

Cultural Identity Among Members of the Filipino American Student Association at the
University of Arizona

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Abstract

This paper considers several cultural elements attributed to Filipino culture as they are brought into play within the social structures of minority cultural centers at a large American public university and as these elements are related to a broader cultural agenda of multi-culturalism in the U.S. The discussion of the ethnographic data deals first with the structural organization within which these cultural elements become, or are potentially causal agents, *sui generis*, for the construction of cultural identities. The cultural elements discussed in this paper include: food, language, time management, and historical factors. The paper concludes with how the interaction of these cultural elements and social structures forge individual and metacultural identities.

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Introduction

In a multi-cultural society such as the United States, how are cultural groups defined and how do individuals define themselves as members of a particular cultural group among many others and within a larger American culture? I pose this question as a way of organizing and analyzing my data on the formation of a culture-based student association (Filipino American Student Association, FASA hereafter) in a large American public university (University of Arizona) and on the identification by FASA members with the culture that the association is supposed to represent in a multi-cultural student body.

The analytical framework used here is an idealization of cultural diversity and cultural unity in the American context. On the outset, this appears to be an imposition of an overarching moral bias over my ethnographic data. But it is a strategy which lays out the particular landscape in which the definition of identity can be made clearer. I posed the question above as a way of outlining a setting for the definition of "cultural identity," which I use in this paper. The term is in line with the ideal imagery of a flat American landscape where diverse "cultural identities" can be constructed from neutralized ethnic identities and can be connected to a larger conception of American cultural identity. In this setting, "cultural identity" can be defined as a type of an ideal identity that is detached from the particularistic elements of ethnic, national, and racial identities and yet attached to particular cultural elements of these more primeval identities, cultural elements that are hoped to be contributive to a broader conception of culture.

Starting with the above idealization is also my way of dealing with the "longstanding sociological concern with the relationship between the individual and society and with the theoretical function of identity as a kind of interface or conceptual bridge linking the two" (Snow and Anderson, 1987, p. 1338). In contrast with studies of ethnic and cultural identity which emphasized the subjective aspect of ethnic or cultural belonging, I take the idealization of diversity and unity in the American context as the final arbiter of both the personal and societal meanings of cultural identity. I take an idealization that has suffused cultural and political agenda which are defining the social structures in which individuals are being defined and are defining themselves and I ask the question, "How is the 'what is' faring against the 'ought to be'?"

I gathered my data for the 'what is', over a period of four months, through observation of and participation in FASA's weekly meetings on campus, occasional get-togethers at restaurants and members' apartments, and joint activities with other associations under an umbrella organization, the Asia Pacific American Cultural Resource Center (APACRC hereafter). Furthermore, I did personal interviews with a few members and I organized the food preparation for FASA's Fiesta, the association's major annual activity.

At the beginning of my study, I tended towards the commonsensical tendency to look for distinct cultural traits proceeding from an objective, cultural continuity with Filipino nationality or ethnicity. But, like some studies of ethnicity, nationalism, and culture (Anderson, 1983; Roosens, 1989; Wachtel, 1998), I have found no pure, objective markers of ethnic, national, cultural, or racial identity in my study of cultural identity among members of FASA. With many members of FASA coming from mixed marriages, even phenotypic appearance is a very poor indicator of Filipino ancestry. With broader cultural and political agenda defining the boundaries of membership, every student is theoretically eligible for membership in FASA. What I found

then is an open field of identity creation. In that field are flesh-and-blood individuals, who can remember, interpret, select, and combine diverse cultural elements in various ways, and social structures that can create, organize, differentiate, separate, or overarch diverse individual and group identities.

This paper focuses on the cultural elements brought by individuals and social structures into this open, interactive field and from which they draw on to construct cultural identities. In this field, "culture becomes a source of causality sui generis" (Roosens, 1989, p. 11). The cultural elements that I discuss in this paper are: structural organization based on "American" values of equality, diversity, and unity and "Asian" values of harmony, self-reliance, and self-effacement; food, language, the concept of time, and historical factors in Filipino-American relationships.

