Tsugiki, a Grafting: The Life and Poetry of a Japanese Pioneer Woman in Washington
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In the imagination of most of us, the pioneer woman is represented by a sunbonneted Caucasian traveling westward on the American Plains. Few are aware of the pioneer women who crossed the Pacific Ocean east to America from Japan. Among these Japanese pioneer women were some whose destiny lay in the Pacific Northwest.

In Washington, pioneer women from Japan, the Issei or first (immigrant) generation, and their Nisei, second-generation, American-born daughters, made up the largest group of nonwhite ethnic women in the state for most of the first half of the 20th century. These women contributed their labor in agriculture and small businesses to help develop the state’s economy. Moreover, they were essential to the establishment of a viable Japanese American community in Washington. Yet, little is known of the history of these women. What follows is the story of one Japanese pioneer woman, Teiko Tomita. An examination of her life offers insight into the historical experience of other Japanese pioneer women in Washington.

Beyond an oral history obtained through interviews, Tomita’s experience is illumined by the rich legacy of tanka poems she wrote since she was a high school girl in Japan. The tanka written by Tomita served as a form of journal for her, a way of expressing her innermost thoughts as she became part of America. Indeed, Tsugiki, the title Tomita gave her section of a poetry anthology, meaning a grafting or a grafted tree, reflects her vision of a Japanese American grafted community rooting itself in Washington through the pioneering experiences of women like herself.

The tanka provided a natural and common vehicle of expression for Japanese immigrants like Tomita. Coming from a country that had instituted compulsory education in the late 19th century, Issei were often highly literate. But one did not have to be highly educated or uniquely gifted to compose tanka. Although the haiku, the Japanese short poem of seventeen syllables arranged in three lines of five, seven, and five syllables, is better known in the United States, the tanka is the more traditional poetic form. The tanka is a Japanese short poem consisting of thirty-one syllables arranged in five lines of five, seven, five, seven, and seven syllables, successively.

Japanese have from ancient times used the tanka to express their deepest emotions. Lyrical verse in the earliest collections of Japanese poetry used the brevity of the tanka form to speak of life, love, and the grief of separation. Commoners as well as aristocrats wrote tanka, which for centuries remained the most popular means of poetic expression for men and women of all classes. Concentration and compression are the essence of the tanka, and in its brief thirty-one syllables Japanese were able to convey what might otherwise have required many pages or even volumes.
Japanese immigrants like Tomita brought this poetic form with them to America and recorded their new lives through it. Issei-composed tanka in America reflected the imagery, feelings, and sensibilities of an immigrant generation taking root in a new land. Teiko Tomita used a traditional Japanese image, the cherry tree, in many of her tsugiki tanka to speak metaphorically of the grafting process of the Japanese immigrants to the rootstock of America. Using the traditional poetic form and traditional metaphors, Tomita created new meanings expressing the Issei immigrant experience. In writing of this immigrant experience, so different from life in Japan, Issei poets also created new metaphors and images and added new vocabulary. Tomita’s early tanka in eastern Washington mention sagebrush and deserts unknown in Japan, and some of her tanka contain English words. The Issei-written tanka was itself adapted to the new land, the poet adapting its content and language while maintaining its ancient form.

In an interview, Tomita recounted that she was born December 1, 1896, in Osaka Prefecture, Japan, the second of nine children in the Matsui family. She graduated from a girls’ high school, and while there learned to write tanka. Her teacher gave her the pen name “Yukari,” which she used even in America. She went on to take a year-and-a-half-long course at a normal school, which earned her a certificate to teach at the elementary school level. She taught until her marriage in 1920.

Most women in Japan at that time married before they were 25, and as Tomita approached her mid 20s she was urged to marry. Family-arranged marriages were the norm in Japan, rather than love marriages, since marriages were more of a contract between families than between individuals. Through a gobetween, she was matched with her husband, Masakazu Tomita, who was farming near Wapato, Washington. She was shown his picture and told of his background and character. She met with his family in Japan, in the neighboring prefecture, and was impressed by them. Tomita and her husband-to-be exchanged letters for two years before their marriage, as a get-acquainted period. In late 1920, Masakazu Tomita returned to Japan for the marriage ceremony. The newlyweds then traveled in Japan for a couple of months before going to Wapato, in February 1921, to farm on the Yakama Indian Reservation. Tomita’s husband had promised her grandparents, who headed the extended family, that they would return in three years; and the grandparents consented, expecting her to work in America for three to five years at most. No one knew that the three-year stay would turn into more than six decades, though Tomita says that when she got to Washington and saw the poor conditions there, she knew they would not be able to return to Japan in so short a time. Indeed, she would never again see her parents. Tomita’s poems indicate the feelings of Issei women toward the families and life they left behind in Japan. Although starting a new life in America, the women still had solid roots in their homeland. Family ties were strong. In one poem Tomita recalled the parting words of her parents:

"Live happily,"

Said my parents

Holding my hands,

Their touch

Even now in my hands

Tomita always remembered her parents’ words of hope for her happiness in the new land. The warmth of her parents' love as expressed in their parting words and touch helped sustain her through the years of separation. Tomita herself passed this hope of happiness on to her own children in America. Separation from her family gave Tomita new insights into the depths of family ties. This is apparent in a poem about her father that grew out of an incident that Tomita liked to recount over and over again. Marriage meant for her
that her husband and children became the focus of her life and thoughts, and that work left little time to feel any longing to return home. She claimed that she had no thoughts of returning to Japan, no sadness over her life in America. But her husband once saw her in the fields, shedding tears. He thought that she had become homesick after receiving a letter from her father. At dinner that night, he sympathized with her, saying he understood that she longed for her home, far away from the harsh land of Yakima. To his surprise, Tomita replied that she had no thoughts of returning to Japan. Rather, she had cried upon reading the letter because it revealed a gentle, caring father she had not understood:

The father I thought so strict
Where did he conceal
Such tender feelings
Revealed in those gentle letters
Many days I cried

"Those gentle letters" inquired after her well-being and happiness in the new land. Tomita came to have a fuller picture of her father than the severe figure of her childhood. She came to understand the love of father for child. The tears were tears of understanding. The strength of ties with family and homeland over the thousands of miles separating them is apparent in another tanka by Tomita, encapsulating her emotions upon receiving a package from her family:

When I think
It is from Japan
Even wrapping paper
Seems so close to me
It’s hard to throw it away

Issei women had settled in the Yakima valley since the 1890s, but even in 1921, when Tomita came to Wapato, the valley was still a raw frontier. Instead of moving from Japan to a richer life, Tomita embarked on a primitive pioneer life. In Kazuo Ito’s book Issei: A History of Japanese Immigrants in North America, Tomita wrote that her Wapato house "was only a little better than a shack, being a two-room cabin hastily put together." Although everyone she knew in Japan had electricity, in Wapato "there was no electric light, so I had to polish oil lamps every morning. We had one small stove in there which took wood or coal, and from time to time I picked up roots of sagebrush and used it as fuel, too." There was no running water. Water had to be drawn from the well outside.

The weather, too, was not gentle. Tomita recalled that in deepest winter it was so cold in the house "you could hear the eggs in the cupboard in the kitchen cracking," and "the place where the sheet was turned down under our chins at night got covered with frost from our breath." When summer came roaring in, "it was scorching hot with a temperature of more than 100 degrees," and at night the Tomitas would have to "spread a blanket under the peach tree" to sleep on.
Tomita helped her husband with the farming on the Yakama Indian Reservation, where he had leased land to grow hay. But in 1921, the year she arrived, and again in 1923, Washington passed stricter antialien land laws, which anti-Japanese agitators pressured the Department of Interior to apply to the Yakama Indian Reservation. The Yakama Indian Agency was forced to stop issuing leases to Japanese Issei, since the new anti-alien land laws prohibited not only the ownership of land but the renting, sharecropping, and issuance of leases to those who had not in good faith registered their intent to become citizens. Inasmuch as the Japanese were denied naturalization rights by United States law strictly on a racial basis, they could not in good faith register their intent to become citizens. They were therefore ineligible to lease land either in Washington or on the reservation.

The Tomitas lost the lease rights to their farm on the reservation. Luckily, Tomita’s husband was an accomplished agriculturist, and a white nursery owner quickly hired him as foreman for a nursery in Satus. Tomita served as cook for the laborers working under her husband. She recalled having to cook in shifts in her small house, first serving the work crew, then her own family. It was in Satus that her first child was born.

