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Abstract:

A prominent thread of current scholarship suggests that ethnicity becomes detached from religion in immigrant religious organizations over time. According to scholars, the decoupling occurs in three associated ways: structurally assimilating to mirror Christian churches, returning to 'theological' roots, and becoming a multi-ethnic congregation. Based on historical archival research and 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork at a Japanese-Buddhist temple, this article shows how the nexus between religion and ethnicity is remarkably durable. Ethnicity may never fully disappear but can be episodic: it crystallizes and becomes a grouping mechanism during important events and can dissipate during mundane everyday events. This article demonstrates how ethnicity fluctuates across time and place and is not something that simply dissipates in the process of immigrant assimilation. Implications include being more critical in studying ethnicity across various subfields, including the sociology of religion and immigration, by asking what a constructivist approach to studying ethnicity entails.

Keywords:

Migration, Ethnicity, Religion, Immigrant Organizations, Buddhism

Introduction

What happens to immigrant religious organizations (IROs) after first generation immigrants arrive and settle into American society? In an influential review, Yang and Ebaugh (2001a) posit that IROs will “assimilate” into the U.S. cultural mainstream over time. These organizations will mirror their Protestant church peers in structural form, return to the theological foundations of the religion, and evolve toward a multi-ethnic membership over time.¹ An evolution towards multi-ethnic membership, the focus of this paper, means ethnicity becomes detached from religion in the IROs, and the organizations focus on the *universalism* and *generalities* of religion rather than the *exclusivities* and *particularities* of ethnicity. The *decoupling thesis* has supporters among those studying immigration, religion, race, and ethnicity (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Jeung 2005; Kurien 2012; Min 2010; Roy 2006; Warner 1993, 1998). Nonetheless, the thesis has been questioned by skeptical scholars in recent years. These scholars note the importance and persistence of race and ethnicity in the U.S and how the lines between religion and ethnicity have always been blurred for immigrants (Cadge 2008; Cheah 2011; Chen and Jeung 2012; Hirschman 2004). This study extends this line of critique by problematizing the assumption that changes to the organization’s structure and theological messages inevitably lead to a multi-ethnic congregation and by exploring the durable nexus between religion and ethnicity. Using a Japanese Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles as a strategic research site (Merton 1987), this article suggests that ethnicity might never truly detach from religion in immigrant religious organizations if we reframe ethnicity as dynamic and processual. Taking a comparative approach to studying ethnicity, race and nationhood, this approach details these phenomena as a set of grouping mechanisms, practical categories, and social boundaries instead of substantial

¹ According to the 1998 National Congregations Survey, multiracial or multi-ethnic memberships are defined as having no more than eighty percent of one racial and/or ethnic group.

entities in the world (Brubaker 2009; Weber 1978; Horowitz 1985; Jenkins 1997; Wimmer 2013).

In this paper, I draw on the example of Pure Land temple to illustrate how ethnicity becomes a grouping mechanism to coordinate important religious events at IROs and how ethnic boundaries can deter new non-Japanese members from regularly attending services. Episodic ethnicity, or the crystallization of ethnic identities as an effective grouping mechanism during important events and its dissipation during mundane activities in IROs, is analyzed both historically and ethnographically in this paper. The first section explores the context, changes, and mechanisms associated with the decoupling of ethnicity from religion. I elaborate on these three changes: structural, theological and the change from homogenous to multi-ethnic congregations. The second section discusses the potential problems with the current approach to framing ethnicity by those that advocate for the decoupling thesis. The third section discusses the ethnographic fieldwork and temple in depth. I base my findings on archival research of Pure Land and their umbrella organization, the Buddhist Churches of America. The findings show how Pure Land mirrors Protestant churches in format and in the universalism of its religious messages. Yet Pure Land has not become multi-ethnic, as the decoupling thesis predicts. The conclusion discusses how the three changes associated with decoupling do not necessarily have to occur simultaneously. And, that ethnicity is not something that simply dissipates in the process of immigrant assimilation. Ethnicity is dynamic in IROs and the burden rests upon social scientists to properly study social categories such as ethnicity.

Context of Decoupling: Migration, Deterritorialization, and Religious Multiplicity

Proponents of the decoupling thesis agree that decoupling is part of larger socio-political

processes.² Migration transforms the definition of religious groups and how immigrants practice religion in receiving countries. Subsequent generations become detached from their parents' culture and notions of religiosity and start to create an identity that combines their cultural heritage with the realities of their adopted homeland (Kurien 2012; Roy 2006). Therefore, deterritorialization and migration, embodied in the presence of the subsequent generations, play vital roles in delinking religion from ethnicity.

Religious multiplicity, which emphasizes individualism and places importance on an individual's autonomy, also allows for the decoupling to take place in America. It encourages Americans to seek different religions. Americans perceive inherited traditions and rituals (extensions of culture) to alienate individuals from their 'authentic selves', hinder their spiritual quests, and more generally conflict with the values of post-denominationalism (Houtman and Aupers 2007). Religious multiplicity can be due to two factors, both linked to the spiritual turn of religion in the West. The first was the spread of a voluntaristic, anti-institutional, and consumerist religious climate that encouraged individuals to choose their religious traditions and to piece together various doctrines to satisfy their tastes (Bellah et al. 2007; Hervieu-Léger 2006; Taylor 2007). The second was the development of a therapeutic understanding of religion. Americans expect religion to focus on the psychological needs of individuals rather than on inherited rituals and traditions (Ellingson 2007; Miller 1997; Roof 2001; Sargeant 2000). Post-denominationalism encourages subsequent generations to reject the status quo and actively shape their religious practices as they see fit.

