

FILIPINO EXPERIENCE IN HAWAI'I

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The collective experience of Filipinos in Hawai'i is a story of struggle often misunderstood. It began at the turn of the century when Hawai'i was on her way to becoming a world sugar producer but was faced with the dwindling supply of cheap labor. Very few Chinese contract workers had stayed on plantations, the Japanese were beginning to leave, and legal barriers, such as the Chinese Exclusion Acts and the Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan, prevented recruiting more of either group. At such a moment the very new territory of Hawai'i looked to another recent U.S. possession, the Philippines.

The Philippine revolution against Spain was virtually won when U.S. expansionist tendencies led to intervention. Spanish officials, reluctant to surrender to Filipino forces, capitulated instead to the U.S. in the Treaty of Paris, 10 December 1898. Seeking a labor supply free from external control, the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association (HSPA) found the Philippines an expedient source. Filipinos, then, were U.S. nationals who could move freely and their entry to the Islands would be scrutinized only by fellow Americans serving the respective territorial governments of Hawai'i and the Philippines. Thus, in 1906, the importation of Filipino laborers began.

The Host Society

The plantations of Hawai'i, especially during their early history, have been likened to a political kingdom where the manager exercised both economic and political control over the laborers and their families.¹ Immigrant labor was viewed chiefly as an economic commodity and the planters were little concerned with the adjustment that each immigrant group would have to make in the process of being uprooted from their culture and adjusting to living with other ethnic groups. In fact, it was the planters' belief that the best way to control their workers was in a community of segregated ethnic camps, so that the physical distances between them would prevent a united opposition of labor to management in a strike for higher wages or improved living conditions.

This was the environment that confronted the first wave of Filipino immigrants when they arrived in Hawai'i. During its early history the plantation industry was a rigid socio-economic system that was characterized by class as well as racial stratification, with a small elite of *haole* planters and businessmen at the top who controlled the industry on which so many of the social institutions of Hawai'i were built, and it was supported at the bottom by the thousands of immigrant laborers whose toil produced the wealth of Hawai'i.

The Early Filipinos

Between 1906 and 1946 (when the Philippines achieved independence) the HSPA recruited 126,000 Filipinos to work in the plantations. The recruitment was primarily among the physically strong and less educated members of the working class. Planter experience with workers of other ethnic groups had shaped a recruitment policy which placed a premium on the less literate whose potential to conform seemed greater. To ensure that only hard-working men were admitted, the HSPA instituted a "rough hand" inspection and selected only young able-bodied men with thick, calloused hands. The 1916 Report of the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics confirmed the prevailing conception among plantation managers that the Filipino laborers had only economic value and that they were viewed primarily as instruments of production.²

At first, Filipino laborers were brought to Hawai'i with no provisions for their return to their homeland. But in 1915, due to increasing protest, the HSPA worked out a system of individual contract under which the terms of employment were specifically provided. The contract provided each recruit with free passage to Hawai'i, housing and other perquisites, and free return passage upon completion of at least three years of good work. Almost all intended going back at the end of their contract. In 1926, the transportation payment for coming to Hawai'i was discontinued. Apparently the HSPA believed that the tales of the good life in Hawai'i were sufficient inducement to prospective laborers.

As the last of the ethnic groups to be recruited for plantation labor, Filipinos continued over the longest period to be assigned to the most difficult and least desirable tasks—planting, weeding, cultivating, cutting, hauling, loading, and fluming, and at corresponding low pay. Whereas members of other

ethnic groups imported earlier might have been advanced to supervisory positions, Filipinos were commonly kept at the level of the lowest skill and economic returns. Actually, the plantation had evolved a system of occupational stratification and differential pay based not on personal qualifications but on racial background.

There were three major linguistic groupings among the early Filipinos brought to Hawai'i. The *Tagalogs*, as the first group to be recruited, came from the vicinity of Manila and neighboring Central Luzon provinces. Because of their wider contacts with the western world, they became a people of diverse occupations with urban sophistication and therefore made them less adaptable to Hawaiian plantation life. Many soon left the plantations to live in Honolulu and other cities on the mainland.

The second linguistic group came from the Visayas and the northern provinces of Mindanao. The *Visayans* were known to be devout Roman Catholics and Spanish customs and ceremonies had been extensively incorporated into their culture. They were hard-working but were thought to have a romantic outlook which viewed life to be enjoyed to the fullest. This attitude was said to have created problems after paydays because many would take off and spend their money freely, perhaps to escape from the drudgery of daily plantation life.

