

Filipino-American Youth Performing Filipinicity

Filipinicity, according to nationalist scholar Antonio Molina, is the quality of being Filipino regardless of location or surroundings, a quality that describes many Filipino-American youth in America.

How can we understand their cultural identity, created from a Philippine heritage in an American context? Any explanation is necessarily complex, given their diversity of language backgrounds, class origins, and histories in the United States. Filipino Americans (informally, Fil-Ams) have successfully assimilated into the American mainstream, often becoming invisible to the general population while remaining highly visible to one another.

Filipinos came to America over 250 years ago, before the Philippines or the United States was a nation. The pioneer Filipino Americans were crew on Spanish galleons that brought luxury goods from China to Mexico for eventual transship-

ment to Europe. They sailed from ports such as Vigan and Manila for the six-month voyage to Acapulco, Mexico. There some jumped ship, and by the close of the 18th century, these seamen had established the first documented Filipino settlement in America in the bayous near New Orleans.

Filipino settlement in the United States was gradual; groups came under a variety of circumstances and for a variety of reasons. Besides serving on ships, "Manilamen" (another term for Filipinos) worked on the haciendas of Mexican California, and some were even enlisted as members of the Royal Hawaiian Band. By the turn of the 20th

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century young intellectuals began studying in the United States as *pensionados* (government-sponsored scholars). A decade later *sakadas* (workers) were providing cheap and dependable labor for the plantations of Hawai'i, the farms of California, and the salmon industry of Alaska and Washington. Although the early migrants were mostly male, they were eventually followed by couples and entire families. World War II brought another opportunity — citizenship which could be obtained by serving in the U.S. armed services. Until the outbreak of war in 1941, the Philippines' commonwealth status made relocation to the United States simple. Following the end of the war the number of U.S.-bound Filipinos increased despite U.S. efforts to limit it. They were encouraged by relatives already in the States, by opportunities for study and work, and by the promise of a better life than their postwar homeland could offer. After the imposition of martial law and the rise of the Marcos dictatorship in 1972, there was another wave of emigration largely from the professions, business, and academe.

Meanwhile, ongoing since 1898, the American military, missionaries, and businessmen were bringing home Filipina brides, and Filipino men living in the States were marrying non-Filipinas. Their part-Filipino offspring would further enrich Fil-Am identity and shape its version of Filipinicity.

Young Filipino-American dancers perform the tinikling at the annual Philippine Festival in Washington, D.C. This dance from the Visayan Islands has become a standard part of most Filipino-American community gatherings as well as public events. Photo by Paul Tañedo





Danongan Kalanduyan, director of the Mindanao Kulintang Ensemble of Seattle, Washington, performs with his group. Filipino Americans and others join to perform music from the Muslim region of Mindanao. Photo by Xander Hobayan

Strategies for identity formation in America have been both proactive and defensive, the former arising from pride in cultural achievement and the latter from anxiety about cultural loss through assimilation. Instrumental to both strategies, folk dance is the oldest and most widespread focus for Filipino identity. Organized by adults for their children, the dance represents a community-based, grassroots effort to maintain identity. Filipino youth come together (under watchful parents, of course!), participate in cultural learning, and garner positive recognition from non-Filipinos through public performance. Dance groups generally draw upon the choreographies of Bayanihan, the Philippines' most successful folkloric company. For example, their *tinikling* bamboo dance has become a cultural icon and is now practically *de rigeur* for the close of any dance program. More recently some American troupes, like the L.A.-based Kayamanan ng Lahi, are pursuing greater ethnographic integrity by seeking models directly in community culture bearers.

The *rondalla* (plucked string band) is

the ubiquitous ensemble of the Spanish-influenced lowlands and stands as a Philippine national icon. It provides festive accompaniment for song, dance, and socializing. *Rondallas* were popular among prewar immigrants, who soon learned, however, that playing in American dance bands was much more profitable. At present there are youth *rondallas* in such diverse locations as Boston, San Diego, and Seattle. It is a challenge to sustain *rondallas* overseas. Their musical demands are high — one must be able to play by ear and by notation, and their instruments are crafted only in the Philippines, principally in Pampanga and Cebu. A *rondalla* is presented at the Smithsonian Festival.

Filipino choral groups are very popular: three centuries of Spanish Catholicism have made choral singing central to Philippine heritage. The chorus is also popular in many Fil-Am communities, which sponsor groups such as the Philippine Chorale (New York City), the Mabuhay Singers (Daly City, California), and the Silangan Singers (Honolulu). Choral singing is often the major, if not

the only, opportunity for youth to become familiar with Philippine languages. Folk choral genres from the Visayas also are featured in the Festival.

Youth have sparked an interest in *kulintang*, the gong-chime tradition of Muslim groups from the southern Philippines. Cultural organizations in New York (Amauan) and in California (World Kulintang Institute in Los Angeles, Kulintang Arts in San Francisco) have received National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grants to support residencies by master artists Dr. Usopay Cadar of the Maranao tradition and Danongan Kalanduyan of the Maguindanao.

Kulintang master Kalanduyan is the single Filipino-American artist who has been awarded the prestigious National Heritage Fellowship from the NEA. Although most students have lowland Christian rather than Muslim forbears, they have become serious participants in the genre. Its ascendancy has significance for cultural identity: *kulintang* is clearly a Southeast Asian tradition without Spanish or American influence and is related to the *gamelan* gong orchestras of Java and Bali. It has become an icon of decolonization: associated with high status as entertainment in the courts of the sultanates and structured by a highly codified system of music theory, improvisation, and aesthetics, it is art music. Maguindanao *kulintang* is included as part of the Folklife Festival program.

Young Fil-Ams have also resuscitated several moribund traditions. Thirty years ago, for example, they initiated a renaissance of Philippine martial arts, particularly *escrima* and *arnis*, which were maintained in secret by early immigrants to Hawai'i and California. There are now a national association, a calendar of competitions, and studios and clubs nationwide.

As cultural activists, Filipino-American descendants from the mountain tribes of Luzon formed BIBAK, a network for

Pahiyas: A Philippine Harvest

Members of BIMAK, an organization in the Washington, D.C., area, participate in the annual Philippine Heritage Parade in Washington, D.C. BIMAK represents Filipino Americans whose families came from upland tribal communities in Luzon. BIMAK and BIBAK organizations across the United States are proud of their heritage and work to keep these traditions alive in their families and communities. Photo by Paul Tañedo

defending the cultural rights of upland cultures. Members of these societies, which were put on display at the 1904 St. Louis Exposition and subjected to exoticization and other forms of misrepresentation, are now demanding accurate and respectful treatment of their heritage. BIBAK, an acronym for the five major upland linguistic groups, provides workshops on culture, crafts, dance, and music for the general community. It actively assists folkloric dance groups in appreciating the upland repertory. Each BIBAK chapter has young people in positions of responsibility. The Kalinga upland group is presented at the Festival.

Fil-Am youth have been creative in the present climate of pluralism and multiculturalism, using opportunities to explore heritage that were not available in previous generations. Pilipino Cultural Nights (PCNs), presented on numerous college campuses, are evidence of this creativity. Most universities with a significant population of Filipinos (international students as well as Fil-Ams) have them. Their typical format includes a selection of folk songs and dances, usually drawn from the Bayanihan repertory. In a style reminiscent of the homeland's *bodabil* (vaudeville) shows, humorous skits about the Philippines and, increasingly, about life in America are interspersed. Recent PCNs sometimes select a single theme or create a unifying story line. More than just entertainment, some productions address social issues such as glass ceilings in employment for minorities, U.S.-Philippine relations, and "Tita Aida"



(AIDS). Remarkably, PCNs are entirely organized, rehearsed, and presented by students, as one year's producers share their experience with the next. Although originally intended as educational outreach to the non-Filipino community, they have become largely a celebration of Filipinicity for friends and family. The PCN model has given rise to similar efforts by Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese campus groups.

We can encounter Filipinicity in a variety of social settings, each reflecting a different kind of commitment to heritage. In a nontraditional cultural setting, for example, an emergent Fil-Am theater addresses issues of homeland and diaspora. For example, "Scenes from an Unfinished Country 1905/1995," a work by the Pintig Cultural Group (Chicago), explores themes of American intervention. *Sining Kulisan & Pinoy Ink* [sic] (Vallejo, California) treats the Spanish period in its production, "Heart of the Son." The adjective "Filipino" for jazz, rock, and hip hop carries specific and positive connotations in regional com-

mercial music businesses. In classical music, besides performing Schubert and Bach, Fil-Ams may mark Filipinicity by programming *kundiman* art song or folk-inspired compositions, such as the violin classic "*Hating Gabi*."