Decoupling Changes: Structural, Theological, and Multi-Ethnic Congregations

² This theory is reminiscent of the controversial modernization and secularization theories. The former describes how a society transforms from rural and agrarian to urban and industrial. Connected to modernization, the latter suggests that societies become more secular and less religious as modernization necessitates these changes. In similar ways, the decoupling thesis describes changes in the same linear fashion, towards a 'pure religion' unaffected by ethnicity and race without questioning the normative and false assumptions implicit in decoupling.

According to Yang and Ebaugh (2001a), the decoupling of ethnicity from religion involves three synergistic changes that immigrant religious organization and their members undergo.³ The first change is structural. The institution structurally assimilates and adapts to the immediate environment. Warner (1994) posits that IROs adopt a Protestant congregational structure since Protestantism is the unofficial norm in American religious life. These changes include, but are not limited to, time of worship, role of worshippers and religious leaders, membership composition, and membership recruitment strategies. The two changes to note are the composition of membership and recruitment strategies: IROs must actively recruit members of the local community to become part of their congregations instead of relying on religious practices in home countries, familial ties, and social expectations to retain members. This pushes IROs to recruit non-ethnics especially if the local community changes and does not consist of only ethnics. The assumption is that IROs actively adopt the model to maintain membership and become more accepted by non-believers and the American mainstream.

The second change concerns a return to the theological foundations of the religion. An organization's adoption of congregational form, which includes recruiting non-ethnic community members, compels believers to go through a process of finding commonalities and differences in their respective religion. In addition to the introduction of non-ethnic members to IROs, the presence of intra-religious pluralism also catalyzes the universalization process. Intra-religious pluralism includes, for example, Buddhists migrating from different parts of the world and interacting in the same local community in the U.S. This pluralism catalyzes the universalization of religion. In other words, gathering in a congregation with people of different ethnic and national origins compels believers to return to the earlier version of the religion, to find

³ These three changes are Weberian ideal types. In reality, these changes blur together and are interrelated.

theological justifications as to *why* and *how* their IRO consists of members from different backgrounds.

According to scholars, these structural and theological changes are often accompanied by a third trend: a more diverse congregation. According to Yang and Ebaugh (2001: 281), all categories of immigrant religions (world, national, and ethnic religions) are moving towards greater universalism in membership. World religions like Buddhism embrace a more inclusive membership once they move from ethnically homogenous to ethnically diverse regions such as American large cities. In terms of boundaries, the existing ethnic boundary of the organization loses its importance as members from different background are welcomed to attend. This is particularly the case for minority religions in America (Yang and Ebaugh 2001b), like Buddhism (Chen 2002), which have to overcome their perceived foreignness in America. Recruiting native-born Americans, especially white Americans, enhances the 'American-ness' of the minority religion and fast tracks the organizational integration.

Scholars (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Warner 1993; Yang and Ebaugh 2001a) *assume* that one change leads to the other two changes. For instance, an organization with universalistic religious interpretations and 'Americanized' structures of worship steer more non-ethnics to joining (Yang and Ebaugh 2001a, 281). Nonetheless, the assumption that one change leads to the introduction of the other two changes is problematic because the grouping of these disparate changes is still an open empirical question. There is no definitive body of work that compellingly connects these three changes together.

Decoupling Mechanisms: Subsequent Generations and Non-Ethnics

The first mechanisms for the decoupling are the presence and demands of subsequent generations in IROs. The disparate experiences of growing up American cause the second

generation to desire different goals from their IROs as opposed to their parents. Some scholars note that the second generation demands a different interpretation of the religious scripture and calls for a less culturally based religion. In Min's study (2010, 203) of Korean Christians and Indians Hindus, he found that for most second generation Korean Christians their religious identities become stronger and their ethnic identities become weaker. This intergenerational conflict has many unanticipated consequences. The first consequence is the potential exodus of the second generation from their parents' churches to join organizations that better align with their religious views. Another consequence is that intergenerational conflict causes IROs to change their approach to recruitment. Religious leaders fear a potential second generation exodus and make conscious decisions to appease and retain the subsequent generations (Kim 2010). Some leaders make decisions to continue combining ethnicity and religion and seeking a homogenous congregation, while other leaders decouple ethnicity and religion to appease the second generation and attract new members (Jeung 2005).

The second mechanism for the decoupling is the presence of non-ethnic members since these members facilitate the changeover to universalistic interpretations of the religious message. As one can imagine, it is uncomfortable for non-ethnics to sit through a religious event where they cannot understand the language of the ritual or religious leader. This is the case for Buddhism in the U.S. where the continued presence of white converts creates internal dialogue for the temple to reform its teachings so everyone can feel equally welcomed (Numrich 1999). These mechanisms are assumed to catalyze the transition from homogeneously ethnic congregations to multi-ethnic congregations. Nevertheless, the framework does not account for the persistence and different modes ethnicity can take within an IRO. The next section provides a comparative approach to studying ethnicity that honors constructivist principles.