Before I discuss these cultural elements in detail, it must be mentioned here that my involvement in the association's activities was as a member and as one who regards herself, by nationality, as a Filipino. As a result, I have often found it hard to distinguish my role as a researcher and as a member. However, the very ambiguity of the concept of identity as it relates to culture, nationality, ethnicity, and race in a multi-cultural society has led me to look at cultural identity as both a sense of individuality and commonality. In my case, I was aware of an ingrained detachment towards Filipino culture by virtue of coming from a family who do not subscribe to Catholicism, which largely supplies the symbolism of a Filipino national culture. In addition, I come from a tribal minority that largely has not been influenced by the three centuries of Spanish rule in the Philippines and that has abandoned its "barbaric" practices of headhunting, near nakedness, etc., only in the past three decades. But, I also was aware of my attachment to Filipino culture by virtue of a shared national language and literature, which I learned mostly

through a national educational system and through the media. Also, a strong ideology of Filipino nationalism vis-a-vis Western neo-imperialism and the Marcos' regime's corruption pervaded academic curricula and campus activism when I was in college in Manila. Furthermore, my Filipino identity is set in the multi-culturalism of the U.S. Although I am not a U.S. citizen, I am a wife to one and a mother to three. In view of the above, I found it hard not to put myself into my research as one individual that can be used as a point of reference in defining Filipino cultural identity in a multi-cultural America.

Structural Organization

This section deals with how the structural organization of students according to the American cultural agenda of multi-culturalism has created niches for cultural identity construction where only vestiges of ethnic awareness existed before. Furthermore, this section deals with the tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces of identity construction in relation to the broader agenda of multi-culturalism as social structures and symbol-using individuals impinge on each other. First, the organization and membership of FASA in relation to larger organizations of which it is a part is laid out.

FASA is one of the Asian student associations under the APACRC which in turn is one of the minority cultural resource centers set up at the University of Arizona to provide academic, social, and cultural support to ethnic minority students. The other Asian student associations under APACRC are: the Vietnamese Student Association (VSA), the Korean Student Association (KSA), and the Hawaiian Student Association (HAWASA). The other minority cultural resource centers at the University of Arizona besides APACRC are: the American Indian

Graduate and Cultural Resource Center, the Chicano/Hispano Student Affairs and Resource Center, and the African American Cultural Resource Center.

On paper, FASA has about 30 members but only a third of these, mostly the officers composed of five, attend the weekly meetings regularly. Most of the members are undergraduates. A third of them have both Filipino biological parents, a third come from mixed marriages (Filipino-Navajo, Filipino-Japanese, Filipino-White, Filipino-Chinese, Filipino-Indian), the other third is a mix of Vietnamese, Koreans, and Whites who have connections with the Filipinos or the Philippines. Many of the members were born in the Philippines and have come with their parents to the U.S. when they were very young, some came recently for educational purposes, some were born in the U.S. and have lived in the U.S. for most of their lives, and the rest were born in Vietnam or Korea and also came to the U.S. when they were very young.

According to the Dean of APACRC, although the minority cultural resource centers were designed primarily for ethnic minority students, open membership in the student associations is encouraged in the spirit of providing opportunities for learning from each other's culture. Thus, she said, the fact that FASA was chaired by a white student is not an anomaly but an indication of the openness of APACRC as a cultural resource center for all students. On the part of Colleen, the white president of FASA, she said she applied for the leadership position of FASA primarily because she came to enjoy being around Filipinos from her previous contacts with other Filipinos in New York.

The setting up of minority cultural centers seemed to have set off a domino effect in creating ethnic consciousness. At a meeting of APACRC in which one of the founders of the

Center spoke about the struggle in the 1980s to set up an Asian center, the story told was that of there being no choice for the Asians on campus but to petition for their own cultural center after the American Indians, Latinos, and African Americans all had their own cultural centers set up. The Asians were left in a vacuum where they felt they had to create a place where they can belong too.