The *Ilokanos* were the last but largest linguistic group brought to the Islands. They came from the northern part of Luzon known as the Ilocos provinces where natural resources are less abundant and earning a livelihood is difficult. Consequently Ilokanos generally are more hard-working and thrifty, compared to their Tagalog and Visayan counterparts. They also seem more temperamental and prone to violence and have sometimes been described as the "Irish" of the Philippines.

Demographic Information

Among early Filipinos, the male to female ratio was unusually abnormal. In 1920 the ratio among adults (twenty-one years old and over) was 685 males to every 100 females, and by 1930 the ratio had increased to 975 men to every 100 women. Even as late as 1950, there were 628 men to every 100 women among the foreign-born Filipinos in Hawai'i. As a consequence of the abnormal male-female ratio, family life as it was known in the Philippines was almost impossible. It was not uncommon

for women to change husbands frequently, and this naturally made family life unstable and served to undermine the whole of the traditional social structure of the Filipinos. In the Philippines the family or clan has a very decisive influence on one's personal status and social mobility.

Because of severe immigration restrictions imposed by the U.S. under legislation first enacted in 1921, the relatively few Filipinos who came to Hawai'i between 1947 and 1965 were generally better educated, adaptable, and sophisticated. They gained confidence quite rapidly, compared to the earlier immigrants, and commonly wished to become permanent members of the community. Many possessed a skill or had professional training which enabled them to adapt more rapidly. Generally, their children were not ashamed to admit their ancestry and were proud of their ethnic heritage. The 1970 U.S. census listed a total of 95,680 persons of Filipino ancestry living in Hawai'i or 12.5 percent of the total population.

Under the greatly liberalized provisions of the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, nearly 50,000 Filipinos were admitted to Hawai'i as permanent residents between 1966 and 1980. They came chiefly as close relatives of citizens or resident alien Filipinos already in Hawai'i. Their most striking characteristic, compared to earlier arrivals, is the large number of young children. This is a sharp contrast to the situation in the early labor immigration. Of the 126,000 brought by HSPA between 1909 and 1946, only 5.5 percent were children, 7.5 percent were women, and the great majority (87 percent) were men. The latest immigrants were more normally distributed as to age and sex, and children, women, and older persons came as a family unit. For instance, of the 1976 immigrants 29.1 percent were youngsters nineteen years old and under, 64.2 percent were twenty to fifty-nine years old and 6.7 percent were sixty years old and older. Females constitute about 55 percent of the population.

The 1970 U.S. census revealed that Filipino families in Hawai'i have substantially larger households than Filipinos in other states of the Union. This seems to indicate that the lifestyle of Filipinos in Hawai'i is closer to the home country where a sizable number of children is considered an asset, and newly arrived relatives from the Philippines are encouraged to live with the host family.

Problems of Adjustment

Each wave of immigrants brought its own peculiar difficulties in adjusting to American society. In fact, the Filipinos, being the last to arrive, are still the most disadvantaged among major immigrant groups in the Islands. Because the first group was recruited primarily for plantation work, the selection process took place almost wholly among manual workers, the less educated, and those most physically fit. Such a selection process had the inevitable effect of denying immigrant Filipinos the type of leadership and control to which they were accustomed in the homeland. In the Philippines, such responsibilities were vested chiefly among community elders, and their absence in Hawai'i was a serious loss to youthful immigrants, especially in their wider community relationships.

Equally serious was the lack of assertiveness among Filipinos and the propensity of admiring anything but Filipino. For 400 years, Filipinos were made to believe that their native culture was of no merit and that they should reject anything Filipino. Both Spanish and American colonial administrators had implanted among Filipinos the feeling of inferiority and such mentality inhibits active participation in community affairs.

Filipino children born in Hawai'i of immigrant parents had somewhat different problems of adjustment, including some which will persist into the next generation. By 1950 there were already 27,000 Filipinos of American birth in Hawai'i, but most were still children. As they came of school age, they faced the peculiar problems of reconciling the expectations of their immigrant parents and neighbors with those of their Hawai'i-born contemporaries. At school and in the wider community they were accorded the dubious reputation of their lowly, poorly paid parents, and the poor economic status compelled children, particularly boys, to seek employment as early as possible, rather than additional education as a means of advancement.

Because of the highly abnormal population distribution and the resultant instability of family conditions, moral controls common in the homeland could not be effectively transmitted to Hawai'i-born Filipinos. Neither were the many Filipino organizations very successful in providing Filipino youth with models and community support. The elders' preoccupation with fiestas, *terno* balls, and other festive celebrations,

while having value in keeping certain aspects of Filipino culture alive, tended to dissipate limited resources and impede attention to matters of more serious concern.

