



EAST-WEST CENTER  
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## EAST-WEST CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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# Benji Bennington Interview Narrative Part 2

2-3-2005 and 3-1-2005 interviews in Honolulu, Hawaii

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The **East-West Center Oral History Project** strives to capture the Center's first 50 years as seen through the eyes of staff, alumni, and supporters who have contributed to its growth.

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## **Benji Bennington**

2-3-2005 and 3-1-2005 interviews in Honolulu, Hawaii

### **PART 2**

#### ***Separation from UH***

This is how I explain it -- which I did a lot of in one of my other jobs. After I was Alumni Officer, I moved into being Admissions Officer, selecting all the students. I became Visa Officer because we had so many visas to do then. Then I started moving into public relations and public information. And it was amazing trying to explain to official EWC visitors (some 300 a year) why the East-West Center separated from the University. And that was something that I would usually get into, because there are still local people that are confused and think we're part of the University.

In Public Affairs, we never include the name University of Hawai'i in any press releases we put out there but local media add UH when they put the articles in the newspaper or put it on the TV. We've gotten some of them [*media*] educated, but some still do it. I mean as far as local people are concerned, we're part of the University, and it relates back to all those stories I was telling you about the incredible interaction between the East-West Center, which was part of the University, the interaction we had with the local community in the first 10 years. So why did we separate from the University? There were a number of different reasons. One was the University is a state-mandated organization. We're international. The [*UH*] Board of Regents doesn't have the same viewpoint as a board that would oversee us. So the EWC developed an International Advisory Panel, I think is what it was called, in the '60s. More focus on international was

one thing we wanted to be able to change. We wanted to be able to have an international board.

The second thing was -- as part of a state university -- there is a commitment to hiring State people, and/or Americans. So when we were pushing for hiring Asians and Pacific Islanders, it wasn't always easy to convince UH. But we really wanted to have an international staff.

A third part was we wanted to start getting the Asian and Pacific countries to contribute money to the Center programs, and they are smart enough to say, "A state university? We're not going to contribute to a state university, you've got 50 of them. We've got students in a lot of those states, and we'll be asked to give to them, too." So we weren't going to get any cooperation in getting money from the various countries as long as we were a part of a state institution. So we felt EWC had to go off on its own.

The fourth reason for EWC to become separate from UH was that we ran many programs such as conferences and practical professional training seminars which are not typical "university-style" programs. So there were these, I think, four very good reasons why EWC felt it was important for us to have our own separate identity. And we were successful in getting that in July 1975.

### ***The 1970s***

At the beginning of the '70s when Kleinjans really moved in and started the changes that he'd been brought on board to do, that's when we shifted into the research institutes.

It was really interesting to come back to EWC [*from working in Asia*] and see the

changes that were obviously happening by evolving into research institutes rather than participant institutes which was basically what the first 10 years were.

But as we got into the research institutes we also developed the Open Grants program, which is sort of the take-all program for the students that were here and that didn't fit into the change. And it also took about two years lead time to work in all the different countries with our field representatives to identify students who could come [*for the new research institutes*]. Because you've got to say what you want, then you have to make sure they've got all the different kinds of documents and tests that have to be taken, the TOEFL, etc. The field representatives ran a national selection for students in their country. Then they sent the slate of national student candidates to here, and we ran the international competition.

They were trying to match the students to what their companies or their universities wanted them to do with what the East-West Center wanted them to do when they came here. Not always a good, easy match.

So the ones that didn't match went into Open Grants. For example, if you came from the [*International*] Rice Research Institute in the Philippines, then they were expecting you to get a degree in something that would work well when you came back to the Rice Research Institute. Because back then, once you got your degree, you're supposed to go home for a minimum of two years and show that you're using your degree at home. East-West Center had a very good return rate. Despite the fact that we had so many cross-cultural marriages, we also still had a good return rate because the Thai-Micronesian combination would go back to Thailand for a few years and then they'd go to Micronesia for a few years, and

then they'd decide where they were going to live, and that particular couple I'm talking about did end up staying in Micronesia.

But, you know, I think that we could really say we did a very good job of the return rates for students back then. Now in the '70s you've got different kinds of things happening. Throughout the '60s we had a lot of local contacts, we had a lot of University of Hawai'i contacts, we had a lot of local businesses, local organizations, all that kind of thing. As we moved into the research institutes, it shifted almost totally to university types of things, because you're talking more academic.