For Tomita, Satus was an even more remote, isolated area of Washington than Wapato had been. She had to walk five miles to see another Japanese face. Isolated as she was, she took solace in writing tanka for herself, recording her life and thoughts. Issei pioneer women often lived in very isolated regions of Washington. Tomita conveyed in a poem the loneliness and monotony of this life, in which the only way to distinguish one day from another might be the sun’s rising and setting:

Neighbors are five miles far away
Many days without seeing anyone
Today, too, without seeing anyone
The sun sets

This isolated life was common to most pioneer women of the West, as was exposure to the harshness of nature. The houses built by the pioneers with their own hands were not proof against the elements. Tomita’s poems speak eloquently of this ceaseless intrusion of nature:

Yakima Valley
The spring storm raging
Even in the house
A cloud of sand Sifts in
The Yakima valley was a desert that with water and sweat could be made to bloom. They worked the land, transforming desert and sagebrush into fertile fields of alfalfa, onions, tomatoes, beans, and melons.

But hard work did not ensure success. In another poem, Tomita expressed her realistic assessment of the immigrants’ struggle to cultivate the land:

Sagebrush desert to fertile plain
A transformation, I hear,

But when the windy season comes

There’s no transforming the sandstorm

The persistent sand was a constant reminder of the desert that could reclaim the newly fertile land at any moment, and of the tenuous hold on success that the Japanese as aliens had on the leased land. At any moment the whirling sandstorm could engulf them and return the fertile plain to sagebrush desert. Tomita’s poems evoke not only the grit of desert sand in the newly developed Yakima valley but also the severe desert heat:

As we busily pick beans

Even the breeze stirring

The weeds at our feet

Feels hot

Perseverance in the face of adversity characterized the early Issei women. This spirit was taught to the children who worked in the fields with their parents. Tomita wrote:

"Soon the heat will be gone"

While picking beans

I encourage my children

And myself

In encouraging her children to persevere in adversity, Tomita strengthened herself to persevere for her children. Tomita’s poems offer a key to her motivations for enduring and continuing to tame and cultivate the burning frontier. Her use of the symbolism of grafted cherry trees, particularly, makes clear the way she viewed her place in this new land:

Carefully grafting

Young cherry trees

I believe in the certainty

They will bud

In the coming spring

The cherry blossom is a Japanese symbol not only of spring but of Japan and the Japanese people themselves. In the grafting of cherry trees, Tomita saw the grafting of the Japanese immigrant onto the root
stock of America, where the graft would continue to grow and become a permanent part. The importance of this symbolism is again underscored in her choice of the title, "Tsugiki" (a graft or grafted tree) for her section of the Issei poetry anthology, Renia no yuki. She viewed not only her past work in the nursery as grafting but perhaps also her own self. In the poem above she expressed her belief in a coming spring when the grafted tree would bud and grow, just as the hopes and dreams of the immigrant Japanese would be fulfilled. The centrality of this hope of a coming spring is expressed in another poem:

Whirls of storming winter

I tolerate

Believing in spring

To come again

By believing in the certainty that the grafted tree would bloom in its new environment, she was able to endure the winter of travails. Perhaps, though, the blossoms would be the next generation, not Tomita’s own. Meanwhile the grafting process was an arduous one, as another poem indicates:

Grafting cherry saplings

Along long furrows

The August sun

Burns on our backs

In 1929 the Tomitas moved to Sunnydale, near Seattle, where Seattle Tacoma International Airport (Sea-Tac) now sprawls. There, they started their own nursery. Moving to more populous Sunnydale meant that for the first time in America Tomita was able to have many Japanese families as neighbors. It also meant the further development of her poetry writing, for she heard of a tanka club in Seattle and joined the group in 1939. Although she was not able to attend the monthly meetings, she would each month send new poems for criticism. Many of her poems were sent on to Japan for publication. But in Sunnydale, misfortune and hardship continued, with the loss of the youngest daughter of the Tomitas’ five children and the impact of the Great Depression. Tomita became a Christian during the Sunnydale years, and many of her later poems reflect her new faith.