Episodic Ethnicity: A Constructivist and Comparative Approach

Conceptualizing ethnicity is an ongoing contentious debate amongst those studying race and ethnicity (Bonilla-Silva 1999; Loveman 1999; Ray and Seamster 2016; Wimmer 2015; Winant 2015). An important aspect of the debate involves understanding what a constructivist account of ethnicity entails since primordial or essentialist views have been largely discredited. Instead of treating ethnic groups and races as substantial entities, those taking a comparative approach to studying ethnicity, race, and nationalism study the dynamism and different forms of ethnicity across time and space. These scholars (Brubaker 2004; Jenkins 1997; Wimmer 2013; Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004) claim that constructivist accounts have lost their force because studies of ethnicity often become static, cliched, and taken for granted. This prescient point concerning how to study ethnicity has not diffused to various subfields, including the sociology of religion and immigration, where scholars have overlooked how different orientations of ethnicity could alter their research findings.⁴

Taking a comparative approach, this study understands ethnicity, race, and nationhood as a single integrated family of phenomena and as grouping mechanisms, practical categories, and social boundaries (Brubaker 2009; Weber 1978; Horowitz 1985; Jenkins 1997; Wimmer 2013). This approach allows scholars to study how different forms of ethnicity, race, and nationhood are constructed and maintained in organizations such as IROs. For instance, and as this study aims to

⁴ To illustrate this point, I highlight two notable projects that exemplify the usage of taken for granted conceptions of ethnicity. Min (2010, 7) conceptualizes ethnicity as synonymous with ethnic groups and utilizes (Gordon 1964, 38) three major characteristics of ethnic groups: the retention of ethnic subculture, involvement in ethnic social networks, and group self-identification. This definition becomes foundational for Min's comprehensive study on Korean Protestants and Indian Hindus. Nonetheless, rather than questioning whether and how ethnicity exists in the site, Min assumes that ethnicity is an identifiable and quantifiable entity. Kurien's (2012) interview-based study of Indian Christians also employs a static definition of ethnicity. In her discussion of decoupling, Kurien states, "As a result of this shift, many Western-born children of immigrants no longer see religious identity and ethnicity as linked. Instead, they embrace a religion that is purified of the cultural traditions and observances of their parent" (ibid: 448). Ethnicity becomes decoupled from religion in these sites perhaps because of how sociologists normatively define the concept.

demonstrate, during the lead up to World War II, nationhood was important to understanding the experiences of Japanese-Americans but its importance receded in the contemporary moment where external categories and internal identities mostly involve race and ethnicity. To be clear, grouping these three social phenomena into a single domain does not mean reducing or undifferentiating one phenomenon from another. Rather, it means admitting that the traditional distinctions between ethnicity, race, and nationalism are not clearly delineated in the world.

It is important to define episodic ethnicity and stress its theoretical contributions. Episodic ethnicity is defined as the crystallization of ethnic identities as an effective grouping mechanism during important events and its dissipation during mundane activities in IROs. Key to the notion of episodic ethnicity is the dynamism of ethnic identities across time and space. In a sense, ethnic identities can be ‘thin’ or ‘thick’ depending on the context (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). From this perspective, episodic ethnicity helps us better understand the experiences of those in America’s racial middle, particularly later-generation Asian-Americans. For Asian-Americans, ethnicity matters but differently than how scholars conceptualize the experiences of white and black immigrants (Hein 2006; Dhingra 2007; Lee and Zhou 2004; Min 2006; Tuan 1998). On the one hand, symbolic ethnicity or, ‘a nostalgic allegiance... a love for and pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior’ (Gans 1979, 9), is a phenomenon mostly attributed to white European-Americans whose ethnicity is in its ‘twilight’ (Alba 1985). On the other hand, the weighty consequences and ‘thickness’ of black identities for Afro-Caribbean immigrants (Waters 1999) do not accurately explain the experiences of some Asian-Americans and their IROs who have assimilated. Episodic ethnicity allows us to overcome the linearity, as the case for European immigrants who become part of the American mainstream in subsequent generations, and fixedness, such as for Afro-Caribbean

immigrants who are theorized to always carry the consequences of blackness, of these concepts. This term gets us closer to the experiences of Asian-Americans whose ethnic identity does not fully disappear but fluctuates between 'thin' and 'thick.'

Methodology and Field Site

This project utilizes ethnographic fieldwork and archival data on Pure Land temple from January 2015 through December 2015. I was a participant observer at the temple, which holds services and events throughout the week. I attended events such as the weekly Sunday service, monthly board member meetings, Ohigan seminars and service days (ancestor Remembrance Day), Dharma study classes, Shotsuki Hoyo (funeral) services, the Obon festival, and special seminars with guest speakers. I supplemented the observations with semi-structured interviews with temple participants including the in-house pastor, temple members and visitors, and friends of the organization. There were 29 interviews ranging from 35 minutes to 3 hours. All interviews were transcribed for coding purposes and conducted in English. I wrote extensive participant observation notes after each day in the field. I used Microsoft Excel to analyze the interviews and field notes. Codes were generated through an abductive approach as I entered the field with a broad and deep theoretical base in ethnicity and immigration and developed theories throughout the research process (see Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Pure Land had a bookshelf of documents including yearbooks, news clippings, and temple reports that I had access to. I analyzed the archives by reading and highlighting themes that connected with immigration, race and ethnicity, and organizational adaptation. The multiple methods allowed me to triangulate my findings and construct a more holistic narrative of Pure Land. I was both an insider and outsider as I grew up attending a Vietnamese temple in Washington state but I do not identify as Japanese-American or speak the language. I was open about my researcher identity, members

knew I was a researcher, and I received verbal consent from the pastor to conduct my research.

