Fig. 6.1. Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu as the Celtic Samurai, 1969. Darrow School high school yearbook photo, New Lebanon, N.Y. Courtesy of Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu.
The Celtic Samurai:
Storytelling a Transnational-Transracial Family Life

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MY MOM AND DAD met in postwar Tokyo, Occupied Japan. They worked in the same building downtown where MacArthur’s general headquarters were. Mom spoke a little English and Dad spoke a little Japanese, and like most couples, they really couldn’t understand each other, so naturally they fell in love. Dad thought Mom was lovely, and Mom thought Dad was charming, and so they decided to marry. And that’s when the trouble started.

I never understood my parents’ story until I saw the film Sayonara (1957). Then I imagined my dad was kind of like Marlon Brando’s character, Major Gruver—an American man full of defiant desire for an Oriental doll. Gruver eventually turned out okay, but at first he just followed the party line, believing it was wrong for Americans and Japanese to marry.

He didn’t come around until his buddy Joe Kelly, played by Red Buttons, convinced him there was nothing wrong with marrying a Japanese woman. Japanese didn’t like these marriages with Americans either, but when Mom told her family she wanted to marry Dad, they were surprisingly accepting, saying that as long as he respected her, it didn’t matter that he was American. But like Gruver and Kelly, Dad had a hard time getting married.

Grandpa Shigematsu went to the city hall, but when the people there found out the groom was an American, they said they couldn’t approve the marriage; he had to go to the American embassy. When my dad went there, the embassy personnel told him the same thing—Americans couldn’t marry Japanese. “You can’t take her to the States anyway, son, so why marry? And where do you want to live? California? You know they wouldn’t let you marry a Mongolian there either. Better to just forget about her and go back to the States by yourself; there’s plenty of good American girls there.”

But Dad didn’t take their advice and stayed, and while everyone waited for the marriage to be legalized, he just moved into my mom’s family’s house in Tokyo, and soon there were kids being born and we had one big happy family (fig. 6.2). Grandma, who had adopted mom, her younger sister, when mom was five and never given birth
Fig. 6.2. Murphy-Shigematsu family portrait, Tokyo, 1953. Left to right, front: father, Fred, sister Johanna, sister Margaret, Stephen, mother, Toshiko; rear, grandfather Mitsuo, grandmother Mitsu. Courtesy of Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu.

herself, finally had her babies. But one day, Dad came home and said he was taking us all to the United States. We were excited until we realized Grandma wasn’t coming—she had to stay with Grandpa—and my sisters started crying. My mom just said, “Shikata ga nai,” which is what she always said when there was something tough that we had to do—there’s no other way, so stop whining! Grandma begged Mom to leave one child for her, but my parents couldn’t decide which one, so they took us all. Grandma lost her only child and all her grandchildren. We left Grandma standing on the docks of Yokohama, got on a big ship to San Francisco, and watched her get smaller and smaller until she disappeared.

We were on our way to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where my dad’s parents had emigrated from Ireland half a century earlier. Dad said we had to stop there on our way to Southern California. I’m not sure if he had a poor sense of geography or was tricking us, but that’s how we ended up in New England. The Murphys were waiting for us. They even called out the Catholic priest to welcome us to America.

Life in the United States wasn’t too bad; the steaks were big and the hot dogs were a foot long. There were hot fudge sundaes with a red cherry on top and pink clouds of
cotton candy. When McDonalds and Dunkin' Donuts came to town, we kids had all we needed. We missed Grandma, but she sent us packages with Japanese goodies like nori (seaweed), sembei (rice crackers), yohkan (red bean candy), and handmade clothes that never fit us because they were always too small. And we had a new Irish family who took us into their home and nourished us, and before we knew it, we were Americans. We even got religion. My mom was Buddhist and my dad was an atheist, so naturally they decided to raise us . . . Catholic. I don’t know why; maybe they were just trying to make us Americans.

Not everyone was nice. Some people didn’t like Japanese. When we first came in 1953, they said this negativity was because of the war, but when people told us to go back to China, it was confusing. Some people weren’t mean but didn’t know what to make of us. They had never seen a family like ours—American husband, Oriental wife, and their mongrel kids. While people didn’t know what to make of us, they thought they knew who Mom was. They called her a “war bride,” which was a nice way of saying she was a bar girl who had been lucky enough to catch a good American boy who took her to the U.S.A. They didn’t know Mom at all. The Christians thought Mom was a heathen, so they came to our apartment to convert her. Dad let them inside, but when they started to call Mom “Theresa,” he got mad and told them her name was Toshiko and she wasn’t changing her name for them and that it was time for them to go. I was proud of my dad for that.

