

**The *Bon* Dance in Southern California:  
Characteristics of a Japanese Diasporic Culture  
WASEDA, Minako**

This paper explores characteristics of the *bon* dance in southern California as part of a Japanese diasporic culture. *Bon* dance is a type of Japanese folk dance originally to welcome the souls of the deceased, but today it has largely developed as a secular community entertainment. The southern California *bon* dance appears to be a direct transplant of the *bon* dance typical in the central area of Tokyo and in newly-developed suburban residential areas, danced in a circle around the *yagura* tower to commercial recordings by professional musicians. However, close observation reveals its distinct characteristics as follows: 1) It is firmly connected to Buddhist temples due to their historical importance as centers of Japanese American socio-cultural activities; in Japan, the *bon* dance is generally organized by local neighborhood associations (*chōnai-kai*) or shopping street associations (*shōtengai kumiai*). 2) It is associated with a new Buddhist meaning, namely the release of one's ego to receive the "Truth" by remembering and appreciating the dead; this is so as not to contradict the beliefs of the *Jōdo-Shin* sect, the predominant sect in American Buddhism, which denies the existence of souls. 3) It is carefully preserved and transmitted in the same way as traditional performing arts, with the goal of maintaining the *bon* dance among the English-speaking younger generations; the repertoire itself belongs to Japanese mass culture, which usually receives no attention for preservation in Japan. 4) It is used as a Japanese cultural showcase aimed at ethnic others, and accordingly has been refined in movement and costume for "presentation" purposes. 5) An original *bon* dance repertoire has been created to express Japanese American identity. The *bon* dance in southern California reveals the transformation of Japanese culture in a diasporic community as it adjusts to specific circumstances and needs, generated through immigration, settlement, and the rise of new generations. It has obtained new functions, meanings, and significance to become a unique "Japanese American" culture.