The small economic gains made by the Tomitas were erased by the outbreak of war between the motherland and the adopted land in December 1941. Since they were denied naturalization rights, all Japanese immigrants were aliens, now enemy aliens. Furthermore, even their American-born children were considered suspect. The old anti-Japanese agitation was rekindled and this time succeeded in perpetrating one of the most massive violations of civil rights in American legal history. With no formal charges of any wrongdoing, more than 110,000 Issei and their United States-citizen children were removed from their homes on the West Coast to incarceration in concentration camps. They were not allowed to return to their homes until 1945. Although most Seattle Japanese were interned in Minidoka in Idaho, those in the outlying areas of Seattle, like the Tomitas, were interned in Tule Lake, California, in 1942. In late 1943 they were moved to Heart Mountain in Wyoming where, ironically, Tomita was reunited with Japanese from the Yakima valley, her first home in America.
Immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor rumors circulated in the Japanese community that military men were searching all Japanese homes for any incriminating evidence that would link them with Japan. Later, there was talk about something fearsome called "camp." Under this pressure, Tomita gathered up her precious poetry manuscripts, took them to the fields and burned them, fearing that the private thoughts recorded in her tanka might be twisted into something harmful to her family. This remains one of the most painful memories of the war for her. Much of the poetic record of her life was wiped out.

Despite the destruction of the manuscripts, not all the poems were lost. Many of the burned tanka remained etched in Tomita’s mind, to be recalled in later years. Easily committed to memory, poetry has often been the device of oral tradition’s preservation of preliterate history, passed on from one generation to the next.

When war broke out between Japan and the United States in December 1941, it looked as though spring would not come, even for the next generation. The war years were difficult ones for the Issei women. After years of struggling, the little they had gained was wrenched from them overnight. Forced by the government to leave the land they had pioneered, they were imprisoned in even more isolated and desolate regions of America than they could have imagined. The incarceration camps were located in remote desert areas. Yet even here, surrounded by barbed wire, the creative spirit of the Issei inmates persisted. The creative arts in the camps found expression in forms ranging from polished sagebrush roots to accomplished poetry. Many Issei learned to write Japanese poetry for the first time in camp and continued even after they had left.

At Heart Mountain, Tomita and other Issei attended lectures and classes in poetry to while away the seemingly endless years of incarceration. Tomita began to keep a journal of her class lectures as well as of her poems, a fresh book to replace the volumes she had burned. Her book of poems shows the changes she made from one draft to another, to final form. In poetry many Issei found the solace Tomita noted in a poem written in 1943 at the Tule Lake incarceration camp:

Within the iron stockade

Always composing poems

From the sorrows of war

A little consolation

As she had done in the Yakima desert, Tomita turned to poetry to comfort herself. But, as always, her poems also reflected hope. In the midst of the sorrow and uncertainty of imprisonment, in January 1943 she could still write:

In the war concentration camp

The New Year’s Day’s sun rises

Look up at the light

Which breaks up the darkness of night

New Year’s Day meant the hope of a new start, the hope that the darkness of the past year might be pierced by the light of freedom. But freedom did not come quickly. The war continued. Tomita’s 1944 poems
reflect the inner turmoil of Issei caught by a war between their country of birth and the adopted country that had not accepted them:

I read the war news

Today again

My heart clouds

And my thoughts are frozen

When the war finally ended in 1945, the Tomitas were living in Minnesota, having secured a work release earlier in the year. The war that had torn them from their homes and made prisoners of them had ended, but the war’s end was bittersweet news:

Among whites jubilantly shouting

"The war is over"

My husband and I

Cried throughout the night

Japan was defeated, horrifying atomic bombs had been dropped, and Japanese Americans had at last been released. Joy and relief at the end of the grief and hardships of the war combined with the sadness of war's destruction and the uncertain future. Tomita worried over the fate of her family in Japan and their mutual concern over her fate in America:

For the first time in five years

Letters are permitted to the home country

Today I only write

"We’re safe"

The link with family in the home country was reestablished. The silence brought by war ended with the simple message, "We’re safe."