Much less in the community. I mean, you no longer have an Institute of Technical Interchange. What you have is no longer training programs under the research institutes. Instead you have professional development programs. And the shift in terms is very appropriate.

The institutes then were Communications, Culture Learning, Food, Population, and Technology and Development. Programs like the Jefferson Fellows went into the Communications Institute. The late-1960s Population Summer Seminar obviously went into the Population Institute. This was the institute, the program that developed the most cooperation with the University because there were many University faculty who were population specialists but nothing to do with the East-West Center. They eventually got the Population Certificate through the University.

And we had lots of joint appointments between East-West Center and the University. That did not happen in the other institutes. And the AID type of

training that you've still got listed here in June of '73, I would say this was getting phased out. You'd have to go back into the books to find out exactly when it got phased out [*Office of Contract Training – USAID funded training*], but certainly that AID type of training was definitely phased out.

I'd say the '70s -- except for 1975 when we had worked up to becoming separate from the University -- was sort of a calm period in one sense, in that we didn't get a lot of budget cuts and weren't overly advised from Washington. We were consolidating the kinds of advisory groups that we had. We were consolidating what we were doing in research. Things were rapidly changing. It was hard on individuals, but I think for what the East-West Center was doing, it saw itself getting consolidated, as this is what we'll organize ourselves as, and this is what will work through the decades. And I think that really did happen.

### ***The 1980s***

The '80s started as Kleinjans left and Lee-Jay Cho, who was the director of our Population Institute, became interim president. Cho had a long relationship with the East-West Center so he was a good one, good scholar to pick for an interim position as president. And then we got Victor Li as president in July 1981. First Asian-American president we had, very much an intellectual, very much a power broker and quite aware of the diplomatic potential of the East-West Center.

He was a very interesting combination that way, because he very definitely was an intellectual person but he understood the power of working with senators and working with governments and with educational institutions. So that in the '80s, though this had been happening in the '60s and the '70s, the growth of

governmental contacts was phenomenal. The number of heads of government and other prominent officials who came by the East-West Center, you wouldn't believe. We've had every country represented by a head of government (except Vietnam?) at some point in our 50 years. We've even had the Dalai Lama come here.

### *The 1980s/Zhao Ziyang's Visit*

We had, I think, some really impressive visitors. The ones that got the most attention in the '80s were when the premier of China came to the United States, and this is a first -- that's the highest ranking Chinese official who had ever been to the U.S. He came to the East-West Center first, but he agreed to the mandate from the White House that he would not make any public statement until he got to Washington. So this was all private while he was here. We had a reception for him in Jefferson Hall. There were over 600 people who came to it. It was really, really a big EWC and community event. Lots of people got to shake his hand. Zhao Ziyang was like an Ohio senator on the political path. I mean, you could tell he was a politician. He didn't speak English, but he was shaking everybody's hands. I remember seeing one local Chinese man who had come to meet him, and after he shook the hand of Zhao Ziyang he's looking at his own hand and saying, "I just shook the hand of the head of my country." You know, I don't think he wanted to wash his hand for probably a month or something, because he had just shaken the hand of the head of his country. I mean, it was a really big thing for him.

### ***The 1980s/Pacific Summit***

In the '80s, I think we had so many heads of government, heads of universities visiting us. You know, the public awareness of us was just incredible in the '80s. The first President [*George H. W.*] Bush came out here and had a Pacific Summit, the first and only such one held. He came here when we also had a meeting of our Pacific Island Development consortium of leaders. We had all the heads of government from the Pacific countries come here and they had the Summit meeting in Jefferson Hall. And it was one of the few times -- I actually don't remember other times -- where we set up security gates like you have at the airport in order to check anybody who was going in and out because we had so many heads of government in one place. We had the red carpet out (laughter). It's the first and only Pacific Leaders Meeting that the U.S. has ever held [*This interview was in 2005*]. And President Bush made comments when he was here and right after that about how much he appreciated getting some idea of what Pacific concerns were. Something that he had not been aware of at all before. So our Pacific Islands Development Program was very much important in what was going on.

### ***LBJ's Visit***

There were many times when we used the Kennedy Theatre as the spot for having a president of a country, president of the United States. I mean, most of the presidents of the United States have been here.

