

It was during his funeral that I realized how much of my culture I had suppressed in order to adapt, assimilate, and be accepted into the local Hawai'i society. Now that he was gone, I realized how much I had denied myself of my own heritage. I can only cast regrets that I did not realize this much sooner.

I was his youngest son and the first in his family to earn a degree from a university. And although he was very ill in the last months of his life and unable to see me march at my commencement ceremony, I know he was very proud and happy of what I had accomplished through him. But I never had the chance to share my experiences with him. I never had the chance to ask him if he felt happy or sad, content, or satisfied with his life in Hawai'i. I guess I never will know.

Sometimes when I visit downtown Honolulu to go shopping for vegetables in Chinatown and to visit my favorite Filipino food stand, I see these old Filipino men who seem to be the same age as my father, if he was still alive. And I think of my father, Nemesio de Los Santos, and of Bienvenido Santos and Celestino Fabia, and I wonder if our dreams really come true.

## From American-Filipino to Filipino-American

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Since my youth in the 1950s a noticeable change in emphasis has occurred in the role of ethnicity in the formulation of an American identity. The goal then was to become assimilated, to become an American as defined by the education system and the media. While one's ethnic background was acknowledged, it was simply to provide evidence of the hybrid vigor of America's racial/ethnic melting pot. Ethnic differences were to be thrown into the crucible and melded to form the American. Nevertheless, each American could proudly claim his or her unique identification with a specific ethnic group. The cult of the hyphenated American — the American-Italians, American-Irish, American-Greeks, American-Filipinos — became celebrated in the popular *Reader's Digest*, one of the most widely-read magazines in America in the 1950s. It and *Life Magazine* helped create the image of the American through guidelines and inspirational models captured in word and picture.

Today the emphasis has shifted with ethnicity being regarded as the dominant aspect in the forging of an American identity. America as reinterpreted is now simply the home of the diasporic groups from Italy, Ireland, Greece, or the Philippines, and the people are now Italian-American, Irish-American, Greek-American, Filipino-American, and even the curious hybrid, the Asian-American. It is the homeland which has become the true fount of identity, and the diaspora a source of enrichment of the original culture. Although this reorientation has been comforting to the new immigrants to the United States, it has introduced new problems for generations of Americans who have only a vague memory or understanding of the homelands from which their parents or forefathers came. The situation of Filipinos in Hawai'i is an interesting case in point because it highlights some of the implications of this shift.

### Growing up Filipino in a Plantation Village

I was born during wartime in a sugar plantation village in Spreckelsville on the island of Maui. Spreckelsville consisted of three camps, all known by numbers rather than name. My family lived in Camp 2 which had some fifty houses, approximately half occupied by Japanese, four by Okinawans, and the remainder by Filipino "bachelors," many of whom had left wives and children behind in the Philippines. "Filipino" at that time meant simply "Ilocano" or "Visayan." Tagalogs for me were those people whom I saw on the screen every

Wednesday evening when my parents and I went to see a "Filipino" film at the neighborhood theater.

Because of the homogeneity of the Filipino community, there was no agonizing over the subtle differences or open rivalries between language groups. Distinction was based on ethnic groups. At the local school, which served a number of plantation camps similar to mine, there were children of Japanese, Okinawan, Filipino, Puerto Rican, Portuguese, and Chinese descent. Everyone knew the other's ethnicity, and it was a way in which we identified each other. Although sometimes in annoyance one would call the other names, such as "daikon" to a Japanese, or "bagoong" to a Filipino, there was always a sense of belonging together as children of the camps. In retrospect, my identity in those days consisted of different aspects. Being someone from Hawai'i, which today means being "local," was one strong aspect of my identity. It was a source of pride to be continually reminded how unique we were in Hawai'i as a society where races lived harmoniously together. But I was a specific type of person from Hawai'i, one whose experiences were grounded in Filipino culture. One's ethnic identity was clearly visible in physical features, customs, name, and food. I was a Filipino boy from Hawai'i, and I was also an American. Being a product of the assimilationist philosophy of U.S. education, I was especially proud when Hawai'i gained statehood in 1959 and became a full-fledged member of the Union. As children of immigrants, we believed in the American dream and welcomed the opportunities which beckoned.

Those aspects of my identity linked to Hawai'i and America were ones that I believed to offer future promise because they were my home. Filipino culture, on the other hand, I saw as the culture of my parents and their friends. While I participated in Filipino activities, I did so mechanically mainly to please my parents. It was not because of any conscious effort to reject my Filipino heritage, but it was only because it appeared to be so foreign and irrelevant compared to the vibrance and promise which characterized Hawai'i and America to the young. Yet I now realize that it was my participation in these plantation Filipino activities which provided me with a uniqueness which I can now cherish as a significant part of my past.

As a youth growing up in a Filipino household I was involved in numerous activities associated with the Filipino community. My father was a leading organizer of cockfights, which then was almost exclusively a Filipino activity, and I helped him to train the cocks, to feed them, and to patch them up after a fight. During the annual Rizal Day celebrations at the end of December, my brother and I would be asked to dance at the festivities sponsored by a Filipino "club"

organized by my father and his friends in Naska. We all had our authentic *barong tagalog* made of pineapple fiber, and the girls had their *Maria Claras*. Most of the boys were reluctant to dance, but we were forced to because of my father's prominent position in the community. It seems that we were always going to some christening or wedding, which I tolerated because I looked forward to the different types of Filipino festival food which one could only get at such events. I do not recall the names of any of these dishes, but I do remember vividly what they looked like and how they tasted.

One of my enduring memories is of the activities at the Naska club, which hosted *manso* dances every weekend. The club had been organized as a mutual assistance association, and one of the ways by which it raised funds was to hold these dances. The Filipino men would purchase tickets which allowed them to dance with the young women. There was a band consisting of mandolins, a saxophone, a trumpet, and drums which provided the live music. The women organized the concession stand which sold *kankanen* and other Filipino delicacies. The children played with their friends, while the young adults stood around chatting and occasionally mocking the men who looked so sleek with their hair pomaded down. One of the sad consequences of wanting to be American was the tendency for the young Filipinos to denigrate the older generation with their peculiar way of dressing and their thick accent. It was our way of saying that we were Hawai'i-born and American.

Yet in looking back over my childhood and youth, I realize now that it was the Filipino "bachelors," those who were single or had families in the Philippines, who had the greatest impact on my perception of male roles. These men, including my father, were excellent cooks. We were frequently invited to the bachelor quarters with their earthen-floor kitchens where the men prepared such wonderful dishes from pork or goat killed communally, fish which someone had caught, and *nateng* or the various types of Filipino vegetables gathered from the canefields. At various places in the fields, Filipino plantation workers planted these vegetables and kept them well-watered from the ditches which irrigated the sugar fields. All the Filipinos knew where these plots were, and they only took what they needed for a meal.

These bachelors were also extremely generous and kind to the children in the plantation camps. Since ours was one of the few nuclear families in the village, I had numerous "uncles" among the single Filipino men in the camp. I was spoiled by their attention and frequent gifts, and in my mind I came to associate them with an ability to soothe any psychological or physical injury. One particular bachelor in my camp was known for his skills as a local doctor

against illnesses physical and otherworldly. On one occasion I dislocated an elbow after falling off a mango tree. In the following weeks I spent agonizing sessions at his home as he attempted to reset the bone. But perhaps his greatest fame was his ability to counter black magic. One of my memories as a child is of different types of objects being placed at various parts of our house to ward off evil intentions by my father's perceived enemies. Though I shared my mother's skepticism regarding the efficacy of such measures, I must admit to a sense of comfort that they were in place. The men, in short, offered a model of emotional and physical care and concern which had a lasting effect on my perceptions.

There were only a few Filipino women in my camp, and so my memories of them are few and rather vague. However, I will never forget Nana Maria, mainly because of her face scarred by chicken pox and her habit of smoking *toscane* cigars with the lit end in her mouth. The women worked extremely hard since washing clothes meant heating the water outside, washing and beating the clothes, and hanging them out to dry. When they were brought in, they were sprinkled with water and rolled up, and then later pressed with a heavy hand iron. My mother used to place strips of banana leaves at one side of the ironing board, and at intervals run the iron over the leaves in order, I suppose, to make the iron glide more smoothly on the clothes. Just keeping the house clean was a major chore because of all the dust from the canefields and the dirt roads which ran through the camp. Every day the women, with the help of the children, would dust the furniture and sweep and mop the wooden floors. One of my earliest memories is of being awoken by the sound of my mother either sweeping or mopping.

Some of the women, my mother among them, could draft their own patterns and then sew clothes for their families or for others. My mother had one of those black tubular Singer sewing machines with a pedal. On hot afternoons I remember the soporific sounds of the whirring of the Singer as my mother applied the skills as a dressmaker which she had learned from a private sewing school in town. She later sent my elder sister to the school to learn to sew, but the latter never showed any interest nor inclination to learn. Occasionally we would go to the largest town on the island, which was then Wailuku, and do some clothes shopping with my mother. I did not particularly enjoy shopping, but I liked the idea of going to town with all the shops and the prospects of purchasing something interesting or eating out in one of the local restaurants. There were no Filipino restaurants, but I did not want more Filipino food since we could get it at home. What I looked forward to was the delicious plate lunches served in these restaurants with large slow-moving ceiling fans. My favorite dish was a

combination of pork spare ribs and chop suey with rice and macaroni salad. The dishes were always a combination of different ethnic recipes reworked into something which suited the local palate.

At home the men did a lot of the cooking, but they also were responsible for obtaining the food. We grew some of our own vegetables and got others from certain areas in the canefields where the vegetables were grown by those on irrigation duty. There appears to have been a regular slaughtering of animals with families sharing the meat. As a young boy I was particularly excited by the preparations. The men got up early in order to purchase the pigs, sharpen the knives, lay out the tables, and boil the water used to clean the carcass. When the trussed pig was finally brought to the table, there was an air of expectation as the men yelled out things to one another above the squeals of the animal. Everything happened very quickly after that—the bleeding, the scraping off of the hair, and the cutting up of the pig for distribution among the participating families. That evening there would be quite a feast, especially of my favorite, *dinardaraan*, a pork dish cooked in blood.

Fish was plentiful because there was always a family member, a cousin, a friend or a neighbor who was extremely skillful in skindiving using a speargun. We were regularly supplied with fish of all sorts, especially the plentiful black and green *manini*. But my favorites were the large lobsters and the octopuses which became a regular fare in our family. On very rare occasions my father would obtain a "balloon" fish, which was known to have a poisonous sac which could kill. Because of the reputation of the fish, not many people ventured to eat it, and even my father refused to eat it unless he himself prepared the fish. There was an unusual taste to the fish which I have never experienced with any other seafood. It may have been the thrill of knowing that one was eating something potentially dangerous, but I remember that it had a distinctive flavor.

While most of the food we had at home was prepared as Filipino dishes with the use of bagoong as the main condiment, we were also being introduced to a variety of other dishes through our neighbors and our school. Since Japanese formed the majority in our plantation camp, we were regularly exposed to Japanese *senbei*, *manju*, *sushi*, *daikon*, *sashimi*, *namasu*, *musubi*, etc. Often the children would bring their lunches from home to eat with their friends, and it was on these occasions that I used to see things which my mother never made. For example, I was always fascinated by the *ume* musubi, which was a rice ball covered with seaweed with a pickled plum in the middle for flavoring.

Food differences were acknowledged, but all the different ethnic dishes became part of our everyday experience. There was ample opportunity to share

food on the rare occasion that our parents allowed us to take food outside to eat. There were parties and especially the ethnic festivals which enabled the Filipino children, for example, to share Japanese *mochi* rice cakes at Japanese New Year or for the Japanese children to eat *kankanen*, the Filipino version of *mochi* rice cakes during the Rizal festival. More and more, however, our tastes were being conditioned by subsidized lunches in school where the weekly menu contained a rich array of ethnic and haole-type food. One day it would be *shoyu* fish, another day corned beef and cabbage, and a third day perhaps *chow fun* and even Portuguese soup. Looking back, however, I do not recall a single Filipino dish on the menu. I was not aware of it then because all the other types of food were so familiar to me as to have been my own. The clever concoctions of dishes borrowing this from one ethnic group and that from another to create a truly mixed cuisine with an "original" name such as "ono (Hawaiian for "delicious") chicken pineapple." It was a source of some amusement that the chief cook was a Japanese American woman called Mrs. Ono. The origin of that uniquely local "plate lunch" one finds everywhere in Hawai'i today could very well have been the creative lunches churned out by the Mrs. Onos who attempted to balance nutrition requirements with local tastes in Hawaii's school cafeterias.

### Playtime and Schoolltime

During the plantation days of my youth, our parents were on the periphery of our lives. We spent practically the whole day with our friends and only went home to bathe, to eat, and to sleep. Our attitudes were being formed by our schools, by the strong American culture available in the weekend radio broadcasts of professional baseball and in the Saturday movies, and by our own peer-group outdoor activities in Hawai'i. We all lived in houses provided by the plantation, we spoke "pidgin" English, we went to the same school, and we played together in the streets or in the canefields. In short, there was a camaraderie among the young people as part of plantation society. We knew our various ethnicities, but the dominant culture was that of the plantation.

One of the things which made us distinctive was the type of games that we played. Baseball was a passion with all the boys in the camp. In addition to listening to the play-by-play simulated broadcasts by radio, we bought bubble gum in order to get the cards with the pictures and statistics of the major league players. One of our favorite pastimes was to listen to the broadcasts and trade these cards. We also played baseball on the dirt roads, using the trunks of trees and sides of buildings for bases, and hitting the ball often high up into the foliage of the monkeypod trees. Despite being surrounded by buildings, I do not

remember a single time when we broke a window. Many of us went from camp baseball to the Little League, the Pony League and, for the best of the group, to high school baseball. Football was also a major sport, but it never rivaled baseball as the king of sports. But once again the dirt roads were the ideal playing fields for touch football for the camp children. Basketball was not as popular and was something that the boys only began playing seriously in high school.

The girls rarely played baseball, football or basketball, but they did participate wholeheartedly alongside the boys in the plantation games. Like the American-style sports, there were particular seasons for these games, although I still do not know who decided when the season for one game should stop and another begin. There were so many interesting games that we played. In one the children collected beans from the pods from one type of tree. Each player would then "bet" a number of beans with another player. Each would then have a turn in taking hold of the beans, throwing them in the air and catching as many as one could on the back of the palm. The object then was to throw the beans off the back of the palm and grab the whole lot without dropping a single one.

Another plantation game known as "pee-wee" involved taking an old broomstick, cutting a piece about a foot in length, which became the "bat," and another of about three or four inches in length with one end sliced off at a 45 degree angle. The player would then make a small groove in the soil to place the shorter piece with the cut end sticking out from the groove. The object was to hit the tip of the short piece with the longer length to make the former fly in the air. Then one had to hit the small piece again before it fell to the ground. A skilled player could hit it two, three, or sometimes even four times before hitting it as far away from the base as possible. The reason is that the score was calculated by multiplying the number of times one hit the small piece and measuring the distance with the bat from the spot where the stick landed and the home base. One counted by twirling the length of stick on the ground in a circular motion as if twirling a baton.

A third popular game, which began on Maui with the cardboard covers made by Haleakala Dairy for its milk and fruit juice bottles, we called "pachi." Each player would again bet a number of pachi (covers) and place them in the center. One player would stack the covers to try to make it difficult for the pachi to be overturned. As children we experimented with all different ways of shaping the pachi pile to prevent too many being upended. The second player then would take one pachi and would slam the pachi onto the pile to see how many he could overturn. Whatever was upended became the property of that particular player. This particular game was marketed in the 1990s as POGS, using specially created covers, and became a craze among children in Hawai'i and California.

