



PROJECT MUSE®

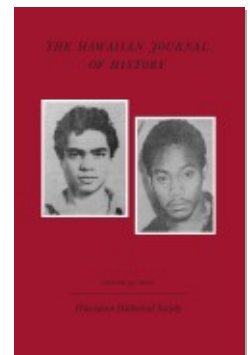
American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War by Duncan Ryūken Williams (review)

Kelli Y. Nakamura

Hawaiian Journal of History, Volume 54, 2020, pp. 195-197 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hjh.2020.0008>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/790046>

is Sammy Amalu, a local Waikiki “trickster” who orchestrated an elaborate hoax on the tourism industry in 1962 when he convinced several hotel owners and developers that he was an investor willing to pay unprecedented millions for their properties.

Saranillio’s analysis tends to stress continuity over change. This is both a methodological and a political project. He aims to show how the American settler colonialism that began in Hawai‘i in the 19th century shaped statehood and its opposition, and how Hawaiians and their allies in Hawai‘i today can use older forms of knowledge to challenge the settler state—for instance by employing traditional land use techniques as an alternative to global capitalism. One of the drawbacks to this approach, however, is that it does not fully explain why statehood, or resistance to it, gained more support in some periods than others. Why did an organized opposition to statehood, in the form of the Hawaiian sovereignty movement, emerge in the 1970s and not the 1950s? Historians might take issue with some of the elisions made here—between past and present moments of protest, or between pre- and post-statehood society and governance. But *Unsustainable Empire* draws these parallels to show how current-day activists may consciously echo historical dissent. In doing so, it reminds us that while Hawai‘i’s history of settler colonialism is long, the history of Hawai‘i is longer.

Sarah Miller-Davenport
Lecturer, Department of History
University of Sheffield

American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War. By Duncan Ryūken Williams. Cambridge Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019. 384 pp. Illustrated. Notes. Index. \$29.95 cloth

American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War by Duncan Ryūken Williams is the story of the experiences of American Buddhists during World War II. While numerous scholars have studied the wartime discrimination, dislocation, dispossession, and confinement of Japanese, Williams illuminates the role that Buddhism played in not only identifying Japanese suspects, but also in sustaining the Japanese community during the war. Subsequently, Buddhism was transformed into what Williams describes as a new American Buddhism, revealing the possibility of being both Buddhist and American during a period of tenuous national loyalties.

In this extensively researched account, Williams details the history of Buddhism in Japanese communities both in Hawai'i and on the mainland, which civil and military officials deemed suspect as they promoted a fundamentally white and Christian nation that ironically enshrined religious freedom in the First Amendment. However, in the decades preceding the attack on Pearl Harbor, many white Americans considered Buddhism incompatible with being a loyal American. Thus, prior to the war, officials had investigated Buddhism as a threat to U.S. national security, conducted extensive surveillance of Buddhist temples and Shintō shrines, and put Buddhist priests on registries of potentially subversive Japanese to be immediately apprehended with the outbreak of war. These preparations became a reality, as the first person officials detained was Bishop Gikyō Kuchiba, leader of the Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist sect in Hawai'i, with other Buddhist priests soon to follow. Following the mass incarceration of Japanese in America with the issuance of Executive Order 9066, officials also closed Buddhist temples across the country and sent Buddhist priests, along with their congregations, to incarceration centers across America.

Despite the fact that their embrace of Buddhism was considered one of many factors that led to their incarceration, many inmates turned to Buddhism to sustain them during the war. Williams provides detailed insight into the *Sangha* or Buddhist communities, first in the assembly centers that gave birth to what he calls "horse stable Buddhism," and later in the incarceration centers (p. 99). Williams illuminates the transformation of Buddhism arguing that it was consistent with the evolution of Buddhism in its roughly 2,500-year history in that, "wartime incarceration brought the question of whether Buddhism could survive in America to a head, dramatically accelerating the natural process of cultural adaptation" (p. 122). For example, the Young Buddhist Association (YBA) became a community-building organization that sponsored many social activities including baseball, dances, and pageants that embraced elements of American culture.

The relocation process itself also ironically helped to strengthen ties between Buddhist sects and create new opportunities for interfaith cooperation with other religions. Although priests of every sect corresponded with the members of their prewar temples, who were spread across many different camps, encouraging them to maintain their particular sect's teachings and rituals, in many War Relocation Authority (WRA) centers, Buddhist often formed "parallel congregations," whereby they gathered in one space, but held their own distinctive services and meetings (p. 131). They also agreed to joint services at key moments in the Buddhist ritual calendar such as *Hanamatsuri* (the Buddha's birthday), *Obon* (the summer ancestral festival), and *Ohigan* ceremonies at the spring and autumn equinox. This concentration of

Buddhist sects also resulted in interfaith collaborations with Christian groups that Williams contends emerged “organically” as they each attempted to work together to better the conditions for the camp’s populations (p. 135). As Williams extensively details this intersect and interfaith cooperation, it would be interesting to determine how, if at all, traditional Buddhist doctrinal teachings in each sect were transformed or supplemented by these new ideas and experiences that emerged in the incarceration centers.

As Buddhism continued to flourish and adapt in the various incarceration centers, Williams argues how it also became a motivating factor for military service to the United States. He reframes understandings of military sacrifice in Buddhist terms through the lens of the figure of a *bodhisattva*, an ideal Buddhist practitioner in the Mahayana Buddhist traditions to which soldiers belonged as they acted in ways to “sacrifice the self for a greater cause of freedom” (p. 151). Although most Nisei soldiers were likely Buddhists, it is difficult to discern how much of this particular understanding of religion would influence their ultimate decision to join the United States military compared to other factors such as proving their loyalty to America and challenging racist propaganda. Yet, Buddhism played an essential role in the experiences of these soldiers and their families, especially as a result of the high casualty rate experienced by the 100th Infantry Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, and despite wartime restrictions, Buddhist funeral services were often held to honor those killed in action.

Williams’ study is a valuable and insightful addition to the scholarship on the wartime experiences of Japanese and Japanese Americans during war by reframing understandings of Buddhism that was central to arguments to justify their mass incarceration. However, Buddhism also became central to the preservation of the Japanese community and underwent its own transformation to become a distinctive type of American Buddhism. Future studies could explore the impact of this new “American Buddhism” in the postwar period and its impact (or decline) in the present within the Japanese community and beyond.

Kelli Y. Nakamura
History Instructor
Arts & Humanities Dept.
Kapi’olani Community College