Johnson, when he was president, gave a State of the Union ... type of address. We set up a stage between Jefferson Hall and Kennedy Theatre. We closed the street

and we set up a great, big, huge stage and that's where he gave the ... address that was obviously aimed at more international types of things and towards Asia international more than Europe international. We also had all these demonstrators, you know, who hung Johnson in effigy.

I mean, it was a very busy and noisy (laughter) event. Because that was going to get national television attention and be remembered -- this is in the '60s, now, I've backed up again. Anyway, I didn't know that you could paint grass to make it greener. (laughter), but because we were having so much television coverage, somebody came through the day before and sprayed something on all the grass in the area so that it looked very green. And they painted the sides of the buildings that would have been in the television camera coverage. We had color TV by then.

### ***The 1960s/Thai Pavilion***

I'm trying to remember another big event -- was it in the '60s or the '70s -- the king of Thailand gave a Thai Pavilion to the East-West Center [*dedicated June 6, 1967*]. Several years earlier we got, I don't know, 24, 32 boxes of a pavilion. A Thai temple. And our East-West Center administrators are looking at each other. A temple? We just got a temple? What are we going to do? I mean, our budget keeps getting cut. We can't put up a temple. And so we stored it.

The East-West Center stored it. I mean, we didn't have any money to put up a temple.

They didn't send anybody, they just sent us the boxes of pieces. The king knew, of course, that we hadn't put it up, because the Thai students talked with

everybody at home and they all had connections, sometimes with royalty and certainly with government officials. So when the king decided to come and dedicate his pavilion we got six months warning that the king and queen of Thailand were coming to bless their pavilion. And so EWC staff is looking at each other. We have a pavilion? Where? So then you had to find the staff member that remembered we'd gotten all these boxes, where'd we put them, etc. Now what do we do because we only had a few months to prepare? We got permission through various State of Hawai'i unions to have the Navy Seabees build the pavilion as a community project.

The Navy engineers are who built it. And they had to work with the Thai students because when we opened the boxes, all the instructions were in Thai.

At least they had instructions (laughter). But, you know, it was a combination of Thai students and the Seabees putting together the pavilion. The concrete tiers that hold up the pavilion were barely dry when the king and queen came. But they were dry. We'd gotten the pavilion constructed but we'd had to turn to the community, and in this case it was the military that came through and built it.

We've also been offered a complete Thai wooden temple too, you know. Because we've always, right from the beginning, had large international gifts for our campus, like the Japanese garden.

### ***The 1960s/Japanese Garden***

The Japanese garden was actually one of the ITI [*Institute of Technical Interchange*] projects in landscape design in the early '60s. What they did is they brought in a group of Japanese landscape artists who were going to build the

Japanese garden, but they also brought in Americans and other nationalities of people who were part of the project to learn about putting together and teaching at the same time. And you know, we got about 40 different Japanese organizations in Japan and here to cooperate with the expense of it, because, I mean, that area used to just be a pasture. It didn't look anything like what it looks like now at all. They just totally re-did it. I can remember (laughter), because Jefferson Hall was already built, and standing on the concrete lanai out back you could watch them put together what they were doing with the garden. They'd have a big crane out there and the crane would move over and pick up this huge rock, and all of the Japanese would hunker around it and have the rock put down in a certain place. And then everybody would discuss if it was right. Did it look right? And if it didn't, they'd pick it up again.

And turn it 20° (laughter). Or put it somewhere else. And it was amazing to watch them do that with every tree that they were putting in there, every rock. The waterfall that they built and building the stream in there. And of course, everything has symbolic meaning. The shape of the stream, the koi that got put into it, the lantern that's at the top of the waterfall and the lantern that's at the bottom. You know, all these things have very significant meaning in the Japanese culture. I'm not sure of the date, we'd have to look in the records [1963-64].

That's when the prince and princess [*of Japan*] came, and they introduced the koi into the stream.

They got the koi from a Japanese fish organization here in Hawai'i. And it was very interesting, when they put the fish in. Because this is a new place for the

fish, all the fish just formed a circle. They just kept following each other in a circle. You know, it was safe. I mean, they were in a new place, right? So they were following all the other fish. And then gradually you'd see a fish go off this way or a fish go off that way. You could see that all from the Jefferson lanai. It was very easy to really see it. And it took a while, it took them hours before the fish moved out to all the parts of the stream that was there.