They were safe. They had survived another hardship, but once again they had to start from scratch. She wrote:

Returning home from the iron stockade

Five years ago

Reconstructing our lives
Is no small thing even now

Her poem reflects the cold reality for Japanese Americans that even after returning from the concentration camps they still faced a long struggle to rebuild their lives. Although it was indeed "no small thing," Tomita did rebuild her life. Because of the incarceration, the Tomitas had not only lost their nursery business but had no capital to invest in another venture. Tomita took the only wage job available to her: she became a garment worker in Seattle. This job opened new worlds for her. Sewing alongside other immigrant women in Seattle, Tomita gained closer contact and better understanding of women from other ethnic groups. The poems written while she was a seamstress reflect a growing awareness of the commonality of experience and emotions she shared with her coworkers. In one poem she wrote:

A German woman and I

Sewing together

Sharing the same feelings

Speaking of the war destruction

In each of our home countries

Although they came from two countries separated by thousands of miles and by different cultural traditions, here in the workplace the two women shared their wartime experiences and became one. While her prewar poems dealt mainly with herself or her family, Tomita’s poems were now enlivened with observations of other people. In contrast to the isolation of her former rural life, her urban workplace offered a microcosm of the multi-ethnic, multicultural American society of which she was a part.

In a series of more narrative poems, Tomita observed some conflict between white and black workers, but in general her poems suggested a sisterhood among the women workers that cut across ethnic lines. Tomita’s poems bring to life the variety of women she worked with, among them a black woman who had such a fine voice that when she sang, it rose clear and strong above the roar of the sewing machines; and a Filipino woman, seemingly very cheerful and carefree, who learned a little Japanese to help her communicate with Tomita. Tomita savored and valued these experiences:

For many years

Mixed among workers of different races

I sew

I’m used to it

Such life is enjoyable

Tomita’s growing appreciation of interaction with other ethnic groups is further demonstrated in a series of poems about her Italian neighbors. The first in the series notes the presence in her neighborhood of many Italians. She admired their industry, which made her feel an affinity with them. In the next poem she again took up this theme:
In their hard work

Italians are like we Japanese

Daughters and wives, too

Work all day in the fields

It was in their shared history of the hard work of farming that Tomita found a commonality of experience with these European immigrants. And the feelings were mutual, it seems, for in the next poems we see that at least one of the Italian neighbors had become a friend. Beyond sharing hard work and vegetables with his Japanese neighbors, he shared the experience of separation from the homeland:

Mutually shared feelings

This Italian

Speaking fervently about

His homeland

In the postwar period we see Tomita’s poems reflecting not only a more urban, multi-ethnic awareness but also a more global viewpoint. Fully understanding the terrible costs of war, Tomita is well aware of the world events that may lead to a war for which her children would have to pay the highest price:

My son is still young

I daily pray

For eternal peace

In this violent world

In particular, she had become ardently opposed to the nuclear arms race, devoting a whole series of poems to this subject. News of the Bikini Island nuclear test victims moved her to write:

Reading of the condition

Of Bikini patients

Incurable disease

The power of science

Is rather a curse

She notes that Japan is a leader in the nuclear disarmament movement:
A country that experienced
The death ash
Japan's accusing voice
Voice of desperation

In another poem in the series, Tomita observed that a ban on nuclear bombs has already been written with the blood of Japan, the only country to suffer an atomic bombing. But she notes, sadly:

Regardless of the earnest prayers
Of the suffering country
Nuclear bombs
Are steadily produced

After decades of hard work, Tomita was finally able to realize her dream of owning a home. Her joy in the fulfillment of the dream is recorded in a series of poems:

I enjoyed drawing pictures
Of my desired house
The long held dream
Became a reality

The dream became a reality just when they had virtually given up hope of achieving it in their generation:

The dream I passed
On to my children
How many years!

The house is finished
But this joy at a dream finally fulfilled in America was short-lived. Her Sunnydale home was directly north of the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. Soon the roar of the jets shook her house:

The runways are to be expanded,
I hear,
The roaring sound
The airport expanded, she wrote, despite the complaints and puzzlement of the surrounding people. Its expansion changed the environment:

Farms and houses, too

Before I’m aware

I see their shadows no more

The runways are being built expansively

As houses and farms disappeared, the people disappeared. The Port of Seattle responded to complaints about noise and low-flying jets by removing the people who complained. It acquired by eminent domain the property of people like Tomita to form a buffer zone around the airport. In 1967 the Tomitas were once again forced to relocate. More fortunate than some, they were able to move in with their daughter’s family in Seattle.