Mom was lonely, and I was just a little kid, but I think I already knew there were two things missing from her life. One was a bath and the other was rice. Now, Japanese must be the cleanest people in the world, totally obsessive-compulsive about baths; you can’t sleep if you don’t take a bath. When Mom started acting funny, we told Grandma Murphy that what Mom really needed was a nice bath. So she made one for her. And when she called Mom, we all went running up to the bathroom. And there it was—a long tub, and deep, but with only about six inches of water in it. And when we put our fingers in it, it was lukewarm! We all asked at once: “Where do you wash?”

We were used to washing outside the tub so that the water in the tub would stay clean. But there was no drain in the floor. None of us could figure it out, so Mom said, “Better go get Grandma.”

When Grandma came, we asked, “Where do you wash, Grandma?”

“Why, right in the tub!”

We all looked at each other in amazement. “You mean you just sit right in the dirty water?”

Grandma looked at us in amazement as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Some of you probably think it’s normal, too. Then she said something I’ll never forget.
“Well, can water be dirty if it has soap in it?”

It was kind of like a Zen koan, and I’ve been trying to figure it out ever since. Well, we all got into the bathtub and splashed around, but Mom just watched us. I think she gave up on taking a bath in America.

She still had hopes for the rice, but Grandma cooked only baked potatoes, fried potatoes, mashed potatoes, scalloped potatoes . . . but it wasn’t potatoes Mom wanted—it was rice. Life without rice for a Japanese is like life without sunshine, and Mom began to despair that food in America would not keep her alive.

So Grandma got a good idea of how to make Mom happy and took us down to Lucky Garden, the Chinese restaurant in town. It smelled funny, and they had this stuff on all the tables, La Choy Soy Sauce. Mom tasted it and made a face at first but then smiled as if to say, “Better than nothing.” They had all these weird-sounding dishes like chop suey and chow mein and the house special, the pu pu platter. Now we didn’t know a lot of English yet, but we were kids, and we knew pu pu, and we told Mom, “We don’t want no pu pu platter.”

Mom got mad and said, “Stop dirty talk, not that kind of pu pu. Just eat it!” A big bowl of rice came, and we got all excited, but when we tasted it, why it wasn’t gohan at all, because it was Chinese rice, Texas long grain, not the sticky rice that we knew. Though she tried to hide it, disappointment was written all over Mom’s face. Grandma didn’t understand why Mom didn’t like the rice, so Dad explained that we weren’t Chinese, we were Japanese, and it was Chinese rice.

Mom decided to check out the rice situation in Massachusetts for herself, and so we headed down to the A&P supermarket and walked up and down the aisles. People stared at us like we were monkeys in a zoo, whispering to each other as we walked by. Mom’s face grew fierce, but she kept walking; she was a woman on a mission. Suddenly she stopped, and there it was—rice! There was Minute Rice—“Just add Boiling Water” “Perfect Every Time!”—and there was Uncle Ben’s Converted Rice. Now I don’t know what it was converted from or converted to or if that kind of a conversion is anything like what the missionaries were trying to do to Mom, but all I cared about was the picture on the box. I was fascinated by Uncle Ben; I had never seen a man like him.

“Who’s Uncle Ben?” I asked.

My sister, who had an answer for everything, pointed to the pancake section and said, “Look! Why, he must be Aunt Jemima’s husband!”

Mom scolded her, “Don’t be silly, they’re not even related.” She grabbed the Uncle Ben’s off the shelf, and we rushed home.

Grandma offered to cook the rice and told Mom to relax. So we went into the living room to watch television. Luckily, Mom’s favorite show was on. Now, I don’t
Why she liked I Love Lucy so much. She hardly ever laughed, and only when no one else laughed, but mostly she just watched with a quizzical expression on her face. Maybe she was trying to figure out what it was Americans thought was funny, or maybe she thought Lucy was a good role model for how to be an American woman, because she started to dress and put on makeup like Lucy. Anyway, some time later, Grandma called us to the kitchen. “The rice is ready!” Mom’s face brightened, and we all went to the kitchen, and there it was.

We all stared at it until my sister finally said, “What’s the brown stuff?”