The willow tree was planted by one of the prime ministers of Japan. And we've also had, when the prince came later, we had another tree. So we've had individuals of different levels of importance in Japan that have come and planted something there.

The tea house was given to the University of Hawai'i from the Urasenke Tea Ceremony Foundation. That's the largest tea ceremony foundation in Japan. And they have a very strong outreach around the world to teach tea ceremony in various countries. The *sensei* for Urasenke is perhaps the number three richest person in Japan. I mean, we're talking about, many, many generations, and all of them were very, very important.

So it was very nice when eventually we got the head of the Urasenke Foundation on our Board as a representative from Japan. The Japanese tea house, like the Thai pavilion, was built in its home country, taken apart, put in boxes, brought over here, and rebuilt. And the University is still the one that schedules the use of the tea house, not the East-West Center, even though it's on the East-West Center grounds. Because they have a program where they do have some tea ceremony classes so it's always stayed with them, it's not stayed with us. It's the only thing I

can think of that's on our grounds that, that we let the University do the running of.

I haven't heard much going on there. I think partly because the tea house is getting old and the more people they have in there, the more wear and tear.

So no, we don't see much in the way of anything there. But the Urasenke *sensei* came several times and did tea ceremonies there, or did them in the garden. I mean, we've held many interesting things in the garden. I can remember one time when we had an Aborigine performing group here from Australia and though the garden is actually a little bit too lush for a background for them, at least it was outdoors and we weren't about to do an Aborigine performance inside the building. So we had them do it in the garden. And it was chicken skin [*goose bumps*], because all of a sudden -- there are no performers in the garden, just disappeared -- then all of a sudden all these Aborigines just sort of appear from nowhere. Because they were in the trees.

I watched from the second floor lanai of Jefferson Hall when they were dancing. You could see the dance patterns that you would normally not see from the same level as the dancer, but I'm up two stories, right? So when he's dancing a gecko, you can see the Aborigine's whole body becomes a gecko. I mean, the whole shape of what he was, it was just, oh! It was just, it was really amazing.

The Japanese garden has always been very popular with local people. And with brides.

Weddings. It finally got to the point that we had so many weddings, couples coming here to get their pictures taken in the Japanese garden that you couldn't

get near it on the weekend. And they weren't cleaning up after themselves. You know, they came to a beautiful place and then they'd leave their papers and Coke bottles and things around. So we finally got to the point where we knew that commercial photographers were making money on this and they were not checking with us. So, we said, you're destroying our garden. I'm sorry, we're going to have to stop this. And so we had to really get pretty tough with a couple of them, that they couldn't come and take their pictures here anyway. We had to involve both EWC staff and campus policy to get things in control. It was very, very popular with local people.

### ***Hawai'i International Film Festival (HIFF)***

One of the programs we've never mentioned, and that should fit in here somewhere is the Hawai'i International Film Festival. That was something that Jeannette Paulson designed in the late '70s.

Victor Li wanted a good community outreach program and she came up with the idea of the film festival. And I've never seen anything grow so fast and so well as what she put together with that idea. It involved us with the local community again. It certainly involved us with lots of people in the film industry. And it got so big that certainly Culture Learning Institute finally said, this project is bigger than all the rest of our programs. We can't continue to support it. And eventually it did become a separate entity and still exists in the local community. Still called the Hawai'i International Film Festival.

It now has a big business corporation name in front of it, because that's where they're getting a large amount of money. I can't think of what it is. But they still

maintain the film festival's vision of identifying films that show people adjusting across cultures. And that's what the East-West Center, you know, set up.

I particularly remember the year we had a focus on Vietnam. I had an exhibition in the lobby -- it was not a gallery then, it was the lobby -- of Vietnamese film posters, but it was the original drawings that were later turned into the posters, OK? And I thought we should also include taste, smell, everything. So I worked with the little Vietnamese restaurant down at the bottom of the hill, and during the film festival, we set up small café tables in the lobby and at noon the Vietnamese restaurant would deliver some things for people to sample Vietnamese food.

And we had to double the food every day (laughter). Word got around. We were showing films, documentary types in the old auditorium that we had, which is now where the gallery is, right? So, so that's why we could have the little tables out there in the lobby.

