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## Immigrant Assimilation at the International Institute of Honolulu, 1916-1937

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# Immigrant Assimilation at the International Institute of Honolulu, 1916-1937

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## Abstract

This paper examines the role of the Young Women's Christian Association in promoting the social adjustment of Asian immigrant women in Honolulu, Hawaii, through a program known as the International Institute. This was the YWCA's principal contribution to the Americanization fervor that swept the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century. Unlike nativist and anti-immigrant Americanization programs that sought to dismantle ethnic differences and promote conformity to Anglo-Saxon values, International Institutes were conceived as service-oriented agencies that celebrated ethnic differences and promoted cultural pluralism – an important distinction given Hawaii's development as a socially diverse insular community. The study identifies tensions between the middle-class, paid staff from the national YWCA and wealthier volunteer board members in Hawaii who controlled the Honolulu Institute's structure and progress as an assimilative agency. Whereas Honolulu board women viewed the International Institute as a service that promoted socioeconomic continuity, their professional colleagues from the continental U.S. viewed it as an instrument of social change.

**Keywords:** Americanization, Honolulu Hawaii, immigration, International Institute, YWCA

Our Goal: Best American community standards,  
better mothers, better homes and better citizens.

YWCA Brochure, 1923

## Introduction

From the mid-1900s through the second decade of the twentieth century, the Hawaiian Islands witnessed unprecedented migration, as tens of thousands of laborers from around the world journeyed to the remote archipelago to work on sugar plantations. Many of the islands' controlling white oligarchs, echoing the sentiments of nativist Americans on the continental United States, believed that the outsiders could not be assimilated. Circumstances in the

Pacific differed from those in northeastern and midwestern cities, where millions of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe sought to put down roots. In Hawaii, concerns centered on migrants from Asia, especially the Japanese, who by 1920 comprised more than 42 percent of the territorial population (Tamura, 1994, p. 58).

The rise of commercial agriculture fueled Hawaii's development as the most ethnically diverse insular society in the world. In 1866 the kingdom exported nearly eighteen million pounds of sugar, as growers relied on infusions of workers to cultivate and harvest the labor-intensive crop (Dudden, 1992, p. 63). Native Hawaiians had been decimated by western-introduced diseases, so plantation owners turned to contract workers from Asia and Europe to fill their labor needs. Chinese laborers were among the first to arrive. Portuguese workers followed in the 1880s, along with large numbers of Japanese. Next came Korean, and later, Filipino workers in the early years of the twentieth century. With the introduction of each new nationality, plantation managers sought to keep wages low and prevent groups from establishing a dominant position with which to advance labor demands (Takaki, 1983, p. 24). By the time the United States annexed Hawaii in 1898, greater numbers of workers were settling in the Islands rather than returning to their native lands. Teaching newcomers the values of their adopted land became a challenge the white minority, which comprised less than eight percent of the population, felt they could no longer ignore (Tamura, 1994, p. 58).

This paper examines the role of the Young Women's Christian Association in promoting the social adjustment of adult immigrant women in Honolulu from 1916 through 1937. Hawaii offered "tremendous appeal" in those years to representatives of the national organization, who traveled frequently to the Islands to study social conditions and recommend how assimilation efforts might proceed. Beginning in 1916, the founders of the YWCA of Honolulu gradually accepted responsibility for educating the city's immigrant women. Of primary focus is the International Institute, a little-known program which the national YWCA introduced to Hawaii in 1919. Institutes were the organization's principal contribution to the Americanization movement that swept the country in the first two decades of the century. One social historian has observed that "during the nativist and intolerant years from World War I through the Great Depression, few other agencies promoted the immigrant cause as persistently and effectively as the International Institutes" (Mohl, 1997, p. 119).