The realization of time passing is very much a part of Tomita’s later writings. Reflecting on the decades of pioneering that had flown past, she wrote:

Long ago are the days

I helped my husband

Cultivate the raw land

And raised our children

We two have grown old

Another poem continues the theme of old age:

My husband

Reading with bifocals

So many decades of struggles

Engraved deeply

In the wrinkles on his face

Thoughts arose of the unfulfilled aspirations of youth. For Tomita there were the dashed hopes of continuing her studies. In a series of poems she recalled these hopes of scholarship, symbolized in a treasured box given to her as a graduation prize:
As a lifetime memory

Placed in a suitcase with love and care

For thirty years

A lacquer calligraphy box

She remembers the words that accompanied the prize, words admonishing her to continue to train her mind and soul. But since coming to America:

Too busy were

Thirty years of life

In a foreign country

Never used the brush and ink

There had never been time for her formal studies. She had written her tanka in isolation in the fields of Yakima. Even after moving to the Seattle area, though she had been able to join a tanka club, she had not been able to attend the monthly meetings because the nursery had required her constant care. Her life, she said in an interview, could be summed up in one word, isogashii (busy) a life filled always with things she had to do. As for thoughts of the luxury of studies:

Never to return are the days

When I put my heart and soul

In my studies only

I grow old in a foreign country

Although she may have had to set aside her aspirations in the grafting process of settling in America, there was always the belief in the fulfillment of dreams for the next generation, when the grafted tree would bloom and bear fruit. The struggles would be well worth the pain for Tomita if her children could fulfill their own dreams and aspirations. Tomita reveled in the fact that her children had not been adversely affected by the family’s hard life:

My daughter has

A rainbow-like dream

Cheerful as she is

The poverty of me her mother

Hasn’t stained her life
Memories of the poverty of much of her life in America, with repeated setbacks, led her to write:

When winter comes

I wonder what it was

That enabled me to endure

Heartrending sorrows

It had been for her children that she worked, and it was the hope of their spring that sustained her through the winter of struggles and sorrows. In her poems she celebrated the triumphs of her children as they went off to college, got married, and started new, exciting jobs. Her poems reveal a conviction on her part that her children would not suffer the trials and tribulations she had endured:

My son’s start in life

Like a clear morning

Without a single cloud

Limitless blue sky of hope

Her struggles did not adversely affect the lives of her children but rather seemed to have ensured their future. She could write hopefully in 1968:

The centennial of

The Japanese immigrants in America

Our next generation

With a great future before them

Fifteen years later Tomita could look back on more than six decades of life experiences in the United States and conclude:

The bitter ordeals I have suffered

One after another

As I remember

Now without sorrow

Filled with grace
Tomita’s later poems reflect a continuation of her thanksgiving that her grandchildren, too, are enjoying the spring out of the travails of her winters. In a series of poems in the summer of 1983 she wrote of her trip to the East Coast to attend her granddaughter’s graduation from Sarah Lawrence. With commencement comes a new flowering for the third-generation tsugiki, and a celebration uniting the generations. The ties that bind the generations together appeared strong as her grandchildren made efforts to communicate with their grandmother in Japanese:

From my granddaughter in New York

A letter in Japanese

As I read it

Tears of joy overflow

Aside from their literary merits, the poems presented here provide valuable information and insight into the life and times of Teiko Tomita. Each poem is a diary entry relating a significant event or thought. Often a series of poems gives a full account of a particular incident in her life. Even more than a diary, the poems reveal the inner thoughts and emotions of the author. Tanka critic Hideko Matsui, in an article in Cho-on, the Japanese poetry magazine to which the Seattle tanka club sent their selected poetry for publication, believes that although poems such as Tomita’s have a simple, classical, moving quality about them, their importance is mainly that they relate the immigrants’ history in the traditional form of the Japanese tanka. In fact, both the historical value and the literary merit of Issei poetry deserve a great deal of further discussion.

For Tomita and a great many other Issei, poetry was a means of recording their lives for posterity as well as an artistic release of their emotions. They wrote tanka as poetic expressions of their lives and thoughts. In writing their tanka they were conscious of their role in recording their history, a history they believed would not be included in general histories about American immigrants.