But I also got involved with what they were doing with films out at Pearl Harbor. They have a nice film screening area. And they had American, Vietnamese and French films about Vietnam, particularly the war. And American, Vietnamese and French directors. And American, Vietnamese and French actors. The emotional level of what was happening out there was really high because there were a lot of people in the military who attended things because the theatre was out in that part of the island.

Oh, it was chicken skin [*goose bumps*]. There were people crying most nights.

The sessions went on for many hours more than we thought they would, as discussions focused on why the Vietnamese films saw it this way, why the French

films saw it that way, why the American films saw it another way. I mean, it was a perfect example of some of the best things that happened with having something like a film festival here and with the strong focus that we had on the culture and, you know, learning about the different attitudes.

Oh, it was cathartic; it was exciting. Exciting!

### ***Late '80s/Oksenberg Presidency***

He was born in Belgium, and he didn't come -- like Victor Li -- he didn't come to the U.S. until he was like eight or nine years old. He was a man who had very strong opinions. He knew exactly what to do. And he knew what he was told to do by the [Board of ] Governors.

### ***Strengthening ties with U.S.***

He took the mandate that the Board of Governors had, where we had to do more for and about the United States. That's when we moved from the CTAPS program into the ASDP, the Asian Studies Development Program. He had us expand to mainland universities and reach out more to black universities. We sent recruiters out, we sent materials everywhere. Our previous experience at EWC was that when blacks become culturally conscious, they're more likely to be relating to African Studies than to Asian Studies. But Oksenberg was right, you know. We did improve the numbers of blacks that we have involved in a variety of our programs, but we didn't get, I think, the numbers he was thinking we would. And that didn't satisfy him, because he thought we ought to be able to get more of them.

### ***Alumni Action***

*[In 1994 there was a major shift in the U.S. Congress]*

We ended up getting told that EWC was going to be eliminated as an organization. In four years we'd be totally phased out. It was alumni and others who were the ones that got to people in Washington.

Alumni -- I don't know which presidents and prime ministers of countries but I know they got in touch with the president of the United States and said, what are you doing? You know, this is the only education/research program that the U.S. has got that we have this much contact with and input. Why are you killing this program? I mean, it's not even the cost of the wing tip of one of your airplanes. I mean, what are you going to gain by doing this (laughter)? So, I think that they didn't realize the power of alumni and the power of all the contacts that we'd made in the first three decades. Where they said, no, you can't eliminate something like the East-West Center.

As a footnote, American alumni are not as well placed as are those in Asia and the Pacific. We're a much bigger country. We're much more spread out. East-West Center does not have the same effect in the United States, in China, in India, just because of the sheer size of the countries and the small number of people we are involved to cover that sheer size.

***RIF (Reduction in Force)***

We had to cut our student body down drastically and we hardly brought in any students because we were getting our budget cut from Washington. We cut our staff in half. And that's when, you know, half the people here lost their jobs. In '94 or '95. So Oksenberg was out and we really inherited an excellent interim

president with Kenji Sumida of Hawai'i.

First, he's a local boy, so he had a very good understanding of, I think, the cross-cultural types of things that were so much of concern with the East-West Center.

And, Kenji was, I think it's Army Reserve, because I think his title is general.

He's a very good organizer, and he was very committed to involving everybody at the East-West Center.

He was very into participation. But because he was military, he also understood hierarchy. He also had contacts back in Washington. He came from UH. Well, from local government, too. I don't know which part came first or where. But, he was a good administrator. He was a very personable person. His focus was to pull the East-West Center -- the people here, right here -- get them back together and feeling good about what the Center was. Because he felt good about what the Center was.

And he knew how to relate to the people in Washington. That had the money and were the ones that were saying, you're going to be zeroed out by the year 2000. So he was very good locally and he was very good in Washington. And at that point, we didn't have to do all that much relating with the University. It was mostly, you know, trying to get the East-West Center to feel good about itself and to improve our relations in Washington so we wouldn't be cut out. And so Kenji was very important in that.

Oh, the alumni were really involved in that. Save the EWC. And you know, we do have well-placed American alumni. I mean, we have ambassadors, and heads of big corporations and things like that. But not as many in the U.S as we would

have from other countries. But we made every effort to get in touch with them. And they made every effort to get in touch with their senators, who were the important people to reach in Washington. It was one of those kinds of things where the alumni really proved their value.