In even more nontraditional settings, performing Filipinicity may involve a sartorial dimension — for example, using accessorized *kimona* or *barong tagalog* (embroidered gauzy overblouse or overskirt) as nightclub wear. It may also involve creating in-jokes by appropriating slang: three young L.A. artists collectively call themselves "The Badaf Pinoyes." ("Pinoy" is an informal, in-group term of self-reference derived from the final syllables of "Pilipino," while "Badaf" defies direct translation.)

There are private displays of identity as well. For example, individual families continue regional customs of the religious year. The Cebuano celebration of the Santo Niño (Christ Child) still takes place during January in Hawai'i, California, and Illinois, replete with songs, prayers, *santos* (icons), and food.



These World War II veterans are members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Vicente Lim Post 5471 in Oxon Hill, Maryland. More than 120,000 soldiers from the Philippine Commonwealth Army fought alongside Americans against the Japanese. Thousands of these soldiers resettled in the U.S. after the war. Photo by Paul Tañedo

During Holy Week, families in Washington, Texas, and West Virginia perform the *pasyon*, a vernacular poetic account of Christ's Passion that begins with Creation and ends with the Final Judgment; it also has songs, prayers, *santos*, and food. In New Jersey and Nevada Muslim Filipinos observe Ramadan with daytime fasting and singing the *maulid*, a poetic account about the life of the Prophet. These are the less public parts of identity. *Pasyon* and other religious genres are part of the Festival.

There are challenges to the identity of Fil-Am youth. Assimilation looms large. Among early immigrants its pull was very strong. Its forces had already been at work in the homeland: an American-based public education system, a U.S.-style democracy, and a high degree of English fluency. In general, first-generation immigrants kept many customs, maintained foodways, and retained their languages, speaking Bikolano or Pangasinan at home, for instance. The

second generation (the first American born) maintained some foodways, had passive understanding of the languages, and kept some of the customs, such as touching the back of an elder's hand to one's forehead as a sign of respect (*mamano*). The third and fourth generations — most of today's Fil-Am youth — are often unaware of which Philippine language their elders spoke, observe few of the customs, and know only a few of the Filipino foods served at celebrations, such as spring rolls (*lumpia*), marinated meat (*adobo*), baked rice cake (*bibingka*), and banana fritters (*cambo/maruya/baduya*).

But there is a contrasting segment of Filipino-American youth composed of the newly arrived. Typically having received early schooling in the Philippines and coming from urban rather than rural areas, they are *au courant* with the latest Manila fashions and music; their foodways reflect the eclecticism of the present-day Philippines; and they are fluent in the national language, Pilipino, and often in another regional language.

The two groups constitute polarities: at one end are the children of "old-timer" families, who do not speak a Philippine language, and who feel they have paid their dues by confronting generations of racism in America; and at the other is the "1.5 generation," Filipino newcomers, who are generally unaware that their way was paved by the old-timers. These contrasts generate tensions between, for example, an upwardly mobile third-generation student from a farm labor background and a Manila-oriented 1.5-generation youth from a professional family who affects Philippine versions of clothing, music, and dance.

On a continuum between these polarities are other groups, including part-Filipino children, whose Filipino identity may be problematic and varied, depending upon whether the other parent is Anglo, African, Asian, or Native American.

Filipino identity is made even more complex by the emergence of ethnically defined gangs.

The Centennial celebration itself problematizes identity for Filipino-American youth. It raises issues about the two relevant countries — one, the source of ethnic heritage, the other, the place of citizenship. U.S. intervention in the Philippines a century ago interrupted the development of an independent Asian nation. However, that intervention enabled today's youth and their forbears to become part of American life. Fil-Am identity emerges directly from the complex commingling of these two national and cultural streams. We hope that Filipino-American youth will find in our Festival program, *Pahiyas: A Philippine Harvest*, resonant moments of encouragement and self-recognition.

Suggested Reading

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