Another obstacle which Filipinos born in Hawai'i still encounter is the inheritance of exaggerated stereotypes which grew up around early immigrants as uncultured, improvident, hot-tempered and oversexed. Such undeserved characterization had the effect for quite some time of discouraging young people of other ethnic groups from associating with Filipinos on a free and open basis. Filipino students have sometimes been discouraged by teachers from taking academic courses essential to college admission. It was common knowledge that the tracking system had been applied to certain groups of students. Unfortunately, many public school teachers have assumed that Filipino students are too quiet and passive to be successful in any profession that involves articulation and verbal skills. The tragedy is that a great many Filipino students had their dreams and aspirations crushed as early as in elementary school; and their relatively low enrollment in institutions of higher learning has reinforced the unwarranted opinion that Filipinos are inferior in mentality and hence incapable of occupations and associations of an intellectual nature. The inability of teachers to respond sensitively to Filipino schoolchildren caught in the conflict of cultures has contributed greatly to such failures.

Related to this problem is the difficulty in affirming one's ethnic identity. In the Philippines, identity is usually based on one's role in the family, neighborhood or community and not on his difference from another racial group. But this was not the case when Filipinos came to Hawai'i. Their individuality or character as a person has lost its visibility because of the externally imposed stereotypes and mass identification foisted upon the early Filipinos.

This began on the plantations where workers were categorized and treated according to racial extraction. And this form of unjust identity has continued off the plantations as well. Local born youngsters have suffered the most as a consequence of this distorted picture of the Filipinos in Hawai'i. In their desire to escape from this predicament, they begin to identify themselves as Filipino-Spanish, or Filipino-Chinese, or Filipino-Hawaiian, and seldom simply as Filipino. It is a matter of record that many children of other immigrant groups changed their names, or the spelling and pronunciation in order to gain acceptability in American society.

The emergence of a common identity and pride of ancestry is a new experience for most Filipinos in Hawai'i. In the process, they will certainly undergo some measure of conflict and misunderstanding.

Cultural Propensities

Many Filipino cultural values are congruent to some degree with western culture; however, some traditional values and practices conflict with those of the dominant society and need considerable understanding. Unlike local residents, Filipinos avoid direct personal confrontation. They regard interpersonal relations as vital, and would rather employ a third party to resolve a potentially explosive situation. In American society, this inclination tends to complicate rather than resolve interpersonal problems.

Related to this social value is the Filipinos' inability to handle open conflict in American style. Americans are accustomed to speaking their minds and can engage in loud or angry argument without affecting their friendship. To a Filipino, coming from a culture that seeks to sidestep or divert conflict whenever possible, such behavior in handling differences is unbecoming. In the acculturation process, Filipinos need to recognize that they are in America and to understand that open conflict is part of American life and that one is expected to speak up for his point of view, and that an argument doesn't mean an end of a friendship.

Filipinos regard family ties as the most important of all human relationships. In Philippine society, the social status of a person is derived from family standing, achievement and wealth. Success is seen in terms of family enterprise rather than individual efforts. To be a good member one has to be subservient to the family. Generally, children remain submissive even to the point of giving up personal ambitions, including marriage, if they run against the wishes of their parents. This peculiar Filipino trait somehow stifles individual initiative and makes the person less responsible for his action.

Filipino childrearing patterns encourage the individual to be reciprocally dependent on kinship groups. This value of building one's kinship alliance has been harnessed very well among Filipinos in Hawai'i. This is evident in the way Filipinos are able to purchase homes by pooling the savings of family members and kinsmen for a down payment or by

banding together to qualify for a mortgage loan. The strength of this alliance system is also evident in times of death or in festive celebrations for wedding or baptismal parties. Here again, individual achievement and assertiveness are sacrificed in behalf of harmony and security for the group.

As a subject people for more than 400 years, Filipinos developed a fatalistic philosophy of utter submission to those of superior station and to supernatural powers. Generally, they do not regard obstacles to be overcome but rather to be adjusted to, believing that they have very little or no control of their own destiny. They perceived that some problems can be resolved merely by allowing the passing of time and the operation of a power beyond their own.