### ***Sumida Presidency***

Kenji had to get the morale back up of all the staff. And of the students. And he had to convince Washington that this is an important institution. Asia and the Pacific are telling you it's an important institution. We're telling you it's an important institution. Doesn't cost you very much. This should continue. And he did it.

We were cut in half. You don't have as many people to run things. You look at what you're doing. We were overly structured. So that's when we dropped the institutes and started calling our approach "programs." And we didn't keep this intricate administration. We organized all the program officers to one spot, and we organized all the heads of programs, who were another group, etc. We still had all the types of participants that we had back in the '60s, we just, again, organized in a different way. And part of it was to not have to have as high a level of hierarchy in administration.

Definitely saved money. And we didn't have that much to work with. Because by the mid-'90s, we were already half down [*budget*] from what we had been before.

### ***Morrison Presidency***

So this is usually not a time when you would seem to have good luck finding a

new president. Finding someone who wants to be president of an institution in that kind of condition was pretty tough. And so our [*Board of*] Governors ended up eventually picking someone who was in the East-West Center, which had never happened before. And they picked Charles Morrison, who is an internationalist.

Perfect kind of choice. I mean, he has great experience in Japan, so that's his primary other culture, but he's very aware of being cross-cultural, he's very aware of being cross-discipline, he's very aware of involving all types of people and advice from everywhere imaginable. I think we probably got a lot better than what we thought we were going to get.

He was here for about 18 years as a researcher. I mean it was very difficult. Everybody saying, "Why did you pick him?" He doesn't have any administrative -- again, somebody who doesn't have the administrative background that someone like Kenji had. I mean, Kenji was a perfect example of how good an administrator you can be. And here's somebody who's been a researcher doing his own thing over in his office in the corner over there. It was, you know, it was interesting that he would have applied; it was interesting that they picked him, and I think we got very lucky, because he has really understood, I think, what the East-West Center is.

I think he's worked well with alumni. Again, he saw the importance of the alumni office, maybe because we wouldn't have existed if the alumni hadn't gotten involved in the '90s. He saw the worth of them. He knew a lot of the researchers here, he knew whether or not people thought the research we were doing was

relevant, and any good. He seemed to talk well with students. He seemed to work pretty well with all the important individuals who came by, and he just really worked out to be a very good president.

The student program has gone back up in numbers again. Very definitely. It's gone back up in other different ways. A lot of it depends on what you call somebody when they come here, whether you call them a professional participant or student participant. We have some programs now that back in the '60s we would have called professional, and now we call students. 'Cause we've always had this commitment, the East-West Center has continued to have degree students at the University of Hawai'i.

### ***Illustrious Visitors***

We didn't get many heads of government and organizations coming to EWC when Oksenberg was here. The exception was when the emperor and empress of Japan came, because the new emperor and empress wanted to make a state visit to the U.S. and that event fell in his five-year term, right? It was a big thing that the emperor wanted to come and stop at the East-West Center and meet the East-West Center students and faculty. And it was just, it was an incredible event. It's one of the things that makes me look at the East-West Center and the kind of involvement I've had with it for almost 45 years. Where else could you ever be and meet the kinds of people that I've met, that my family has gotten aware of, than at the East-West Center?

### **Partnerships and Networks**

#### ***UH Gamelan Orchestra***

At one point, the University of Hawai'i had a new Indonesian gamelan orchestra and Pak [*Hardja*] Susilo was the teacher -- Hardja Susilo, first name is H-A-R-D-J-A. He was going to take 28 students, or 25 students with three faculty members to Indonesia to study for three months. One of the other faculty members who was going to go was Ric Trimillos, who was part of my group from the early '60s. We started the same day at the East-West Center in '62.

Sus and his wife got divorced just before they were ready to go to Indonesia that spring. So his wife, who was going to be the third faculty member, needed somebody to replace her. Ric says, well, why don't we talk to Benji? She's got a background in Indonesia, you know, she might like to go. And I said, Oh! I'd love to go. I joined the gamelan in February of '73, so I would at least have a little idea of what the music was all about, because I was not a musician, I'd never done anything musical before that. So when we left at the end of May, I would at least know some of the people, and know a little bit about the gamelan. That was a marvelous three months that we had, the 28 of us in Yogyakarta.

And it was interesting that all the official contacts that Pak Susilo and Ric had to make in order to get our group there turned out to be East-West Center alumni.

