

# **The Master and the Federation: A Filipino-American Social Movement in California and Hawaii**

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The Filipino Federation of America, Inc. was a mutual aid organization that was founded in Los Angeles in 1925 and brought to Hawaii in 1928. It was the subject of much discussion and debate among the Filipinos in Hawaii and in the larger community, particularly in the thirties during the peak of its popularity. Leaders of the Filipino community denounced the organization; members of the larger community, on the other hand, accepted it as a "peculiar" part of Philippine culture and assumed that the Filipinos brought the organization with them to Hawaii. The Federation declined rapidly after the war, but it continued to attract the interest of Hawaii's community even after its founder and president, Hilario Camino Moncado, died in 1956 and up until the early sixties, when his widow, Diana Toy Moncado passed away.

The controversy about the Federation centered essentially on the fact that its members held and promoted the belief that Hilario Camino Moncado was God and the Filipino "brown Christ." Critics of the Federation denounced Moncado for this "fakery" and for exploiting his followers. Likewise, they derided the Federation members for believing in the divinity of Moncado and strongly disapproved of what the critics perceived were the members' "bizarre" spiritual beliefs and practices.

Today, this Filipino-American organization in Hawaii consists of small factions of a dwindling first-generation membership, a loyal but negligible second-generation following, and support from a handful of third-generation youth. However, since the Federation was formed in Hawaii, the members of the organization—popularly known as "followers of Moncado" or "Federation men"—became permanent figures in the cultural landscape of Hawaii. They once occupied a very visible place in the community and partook in the development of the Filipino communities on the different islands. Now, they represent an important chapter in the history of the Filipinos in Hawaii.

This article presents an overview of selected aspects of the Filipino Federation of America which underscore the significance of the movement as it evolved in California and formed a new identity in Hawaii in the twenties and thirties. The study takes into account the perspective of the Federation members and the vantage from which they saw and interpreted events. It also places the Federation phenomenon in the context of the Filipino-American experience.

### An Early Study of the Federation

The first scholarly article on the Filipino Federation of America appeared in the 1942 issue of *Social Process in Hawaii*. The study by David E. Thompson offered a sociological explanation for the phenomenon. Thompson discussed the Federation in relation to: the proclivity of Filipinos to religious movements; the oppressive conditions which confronted the Filipino immigrants in America thereby setting the stage for the birth of a movement; the strong common beliefs and practices which held the members together in a fraternal bond; the symbolism of Moncado as having achieved the "worldly success and prestige" that eluded most of the Filipino immigrant laborers (Thompson 1942). Thompson analyzed the Federation as a "control movement" in California and Hawaii: Moncado opposed organized labor and instructed Federation members not to join strikes, thereby pleasing the agri-business industries in California and Hawaii. He also placed the Federation in the appropriate framework of its California background. Thompson gave an outsider's view of the phenomenon and was fundamentally critical of the organization, particularly its anti-labor union stand.<sup>1</sup>

### Mutual Aid Organizations

A study of the Filipino Federation of America is fundamentally a study of the experience of the pioneering Filipinos who came to America as *sakadas* in the twenties and thirties (San Buenaventura 1990). The members of the Federation were part of the thousands of Filipinos then who came seeking better opportunities in the frontiers of Hawaii and California. Like their *sakada* cohorts, majority of the Federation members came as recruited laborers for the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association (HSPA); many worked briefly in the islands' plantations before proceeding to the West Coast. Driven by a strong desire to experience America it was common for Filipino plantation workers to break their three-year contract with the HSPA in order to work in California. The formation of large Filipino population communities on the West Coast made it an attractive destination where, through mutual dependency, it became a little easier for Filipinos to survive.

In the absence of a kin support system, the pioneering Filipinos sought the security of mutual aid, fraternal organizations to address their most fundamental needs in times of loneliness, sickness and death. These organizations functioned as surrogate families and helped in softening the impact of the painful encounter

with the new country. They also served as instruments of acculturation and symbolized the Filipinos' collective efforts to obtain some control over their existence away from home.

The early mutual aid organizations were the precursor of the Filipino community. Due to adverse and isolated conditions and the socio-demographic character of the Filipino immigration in the early decades of this century, diverse groups of *sakadas*, without the presence of families and female cohorts, essentially formed small self-help groups among townmates and co-workers. These organizations evolved as little pockets of independent communities. In Hawaii, Filipino mutual aid organizations and hometown societies evolved within the Filipino "community groupings" in the plantations (Cariaga 1937: 59).

In addition to these informal, small societies, two organizations were brought to Hawaii in 1921 and 1922 by their respective representatives from the Philippines: the *Caballeros de Dimas Alang* and *Legionarios del Trabajo*. These groups identified themselves as fraternal organizations and actively recruited for members from among the *sakadas* on the plantation. The HSPA monitored both organizations closely and viewed them suspiciously like any outside entity involved in solicitation of any kind among the plantation workers.<sup>2</sup> The HSPA's primary concern in the case of both organizations—and others—was whether or not they supported Pablo Manlapit's "high wage movement activities"—specifically, the strikes against the plantations (HSPA 1921, 1922, 1923, 1934). The *Dimas Alang* and *Legionarios* were also established in California where they competed aggressively for members against a third fraternal organization, the Filipino Federation of America, Inc.<sup>3</sup>

### The Federation in California

Unlike the *Dimas Alang* and *Legionarios*, the Filipino Federation was an organization with Filipino-American roots and concerns. It was formed on December 27, 1925 in Los Angeles and incorporated for fifty years in 1927 in the state of California. A factor that impressed those who joined the organization was this incorporation. It distinguished the Federation from other Filipino groups. The "Inc." after its name gave it an image of legitimacy, importance, status, power and connoted an organization that was serious about its business and purpose.

The Federation espoused twelve objectives<sup>4</sup> that reflected a fundamental awareness of the Filipinos' bicultural existence in America. In summary, these objectives defined the mutual aid character of the Federation, projected a different, positive image of the Filipinos as part of the organization's stated moral standards and Christian objectives, and addressed Philippine-American relations, specifically the issue of Philippine independence.

Taken as a whole, the Federation objectives represented an organizational strategy that was directed at the white establishment with one important goal: the American acceptance of Filipinos. They represented a "declaration of worthiness" coming from a group of Filipinos who believed in seeking and occupying a deserving place in America.

The Federation was also a "quasi religious" organization with strong mystical symbolisms that were derived from Filipino folk beliefs and practices. Prominent among these symbols was the number 12. It was therefore not coincidental that the organization had 12 objectives and its foundation started with 12 individuals led by Hilario Camino Moncado. The structure of the organization was planned based on what it considered was the mystical significance of the number 12: it would consist of 12 divisions; each division would have 12 lodges; and each lodge would be comprised of 12 members; the total membership would therefore come to 1728, a number which was featured prominently on the Federation logo from the time it was first designed.

This was the concept the Federation members referred to as "doce-doce" (literally, "twelve-twelve") which they used in their recruiting campaign (San Buenaventura 1990: 167-73; 1980: 14-15).

They tried to convince their peers to join by first showing them a photograph of 12 men standing side by side with their arms across their chests and their hands linked, six on each side of a thirteenth person in the center. This was the formal photograph taken of lodge 1, division 1 consisting of the founding members and Moncado. Subsequently, members of each lodge would have formal photographs taken in the same manner.

The "doce" photograph was a good recruitment strategy. Many were struck by the mystical symbolism of the image. They recalled that their elderly folks in the Philippines heeded them to join any group that had the number 12 associated with it (Blas 1980): Christ had 12 apostles; likewise, a folk belief had flourished after the execution in 1896 of the Philippine national hero, Jose Rizal, that Rizal was the second Christ and that he too had 12 disciples.<sup>5</sup>

### The Federation's Material Component

Federation members have always defined their organization as having two "divisions": the "material" and the "spiritual." The material division encompassed the general business of the organization, including membership recruitment, the publishing and circulation of the Federation's official publication, the *Filipino Nation*, and activities that dealt with the Filipinos' interaction with the community, expatriate issues, and Philippine-American relations as pursued under the political leadership of Moncado. Material members were active in promoting the Federation in public primarily through their participation in the organization's annual convention and in July 4th parades.

Moncado conducted the "material" activities from the organization's Los Angeles office. The first major responsibility he undertook was to organize the Rizal Day celebration in December 1926. The Federation spearheaded a series of Rizal Day activities which included decorating a street in downtown Los Angeles with American and Filipino flags, an essay contest, and a special celebration of the first anniversary of the founding of the Federation (San Buenaventura 1990: 173-79; Moncado 1927). The success of this event was quite significant: it symbolized the first public association of Moncado with Rizal; it aroused emotions of Filipino nationalism and pride; it reenforced the continuing desire of Filipinos to be accepted as equals of Americans as they saw the flag of their country wave side by side with the American flag;<sup>6</sup> it demonstrated potential empowerment through ethnic collective action; and it established Moncado's charismatic leadership and the ability of his followers to finance and successfully implement a significant public undertaking.

The 1926 Rizal Day catapulted Moncado and the Federation into public recognition and set its momentum as a social movement. The membership of the Federation grew astronomically: from 34 "matriculate" members in 1926 before the Rizal Day celebration to nearly 700 members by the end of 1928 representing 57 lodges (FFA 1928). Each matriculate member had to pay the required fee of \$100 plus \$10 for the Federation pin.<sup>7</sup>

### The Spiritual Dimension

Underneath the material structure of the Federation was its spiritual component. All Federation members underwent a form of spiritual initiation upon joining the organization. This consisted of specially-constructed prayers (e.g. prayers to obtain power, for protection against dangers and to resist all kinds of

temptations), a list of instructions as to what prayers to say and at what time of the day to perform them. In addition, the members were asked to fast for as long and as frequently as they could on a voluntary basis. After this orientation, the majority continued on as material members and engaged in promoting the activities of the organization in their respective places of work and in the Federation branches throughout California.<sup>8</sup>

Others chose to become "spiritual" members under the guidance of Lorenzo de los Reyes, the Federation's spiritual leader and a founding member. In fall 1926, Reyes<sup>9</sup> left Los Angeles to concentrate on his spiritual mission in the newly purchased Federation property in Stockton, headquarters of the Federation Branch No. 1. In no time, Stockton became the spiritual center of the Federation and was referred to as "The College of Mysteries" (Darilay 1931: 11). Those who wanted to know more about the organization's spiritual teachings and practices spent time in Stockton fasting, praying, learning "physical culture," and listening to Reyes' lectures. The "true" spirituals started the practice of celibacy, maintained a non-carnivorous and raw food diet, and did not cut their hair.

The body of Reyes' spiritual teachings was fundamentally an extension of Filipino folk beliefs and practices which the immigrant workers brought with them to America. However, as Reyes articulated Filipino nativistic beliefs he also drew symbolisms and ideas from American cultural elements, including popular culture, thus allowing the movement to take on a Filipino-American syncretic identity. He also paved the way for Moncado's dual charismatic role as a political leader and as the spiritual "Master" known as "Equifrilibrium."<sup>10</sup> Moncado was extremely competent and skillful in performing this leadership role by himself. However, Reyes played an indispensable role in promoting the acceptance of the idea of Moncado's "Divinity: Moncado could not have assumed the role of the "Filipino Christ" had Reyes not been there as his John the Baptist."<sup>11</sup>

### Moncado and Reyes

The symbiotic relationship between Moncado and Reyes was best manifested in the complementary roles that each played in the development of the organization as a social movement. While Moncado stood on center stage of the Federation activities and basked in the public limelight as the charismatic leader of this Filipino organization, Reyes worked hard and quietly behind the scene to reinforce the mystic character of the Federation and the "divine" attributes of Moncado to its members: Moncado, the charismatic leader in the material world

of the Federation, was also the hidden reincarnation of Christ and Jose Rizal. As the organization's spiritual leader, Reyes' mission was to make the members come to this realization; it was essential in the process of guiding them to lead moral lives.

Members of the Federation in Hawaii have indicated that the Federation was actually the idea of both Moncado and Reyes, not just Moncado. Part of this suggestion comes from the fact that Moncado and Reyes knew each other in the early years of their sojourn in America. They first met in San Francisco in 1916, just a year after Moncado arrived in California. According to Reyes' biography, he and Moncado went their separate ways, met several times after that and finally got together when it was time to form an organization (Darilay 1931: 9-11). Both Moncado and Reyes were HSPA labor recruits and came to California by way of Hawaii.

### The Bisayan Immigrant

Moncado was born to a poor rural family in Balamban, Cebu. His birth certificate from the town's Roman Catholic parish church show that he was born Hilarion Caminos Moncada on November 3, 1895 and was baptized on November 4, 1895.<sup>12</sup> He legally changed his name to Hilario Camino Moncado around 1919, probably while still residing in San Francisco. He and the Federation also gave his official date of birth as November 4, 1898 (Moncado 1955: 7).

Moncado arrived in Honolulu in 1914 under HSPA contract no. 10221 with a declared age of 21 (HSPA/PA 1929). (Because HSPA required a minimum age of 18 for its recruits, it was not uncommon for underaged Filipinos to lie about their age in order to qualify to work in Hawaii.) An HSPA memo indicates that he was assigned to Kekaha Plantation on Kauai but all Federation documents, including Moncado's (1955: 7),<sup>13</sup> state that he was in Koloa, where he worked for one year before heading for the West Coast. He worked in San Francisco and in an Alaskan cannery before residing in Los Angeles. Through those years prior to the founding of the Federation, Moncado supported himself through odd jobs as laborer, labor agent, elevator "boy" and the like. He put himself through high school in San Francisco and obtained a college degree in a city university in Los Angeles in 1928 at the peak of the movement. Two years later, he was conferred an honorary doctoral degree from an unaccredited university which soon became defunct. Nevertheless, Hilario Camino Moncado held the title of "Dr. Moncado."

Moncado was tall for a Filipino, about six feet,<sup>14</sup> which immediately made him stand out among the rest of his countrymates. According to the Federation

secretary, Helen Borough (1984a), "when [Moncado] walked people would turn around and wonder who he was... Walking into the banquet room, walking to the [hotel] lobby, you could tell he was the leader. People would turn and look at him. It showed self-confidence when he walked." He was always immaculately dressed (Borough 1984b; Yap 1984; DeSeo 1931: 30-31). In addition to his charismatic personality, he was ambitious and visionary and possessed good organizational and leadership skills. Personally, however, he had "few if any intimate friends...feelings for him [were] usually those of intense loyalty or intense hatred" (DeSeo 1931: 31).

Moncado did not reveal much about himself and his personal background. This added to the "mysterious" aura that surrounded him and became consistent with his mystic persona. In the context of their indigenous world view, the Federation members linked Moncado's being a "*mysterioso*" (mysterious) with supernatural power. Thus, it was perfectly logical for members to accept the mystical background that was presented to them about Moncado: that he was trained in mysticism in India at age 9 and received "Ph.D. degrees in Kabala, Numerology and Human Nature" at age 12.

### The Tagalog Mystic

Lorenzo de los Reyes grew up in Tiaong in the southern Tagalog province of Tayabas (since renamed Quezon). From the middle of the 1800s, if not earlier, this region became known for its native mysticism. It has been the center of messianic movements—or the *colorum* tradition—which flourished and continue to flourish on the slopes of the mystical Mt. Banahaw (Ileto 1979: 86-92).<sup>15</sup> According to Darilay's biographical sketch, Reyes trained as a young child under an old Filipino mystic. Taking the appearance of Halley's comet in 1910 as a sign, Reyes left the Philippines for Hawaii that year and worked in Ewa plantation (Darilay 1931: 10; Felipe 1979).<sup>16</sup> He proceeded to San Francisco in the early part of 1911 and earned his living on the West Coast doing manual and domestic labor.

Reyes' personal background remained undisclosed even to those who knew him personally. They could only reveal what was already known about him from the biography that was featured in the 1931 "blue book" edition of his book, *Every Day New and Wonder*.<sup>17</sup> His loyal followers who studied under him in Honolulu have been unable to give any information about his birth date, his family, the details of his life in Hawaii and California. The material members in California could only say that he kept to himself and was always addressed as

"Mr. Reyes" by the members, except for Moncado who occasionally called him by a nickname, "Insong."<sup>18</sup>

Unlike the rest of the *sakadas* who came seeking economic opportunities and material benefits, Reyes left for abroad in search of the fulfillment of a mystic mission, reportedly to find a person who would someday be the "Master of Morality." He lived an ascetic life and did not personally or materially profit from the resources of the organization. On the contrary, there seem to be reliable indications that Reyes contributed his hard-earned savings to finance the formation of the Federation and that he may have been involved in Moncado's earlier attempt to form a Filipino organization before the inception of the Federation.<sup>19</sup> Some members in Hawaii have also implied that Lorenzo de los Reyes was actually responsible for financing Moncado's high school and college education in the years preceding the founding of the Federation.

It is practically impossible to know at this point to what extent Reyes recognized the charismatic personality of Moncado and his special qualities, and whether or not he believed that Moncado had extraordinary powers and a messianic identity. Or, did Reyes simply nurture this belief in Moncado as far as it went in pursuit of a bigger goal which was the fulfillment of his lifetime mission of practicing mysticism and teaching others to capture its hidden meanings and spiritual empowerment? Was his mystic undertaking not dependent, after all, on having a charismatic figure as a focus and an instrument of his mission?

### A Strong Spiritual Following

What certainly became clear was Reyes' success in building up a loyal following of spiritual members. One of these members, who still lives, resides in Honolulu and was interviewed in September 1979, related the task of *sacrificio* (sacrifice) which he undertook as a spiritual under Reyes in California about 1929. He was part of a group of 12 spirituals who lived in the mountains outside of Salinas without food and little water; each went separately to pray, meditate, and fast. According to this member, he did this for seven months although others were not able to last that long. This same member also said that the material members disapproved of the spirituals' physical appearance: emaciated-looking from fasting, with unkempt faces from not shaving and with long hair growing (San Buenventura 1990: 264-65). The material members felt that Reyes had gone too far and openly criticized his "superstitious" teachings