No social historian has written as extensively about the rise of International Institutes in America as Raymond A. Mohl. This study builds upon his work by examining the history of the Honolulu Institute as an agency of assimilation. It also identifies apparent tensions between

middle-class, paid staff from the national office and wealthier volunteer board members who controlled the local organization. In doing so, it draws on the unpublished reports of visiting consultants for clues as to how progressive reformers at the national YWCA viewed their more conservative counterparts in Honolulu. Whereas local board women in Hawaii saw the Institute as an agency that would preserve socioeconomic continuity, their counterparts on the mainland U.S. viewed it as an instrument of social change.

The YWCA of Honolulu was established in 1900 as an evangelically grounded organization intended to educate and provide recreational outlets for a predominantly white, middle-class urban membership. Many of its founding members were descended from Protestant missionaries to the Hawaiian Islands whose husbands rose to positions of authority in local politics, religion, and business. They were part of a privileged *haole* (white) oligarchy that held sway over the Islands' rigidly stratified society and, in the second decade of the century, looked to the national YWCA for guidance in promoting the welfare of Honolulu's large population of foreign-born women. But the founders of the Honolulu organization were not progressive reformers. Indeed, they conceived the local association as a bulwark of Christian morality and traditional values in the face of demographic changes that were fundamentally reshaping the Islands.

### Travelers' Aid and the First World War

Among the first of the national visitors to make an impact in Hawaii was Helen Salisbury, who arrived in 1916 and launched a Travelers' Aid service to monitor large numbers of Japanese "picture brides" coming into Hawaii or passing through on their way to San Francisco (Salisbury, 1916). This was a community gatekeeping service modeled on programs established at train stations and harbors in major American cities in the late 1800s. Working through reform-minded benevolent societies and Christian associations like the YWCA, women across the country used Travelers' Aid to offer guidance to single women drawn to cities in search of work (Weiner, 1985, pp. 49-52).

Travelers' Aid was an initial answer to the increased mobility of young women moving into and among the Hawaiian Islands. Between 1907 and 1923 more than 14,000 picture brides arrived in the Islands from Japan, before the Immigration Act ended Japanese immigration (Hunter, 1971, p. 103). Their social and cultural adjustment concerned church and civic leaders, as did the safety of women traveling unescorted within the territory via interisland steamer.

Salisbury's plan, developed in consultation with civic and religious leaders and the Japanese Consulate, monitored the movements of unescorted women until outreach services could be arranged once they settled in town or on the plantations. Offering adjustment services was of primary interest, but officials were also concerned with ensuring women's moral behavior. Newspapers implied the danger facing women entering Honolulu Harbor after dark:

The wharf is a lonely place at such hours for any woman traveling alone, and for the innocent or ignorant young woman a place far from safe. With no trolley cars running, she is at the mercy of the clamorous row of chauffeurs and hack drivers, one of whom usually seizes upon her luggage, almost forcing her to follow him. Were all these men trustworthy, even this situation might be deemed merely unpleasant. But quite the contrary is unfortunately the case (Williams, 1917).

The first Travelers' Aid secretaries hired were Japanese national Tsuru Kishimoto and Kauai native, W. L. Bowers. Together, they formed a front-line of engagement with in-bound passengers from Japan as well as interisland travelers. YWCA records suggest the degree of coordination involved:

The [Japanese] Consulate will give us its backing and whatever data it has. [Consul General Rokuro] Moroi suggested with great enthusiasm the putting of literature on the steamers from Japan, telling about our work and preparing the women to receive our worker. He dilated at great length on the plan ... saying that was the psychological time to interest them (Salisbury, 1916).

Bowers monitored interisland movement at the Honolulu docks at night, asking women where they were going, and tracking how many she met. During a one-month period in 1916, she recorded 362 women entering Honolulu from the neighbor islands. Of these ninety-one were Hawaiian, eighty-eight Caucasians, sixty-seven Japanese, thirty-nine Portuguese, thirty-one Filipino, twenty-two Chinese, and ten were Russian. Fourteen women were of other nationalities (Williams, 1917).