“Raisins.”

“And the yellow stuff?”

“Eggs.”

“What about the yucky stuff?”

“Cream and sugar.”

I looked at Mom’s face and wondered what she was feeling. Was she happy? She had made her rice. Was she sad? It wasn’t really her rice. Was she lonely? Maybe she was imagining a steaming bowl of white sticky rice with an umeboshi (pickled plum) on top. But Mom smiled and looked at Grandma and said, “Thank you for making rice” and had her first taste of rice pudding.

Reflection

In this written version of my live performance The Celtic Samurai, I tell the story of my transcultural journey between Japan and the United States and show how American men of diverse backgrounds and Japanese women came together despite the immense legal and social barriers that stood between them. However, the opposition drove many couples apart, with some Japanese women becoming single mothers and others giving up their children. The kids were heavily stigmatized as the children of the former enemy and occupiers and immoral women, with prejudice and discrimination directed at them.

A popular narrative of the postwar era is the inspiring story of Miki Sawada, the daughter of a noble family married to a man who was once the ambassador to the United Nations. Sawada claims that an apparently mixed race baby fell into her lap from the overhead luggage compartment while she was traveling on a train one day. The incident shocked her into action, and she dedicated her property and life to establishing and running an orphanage, the Elizabeth Saunders Home, where more than a thousand mixed-blood children were raised. Sawada believed that the kids needed to be separated from an unforgiving Japanese society and sheltered in her institution. She drew attention to the plight of these children, leading novelist Pearl
Buck to establish a foundation in 1964 to help what she called “Amerasians,” who were born all over Asia, wherever the U.S. military went.

Most couples that were able to marry did not remain in Japan, and tens of thousands came to the United States and settled in California, around military bases, or wherever the American spouses called home. They were called “the loneliest brides in America” by Ebony magazine and encountered incredible adjustment difficulties, symbolized by the loss of the most basic comforts of familiar foods and customs.\(^1\)

They also endured hostility from many communities, including from Japanese Americans. Their resilience and perseverance in raising their children in an adopted homeland is a story that needs to be told. My mother’s story was part of a larger so-called war bride phenomenon of post–World War II U.S.-occupied Japan.

When war brides and their families came to the United States in the years following World War II, they encountered the harsh remnants of the trauma inflicted on persons of Japanese ancestry. Following the December 7, 1941, bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese Imperial Navy and the resulting wave of anti-Japanese hysteria, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942. A month later, the Department of War began forcibly removing all “Persons of Japanese Ancestry” from western coastal regions to inhospitable inland “relocation” camps. In General John L. DeWitt’s “A Jap’s a Jap” environment, the “evacuation” of some 120,000 Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals was clearly more racially motivated than a “military necessity,” as even the elderly, the ill and infirm, children, infants, and orphans were interned.\(^4\)

Little is known of the fates of those of mixed ancestry, but according to a 1949 edition of the Japanese American newspaper The Pacific Citizen, Colonel Karl Bendetsen, administrator of the Wartime Civil Control Administration, infamously stated, “I am determined that if they have one drop of Japanese blood in them, they must go to camp.”\(^3\) Of the 101 Japanese American orphans and foster children who were rounded up and sent to the Children’s Village in the Manzanar internment camp, many were of mixed Japanese heritage and some were said to have had as little as one-sixteenth Japanese ancestry, with several reporting later that they did not even know they were part Japanese until they were interned.\(^4\) The U.S. Army’s schizophrenic policy toward mixed marriages and people of mixed heritage was irrationally driven by racial prejudices and the one-drop rule mentality.\(^5\)

After they were released from the camps, Nisei (second-generation Japanese Americans) and Sansei (third-generation Japanese Americans) followed an “all American” economic and cultural survival model of assimilation into the dominant white culture, and rates of intermarriage with whites steadily increased, as did the number of mixed Japanese Americans. Today interracial and multiracial Japanese American families
individuals are commonplace, with three out of four persons of Japanese ancestry being of mixed ancestry, the descendants of war brides and intermarried Japanese Americans. They are now the “new face” of Japanese America, leading the trend that other Asian American groups are following. It is instructive to look back at a generation when “hapa” or haafu (the Japanese term for “half”) were regarded not as cosmopolitans but as “war babies” in Japan and white America, and even as inu (Japanese for “dogs,” or, in this case, “mutts”), and were treated as outcasts by the Japanese American community.7