However, according to an interview with Krishmon, a member of FASA and one of the active organizers of APACRC at its inception, "petty bickerings" soon came out between different Asian ethnic groups who were then all under one association. This one association was divided into the different student associations (FASA, VSA, KSA, & HAWASA) on the rationale that stronger cultural identities can be built in these more specifically-labeled associations and that any built-up cultural strength can in turn become a springboard for broader community involvement. From Krishmon's lamentations, it seems that further division has not produced the expected positions of strength but rather produced a superficial and apathetic view of cultural identity and broader communal concerns.

In contrast to Krishmon's pessimism, the board of directors of the Asian American Faculty, Staff and Alumni Association (AAFSAA), an offshoot of APACRC to include a wider community of Asian Americans, expressed a sense of accomplishment and future optimism about the role of APACRC and all the associations under it in building stronger Asian cultural identities and American communities. From the speeches given by some of AAFSAA's board of directors, there was a noticeable self-consciousness about the perceived envy of the "Asian success" by other minority groups and about the resentment by whites of the privileges given to minorities. AAFSAA, they implied, was an effort to apply in practice the Asian values of self-reliance, not separation, through raising funds for scholarships and community programs. One of

the speakers emphasized that the goal of building stronger Asian cultural identities comes out of the Asian value of "harmonizing" not "conforming" oneness. He said further that Asians should practice "self-effacement" not "gloating" about its academic and professional successes.

From the above discussion of structural organization, the conclusion can be drawn that a sense or a need for ethnic or cultural belonging does not exist in and of itself but is created by processes of social structuring. Lamphere (1992, p.) has forwarded the thesis that the processes of "separation and division are not merely a matter of choice, language barriers, or cultural differences too difficult to bridge. They are also patterns supported and even created by the structure of the institutions in which newcomers interact with established residents." Where only vague and disparate ethnic and cultural identities exist before, social structuring creates niches where these identities are more clearly defined. In the process of defining clearer identities within these structural niches, distinct cultural elements are brought into play and broader agendas are used to pull up distinctiveness into a communal whole. The following sections will deal with several Filipino cultural elements that were brought into play and how these are used to either emphasize distinctiveness or commonality.

Food

Food seems so ordinary and concrete it does not appear to have any higher meanings for identity construction. However, in the course of my study, I found food to be a powerful emotional magnet for personal cultural identification as well as a very palpable social currency for building broader communities.

If I must make an exception from my earlier agreement with the thesis that cultural identity does not proceed from an objective cultural continuity from the past, food is it. In an

interview with Adrian and in interactions with other members during the planning and food preparation for the Fiesta, food appears to be a direct link between these individuals' biological ancestry and their sense of cultural identity. In short, food is maternal love and *mama is Filipino, ergo, I am Filipino because I eat Filipino food*. Adrian mentions that he identifies the most with Filipino food in identifying himself as a Filipino. His Mom cooked it a lot and when she passed away, his craving for Filipino food was one of his motivations for joining FASA. The ethnic Filipino food that FASA members endeavor to prepare and eat together provided Adrian the comfort and nurture that he associates with his mother's cooking. Leola, of Navajo-Filipino parentage, does not know much about Filipino culture but knows well about Filipino food, which her Filipino mother cooks often. Mary, of white-Filipino parentage, goes into ecstatic musing, while helping plan the menu for the Fiesta, about how warm and sweet some kind of dessert her mother used to cook.

Members of non-Filipino parentage recall fun and friendship with Filipinos usually around not only the actual eating of food but also around the laborious preparation of some popular Filipino dishes. Carrie, a white member and girlfriend to a Filipino comments how food among Filipinos becomes "the occasion itself."

For some members of FASA who had more experience with Filipino culture in the Philippines, food becomes a locus for calling attention to certain Filipino values. Robert, the lead cook for the Fiesta, attributed his method of cutting chicken wings into three pieces as showing Filipino thriftiness. Later, when the pole used for roasting the Fiesta pig broke and the pig fell into the fire pit, Robert rushed to Home Depot to get an iron grate on which the pig (now chopped into pieces) was barbecued instead. Robert attributed the solution to Filipino resourcefulness. Jehan, finding that there was plenty of food left during the Fiesta, went on stage

and announced that "in the spirit of Filipino hospitality and generosity," all Fiesta attendees were welcome to bring home some of the leftover food.