America's involvement in the First World War accelerated the YWCA's work with immigrant women. Honolulu volunteers engaged in such activities as raising money for medical supplies and sewing surgical bandages and clothing for shipment to Europe. Of greater

sensitivity was their involvement, under direction of the federal government's Commission on Training Camp Activities, in curbing prostitution in areas where soldiers mobilized for training (Durham, 1978, p. 59). The resulting social morality campaign recalled that Protestant missionaries had made reforming the moral behavior of Native Hawaiians a priority a century earlier. Now, their descendants projected similar concerns onto Asian women and their daughters. Following the war, the national YWCA began systematically working in immigrant communities across the country. Consultants were dispatched to cities with large ethnic populations, where they created service and education programs. Once the programs were established, operational control was turned over to local associations who hired executives to run them. In this way, national funding and expertise supported the establishment of sixty-two facilities for the assimilation of immigrant women during and after the war. In 1919 Honolulu became the forty-second American city to establish an International Institute (Wilcox, 1919, p. 131).

### Americanization and the International Institute Movement

In February of that year a visiting immigration specialist named Sue Barnwell attended an annual YWCA meeting in Honolulu, where the Americanization plan was unveiled. She told a gathering of officers and members that Honolulu's "American" (meaning Caucasian) community was not doing enough to assimilate the proportionately large number of foreigners in the territory. Barnwell opined that the absence of social adjustment programs for Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, and Filipino women was an oversight they needed to address. Allowing adult women to languish at home while their husbands and children were acculturated through work or school, she believed, removed them from the channels of community engagement needed to facilitate adjustment to their new home:

Can you afford in these islands to be passive when four-fifths of your population do not understand the ideals and national life of America, many of whom do not understand the language, and whose birth rate is nine times that of ours? The children are the citizens of tomorrow, and it is coming to pass that the children know more than the parents and parental reverence brought from the Orient is rapidly breaking down ("Splendid Growth," 1919).

Such talk fueled the anxiety of city elites, stoking concerns about the need to teach immigrant women the fundamentals of American culture, and reinforcing white perceptions that immigrants were overwhelming the Islands with their numbers.

Americanization was a national phenomenon that was grounded in concerns about the social effects of largescale immigration. Its advocates included social workers, intellectuals, and industrialists who believed that by teaching foreigners to be loyal citizens they were “unifying the nation in the face of external perils, while at the same time assuring the continued existence of the traditional American way of life” (Hartmann, 1948, p. 7). But whereas settlement house workers rejected the elimination of native language and cultural influences, a nativist strain of Americanization called for forced assimilation to the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture (van Elteren, 2006, p. 58).

Historian John Higham described how private citizens addressed the “immigrant problem” in American cities through voluntary involvement in social settlements and patriotic organizations that were increasingly active in the early decades of the century. Identifying these groups as representative of “two sides of the Americanization movement,” he viewed the assimilative approach of settlement workers as the more humanitarian of the two. Settlement workers, he noted, “did more to sustain the immigrant’s respect for his old culture than to urge him forward into the new one.” Less tolerant of foreign influences were those groups that relied on education programs to promote loyalty and patriotism: “One current tended to soften the movement, orienting it toward the welfare of the immigrant; the other steeled it to an imperious demand for conformity” (Higham, 1955, p. 237).

In his examination of the YWCA’s approach to Americanization, Mohl described International Institutes as “service-oriented agencies designed to protect immigrant women, address their problems, and facilitate their adjustment to life in the United States” (1997, pp. 114-5). They were conceived as safe havens where women could consult with social workers in their native language on issues ranging from housing and employment assistance to advice on immigration, banking, and other matters. Much of the counseling, teaching, and casework of International Institutes was undertaken by “nationality workers,” – trained bilingual workers who were immigrants themselves.