Oh, it's always a small world when you start dealing with Asia or Pacific, if you're East-West Center. Very small world. And so it went very smoothly to get the approvals. Because you had to have a research approval, you had to have an immigration visa approval, and we had to have the approval of the school that we were going to be attached with in Yogyakarta, the art school. All of the approval contacts turned out to be associated with the East-West Center.

So it went very smoothly. And from then on, since '73, I've played with the UH gamelan. And we usually perform in Hawai'i, doing public performances about twice a year.

The gamelan is made up of a series of xylophone-like type instruments and of gong-type instruments. It does have a couple of string instruments. I play mostly either one of the xylophone-types of things or one of the gong groups. The way Susilo teaches you to play in the gamelan is you do not get assigned to an instrument. You must be able to sit wherever they need you. So, if I came into rehearsal late, I've got to sit where there was an empty spot, and you should know how to play that, because that's the way Indonesians would do it.

Some of the instruments are more difficult than the others, so, you know, it can be very hard. But it's a very good way to teach gamelan. It is the way it would be done in Indonesia. I think he has been -- Pak Susilo -- has been recognized by his home country as a living treasure of Indonesia for teaching about gamelan in the Western world because he's done so well with the program here. Just unbelievably well.

He just retired in December [2004]. But he does come on Saturdays when they have rehearsal, and plays with them. Because he can play any instrument, right, and keep track of everybody playing on all the other instruments and tell you whether you're doing it right.

The drum is the leader. The drum is the one that tells you what song you're doing, how fast you're doing it, when you're making a transition to something else.

We were never supposed to have music. We had sheet music, you know, if we

didn't think we were comfortable with it. I usually (laughter) wrote down the gong and the first eight notes, that was on my little crib sheet. So I could make sure if I got into it, and then it just flowed, you know. But he didn't want us to have music there.

It was interesting when we took the group of Americans to Indonesia. First of all, of course, our group had a lot of local kids. So we had Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, Filipino Americans, Chinese Americans, we had an Indian, we had *haoles*. It was mostly local kids who were at the music department, right? Plus a few others like the Indian lady and you know, myself. So we were not the typical American group that any of the Indonesians had ever seen. So they kept saying, you're Asian. Yes, but I'm an American (laughter). You know, this kind of thing. So it was a real education for the local Indonesian community.

We were there for three months, but it might have taken almost six weeks for the Indonesians to really register that we were there to learn their music, not to teach them something Western. Because any group that had come before was always teaching them. So they were afraid we were going to move into that mode. But we had, for the 25 plus the three teachers, so 28 of us, we had 19 teachers.

Because there were all different kinds of things to learn. I took courses in makeup, in costuming, in stories, you know that kind of thing, because I wasn't into dancing. We all played in the gamelan, but I wasn't that good. I mean, I'd only been playing the music since February.

But, it was really very, very good. We took over a whole little inn in Yogyakarta. And it was nice that this little inn had a room that had a gamelan in it. So we

were able to do our ensemble rehearsals right in the hotel. Lots of teachers came to the hotel because they found that kind of fun, and because the hotel was very interested in this group of foreigners that they had there. And they would always serve tea and you know, Indonesian's *pupus*, while the teachers were there because these were important people in the community.

In Indonesia, the gamelan players, particularly the well-known teachers, are significant people. They're well-respected by the community, so the hotel was bending over backwards to always do all this while we were there. And at one point we got invited by the sultan to do a public performance, to show what we'd learned, at the *pendopo*, which is the small stage area -- "pen-doo-po." I mean, this was great -- all the officials in the city were invited to come to this because this is the first time they'd ever had a group of 28 foreigners come to study. I mean, we were very obvious in the community as we had to walk everywhere. I think I was in a car once in the three months that I was there. So we walked everywhere or went by *becak*, which is the Indonesian version of a rickshaw. People we didn't know would just look at us and say, Aloha! (laughter). And the drivers of the *becaks* got to know our teaching schedule.

We'd go down to the main drag in Yogyakarta and we'd go in and get a nice drink, because it was very hot there, right? And the *becak* driver would come up to the door. He goes, "You're going to be late for class unless I take you now" (laughter).

Because they knew everybody's class schedule and whether or not they had to go somewhere, and how long it would take to get there and they kept track of us. So,

when we did this performance at the sultan of Yogyakarta's palace, all the *becak* drivers were there, hanging over the fence to watch.