Pure Land and its rich history provide an ideal case study for understanding the dynamism of ethnicity's relationship with religion in IROs. Pure Land was established as a branch of a larger Los Angeles temple in 1926. During WWII it temporarily closed and its space was rented out, and it reopened in 1946. It became an independent temple in 1950, and it has continuously operated since then. Historically, the temple was located in a Japanese enclave that saw persons pool money together to buy property next to each other. The land was considered unattractive for natives when the Japanese moved in. Nevertheless, the neighborhood has changed a great deal with gentrification and increased land value. The Japanese temple is part of the Buddhist Churches of America, an umbrella organization for Buddhist churches that was established after the arrival of the Japanese immigrants during the late 1800s. I will first discuss the historical episodic ethnicity at the Buddhist Church of America. Ethnicity became an effective grouping mechanism for Japanese-American temple members from approximately 1899 to 1945 but the importance of ethnicity and nationhood gradually diminished following WWII. I secondly discuss the structural and theological changes that have occurred at Pure Land. I lastly describe the difficulties of becoming a diverse congregation and contemporary episodic ethnicity at Pure Land. When possible, I delineate between ethnicity, race, and nationhood in the analysis.

Historical Episodic Ethnicity

The storied history of the BCA provides leverage in understanding how ethnicity should be conceived of as dynamic and fluctuating for IROs. The Buddhist Churches of America organization was established in the late 1800s by Japanese immigrants who feared their culture would be lost in the hostland. This organization is part of the Jodo Shinshu denomination which

is part of the Mahayana branch of Buddhism (BCA 1998). Contrary to popular notions of Buddhism being individualistic, Mahayana involves reaching enlightenment *together*, in the ‘greater vehicle.’ In practice, this meant the BCA encouraged hosting community gatherings. It “was foremost a temple to hear the Dharma, but its secondary role was a social gathering place. After a service the men would gather together.... And wonder together about the homes they had left behind in Japan” (BCA 1974, 7). Almost overnight, the BCA became *the* epicenter for the nascent but rapidly assimilating Japanese community in America.⁵

Japanese Buddhism was introduced to the U.S. in midst of extreme nativist sentiments highlighted by the 1924 Asian Exclusion Act and relocation centers for Japanese-Americans during WWII. This starkly contrasts with the laissez faire environment in which post-1965 IROs emerge. Instead of benefiting from social movements and the re-introduction and increased acceptance of Buddhism in the 1960s, the BCA experienced unfiltered racism and xenophobia from approximately 1899 to 1945 when the last relocation camps were closed. American policymakers created and implemented discriminatory laws based on ethnicity, race, and nationhood, to disenfranchise the Japanese-Americans and their communities.⁶ Ethnicity became increasingly intertwined with religion as the BCA and its members experienced the extreme xenophobia of the epoch. To curb these hostilities, BCA leaders intentionally assimilated through measures such as changing the organization’s name from the Buddhist Mission of North America.

The prolonged period of institutional discrimination and societal hostility had two major consequences. The first consequence was that it increased the need for Buddhist temples after the

⁵ There is also a sizeable Japanese Christian population at the time but the majority of the Japanese were indeed Buddhist.

⁶ It is difficult to differentiate the sources of discrimination since discrimination could be based on ethnicity, race, or nationhood.

Japanese-Americans were freed from the camps. Dozens of temples were constructed after the camps as Japanese-Americans needed the safe haven the temples offered. Perhaps more so than before, the temples became the foci for local Japanese communities, with existing members continuing to participate and new members joining because of exclusion from the American mainstream. Some Japanese-Americans joined out of necessity because mainstream organizations would not recognize them as equals while others joined as an act of defiance against the U.S. (Bonacich and Modell 1980). The period after the camps ended saw a substantial increase in membership (Kashima 1977).⁷ The second consequence of the discrimination was that it reinforced the importance of ethnicity for these temples, further meshing ethnicity with religion. The purpose of the BCA became synonymous with religion *and* ethnicity. The trauma of the relocation camps played a large role in the tight coupling, as discussed in the Buddhist Churches of America's 75 Year Commemoration book. "Suddenly, the catastrophe of war involved all those having Japanese ancestry. Pushed, registered, rounded up and confined into Assembly and then Relocation Camps or incarcerated into Internment Camps, the evacuees struggle to maintain some semblance of order in their lives. The ministers and lay Buddhists initiated services in the camp..." (BCA 1974, 459–60). As the quotation shows, ethnicity as a self-identity took on the utmost importance and shaped the experiences of Japanese-Americans forced into the relocation camps. The Japanese-Americans' perceived national origins profoundly impacted them in the form of ethnic categorization. Ethnicity's coupling with religion reflected the new reality: the increased importance of ethnicity for Japanese-Americans. Mainstream society also perceived the BCA as an ethnic organization *more* than a religious temple during and after WWII. Numerous temples temporarily closed during WWII because they