In relation to other cultural groups, food becomes a very tangible way of finding commonality with other Asian cultures as well as a way of differentiating one's group from another. Egg rolls and noodles are common to many Asian cuisines, but Filipinos claim to use certain unique ingredients while the Vietnamese use other sets of ingredients. Language come into play in this differentiation where Filipinos stamp their egg roll and noodles with uniqueness by the distinctly Filipino names of the dishes, *lumpia* and *pancit*, respectively.

Language

In the course of my interaction with members of FASA, I sensed a tension between a Filipino nationalistic self-consciousness and the status accorded to the degree of acculturation to American culture. Nowhere is this tension more apparent than in the use of Tagalog (one of eighty Philippine languages but was made the Philippine national language) and in the "quality" of one's accent in English. Adrian articulated this tension in my interview with him. It seems that Filipino members who have come recently to the U.S. and whose accent in the English language is still thick, used facility in speaking Tagalog a measure of authenticity of Filipino identity. On the other hand, those who speak English with perfect American accents like to emphasize the naturalness of their degree of acculturation to an American lifestyle. Yet both groups were vulnerable to the pressures of authenticity and naturalness that each side brings into interactions.

Yet again, language becomes a source for attributing to one's group certain unique cultural traits. This is apparent in the use of Tagalog words in jesting and joking and then attributing this to a Filipino sense of fun and humor.

Time

"Filipino time" is a common phrase many Filipinos resignedly use to describe their propensity for being late. Again, Adrian put this self-ascribed cultural practice more forcefully when he said, "it's in the blood " when asked if Filipinos who grew up in the U.S. still practice "Filipino time." My observation shows however that this easily self-ascribed Filipino trait is taken for granted only during Filipino functions but not during social events outside of FASA functions. It seems that for many FASA members, FASA functions became occasions where they can let go and claim their "natural right" to be late. They knew better, however, than to be late in situations where punctuality is demanded.

It may be that the group exerts a pressure on the members to act and talk Filipino that even the poor management of time is wrung dry of certain Filipino traits. I have scheduled the Fiesta food preparation for one whole afternoon and an evening but only Colleen showed up at the appointed time. The rest trickled in during the last third of the scheduled time. The required work was done however, even considering unexpected mishaps. The members were quick to omit or add ingredients as things did not work out well. They cut egg roll wrappers and vegetables into smaller pieces when original sizes and numbers were low. Several members attributed this "all things worked out well after all" phenomenon to Filipino coolness and ingenuity.

History

Notwithstanding the assertions of open membership and Filipino connections as reasons for FASA having a white student as its president, this section will take the particular case of Colleen to bring in the historical elements that define Filipino-American relationships. This is also to show that the supposedly neutralizing American cultural landscape has in it cultural groups bringing in their unique historical past and which can affect notions of deference and assertiveness in multi-cultural settings.

Many authors have expressed confusion as to where to locate the Philippines culturally (Karnow, 1989; Steinberg, 1982; Timberman, 1991;). It seems more Latin than Asian. It looks more Western than Eastern. Several Philippine leading nationalists have expressed the uncertainty of a Filipino identity as in the following observation by the late Senator Claro M.

Recto:

We apologize for our western customs because we know we are orientals. But we are ashamed also of what characterizes us as orientals, fearing that such traits are old-fashioned and backward (cited in Timberman, p. 12).

Another Filipino nationalist stated the same ambiguity and uncertainty about a Filipino identity when he wrote that Filipinos are:

An oriental people standing at the portals of Asia, in deep sympathy with its kindred neighbors yet with hands outstretched to the cultures of Spain and America (Kalaw, 1937, p. 185).

Or, as Imelda Marcos simply put it: "We are neither here nor there" (quoted in Steinberg, 1982, p. 129, and cited in Timberman, 1991, p. 3).