## From Liberal Assimilation to Cultural Pluralism

The person credited with shaping the YWCA’s answer to Americanization was Edith

Terry Bremer, a social worker and pioneer in immigrant social services. Bremer graduated from the University of Chicago in 1907 and conducted field research for the Chicago Juvenile Court under Julia Lathrop the following year. She had been a resident of both the University of Chicago Settlement and the Union Settlement in New York City, where her view of the challenges facing immigrants was influenced by Jane Addams and Margaret Dreier Robins (Mohl, 1997, p. 114; Sicherman and Green, 1980, p. 105). Though she receives little attention in notable histories of the social settlements, Bremer was a protegee of progressive social thinkers whom one feminist historian called “as remarkable a group of women leaders as has been seen in this country before or since” (Scott, 1991, p. 142).

Bremer’s experience informed her view as a proponent of liberal assimilationism, which rejected nativist Americanization as an oppressive agent of homogenization in favor of a more protective philosophy toward immigrants that was “sensitive to the importance of their historical and cultural traditions.” This early conception of the immigrant adjustment process assumed an inevitable weakening of ethnic cultural influences through extended exposure to English-language newspapers, schools, factories, neighborhood shops, and other “social forces of modern American life” (Mohl, 1997, p. 114). By the time she began working for the YWCA in 1908, Bremer had thoroughly embraced the “humanitarian” approach of the settlement workers. At a time when many Americans viewed foreigners as a threat to the nation’s values and institutions, she encouraged the retention of ethnic differences. She also believed that existing immigrant service agencies “largely ignored women,” something she was determined to change (Sicherman and Green, p. 105).

Bremer arrived at the YWCA’s national headquarters in New York City at a time of unprecedented institutional growth, shortly after the establishment of the National Training School for professional secretaries (the YWCA’s term for specialist). Soon, experts in physical fitness, religious education, employment assistance, and room registry were being added to the rosters of local associations across the country. With the professionalization of YWCA programs came an awareness of the need for a “specialized approach to different groups of women and girls in the community,” including working women and the foreign born. Hence, the association’s traditional general-service approach for a “homogeneous constituency” of working Anglo-Saxons was giving way to specialized services for diverse communities of women and girls (Sims, 1936, pp. 58-9).

Amid such sweeping changes, Bremer established the first International Institute in 1910, as the national board began implementing the program in such cities as Trenton, Los Angeles,

and Lawrence, Massachusetts (Sims, 1936, p. 60). By the end of the First World War, Institutes were providing adjustment services to immigrant women in sixty-two cities, including Honolulu. But while they represented a benevolent approach to Americanization, they did not erase the ambivalence many native-born citizens of both sexes felt toward immigrants. According to YWCA historian Mary Sims, native-born city dwellers were acutely aware of “the dangers, the obligations and the opportunities presented by the presence of large foreign-born populations of differing speech and differing political loyalties” (1936, p. 64).

The “ruthless Americanization” of the war years left Bremer greatly disturbed, and in the 1920s her ideas about immigrant adjustment evolved from liberal assimilationism to cultural pluralism (Wacker, 1979, pp. 325-33). She believed that social contacts provided through the International Institutes discouraged social isolation and hastened the “silent alchemy of assimilation which is brought about only through association and participation” with other women. She articulated the pluralist position in this way:

We do not believe in the superiority or the dominance of any race. We refuse to fasten the shortcomings or ignorance of individuals upon the race he belongs to. We believe in the worthiness of each race of people. At bottom this is a religious idea, having its root in the concept of the world as one great human family, having one and the same God above us. We insist upon the right to widen our fellowship in order to take in all races of people (Bremer, 1923, p. 9).

### Americanization in Honolulu

In the spring of 1919 arrangements were made for the lease of *Ka Hale Kokua* or “House Helpful,” which served as headquarters for Honolulu’s International Institute. Its first executive was Elsie Wilcox, a respected member of the privileged class of Island *haole* women, active in numerous social causes throughout her life. Born to plantation wealth and like many local YWCA leaders the beneficiary of a familiar missionary name and powerful family contacts, she later became the first female senator to serve in Hawaii’s territorial legislature (Hughes, 1996, p. 82). The International Institute, she noted, “seeks to give foreign-born women a center where they may come into touch with the best in American life and ideals.” The residence itself served as a “model American home,” where women of various nationalities took part in group activities (initially segregated by nationality) designed to introduce them to American

ways. English classes, child-care instruction, nutrition guidance, cooking lessons, and home-making were all part of the Americanization curriculum (Wilcox, 1919, p. 131).