It was an incredible experience. And the community there was just totally nonplussed by what we did or tried to do. First of all, when we just walked out on the stage so they could introduce us, we were all dressed Javanese.

Oh my God! They just broke into hysteria! You know, all these people standing up there dressed as Javanese. Then, we sit down and we start playing and then the first person sang. Oh my God! "They've got somebody who can sing in Javanese." And then the dancers went out there. Oh my God! And one of the dancers we had was Byron Moon, who is the assistant director of the gamelan now and an EWC alum. A local boy, half Korean, but he's about 6 feet tall, and an excellent dancer. Excellent musician. So he got out on the stage, with one of the headdresses on, so you know, this adds another foot of height, right. So he gets out there on the stage. The Javanese people -- you know are about her size and smaller [*Editor's note: Benji is referring to the interviewer who is about 5 foot tall.*]

Here he is, he's out there dancing this real strong dance. And then we had a few other dancers and all with elaborate costumes and makeup. So they, the audience was just totally nonplussed that a foreign group could do this. The sultan's guests were really impressed.

The sultan didn't attend -- because he'd attended things that foreigners had done before. I mean, let's face it, we were invited to go and hear Indonesians playing Western music, and frequently it was excruciating. It was so poorly done. They

didn't have the right instruments, they weren't all on the same scale (laughter). All these kinds of things. So, you know, who could blame them if things went wrong with foreigners coming in and doing their thing.

The very next day, the sultan invited all of us to his palace for tea. That was his apology. I mean, he never actually apologized for not being there, but he'd heard such good things about us. Oh, we made zillions of mistakes, because of all the things that we attempted but because we did have some very good musicians, they were totally impressed.

I played several different instruments 'cause Sus moved us around to different instruments, right? Sooooo...I went to sit in a group of gongs about this big [*6 feet x 6 feet*] and they're a big group that surrounds you like this. Well, the Indonesian who had been playing before me was one of my teachers, Pak Bundu, and he was about 75 pounds. He was one of the smallest Indonesians I've ever seen. And he didn't like how far he had to stretch to play these things, so he'd moved them around.

Well, no, he'd actually taken a kettle that was this tone and put it over here, because he liked to play it there, and then he moved that one somewhere else. So he'd move things. Well, I was so new to all this, I was playing it kinetically. You know, I hit there, I hit here, I hit there (laughter). I had this all worked out -- and he changed all the notes around.

Oh, God! I just totally fell apart in that one. I played fine when I was on the xylophones because nobody was moving the keys around. But he'd moved this. And, you know, the Indonesians immediately recognized what had happened. I

knew it was wrong, but I didn't know where the right one was, you know. So then there's the Indonesians surrounding me (laughter) -- pointing this one next. This one next. This one next. (laughter). Because they could just tell by looking at them, let alone the sound, where they, where they were.

Its repetitive, it can be meditative at some points. If you do Balinese, it's very fast and exciting, and we have a Balinese gamelan, too, and I've learned how to play actually only one instrument in the Balinese, because I've not gotten as involved in that. Gamelan is good for your soul. If you don't do it or you don't hear it for a while, you feel the lack of it when you get that involved in it. And Sus, Sus is just an extraordinary teacher. Many of the students that are in there have had East-West Center connections. Sus was also at the East-West Center.

Bill [*Feltz*] did a videotape on explaining gamelan music. It's a half-hour teaching aid for schools. Both Byron Moon and Susilo were here at the East-West Center to put together that tape. It was like a six-month project to put that tape together using the gamelan and EWC still gets requests for it. We still have copies of it and send it out to teachers, because it's still one of the best explanations of what a gamelan is in a cultural sense. Of course, that's very important to the East-West Center that we got the cultural part in there besides the music part. And the gamelan plays for lots of events for the East-West Center. Luckily.

In December we had the retirement party for Susilo, and we had it over in Jefferson Hall. We brought the whole gamelan over for that. And that's when the [*Indian Ocean, 2004*] tsunami happened, right?

So we left the gamelan in Jefferson Hall. Then when the East-West Center had

its program on the *lanai* of Jefferson to recognize this tragedy and raising money, the gamelan played because what happened with the tsunami in Indonesia was very important to so many of us.

**SEE Parts 1 & 3**