⁷ The estimated total membership is 43,164 in 1936, 46,289 in 1942 and 50,000 in 1960 (Kashima 1977, 142). This number is believed to be underestimated as children and partners were not counted toward the total membership.

were suspected of fomenting and inciting a Japanese response to America's actions. The BCA also perceived its mission to be Buddhist *and* Japanese. Kashima (1977) posits the BCA instituted practices to maintain group cohesion along ethnic lines before and much more after WWII. Therefore, mainstream society saw the BCA *and* the BCA saw itself as an ethnic organization. As historically illustrated, ethnicity appears and carries significant meaning in this period as Japanese-Americans were severely discriminated against.

The consequences of the ethnic and national categorization of Japanese gradually lost their severity after WWII. Hostilities against the Japanese were slowly but surely declining and the Japanese were allowed to participate in mainstream society again (Montero 1981). These factors along with the strong sense of community that was fostered during the hostile pre-war period encouraged cooperation and collective actions that facilitated rapid assimilation through the rise and expansion of the Japanese ethnic economy (Broom and Riemer 1949). The comparatively relaxed environment started to change the temples' relationship with ethnicity. The temples started to return to focusing on religious issues instead of ethno-religious messages as their members assimilated and began considering themselves Americans. Ethnicity as a grouping mechanism starts to lose its efficacy as Japanese-Americans experienced less discrimination when attending mainstream venues. An overview of the BCA illustrates the fluctuation of ethnicity throughout its history. Ethnicity as a grouping mechanism was extremely important during the initial settlement period through the post-WWII period because American nativists targeted the Japanese for discrimination. Nevertheless, the coupling of ethnicity to religion fades as subsequent generations assimilate and ethnicity for Japanese-Americans loses some of its significance as a social category.

Change One of Decoupling: Structural Assimilation of Pure Land

Pure Land has structurally assimilated into the American mainstream throughout its 90 years of existence in Los Angeles. In the contemporary moment, the structural assimilation is immediately apparent. Inside the main entrance there is a generic small waiting room with pamphlets about Buddhism and meditation, volunteer opportunities in the form of flyers, and a visitor sign-in binder. There are two huge wooden doors separating the main worship hall from the waiting room. The main worship hall looks reminiscent of a Protestant church with 14 rows of wooden benches divided by a walkway wide enough for four people to walk side-by-side. Like in a church, there is a nook in front of the wooden benches containing two Dharma books. Usually only 10-15 members attend these events. The entire service is in English, and there is a smaller service in Japanese for older members who are more comfortable listening in Japanese. The English service is weekly while the Japanese one is sporadic and in the process of being phased out.

Pure Land also starts to mirror Protestant churches in its recruitment methods. As a Buddhist temple, Pure Land discourages proselytizing to non-believers. Nonetheless, as a strategy to bolster and retain membership, Pure Land has developed a close relationship with the local community to create a smaller bridge for local community members to cross in order to join the organization. The potential participation of non-ethnic members encourages Pure Land to evolve its recruitment strategies. Developing a close relationship with the community includes donating money to various local causes, allowing local groups access to the temple's resources, and having their pastor serve at local fundraisers. This marks a significant structural change for Pure Land which originally did not have to worry about recruitment because exclusion from American institutions and familial obligations compelled individuals to attend temple.

Change Two of Decoupling: Returning to its Theological Roots

The theological changes are also obvious and abundant at Pure Land. There are many times when I sit in the back of the worship hall and close my eyes to listen to the content of the ongoing sermon. I forget where I am for certain moments as the universalistic messages the pastor offers are indistinguishable from those presented in meditation centers or even in Protestant churches. The messages to free one's mind and to practice mindfulness are universalistic by design. "I know people who come for the first time or are new to Buddhism get weirded out when we bring up Japan or the Buddha too much." says Bill, the resident Buddhist pastor, "I try to give a message where anyone, at any point of life, of any background, can understand... This message is what the members want." Bill intentionally delivers universal sermons in order to be inclusive of everyone in the room with the thought that a particular message towards the Japanese-American constituency would alienate non-ethnic members. Rarely does Bill frame his sermons at Sunday service or dharma classes in terms of Japanese-Americans or Japanese. Bill will use the word Japanese or Japanese-Americans but only in referencing the history of the temple.

The universal sermons have unanticipated effects on the congregation. On the one hand, universal religious messages resonate with non-Japanese members who in turn encourage the pastor to continue preaching these messages. Helen, a Mexican-American member for over four years, understands and appreciates the pastor's inclusive gesture. She is a vocal member of the congregation as she eagerly raises her hand to ask questions and make comments at Sunday services, classes, and seminars. Her voice rises above those of the other members because it is laced with enthusiasm. "I appreciate him always being inclusive towards me. It would be easy to talk to the majority of the temple members; I'm the only Mexican here. This is what makes me come back because he thinks about me." Her energy is not lost amongst other temple members.