Despite great hardships, the Issei immigrants did indeed adapt to their new environment. For some, like Tomita, poetic expression helped make that adaptation more endurable. Their poetry, in turn, helps us grasp the history of that adaptation and survival. Tomita’s life provides an outline generally representative of the Issei woman’s harsh life in Washington. Like Tomita, most women who came were wives of settled immigrants. Many were “picture brides” whose marriages had been arranged by their families through the exchange of pictures with Japanese male immigrants living in Washington. After 1921, because the Japanese government did not issue passports to picture brides, most grooms, like Tomita’s husband, traveled to Japan to marry and brought their wives back with them.

In 1924 Congress passed a new immigration and naturalization act that prohibited the immigration of “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” a category the United States Supreme Court had created in its 1922 Ozawa decision and 1923 Thind decision, ruling that Mongolians as a racial group and people from India were not eligible for naturalization. Thus no new immigrants from Japan, male or female, arrived after 1924. Still, because the Japanese males had been able to send for wives from 1908 to 1924, there occurred a dramatic increase in the numbers of women of Japanese ethnicity in Washington. The Japanese women who came between 1910 and 1924 played a crucial role in the growth of a Japanese American community in Washington. The summoning of wives like Tomita reinforced the commitment to permanent residency in America more than economic stakes in farms and businesses. There was a settled family life with the coming of wives and an emergence of Japanese American family units with the dramatic increase in American-born children between 1900 and 1930. With the birth of the second generation, there was a transformation from immigrant society to permanent settlers, as Issei began to focus and identify their own future in terms of
the future of their children in America. The arrival of women was an integral part of the process by which Japanese immigrant society sank its roots into American soil. The arrival of women guaranteed that a community with a family life could be established in America. The Japanese community developed a family orientation around schools, churches, clubs, and associations. The women brought both community and Japanese culture with them. Often highly educated, like Tomita, they preserved such values as love of learning and an appreciation of the arts.

Tomita’s lifetime of work in the Yakima valley, Sunnydale, and Seattle underscores the fact that Japanese pioneer women were not only wives and mothers but also workers. Their labor was indispensable in the operation of farms, small businesses, and labor camps, as well as in family enterprise such as small shops and tiny farms. Japanese women played a vital economic role in the new land. The majority of Japanese women initially lived in rural areas, helping their husbands till the soil as farmers. Japanese agriculturalists were especially prominent in Washington. In urban areas, women entered small businesses operated by their husbands, such as laundries, markets, restaurants, and boardinghouses, or they became domestic servants, seamstresses, and cannery workers. Labor camps that provided workers for railroads, lumber camps, and mills were often run by Issei men. Many Issei women worked in these labor camps. As Tomita did in her Yakima years, the women cooked for the large group of workers employed by their husbands.

Japanese women performed tasks essential to the maintenance of the family by earning income, rearing children, preparing meals, shopping, and tending the sick. Because of their essential role in running the family and their valuable economic role, the women enjoyed greater power in decision-making for the family than did their counterparts in Japan. Moreover, in the pioneer setting the Issei women were free of the traditional control of the mother-in-law, another factor that greatly enlarged their influence in the family.

In the 1930s the power of Issei wives in the family increased as the men aged. Many Issei men in the 1930s were over 55. As the men aged, their wives, on average, 10 years younger, took on increased economic responsibilities and made more of the important decisions. Thus women increasingly became the focal point of the Japanese American family.

After the war the Issei pioneers, now nearing retirement age, had to begin their lives over again. Like Tomita, many Issei women whose assets and capital had been taken from them by the incarceration went to work in garment factories or into domestic service. Tomita’s postwar urban life also reflects a general shift of Japanese Americans after the war to urban residences and occupations.

In the postwar years, hard work once more bore fruit, though not as great a harvest as might have been possible given more hospitable conditions. The children of the pioneers "the Nisei" married and had children of their own. A third generation was born. The Issei women looked back on their years of struggle and saw in their grandchildren the fulfillment of their young hopes when they first came to America. They believed the tsugiki to be strong and firmly rooted in its adopted land. The children and grandchildren, the second and third generation branches of the tsugiki, are blooming in the spring that has finally come. Tomita wrote in May 1983:

The seeds I planted
Sprout and grow up
Even in this very old body
Joy overflows
Through the struggles of Tomita and other Issei pioneer women, the history of Washington has been enriched.


**MLA Citation:**