Impact on the Community

Quantitatively the contribution of Filipinos to the economic well-being of Hawai'i has been greatest at the level of labor during the first seventy years of their residence. During more than fifty of these years, Filipinos made up well over half the workers on sugar and pineapple plantations of Hawai'i. Throughout the entire period their proportion of employed persons classified by the U.S. census as laborers was the highest of any of the major ethnic groups in the Islands. Filipinos have carried the major burden of labor in stevedoring, construction, hotel operation, and the tourist industry. The so-called service occupations—attendants in hospitals, waiters in restaurants, janitors and watchmen—have drawn heavily on immigrant Filipinos for the many menial tasks essential to the corporate life of the community.

Although so much of the weight of labor has been on the shoulders of Filipinos brought to Hawai'i between 1906 and 1946, not all chose to remain at that level. As early as 1930, according to the census, 10 percent of Filipino immigrants had found occupations other than as laborers, chiefly in skilled and semi-skilled fields as fishermen, carpenters, longshoremen, barbers and tailors. A significant minority established themselves as salesmen and in retail trade, and a smaller number as musicians and ministers.

In less than a generation, nearly half of the employed Filipino men (47.5 percent) were engaged in occupations other than as laborers. By 1950 they had moved especially into more remunerative occupations

as operatives and craftsmen, but as their numbers were strengthened by well-educated and experienced members of the newer immigration and the Hawai'i-born generation, Filipinos were able to enter business management and the professions to a limited degree.

Prior to the 1970 census, Hawai'i Filipinos had become sufficiently adjusted to local economic expectations to have largely graduated out of the category of unskilled labor, leaving less than 28 percent of the employed men still so classified. The largest number of Filipino men (42.5 percent) was in skilled and semi-skilled occupations, but a respectable proportion (4.6 percent) was in professional pursuits, considering the legal and other obstacles which trained personnel among recent immigrants had to overcome. The relatively few business enterprises in which Filipinos have gained firm foothold are construction, entertainment, real estate, tourism and travel, landscaping and food distribution. The number of firms owned and operated by Filipinos has remained relatively small. Their impact on the economy has been as hard-working, conscientious workers, both as consumers and as contributors to the capital savings of the community.

The educational contributions of Filipinos have been relatively late in appearing, owing to exclusive selection of immigrants for purposes of unskilled labor until after the war. Although early immigrants had a relatively high regard for education on arrival in Hawai'i, their low economic status discouraged advanced schooling for their children. Concern for family welfare led to employment for children as early as possible, and less than half those of high school age were actually sent to school throughout the period of World War II. Since the war, Filipino appreciation of education as a channel of individual and family advancement has greatly increased the proportion of their children completing high school. As late as 1970, somewhat less than a quarter of the Filipino residents of college age were so enrolled (24.8 percent of the men and 23.5 percent of the women).

Despite this delayed use of education, Filipinos in increasing number are making contributions in medicine, nursing, education, law, engineering, social services, the military, insurance, accounting and related occupations. Increased contributions are anticipated as legal restrictions on professional training received in the Philippines by recent immigrants are modified or removed.

Filipino movement into the mainstream of Island and American society has begun to focus especially on government and politics. Filipino leaders generally agreed that education and politics offer the greatest prospects. In 1980 there were already one state senator, four state representatives, one county mayor, three council members, one supreme court justice, two state and city cabinet members, one school district superintendent, a handful of teachers and school principals, and other government employees in management positions. Although these achievements seem impressive against their plantation background, many Filipinos have felt that their political representation should more nearly accord with their number and talents in the community.

The sharp contrast in conditions for Filipinos between the first and fourth quarters of the twentieth century affords perhaps the most reliable index of their probable future. They came first as a miscellaneous collection, primarily of single men, recruited to perform strenuous work with the goal of returning after a few years with sufficient earnings to spend their remaining years in the more congenial atmosphere of the native barrio. Within the seventy years of its existence, this chance gathering of men—drawn from widely different communities because of their physical abilities and common economic motivation—has become largely transformed into a community of Filipino Americans to whom Hawai'i is home. The Filipino population of Hawai'i in 1970 consisted predominantly (65 percent) of American citizens, with a youthful median age of 24.1 years, and a reasonably normal ratio of 131 males to every 100 females. The new waves of immigrants since 1946 have come expecting to remain permanently in America and to become U.S. citizens. They have begun to think of themselves less as Tagalogs, Visayans, or Ilokanos, and more as Filipinos. The fact that immigrants and native-born citizens alike sought and have been able to participate in the life of the wider community offers the best promise of their future.

NOTES

1. Andrew W. Lind, *An Island Community: Ecological Succession in Hawaii* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), pp. 210-215.
2. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Labor Conditions in Hawaii* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1916).