“Sometimes it gets really dead in here... she’s such a breath of fresh air and someone who just wants to learn more. We need more people like her,” says the minister’s assistant who attends all the services and classes. The enthusiasm of Helen and the other non-Japanese members encourages the pastor to continue delivering these universal messages. On the other hand, these messages are experienced differently for some Japanese-American members. A portion of these Japanese members negatively perceive the religious message. They perceive the universalistic messages as disinteresting and bland. Timothy, a 23-year-old Japanese-American member elaborates, “I get so bored going to [Sunday] service... It’s [the messages] meant for everyone but everyone has different levels of knowledge [of Buddhism]. You can’t get to the nitty gritty stuff about Buddhism... I guess you have to go with the common denominator then... And it’s frustrating because so much more can be discussed because we have similar experiences.”

Timothy later elaborates how these similar experiences refer to those of subsequent generation of Japanese-Americans. For Timothy, the messages become too general, there is no depth when the pastor does not acknowledge the similar experiences shared by most members. Members such as Timothy stay silent or sporadically attend services, leaving the pastor unaware of their feelings. Other Japanese-American members acknowledge the general nature of the sermons but reason that is how Buddhism must be practiced. These members continue to attend even if the religious content becomes trite. The presence of silent members encourages the pastor to continue delivering the universal message.

No Change Three? Difficulties of Becoming a Diverse Congregation

Contrary to the decoupling thesis, Pure Land does not have a more diverse congregation. As of 2013, over 92% of the membership is of Japanese descent.⁸ The difficulties of becoming a

⁸ Data was compiled from membership numbers conducted by Pure Land in 2013.

more diverse congregation is partly due to the persistence of ethnic boundaries (Barth 1969). During the months I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, I began to understand the effects of the Japanese ethnic boundary that symbolically encloses Pure Land. I met over a dozen community members who had attended temple services several times before disappearing because of the effects of ethnic boundaries.⁹ These potential members told similar stories. They develop a personal interest in Buddhism and attend Pure Land to continue learning the dharma. They are initially enthusiastic about the pastor's teachings and are welcomed by the pastor and temple leadership. The potential members often cite the structure and religious message as positives of the temple. "It reminds me a lot of my church growing up. So that's cool. I don't have to do anything special," says Russell, a white American from Southern California, who attended events for two months before stopping. "It's not like anything I expected. I thought it would be more Japanese but everything is in English, it's understandable, and relatable to my experiences." The temple is like Russell's childhood church and there is a relaxed dress code. Nevertheless, Russell abruptly stopped two months after his first Sunday service. Seemingly embarrassed after he stopped attending, Russell never wanted to talk in person about the reasons he left until I asked him over coffee.

Interviewer: Are you planning on attending another temple or anything?

Russell: I've been searching around for a temple that's *less different* [emphasized]. A temple that can make me feel more comfortable every week and I don't have to deal with being different than anyone else. I think Buddhism shouldn't be linked to race or ethnicity. Buddhism, more than anything, is a philosophy [free of other identities].

Interviewer: Differences mean a lot of things. I don't want to mix up your words. Could you elaborate a little on it?

Russell: [Long pause] I don't know if this is politically correct to say. And I don't want to

⁹ I befriended these members during their initial visits and asked for their contact information if they seemed interested in my study. Similar to Russell, the eight had a connection with Buddhism before they attended Pure Land but came from different backgrounds. I estimate 20 people attended for a few visits and stopped during my time at Pure Land. These ethnic effects could include discrimination based on race and nationality. Again, it would be too difficult to delineate which comments are based on ethnicity, race, or nationhood.

be perceived wrongly. But the temple is *so* [emphasized] Japanese. Everyone there is Japanese. And it's weird being the only white person in there... Being around people that look like me matters I guess... I know it shouldn't but it does.

The conversation between Russell and me highlights how Russell experiences ethnic differences through and as somatic differences. Russell becomes self-conscious about being one of the few white persons in the room and describes feeling that he does not belong. These physical differences *racialize* the Japanese members and Russell starts to ascribe negative characteristics (unfriendly and tacit) to everyone he considers Japanese instead of other potentially contributing factors such as how groggy members are on Sunday mornings and the members' old age. For Russell, these somatic or racial differences supersede the seemingly endless similarities shared with other members. The ethnic boundaries between Japanese members and non-Japanese members are filled with nominal distinctions that are rooted in phenotypical variance. Even after 90 years of organizational adaptation, the symbolic importance of ethnic boundaries has not been lost. This persistence has negative consequences as some non-Japanese members do not attend Pure Land for the long term.