The Honolulu Institute offered casework assistance with such matters as registering the birth of children to assure citizenship, developing family budgets, and negotiating the intricacies of the banking and legal systems. This type of outreach featured highly personalized attention, as in the following example:

A man died leaving insurance with two companies but had not named anyone beneficiary. His widow was required to go to court to establish her rights. She was not willing to trust friends or neighbors so came to our worker who had many patient interviews with officials of the companies, the Court and the widow, so that the situation could be cleared (Barnes, 1933).

Another case involved:

a woman who had used a court interpreter. After signing a paper which she did not understand she spent a sleepless night and came in great distress to our worker asking her to go to court and see what had been done. She thought she had signed her life away (Barnes, 1933).

But while the International Institute's assistance programs filled a gap in the city's social service network, progress was hampered by lack of clarity about its mission and the competing priorities of the YWCA of Honolulu. Between 1920 and 1927, Honolulu's association leaders were preoccupied with raising funds for a new facility in the downtown area that would cater to the recreational needs of its primary membership of mostly white women and girls. Consequently, the Institute did not receive the attention it required in its early years. The YWCA observed an open membership policy, but there is little evidence that either Native Hawaiian or first-generation Asian women were actively recruited by the membership committee.

Another challenge facing the Honolulu Institute was lack of sustained leadership, which reflected a national shortage of female executives familiar with immigration issues. Following Wilcox's brief tenure, a succession of women spent short periods advising the local association, including Shirley Leonard, an educator from Akron, Ohio. Sarah Ellis, a veteran port worker,

fluent in Japanese, came from Angel Island in San Francisco and spent six months in Honolulu in 1921. Antoinette Withington joined the staff as executive administrator later that year. She had previously worked with Richard Clarke Cabot, renowned Massachusetts physician and pioneer in the field of medical social work. Then followed a long line of executives, many of whom, like Ellis, came to Hawaii on temporary leave from permanent jobs elsewhere ("International Institute," 1937).

Though executive turnover was high, the Institute found greater success recruiting qualified "nationality workers" who spoke the language of the women with whom they worked. Much of the teaching, counseling and social casework undertaken by the YWCA through the Institutes was conducted by women who were themselves first-generation immigrants to America and whose personal experience informed their understanding of the challenges facing newcomers. Two women stand out as successful in bridging the gap among cultures at the Honolulu Institute. One was Tsuru Kishimoto, who previously served as a Travelers' Aid worker and had taught Japanese for several years at Kawaiahae Seminary for girls in Honolulu. Korean-born Ha Soo Whang was a devoted Christian who joined the staff in December 1919 after graduating from Athens College in Alabama. She had spent three months at the International Institute in San Francisco and taught Sunday school classes at the Korean Methodist Church on Oahu ("International Institute," 1937).

Due largely to their dedication, Honolulu's International Institute became a center of cultural pride in the 1920s as members of different nationality groups formed clubs of their own, a trend that accelerated into the next decade when interracial clubs were formed as well. Among the earliest of the nationality groups were the Korean Mothers' Club (1920), the Japanese Midwives' Club (1923), the Sampaguita Club (1931), and the Hyung Jay (Sisters) Club (1928) founded by Whang. The latter was comprised of first- and second-generation Korean women who participated in folk dance, music, and dramatic performances presented at public venues throughout the city ("International Institute," 1937). Nationality workers encouraged the formation of clubs to foster cultural pluralism, promote ethnic pride, and alleviate intercultural conflict.