Yet infused in this ambiguity and uncertainty among Filipinos is an unmistakable infatuation with things American and an inordinate belief in the powerful role of the U.S. in

Philippine politics and destiny. This is apparent whether Filipinos prefer imported American goods over locally-made ones or whether they are protesting U.S. imperialism in the Philippines. Historians trace this affinity of Filipinos to America in the co-option of the Philippine national movement by the U.S. policy of "benevolent assimilation" (Timberman, 1991). Steinberg (1982) asserts that one of the insidious consequences of Spanish and American colonial rule in the Philippines has been the negation of Philippine self-confidence. Karnow (1989) unceremoniously described the Philippines as the product of 300 years in a convent and 50 years in Hollywood. Timberman (1991, p.4) sums this up when he wrote that the Philippines' "historical experience has created a culture and society with multiple layers of sometimes contradictory characteristics."

In view of the above, the case of Colleen can be interpreted as a manifestation of the ready deference of Filipinos to Americans. It can be said also that Colleen has capitalized on her connections to Filipinos to become FASA's president but this is less evident than the deference given to her by the Filipino members of FASA. During the Fiesta program, Colleen was presented with a bouquet of flowers as "an appreciation for her hard work in presiding over FASA and in her work at APACRC." She was fondly called "Our Little American Filipina."

Conclusion

I have attempted to set my ethnographic findings within an idealization of a multi-cultural America but it is a simplistic endeavor to look for a simple correlation between actual and idealized processes. Just as the individual and society are not fixed posts between an open, interactive field of identity construction, even an overarching idealization do not hover still like a roof over individuals and social structures. The 'ought to be' is continually negotiated in the 'what

is'. The 'what is' is a creative tension between particularistic and universalistic ideals of individuals and groups.

I see the preoccupation on the fragmentation of American society as a preoccupation with what is felt to be lost or compromised. But what is really being lost and compromised when in reality there may not be any objective content there in the first place? I see a more fruitful preoccupation in what is being forged in the interaction between different cultures or to look for those processes and elements which would tip otherwise creative tensions towards divisive particularism or tyrannical universalism.

This paper has cited those instances where certain values were claimed by FASA and AAFSAA members as 'Filipino' or 'Asian.' My ethnographic study has not gone further to gather data on how far these values are internalized as personal values or how far these values are connected to American values of equality, diversity, and unity. My efforts at delving into personal meanings have been met with uncomfortable silences, self-conscious ethnic identification, or off the mark responses suggesting that many Filipino-Americans simply cannot talk about what is not yet fully there. Contemporary American society maybe at a self-conscious phase where division and separation must occur as in mitosis before a new society can be forged. But there are glimpses of values that are internalized as personal values as in Adrian's telling of his shock at seeing the great disparity between rich and poor in the Philippines, which can indicate that he has internalized the American ideal of equality. The efforts of AAFSAA to bring out the Asian values of self-reliance, harmony, and self-effacement can be a connection to and a potential modifier of American values of independence, unity and assertiveness.

One of the positive things that I see being forged in social structuring of cultural identities are perspectives from which individuals can detach themselves from their imputed ethnic identities and from which they can take control of their personal and social identities. In this regard, I see self-deprecating comments about Filipino culture by FASA members as the result of taking a detached perspective and then taking control by basically claiming the prerogative to criticize one's own culture. From this point, the individual then can take, leave, or modify his/her socially-imputed cultural identity. In the same regard, I see Colleen's and other whites' efforts to involve themselves in the minority centers as an effort of detachment from the imputed dominant characteristic of whites. This is evident when some of them talk about how they would rather be involved in minority centers than in white-dominated sorority houses.

While there are many aspects of the American multi-cultural landscape that are alienating, I see it rather as offering and allowing many points for detachment and reflection which I consider an important aspect of freedom and equality. It is a paradox of life that only from a point of detachment and reflection can an individual take control of his/her place in society. But it is also a paradox of social life that the insights gained by individuals from these points of detachment and reflection will remain private or channeled to particularistic interests if there are no common goals or ideals that a diverse population can aspire to achieve. Hence the emphasis of this paper on an idealization of a whole. It implies a moral imperative but what sociological analysis can escape having to deal with moral imperatives, from the personal or communal point of view?

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