other more attractive or richer men, or left for the city where an easier way to earn money than working in the fields for
35¢ per day beckoned. *Hole-hole*, or field songs of the period, describe some of the people's frustrations: "Woe is me. The wife I sent for with my savings has gone to another man," "If I work at stripping *hole-hole* [dried cane leaves], all I'll earn is 35¢. If I sleep with a Chinaman, I'll make $1.00!"\(^{16}\)

Literary information includes the following. A short story about a picture bride named Tomiko tells that her drunkard husband forced her to do washing for other people, threatening that he could sell her if he wished. One of the other picture brides on her ship had been met by a suspicious-looking man who claimed to meet her in her husband's place, since the husband was ill. Upon hearing that, Tomiko recalled having heard stories of brides being stolen by imposters.\(^{17}\) Milton Murayama's *All I Asking for is My Body* mentions a boy whose mother was a prostitute in a small town on the island of Hawaii, and whose father was her pimp.\(^{18}\)

Some women came to Hawaii to work as prostitutes. Because it was difficult for unmarried women to immigrate to Hawaii, these women came or were sent to Hawaii as picture brides. They were entered upon the future husband's family register in Japan and came to Hawaii, but became prostitutes rather than wives.

Other women were duped by pimps searching the Japanese countryside for gullible young girls eager for romance and glamour, only to be forced into prostitution by their new husbands. Thus in Hawaii most Japanese prostitutes had husbands, a practice unseen in the homeland.\(^{19}\)

Married or single, they were controlled by pimps. The prostitutes listed in the 1900 census were single women. In the 1896 census are reported 838 unmarried Japanese women out of 4,064, or 20.62% of Japanese women 15 years old and older. The Superintendent of the Census wrote, "... it is safe to say that a considerable number of these are leading an immoral life."\(^{20}\)

Oral information provides further enlightenment on activities of Japanese prostitutes during the immigration period. The monthly pay day at the plantations brought gamblers and cart-loads of Japanese prostitutes to the plantations. New hay and blankets would be spread on the stable floors and blankets would be hung in front of the stalls for the women to conduct their business.\(^{21}\)

**CHINATOWN**

The majority of women sold or attracted into prostitution came under the domination of Japanese gangsters, especially in Chinatown in Honolulu. Adjacent to the main business district of Honolulu, China-
town was bordered by the Nuuanu Stream on the west, Kukui Street on the north, Nuuanu Avenue on the east, and Queen Street on the south. Within this area lived and worked 7,000 people, most of them Asian immigrants.

The police tried to contain activities of the prostitutes within a small area of Chinatown, in the section bounded by Pauahi, River, and Nuuanu streets. The police also prevented public solicitation, but as long as the women registered with the police and got their periodic examinations as prescribed by the Act to Mitigate, the authorities did not prevent prostitution. Thus, their professional activities confined to one section of town, the Japanese prostitutes plied their trade from 7 p.m. to 11 or 12 midnight. From their homes they left for shed-like buildings, with a frontage of 6 feet and depth of 12 feet, which stood in rows along the streets. In the front of each building was a low, small glass window, through which guests could window-shop, comparing the women who were dimly lit by hand lamps. Behind a partition of wood was the sleeping area.

Clad in Japanese clothes, but more often in Hawaiian holokus (long covered dresses), their hair done in the contemporary Japanese schoolgirl style with a high front and long hair in back tied with ribbon, they wore heavy white face powder which ran in the hot weather, creating dark shadows on their faces. Customers were of all races, although the Chinese were the best customers.

An article in the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* warned the people of Honolulu that portions of Maunakea, Nuuanu, King, Hotel, and Alakea streets were full of these women “... with their hideous, powdered faces”. The writer reported after visits to several places:

The street is not a cheerful one for prowling in during the night. There are no policemen stationed about to preserve order, but there are hoodlums and gamblers from Japan, human vampires who live with those women between midnight and noon and gamble their money.

At the first place he visited, on Nuuanu Street, a man stood outside smoking a cigarette, while inside a light illuminated a woman, “... a particularly homely hand painted affair, thrumming a musical instrument...” Above this place was another, where the women could not be seen but advertised themselves by playing on the same kind of instrument as the first woman. A third place visited was a shabby barber shop with a bathing department composed of two rooms, each containing a bath tub. At the end of a hallway was a larger compartment from which voices of men and women and splashes of water could be heard.
Surely the Chinatown by evening as seen by more sympathetic eyes was a more congenial place for night life and recreation. In contrast to the gloomy, frightening description above is the description by Japanese historian Kihara. The Nuuanu Stream along River Street was very wide and low, with no slope. It flowed slowly from Nuuanu Street. Lining its banks were many restaurants. All through the night there were bright lights shining along the river. Singing, shamisen music, and loud noises continued till morning. All in all, it was an exciting place for a bath, food and drink, games of chance, and women.

Why most of the prostitutes in Honolulu in the 1890s and early 1900s were Japanese is difficult to determine. A Japanese theory is that the Hawaiian government believed that Japanese girls' bodies were strong and clean, and they rarely passed on diseases.

Prostitution was a lucrative profession. In 1899 the average wage for a male plantation contract laborer was $15 per month, for a salaried worker about $18 per month, for laundry work 5c for each piece or $1 per customer per month. A maid earned $8-$10 per month. A prostitute earned 50c-$1 per customer, and at least $4-$5 in an evening, although a popular one with a pretty face made $20 per night. Even after subtracting the cost of renting the shop, and buying clothes and food, a busy woman could have about $200 left at the end of the month.

Reverend Takie Okumura, a Japanese Christian minister of Honolulu, wrote:

One day I visited the home of one harlot, and urged her to return to clean, decent life and work. She said: "Doesn't a big, healthy man on the sugar plantation get only $14 a month? I'm far better off, for in this work I can save up and send back $200 a month to my home in Japan. Am I not a real patriot who enriches our country?"

It is questionable whether or not her country or family profited from this woman's labors, since most of the Japanese prostitutes worked for pimps. Okumura had been informed that there were 200 prostitutes and 300 pimps who lived off them. Attorney General Henry E. Cooper noted that the prostitutes were controlled principally by Japanese men, often the husbands.

As the three-year contracts expired, increasing numbers of Japanese men had moved to the city of Honolulu, some to gainful employment as carpenters, restaurant owners, shopkeepers, and gardeners, and others to crime and pimping. The Japanese pimps and gamblers in Chinatown were organized in groups called Hinode (Rising Sun), Gikyo (Chivalry), and Isshin (Whole-hearted, One Mind). The Hinode group published a newspaper called Hinode Shimbun, and all groups participated in the extortion of Japanese merchants in addition to prostitution and gambl-
According to a report by the sheriff of the island of Hawaii, L. A. Andrews, in 1901:

One of the elements of danger to the peace of our community in the near future is from the Japanese secret societies, which levy blackmail on their own countrymen. It is almost impossible to get information or evidence to convict in these cases, because the Japanese are afraid to give evidence, and they well may be, for it is almost as good as a ticket to the next world to openly turn informer on any doing of their organization, as would be necessary in living [sic] evidence before Court.30

Not only did they terrorize their victims into silence, they were also able to raise $2,000–$3,000 easily, to bribe the police when necessary.31 While it seems unlikely that such men would allow their women to send money home, Kihara has written that every month the gamblers sent several tens of thousands of dollars to Japan.32

In 1900 Chinatown was burned to purify it of the plague. Six thousand people, 3,500 of whom were Japanese, were left homeless. To the authorities this chaotic period seemed a good time to fight the Japanese criminals. In May 1900, 30 men were each charged with being “... an idle person, a disorderly person and a vagrant, creating disturbance of the peace, inciting others to create disturbance of the peace, and instigating others to gambling and drunkenness.”33 The majority of those named were not served their warrants, having left in haste and secrecy to safer places. Moreover, no one was willing to testify, so nothing came of this test case.

After the Chinatown fire some of the Japanese prostitutes started new lives, but many others returned to their work, to a section of Honolulu called Iwilei.

IWILEI

In 1901 Abram E. Cory delivered a sermon at the Honolulu Christian Church titled “Shall the Citizens of Hawaii Tolerate Iwilei?” He attempted to stir public opinion to halt prostitution in Hawaii as carried on in Iwilei, an area not far from Chinatown. In Iwilei, Hawaiians and a few Chinese lived amid slaughter houses, a fertilizer plant, the government laundry, and the Oahu Jail. Cory noted that of the potential $214,000 annual income of the brothels in Iwilei, $32,000 went for rent and expenses, $75,000 supported the women and their pimps, and the remaining $107,000 was sent to Japan.34 It was true that of the 144 women registered and working at Iwilei, 131 were Japanese.35

Cory and others believed that public and private morality were being ruined by the presence of these women at Iwilei. Despite such campaigns, Iwilei existed as a social problem for many years. Continued social
pressure forced the government of the Territory of Hawaii in 1904 to segregate all known prostitutes within a small section of Iwilei, and to require weekly sanitary inspections of the women. But there was no legal way to compel prostitutes to live there, nor to force them to submit to treatment for disease or to stop them from continuing their work even if diseased.

A description of this redlight district in 1901 tells of a “slave pen” of 2 acres, surrounded by a board fence 12 feet high. Buildings owned by a Japanese company contained rooms which rented for $15 per month, providing an annual income of $45,000. Each “slave owner” rented between two to a dozen rooms for Japanese prostitutes. Business hours were from 4 p.m. to 2 a.m.

The same report related that in 1905 there were said to be less than 130 women in Iwilei, of whom 117 were Japanese, 8 Puerto Rican, and 3 French. Yet in a poll done in 1904, it continued, “... no less than 203 separate houses of ill fame...” were counted in the city of Honolulu. The citizens considered Iwilei a failure in containing prostitution.

Pressure from citizens against Iwilei did not abate. Public meetings were held, petitions were presented, pamphlets were circulated, and groups were formed to combat the social evil manifested by Iwilei. The two newspapers took opposite sides in the move to close Iwilei.

The main theme of the crusaders against Iwilei was its encouragement of disease and moral corruption. They stated no objection to the race of the prostitutes. It was about this time, however, that California decided it no longer wanted any Japanese, and the presence of Japanese prostitutes in California was a factor in the move to bar Japanese from the United States.

Closed on April 17, 1908 by Honolulu Sheriff Iaukea, Iwilei reopened from June 15 to June 22. On July 17, ten Japanese women at a house known as the Isoi place were arrested and charged under the vagrancy law as being common prostitutes. This test case was discharged.

Iwilei continued into the next decade, until 1917. Studies of prostitution in Honolulu continued as well. A Committee on the Social Evil, organized by the Board of Trustees of the Kaiulani Home for Girls, in describing the Japanese involvement wrote that there were more Japanese women participating because there were more Japanese women in the islands than females of other races, and that most of the Japanese prostitutes were exploited by Japanese men. Meanwhile the majority of registered prostitutes in Honolulu were Japanese, but most commercial sex existing in Honolulu occurred outside of Iwilei.
The fate of Japanese prostitutes is unclear. According to the above report, all Japanese prostitutes in Iwilei were deported after a September 1913 raid by immigration officials. Yet in the 1914 report of the U. S. Bureau of Immigration is a statement that in early 1914 the Bureau arrested many prostitutes in Iwilei, but that others left Iwilei in order to avoid arrest. Among those who fled were ten who went to Japan, but others "... have now returned to their old quarters and are plying their trade."

Although the fate of Japanese prostitutes in Hawaii is not known, the Committee on the Social Evil indicated that marriage and respectable life were possible for them. Passage into normal society would have been eased by the scarcity of women, but the local Japanese community would surely have known of a woman's past. Would her past have been held against her?

Former Japanese prostitutes in Hawaii did not reveal their past. Little information remains about their lives, although they were an important part of the pioneering Japanese society in Hawaii.

NOTES


2 U. S. Census Office, Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Population, I.


5 Letters, R. W. Irwin to W. M. Gibson, 31 August 1885; and Inouye Kaoru to R. W. Irwin, 20 January 1886, Treaties Japan: 1885-June 1886 file, AH.

6 R. W. Irwin, "Instructions to Japanese Laborers While under contract to Bd of Im.,” 15 February 1886, IDM.

7 Letter, W. M. Gibson to Irwin, 28 September 1885, FOLB.


9 Letter, L. A. Thurston to G. O. Nacayama, 9 May 1888, IDLB.

10 G. O. Nacayama, "Report of the Japanese Inspector in Chief to the Minister of Interior and President of the Board of Immigration, 1888," Hawaii (Kingdom), Bureau of Immigration, Report, 1888 (Honolulu, 1889).

11 Letter, Thurston to Nacayama, 4 May 1888, IDLB.


15 Unsigned report to the President, Protective League, Honolulu, 18 June 1901 in Minutes of the Protective League of Honolulu; Territory of Hawaii, October 1900-December 1901, HHS.


21 Conversation between Stan Tomita (husband of the author) and Mr. William Ko of Honolulu, deceased.

22 Miyaoka, Kaigai, pp. 188, 189.


24 Kihara, Hawaii Nippon-jin Shi, p. 506.

25 Miyaoka, Kaigai, p. 189.


27 Takie Okumura, Seventy Years of Divine Blessings (n.p., 1940?), p. 22.

28 Okumura, Seventy Years, p. 21; Cooper, Report of the Attorney General, 1899, p. 8; Miyaoka, Kaigai, p. 190.

29 Kihara, Hawaii Nippon-jin Shi, pp. 505-506.


32 Kihara, Hawaii Nippon-jin Shi, p. 506.

33 “Republic of Hawaii vs Higuchi et al,” microfilm no. 2789, Criminal Division, Circuit Court, Hawaii.

34 Abram E. Cory, Shall the Citizens of Hawaii Tolerate Iwilei? (Honolulu, n.p., 1901?), p. 10, HMCS.

35 E. P. Dole to Acting Governor Henry E. Cooper, 3 June 1901, FO & Ex.

36 E. W. Thwing, Shall Honolulu Continue to Oppose Public Vice? (Honolulu, n.p., 1908), pp. 3, 9, HMCS.


39 Ibid., p. 5.