The Honolulu Institute also helped ease "the gap which arises between the Americanized daughter with her modern ideas and the foreign mother who clings to the ways of the old country" (Wilcox, 1919, p. 131). Social workers familiar with the challenges of immigrant adjustment had long been aware of the wedge that often developed between parents and their children in the adopted country. To native-born daughters, for whom language and cultural

identification came naturally, the foreign behavior and beliefs of their mothers could be a source of embarrassment. For the mothers, cultural estrangement from their daughters intensified the pain of separation from family and friends. International Institutes were meant to lessen the impact. In Bremer's words:

We believe that there must be developed a more understanding relation between the interests of the daughter whose girlhood is shaped in America and the mother whose girlhood belonged to a far-off environment. There should be a natural affiliation between group work among young second-generation girls and the interests of their foreign mothers. The mother should be helped to understand what her young daughter wants and why, instead of being left to submit in despair to the unknown monster of American ways, which, from her point of view, devours her daughter's mind in spite of her! (Bremer, 1923, p. 11).

### Legacy of Plantation Paternalism

Under Bremer's guidance, the goals of the International Institute movement continued to evolve toward a leadership-development model of immigrant assimilation. Progressive reformers saw that adjustment services were vital to immigrant integration, but they realized that Institutes could serve a greater purpose in local communities by helping foreign-born women become more independent. In advancing this broader mission, national leaders hoped that local board women would encourage the autonomous growth of Institutes beyond the influence of the YWCA.

At the national level, YWCA leaders remained confident in Honolulu's promise as a setting in which the ideals of the Institute might flourish, but they recognized the danger of it falling short of its potential as a social equalizer. Some advisors were skeptical of the Institute's prospects for promoting leadership development given the territory's rigid social hierarchy. In 1919, national consultant Gertrude Gogin cited plantation paternalism and the authority of Hawaii's social and business oligarchy as potential obstacles to the Institute's assimilative agenda. She identified as concerns the limited sharing of leadership responsibilities and the small number of women who served on territorial boards and commissions. She was also troubled by the close relations between women who ran the local YWCA and the men who oversaw Hawaii's dominant commercial institutions:

the problem of leadership for all agencies [is] a great one. The same women are used on all boards and committees. Moreover, this small proportion of whites has meant intermarriage and a curious inter-relationship, personal and business, which can only come in an insular community. All this spells problem for the association worker in her relation to the community. There are certain controlling agencies which must always be considered as for example, the Sugar Planter's Association, composed of perhaps the most influential men, the Hawaiian Board of Missions, the Pineapple Plantation men, and certain other commercial and shipping interests (Gogin, 1919).

The YWCA's directors in Honolulu left no explicit evidence of whether they shared the vision of the International Institute as a vehicle for cultivating community leaders, but the agency's constitution offers some tantalizing clues. Interestingly, the document wasn't committed to paper until five years after the Institute's establishment, and only then at the recommendation of a visiting executive:

The purpose of this International Institute shall be to carry out the service and spirit of a Young Women's Christian Association among foreign women and girls: through protective work on a sound social basis, to promote their physical and social well being; through educational work, especially designed to fit the psychology and characteristics of each nationality, to offer opportunities for the enrichment of the mind and for the quickening of spiritual facilities; through cultivation of fellowship between representatives of all nationalities, including native Americans, to promote the spirit of justice and good-will among peoples of different nations; - thus to work as a social force for the building of the Kingdom of God among men ("Constitution," 1924).

The document describes the Institute as a branch of the Honolulu YWCA, administered by a board-appointed committee drawn from the same powerful group of Caucasian women who oversaw the local association. Though it occupied a separate facility, at least initially, the Institute was not viewed as an autonomous agency. The constitution describes two additional levels of oversight - an advisory council and nationality committees - both designated as information-gathering bodies. Supporting documents do not identify the individuals who occupied these sub-committees, but the constitution stipulates that members "shall be as far

as possible representative of the nationalities with whom the International Institute is associated." The sub-committees were intended

to study intensively the life of a particular nationality in America, its language, its history, its life in this city, and to acquaint Americans with facts about that nationality; to acquaint that nationality more generally with interesting facts about America, and to provide the means for social interchange between American homes and representatives of that nationality ("Constitution," 1924).