Contemporary Episodic Ethnicity

As mentioned earlier, Pure Land has embraced the universalism of religion over the particularities of ethnicity at weekly events such as Sunday services. One consequence of this is that younger members like Timothy, who are not compelled by the embrace of religion do not consistently attend weekly events. Consequently, with an aging population and an uninspired younger generation of Japanese-Americans, weekly attendance at Pure Land has sagged in recent years. The low turnout at these events starkly contrasts the membership participation at large events such the Bon Odori (Obon for short) festival where over a hundred members attend.¹⁰

¹⁰ The Obon festival started over 500 years ago in Japan. Obon originates from the legend of Mokuren, who danced with joy after saving his mother from hell. This dance became Bon Odori, which today signifies remembrance of

Instead of disappearing altogether as Pure Land assimilates, ethnicity, as a special form of kinship, is an effective way of grouping that crystallizes Japanese groupness at significant events that require volunteers. This crystallization is absent during weekly events but continues to drive larger membership turnouts and enables the successful completion of large events such as the Obon festival.¹¹

Logistically, the festival requires a lot of work. Planning begins months prior as the festival chair is chosen and expected to coordinate with vendors, partners, and donors. The lead-up to the festival requires five weeks of Obon dance practices and four days of intense booth construction and large tent assembly. Members bring extra gloves, kneepads, ibuprofen, and sweat towels in preparation for the physical labor. Temple members play an important role, as they are expected to construct the booths, serve food, run game stands, memorize the dances, direct the lost and confused non-members during Obon, and clean up afterwards. The way in which members are persuaded to take part in these dance practices is of special interest. Instead of asking members to be dutiful Buddhists and attend practices, the temple leaders frame participation as an ethnic and familial obligation. Oftentimes these kinships are fictional, as there are no familial bonds between dance coordinator and dancer. During the start of one of the final practices, I overhear Stephanie, a 19-year-old member, who saunters into the parking lot and exchanges pleasantries with Holly, one of the dance leaders. Stephanie grew up in the temple but has not been attending practices because of school responsibilities.

Holly: Where have you been? We've missed you here at these practices. Everything been okay?
Stephanie: Yeah... I'm sorry! I just have been so busy with this new job.

ancestors and their sacrifices. The dance still happens but Obon has morphed into something else today. The festival has carnival games, Japanese foods, bingo, and ticket raffles. The Buddhist roots of the festival are not lost but it has become a combination of Buddhist, Japanese, Japanese-American, and local community event.

¹¹ This paper prioritizes depth over breadth as Obon will be the only spotlighted 'ethnic' event. Other events use the same ethnic grouping mechanism but Obon provides the richest empirical data and the most powerful example.

Holly: I'm sorry to hear that! ... Listen, we really need you here though. Its only 4 hours a week. And we won't have enough people who teach the dance to the others [if you're not here]. You're part of something larger here, right? Obon goes beyond the temple. We have to support each other through this because no one else is going to do it otherwise.

After Holly leaves, I jokingly comment to Stephanie, "Wow, there's so much pressure for you to attend these practices." Stephanie laughs, "I was dreading coming here today because Holly does this to everyone... But she's right though... I need to step it up and it feels like I'm letting everyone down when I'm not here." I continue the conversation, "But you don't know everyone here. Some of these people you don't even know [their name]. Why be accountable to them?" Stephanie pauses before answering, "This goes back to what she said about being part of something larger. This is bigger than friends and the temple. We are doing it for each other... we share the same experiences and background."

These conversations illustrate how members utilize ethnic framing during the lead up to Obon. Instead of focusing on being a Buddhist or a temple member, the conversation centers around being part of 'something larger' which Holly frames and Stephanie perceives to be ethnicity. This ethnic grouping mechanism is the impetus that drives Stephanie to attend even if she will not memorize all the dances before Obon. The conversation concerning 'something larger' becomes a dialogue about an ethnicity that transcends the temple, organizational membership, and the individuals at the practice. The 'something larger' encompasses the Japanese-American experiences of which Stephanie feels acutely part of during Obon, specifically when Holly utilizes ethnicity as a grouping mechanism in conversations.

Ethnicity also becomes an effective grouping mechanism for Japanese *non*-members during the preparation for festivals. I met Tim, an employee of the local YMCA chapter, several days prior to Obon. The YMCA has food booths at the Obon each year. Tim is a 3rd generation Japanese-American who says religion has played a small role in his life. Like many

conversations between acquaintances, my initial conversations with Tim superficially touched on many subjects. Nonetheless, as we were almost done shucking corn I asked Tim, “Why do you keep volunteering for Obon? It’s a lot of work getting things ready. I bet there are other [YMCA] employees who could do this.” Tim thinks about this and answers, “It’s a family here. The organizers of the Obon and volunteers always make it feel like we’re part of a big family here. Everyone is equal and welcomed... I feel close to everyone here because we’re all Japanese.” Several months after Obon, Tim elaborated on his initial comments.

Interviewer: That comment you made last time [we talked] about family and how it pulls you to Pure Land for Obon. I have to confess, I don’t understand it. Could you help me [understand]?

Tim: Sure. Let me think of a good way to put it [long pause]. Obon becomes a time when your background matters. It always matters but more so then. It matters because we’re all coming together to get this event taken care of. We make this thing our priority. And we do it to make money, yes, but more importantly we do this for ourselves. We do this for each other.

Interviewer: And who is this ‘we’ you are referring to?

Tim: I am referring to the Japanese community in Los Angeles... I am referring to everyone who has a Japanese background. Anyone who is Buddhist. Anyone who is in touch with their roots and ancestors.

