

FILIPINOS IN HAWAII: PROBLEMS IN THE PROMISED LAND*

F. Landa Jocano

In this paper, I shall discuss some of the major problems encountered by Filipino emigrants to Hawaii. The report is admittedly preliminary, representing only a small section of a longer study of Filipino Americans, but I believe it will suffice to give you a picture of some of the major difficulties that await Filipinos who travel to Hawaii in search of employment and a new life.

When I went to Hawaii in August 1969, I had no intention to undertake this study, since I had gone there for another purpose.¹ Shortly after my arrival, I began to receive invitations from Filipino residents in Honolulu, asking me to join them for picnics on weekends or to spend evenings at their homes. These informal visits gradually led to active participation in the affairs of Filipino organizations like the United Filipino Council of Hawaii, the United Bisayan Community of Waipahu, the Ilocano National Organization, the Oahu United Filipino Council, and others of the same kind. From October to December, I found myself spending weekends and holidays with Filipinos in the plantations of Ewa and Waipahu or in the cockpits of Wainai, all near Honolulu on the island of Oahu.

The study developed spontaneously out of this personal involvement. Thus it had no carefully constructed design on which to build and

no hypotheses to test. It was only when the entries in my diary became extensive fieldnotes that I decided, in the early part of 1970, to be more systematic than I had been in the recording of what I saw and heard. It was at this time that I decided as well to widen the circle of my informants to include, not merely the leaders with whom I had earlier been associated, but also the lower-income people about whom these leaders often spoke.

For my purposes, Filipinos living in the Kalihi district of southwest Honolulu provided a convenient source of information. Many Filipinos lived there, and still do. Whenever time permitted, between the months of January and May 1970, I visited and interviewed informants living there. In the interests of a representative selection, I chose 25 Filipino families of each of the two residential sections of Kalihi, namely, upper Kalihi, which is occupied by middle-income people, and lower Kalihi, where members of the low-income group tend to live. These data were later compared with information obtained from Filipinos living in the plantations and from others residing in various parts of Honolulu.

Hence whenever I speak of Filipinos in Hawaii in this paper, I refer to those living in Honolulu and nearby plantation communities. When I speak of Filipinos from other islands of Hawaii, my sources are either written materials or people who have first-hand information of them.

Historical Background

To understand the problems that Filipinos face in Hawaii today, it will help to understand

*Paper presented October 22, 1970, as part of the public lecture series entitled, "The Philippines Today: Second Thoughts for Citizens Concerned," at the San Miguel Auditorium, Makati, Rizal, under the sponsorship of the Philippine Sociological Society, Inc. Dr. Jocano is chairman of the department of anthropology, University of the Philippines.

the history of their immigration to those islands. As of 1970, the Filipinos constitute the third largest ethnic group in Hawaii. Recent estimates place them at over 80,000 in number, with every indication that they will continue to enter Hawaii in large numbers. For the three years previous to 1970, Filipinos represented the biggest group of immigrants to enter the state of Hawaii: in 1967, for example, 1,550 Filipinos were admitted to Hawaii, a figure representing 64 per cent of the total 2,400 immigrants; in 1968, of the 4,000 newcomers over 75 per cent were Filipinos.

This immigration has a long history, its origins at the turn of the century being closely linked with the development of the sugar industry of Hawaii. The first plantation established in Hawaii was in the island of Kauai in 1835. It relied mainly on Hawaiians for its labor force. But when other plantations were established, the need for additional labor became acute. In 1852, with the assistance of the Hawaiian Government, labor was imported from various countries, Asian and European. The Chinese were the first to come, followed by peoples from Oceania, Japan, Portugal (Azores and Madieras), Germany, Puerto Rico, Korea, and Spain. In numbers the largest group among the newcomers were the Japanese, who came as early as 1885 — indeed, Kitano claims (1969:13) that “In 1868, the Hawaiian monarchy had recruited plantation laborers through its representative in Tokyo.”

From 1885 on, thousands of Japanese were allowed to emigrate from Japan, and many of them came to Hawaii; others proceeded to the mainland United States. However, when the Japanese Government decided to curtail further emigration of its citizens to Hawaii in 1907–1908, following the so-called “Gentlemen’s Agreement,” the Hawaiian sugar and pineapple planters were faced with a choice between the employment of native-born workers or the introduction of other immigrant groups.

As both European and Asian labor had been, or was in the process of being, cut off, the choice was limited to workers from Puerto Rico or the

Philippines — the only two places where migrant labor could be recruited. Experiments had been made with workers of both nationalities. Puerto Rican immigration, particularly in 1900 and 1901, was found undesirable for two reasons: there was strong opposition to recruitment in Puerto Rico itself, and there was no direct and regular means of transportation. In a word, Puerto Rican labor was not only difficult to obtain but also expensive to bring to Hawaii.

The Hawaiian Sugar Planters’ Association (HSPA) had no choice but to turn to the Philippines for labor. This was timely, because by 1900 the Philippines was under the control of the Americans and Americanization of the country had been started. In fact, Bruno Lasker (1931:163) considers the latter as “one of the strongest forces attracting migrants to the mainland of the United States, and also exercised a strong pull to Hawaii, partly because of the advantages which the territory offered and partly as a stepping stone to the American continent.”

The initial experiment with Filipino labor, conducted in the years 1906 and 1907, involved only a few Filipinos. Through a labor agent in Manila, the HSPA recruited about 188 men, 20 women and two children — mostly Tagalog-speakers. While these laborers showed great promise, many of them did not last on the plantations. They slowly drifted to Honolulu, having been oriented to city life while in Manila. Finding difficulty in adjusting to the new environment, they figured prominently in many crime reports, and were branded “poke-knives” — a stereotype which has remained to this day as the standard label for Filipino males in Hawaii.

This made the HSPA turn to the Philippine rural areas for recruitment. The Bisayan islands were tapped for this purpose, and by 1916 the island of Cebu took the lead in supplying the plantations with laborers. However, the Bisayan recruits proved a disappointment to the HSPA, partly because many left the plantations before long, and partly because some had faked their employment papers. To be considered for employment, the applicant had to be single, young

(between 18 and 25 years old), and illiterate. The latter requirement has been denied by the HSPA officials as "malicious propaganda" that was never part of the HSPA recruitment policy. However, many old laborers, now retired and in their late 50s and early 60s, can recall how they were recruited.

First, the agents would feel your hands. If your palms were soft, they automatically reject you. Second, they would talk to you in English and give you a piece of paper to write. If you knew how to read and write, or, if you speak good English, you are disqualified. So many of us simply used our thumbs for signatures and played dumb whenever the agents spoke to us. You see many young boys had gone to school in Siliman.

By 1919, the HSPA had turned to the Ilocos region. Between 1920 and 1924, Ilocos Norte sent the largest group of laborers to Hawaii. From 1924 onward, Ilocos Sur and Ilocos Norte supplied the plantations with more laborers than any two provinces combined, and they continue to be the prime sources of Filipino labor to this day.

Growth in the number of Filipino labor immigrants in Hawaii can be summarized most clearly in table form, using available data for selected years.

<i>Year</i>	<i>No. of laborers</i>
1906	202
1916	8,549
1920	13,061
1925	24,345
1930	34,705
1935	54,668

When opportunity offered, numbers of the laborers left the plantations and found jobs in the city of Honolulu and other big centers. But the Depression brought a stop to labor recruitment; in fact many Filipinos were sent back to the Philippines. The last batch of laborers came to Hawaii in 1946 and numbered about 6,000. After that, Filipinos came under the new category of immigrants, many of them professionals looking for their futures in a new land.

Problems of Life and Adjustment in Hawaii

To return to the main subject of this paper, I ask how Filipino settlers in Hawaii earn their living and adjust to the environment there. What are some of the major problems encountered? To answer this question, I shall have to speak separately of two categories: the newcomers, and the oldtimers. The latter category includes both permanent residents and American citizens. Each has different problems of adjustment and each has developed its own ways of solving them.

The newcomers. By newcomer we mean immigrants who arrived in Hawaii between 1967 and 1970. Many of them are high school graduates from the rural areas of the Philippines, but there are also among them some professionals such as engineers, lawyers, nurses, and doctors. Some are college graduates. Their problems seem to arise from two sources: (a) difficulty in finding a job commensurate with their college training, and (b) inconveniences arising from strained family relations.

Professionals have more difficulty than non-professionals in getting suitable jobs. The probable main source of the difficulty is that the Filipino professional must compete with many aspirants, