

Filipino americans essay

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Filipino Americans, those groups of people who have come from the Philippine Islands to live permanently in the United States comprise the largest immigrant group from Asia, outnumbering those from China and Hong Kong, known as traditional exporters of manpower to America, and rank second only to Mexico in the total number of immigrants. Of the approximately 9 million immigrants living in the United States of Asian descent, 20 percent are Filipino Americans (Filipino American History). Officially, there are 2 million Filipinos and Filipino Americans residing in America (Gamalinda).

This paper focuses on the history of the Filipino Americans and aims to gain understanding of their culture, tradition and values. With his Oriental features, a Filipino is often mistaken for a Thai, a Chinese, Japanese or other nationals. However, his native culture and traditions as well as his unique colonial past make the Filipino different from other Asians. Thus, second, third and fourth generation Filipino Americans brought up in the American way often find it difficult to grasp the Filipino psyche. Many fail to understand or define what a Filipino is really like. To understand the Filipino Americans' present, it is necessary to look at their past. The name Filipino is derived from Felipe, the name of the Spanish king (Philip II) who was on the throne when Ferdinand Magellan arrived in the Philippine archipelago with the remnant of his ships to claim the islands for Spain on March 16, 1521. During the Spanish colonization period the term "Filipinos" was not used to refer to the natives (who was called an "indio") but to the children of Spaniards who were born in the Islands.

The Filipino people are divided by ethnic diversity. The Philippine national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal, has been called The First Filipino because he was the first to espouse a national identity, urging them to aspire, not towards becoming a province, but towards becoming a nation. Before him, islanders referred to themselves by their ethnic origin, e.

g., Tagalogs, Kapampangans, Bicolanos, Ilongos, Warays. Although most of the people speak Filipino, also known as Tagalog, the national language which is used along with English as the medium of instruction in schools, there are 48 other dialects spoken throughout the archipelago. A Tagalog may think of himself as a Filipino but he would usually consider himself different from an Ilocano or an Ilongo. Regional differences which prevented the formation of a distinct national identity partly enabled the Spanish colonizers to maintain their hold on the Philippines for so long. Before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores, the islands had been populated by natives of mostly Malay descent, described by Nakpil as “ a hodge-podge of Oriental races known for being intrepid sea-farers” (130). Ruled by tribal chieftains, these pioneers inhabited small villages known as balangays (named after a native boat). Villages along seashores traded with the Chinese, Indians, and other foreigners who sailed inland regularly to exchange their porcelain and silk for gold.

At times, Muslim warriors as well as Chinese pirates and other foreign intruders made forays into local villages, looting and impregnating women. Spaniards intermarried with the natives; even the friars were known to maintain mistresses. This has resulted in natives being born of fair skin or

mestizo features. The tendency to admire people with fair skin and aquiline noses stems from centuries of colonial upbringing which taught the natives that the whites are superior. Prosperous and free before the coming of the white man, the Philippines was described by Rizal in his poem " Mi Ultimo Adios, " written on the eve of his execution, as an " Eden lost." Foreign travelers who visited the islands in the sixteenth century observed that the natives were easily content with what they had, fond of merrymaking and considered gold only as ornament, not as riches. Thus, they could not understand the Spaniard's fierce demand for the yellow commodity which the natives were forced to produce as tribute to the king.

Nothing much has changed since the sixteenth century: today Filipinos are known for their fondness for videoke bars, singing their hearts' content in the company of their friends or relatives. Unlike the Chinese or Indians, the Filipinos traditionally were not merchants who looked after profit: they took only what they needed. This ancient tradition persists to this day. Filipino overseas workers usually seek employment abroad to earn sufficient money to start a small business at home but most do not succeed and are forced to return to their foreign employers.

This has enabled the Chinese businessmen to flourish in the islands and today they have almost total control of the national economy. Filipino Americans, particularly the greater mass of workers who man the nation's hospitals, factories, and farms, are largely " invisible" (Filipino American History). Children of successful Filipino Americans probably ask why most of their kin are content, even happy with menial jobs. While many Filipino

Americans have succeeded in the corporate jungles of America and some have been recognized for their achievements as scientists, inventors, lawyers, politicians, doctors, artists and athletes, most Filipinos are busy doing the dirty work of America, from swabbing the decks of aircraft carriers to changing the diapers of the sick and the elderly.

Part of the answer may lie in the fact that the Filipino has long suffered from a severe case of inferiority complex arising from centuries of colonization: three hundred thirty three years under Spain and 48 years under the United States. Under Spain, the indios were taught from birth to death that they were inferior. An educated Filipino was considered a threat to national security, and an ignorant one loyal to the crown.

They were kept illiterate except for the ilustrados or the privileged classes, and were governed in fact, not by the Spanish civil government but by the Spanish friar: "a blind reactionary who reached for the whip when he heard the word progress"(Ma. Guerrero 3). American policymakers excited at the prospect of acquiring territory in a distant land saw the Filipinos as mere "infants" compared to their European and American counterparts as regards "intelligence and civilization." (Younghusband 160-161). To ignore this fact, in the white man's view, would be ill-advised. This belief on the inferiority of the brown man(and other races) has resulted in grave injustice to the Filipinos. "Many do not realize," writes Zialcita, "that the educational system in 19th century Philippines was actually ahead of other Asian countries of that period"(15). James Blount, an infantryman who later served

as judge in the Philippines, later gave a favorable account of the natives in his book about the American occupation.

From being a colony of Spain, the Philippines became a colony of America. When the United States waged war against Cuba near the turn of the last century, it had to contend with the Spanish armada in Manila Bay, Philippines, then a Spanish possession. As every American student knows, Admiral Dewey destroyed the Spanish navy in a lopsided victory that raised morale at home and proved America a real world power.

By coincidence, Spain's grip on the Islands at that time was being pried loose by a popular revolt. What to do with the Philippines was a dilemma, considering America's aversion to colonies. American policy-makers were, however, seduced by this opportunity to acquire possession in a distant land where they could build a refueling base to serve its growing naval might. As history went, the United States annexed the Philippines through the Treaty of Paris, paying off 20 million dollars to Spain.

(The Treaty of Paris was recognized and mentioned in the 1935 Philippine Constitution to describe the national territory, but it was removed from the revised constitution of 1987, said treaty being seen by nationalists as a painful reminder of the country's colonial past). In hindsight, the American government also paid for a 300-million dollar war as the Filipinos fought the new colonizer. The Filipino-American War raged from 1898 to 1902, resulting in 70, 000 American and about two million Filipino, mostly civilian, casualties.

A massacre of American soldiers by Filipino insurgents in Samar island led to a brutal “ pacification” campaign that aimed to convert Samar into a “ howling wilderness.” It is not often mentioned, and few care to remember, but the Philippines is the United States’ first Viet Nam. But this sad chapter in U. S. History has been glossed over as Filipino children have been taught in public elementary schools that the Americans actually saved them from the Spaniards in the name of “ Benevolent Assimilation.

” For a people barely recovering from the trauma of a revolutionary war against Spain and undergoing a protracted struggle against America, the new occupation could only reinforce national self-doubt, previously cultivated by their Spanish masters with the aid of whiplashes and execution at the gallows. The Americans were infinitely more liberal and democratic than the Spaniards, but they too wrestled with doubt as to the wisdom and justice of their cause. Was Benevolent Assimilation – the noble task of assuming the so-called “ white man’s burden” justified in the face of so much suffering among the natives? History shows that America’s acts since the Filipino-American War has been one continuing attempt to justify its new role as keeper of world peace. Pictured by many war correspondents as uncivilized in keeping with the tenor of the pacification campaign against the Filipino insurgents, the image of the Filipino was severely damaged further during the St. Louis Exposition in 1904 to celebrate the Louisiana Purchase, with exhibits seen by some 19 million visitors.

To prove the American theory that colonization of the Philippines was necessary in order to “ Christianize” and civilize them, various ethnic groups

including headhunters were taken from the remote mountain fastnesses of the Philippines and exhibited at the fair where they were made to perform their dog-eating and tribal rituals (Vergara 114-145). Shocked at the display of “ savageness,” most visitors at the exposition overlooked the fact that most Filipinos had long been civilized before Magellan came: they had their own languages, literature and arts. They too forgot that Filipinos were already devout practicing Catholics and those of means were being educated in European universities before the Americans came to “ civilize” them with the Kragg rifle.

The efforts of the early American administrators to improve public welfare, unlike the exploitative bent of their Spanish counterparts were not lost, however, on the Filipinos who quickly developed a deep loyalty to America. During the Second World War, Filipino soldiers fought alongside Americans in Bataan and Corregidor. Thousands of them died in the horrible “ Death March.” Unfazed by the cruelty of the Japanese regime, guerilla resistance fighters prepared the way for the return of General Douglas MacArthur.

On July 4, 1946, the Philippines, then under a Commonwealth government, was granted independence as provided under the Tydings-Mc Duffie Act. Sentimental and good-natured, Filipinos to this day feel gratitude to the Americans for driving back the Japanese invaders. Filipino soldiers have fought America’s wars: in Korea, Viet Nam, even Iraq. This feeling, rooted in the age-old Filipino value of “ utang na loob” (debt of gratitude) has endured up to the present.

Filipinos consider themselves America’s “ little brown brothers.” As the indios of old were wont to imitate their Spanish colonial masters, the Filipinos were quick to adopt things American: the

English language, political system, education. The success of most Filipino Americans can be traced to their facility in the use of the English language, and this they owe largely to America.

American soldiers who fought in the Filipino-American War, known as “Thomasites” after the ship that took them to the islands, were among the first to give the natives the benefits of real education (Agoncillo 362). It is said that the Spaniards gave the Filipinos Christianity, while the Americans gave them Hollywood. The Philippines used to have its own version of Elvis Presley (Eddie Mesa), Timi Yuro (Nora Aunor), Perry Como (Diomedes Maturan).