According to a typescript history of the International Institute on file at the Hawaii state archives, the active recruitment of foreign-born women to serve on advisory and nationality committees was strongly encouraged by visiting executives, "but it was many years before any member of these Committees found a place on the general International Institute Committee" ("International Institute," 1937). In other words, authority for Honolulu's International Institute rested solely with the white YWCA board women, who appeared to guard their authority carefully. This document suggests that while local board women tacitly accepted the recommendations of visiting advisors, they showed little sustained interest in developing the Institute's capacity for immigrant leadership development. Indeed, in 1927, when a new central YWCA facility was opened in downtown Honolulu, leaders of the local association sought to integrate the Institute programs under one roof, against the advice of national representatives. As predicted, when the new facility hosted social and recreational activities for second-generation immigrants, their foreign-born mothers stayed away.

Edith Bremer did not consult directly with YWCA leaders in Honolulu, but she was aware of the interracial complexities of Island society. In 1930, when the national office prepared to send another executive to Honolulu to assume the post of director, Bremer briefed her on the challenges facing the Institute. The notes from their conversation reflect Bremer's disappointment that the Honolulu YWCA had not permitted the Institute to develop independently:

We regard the International Institute as the other face of the Association where its plan of work, its method is geared to deal with the less sophisticated and less released people. Let the 'up-town' Association be the beautiful place to which American and English women and girls love to come, a place where the second generation young

people will feel happily at home, but that there must be another place of a different atmosphere also maintained if the total Association wishes to be to Honolulu what a YWCA is expected to be in a city on the continent. ("Office Interview," 1930).

Budget constraints during the depression years reinforced the attitude locally that the International Institute should be integrated into the parent organization. In 1936, the Institute was moved into the YWCA's downtown facility despite evidence that immigrant groups preferred to remain separate. The following year a visiting secretary commented on the integration during an address in Honolulu. It was clear she did not approve of the move:

There is a serious danger here which I would like to call to your attention. It is that the Y.W.C.A. might completely absorb the International Institute. This should not happen. The Institute is needed for helping in the development of leadership in the nationality community groups, and for the deliberately planned interpretation between groups. For this end I have recommended to the International Institute committee that a strong advisory committee of community men and women be formed, chiefly from the nationality communities (Sawyer, 1937).

Notwithstanding the objections of national representatives, leaders of the Honolulu YWCA justified the integration of the International Institute under one roof to facilitate cooperation and understanding among nationality groups. In the 1930s some Caucasian leaders called for the elimination of the Institute altogether, given the progress of Americanization among first- and second-generation women from China, Japan and Korea. As the Honolulu Institute approached its second decade of existence, its influence waned with the emergence of social service agencies better equipped to work with newer immigrants to Hawaii, most of whom were from the Philippines.

## Conclusion

The YWCA's efforts to facilitate immigrant adjustment in Honolulu occurred at a paradoxical time when assimilation was both questioned and demanded by Hawaii's white minority. The leaders of the local association established the International Institute to manage the influence of migrants in their community, but they stopped short of embracing its

underlying philosophy of promoting democratic participation and leadership development. As this study suggests, however, the Institute opened a window of tolerance and acceptance which led ultimately to the fuller participation of Asian-American women in territorial civic affairs. Viewed in this light, the history of the Honolulu Institute reinforces the “essential message of the International Institutes ... that diversity rather than conformity, that cooperation rather than conflict, was the essence of American democracy” (Mohl, 1997, p. 128).

The Great Depression hampered the national YWCA’s work with immigrants such that it ended its supervision of the International Institute movement in 1933. Edith Bremer supported the split from the YWCA, arguing that “the immigration cause was too important to be submerged as a partial concern of a woman’s organization” (Mohl and Betten, 1974, p. 23). The Honolulu Institute remained under the authority of the local association for a decade after the national organization abandoned its work in this area. The 1920s and 1930s were the high point of its assimilative influence with first-generation immigrant women.

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