The conversations with Tim further illustrate how some Japanese non-members perceive volunteering for Obon. Tim’s story is the typical non-member’s relationship with the temple during preparations for Obon. He is a Japanese-American, familiar with Buddhism, who only volunteers at large events and does not attend weekly events. Tim initially collaborates with the temple because of his job duties but this volunteer opportunity takes on much more meaning. Volunteering is associated with being part of the Japanese ethnic group. The examples of Stephanie and Tim illustrate how powerful ethnicity as a grouping mechanism can be. Members experience ethnicity differently as Holly associates non-participation with guilt while Tim volunteers because of the closeness, associated with ethnicity, at Pure Land. These feelings are

part of what makes ethnicity episodic and an effectual grouping mechanism.

Implications and Conclusion

Every study has scope conditions, and this case study is no different. The study is limited to studying Japanese-Americans. Unlike Mexico-US migration which has been voluminous and uninterrupted for one hundred years (Jiménez 2010, 31–65), migration from Japan to the U.S. has all but subsided (López, Ruiz, and Patten 2017; PEW 2017). Low immigration rates could lead to lower levels of ‘ethnic replenishment’ (Jiménez 2010) wherein contemporary immigration provides the basis for the rejuvenation of ethnic identity. Perhaps a more analogous comparison than Mexican-Americans are later generation white Americans (Gans 2014). Two temple members briefly mentioned how their religiosity is connected to Buddhism in Japan, their ancestral homeland, but there is too little substantive evidence in this research to suggest that homeland processes replenish the ethnic identity of temples through conduits such as the internet and distant family ties. The different organizational implications of the status of majority and minority religions in America has been documented by other scholars (Chen 2002; Yang and Ebaugh 2001b). Hence, some of the findings based on a Buddhist temple might not be applicable to immigrant Christian organizations. In addition, the findings might be more relevant to non-Abrahamic religions since Abrahamic religions are exclusive in ways that non-Abrahamic religions are not. Normative understandings of exclusion are essential, or perhaps constitutive, to Abrahamic religions. These religions ask for rigidity in practices and beliefs and expect religious primacy, expecting believers to identify primarily with a specific religion. (Brubaker 2015, 85–101). Since all the interviews were conducted in English, elder members who only spoke Japanese could not be included in interviews. I tried to limit this selection bias by interacting with temple members of the same age who were bilingual. Even though this study was conducted

in an American context, I believe the concept of episodic ethnicity could be applied to different milieus.

Some scholars might ask whether we should expect Asian-Americans to continuously endure the effects of historical and contemporary racialized experiences in their everyday lives. This viewpoint might be too pessimistic towards the integration of Asian-Americans into the American mainstream. The empirical data on Asian-Americans illustrates how they are becoming English-only speakers as quickly as third-generation Europeans (Alba et al. 2002), intermarrying whites at high rates (Gans 2012) and excelling in school more than native-born students (Louie 2004; Lee and Zhou 2004). In certain contexts, the Asian-American population becomes the standard for success and in which all other populations are measured (Jimenez 2017; Jiménez and Horowitz 2013). It would be wrong to assume that ethnic and racial discrimination does not affect Asian-Americans. It would also be wrong to believe that all Asian-Americans constantly endure discrimination, particularly in the case of later generations who have ‘upwardly assimilated.’

In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu (1991, 224) warns social scientists to be careful in dealing with categories of analysis. In his words, “the power over the group that is to be brought into existence as a group is, inseparably, a power of creating that group by imposing on it common principles of vision and division, and thus a unique vision of its identity and an identical vision of its unity.” In other words, the social scientist is in an authoritative position to create categories and boundaries through their research. The social scientist’s expertise expands over time to maintain these boundaries even as the cultural content of the category shifts to something the original categorization cannot capture. The nuanced role of ethnicity in IROs, specifically BCA and Pure Land, are cases in point. Ethnicity, in the ways that researchers

traditionally discuss it, played a major role in the early formation of the temple. Discrimination based on race and nationality in the early 20th century pushed Japanese Buddhists to use their temples as a buffer zone against the harsh realities of mainstream society and a venue for ethnic events. Members attended temple because they were Japanese *and* Buddhist. Nonetheless, times have changed. Some even argue that Japanese-Americans have successfully assimilated into the American mainstream and that ethnicity is perceived differently for successive generations. Buddhist temples have evolved to meet the changing needs of their members. The role of ethnicity in these organizations has evolved too. Unfortunately, sociologists of religion and immigration have ignored Bourdieu's warning by prematurely proclaiming that ethnicity becomes detached from religion in these organizations even as the category's content shifts to something the original categorization did not capture. For these scholars, ethnicity simply dissipates in the process of immigrant assimilation. If it is traditionally defined then yes, ethnicity has disappeared from assimilated IROs. But if we use a comparative framework and adhere to constructivist principles, we can understand how ethnicity fluctuates and organizations like Pure Land can use ethnicity as a powerful grouping mechanism. The implications of this study are equally important for those concerned about the wellbeing of IROs after immigrants settle into the hostland for multiple generations. The relationship between religion and ethnicity is not a zero-sum game. Rather, IROs can embrace both ideas to boost membership and meet the needs of later generations and non-ethnics. By returning to Bourdieu's point on categories, I hope to bring attention to the power that social scientists exert on their field sites and domains of study. Before claiming that ethnicity becomes detached from religion in immigrant religious organizations, one must ask: how should we understand ethnicity?

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