There was even a female Elvis Presley of the Philippines (Cora Adajar). Noting that the Filipino people “should perpetuate their occidental way of life which they can only do through continued association with America and the western world, President Manuel L. Quezon described the role of the Filipino people in a letter to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as “the connecting link between Orient and Occident.” The late General Carlos P. Romulo, a Filipino who learned English from an American soldier and who later became known as “Mr. United Nations” for his distinguished service as ambassador spoke of the Filipino-American relation in this wise: “I am a Filipino: child of the marriage of the East and the West. The East, with its languor and mysticism, its passivity and endurance, was my mother.

My sire was the West that came thundering across the seas with the Sword and the Cross and the Machine.” The Filipinos’ coming to America is not a recent phenomenon. During the Spanish regime, native crew who

deserted the Manila galleon ships plying the Manila to Acapulco route to escape their cruel taskmasters settled in the marshlands of Louisiana, where they taught the sun-drying of shrimp. These Filipino settlers joined Jean Lafitte in the Battle of New Orleans against the British redcoats. Long before that, native voyagers from the Philippine archipelago are said to have reached the American mainland on October 18, 1587, fifty years ahead of the Jamestown colonists. A Filipino, Antonio Miranda Rodriguez Poblador, was directed by the Spanish government in Mexico to establish a settlement in the land where the City of Los Angeles now stands .

Later migration of Filipinos to the United States came in waves. The first occurred in the early 1900s when Filipinos came to Hawaii to work in the sugar cane plantations. Most of these immigrants were Ilocanos, known for their industry, frugality, and clannishness, who were driven by the harsh conditions in their homeland to seek opportunities elsewhere. Others worked in the West Coast, from California to Alaska, doing all kinds of manual jobs. Even today, some Filipino farm workers jokingly refer to themselves as CPAs (Certified Pickers of Apple).

In 1903, children of well-to-do families called “ pensionados” were also allowed to travel to America to study in its universities. Immigration almost stopped when the U. S. Congress limited the number of immigrants in response to protests and claims that the Filipinos brought down wages by competing with the whites for cheap labor.

Like the blacks and other racial groups, Filipinos have been victims of discrimination in the workplace and in society. The fear of half-breeds

multiplying in their midst made many Americans wary of the Filipino migrant worker (Cortez 343-345). The success of many Filipino Americans in their various fields may contribute towards helping them rid themselves of the feelings of inferiority arising from their colonial past.

To their credit, many Filipino Americans have excelled quietly in fields previously thought exclusive to the white man. The lunar buggy that astronauts rode over the dunes of the moon was designed by a Filipino American inventor, Eduardo San Juan. Another Filipino American, Agapito Flores, invented the fluorescent lamp.

Governor Ben Cayetano of Hawaii was a Filipino American. Joey Comiso, a scientist who has pioneered in the remote sensing of the polar oceans, is another Filipino American (Lee-Chua 12). The names of Filipino Americans who have distinguished themselves in competitive America would make the ancient indios proud. According to Ocampo, the yoyo is an ancient Filipino invention. In the 1920s, a Filipino, Pedro Flores, built a yoyo to amuse his ward, until an American took notice of it, and built a similar toy. Later, the Duncan Yoyo Company was found, which earned millions out of the new toy which they popularized by inventing many yoyo tricks.

The company later sold their yoyos to the Philippines at a price, unaware that it was a native invention (208-210). Colonialism has been identified as partly to account for the Filipinos' "invisibility." The other cause lies in the Filipinos' love for kin, combined with their inherent capacity for survival against all odds. Filipinos under Spain had to contend not only with the harsh tribute demanded by their tax collectors, but also with the never

ending cycle of famine, tropical storms, earthquakes (the Philippines is within the Pacific “ ring of fire”), volcanic eruptions, pirate raids, sporadic rebellions. Continuous suffering has inured the Filipino, making him more pliable, passive, but also stronger and willing to perform hard work for the sake of their loved ones. Many Filipino Americans are conscious of their roots and intend to return to their hometown when they retire. Filipino families are so tightly-knit that everybody deems it his/her duty to contribute something to make life easier: food for the table, contribution for someone’s wedding or graduation, financial support to someone studying in college. Filipinos traditionally care for their parents when they are old, treating them with respect and consulting them on family affairs.

Filipinos will usually go home at all costs to be at the bedside of a dying relative or attend his/her funeral. Thus, to a Filipino, being a “ mere” caregiver, janitor, and odd-job man is no hard task at all as long as he earns sufficiently for the family back home. General Carlos P. Romulo spoke loftily of his heritage: “ I am a Filipino: inheritor of a glorious past, hostage to the uncertain future.

As such, I must prove myself equal to a two-fold task: the task of meeting my responsibilities to the past, and the task of performing my obligations to the future.” The Filipino Americans, as they discover their complex cultural heritage, are slowly but inexorably proceeding to accomplish said two-fold task. WORKS CITED Agoncillo, Teodoro A. Filipino Response to American Educational and Cultural Institutions, History and

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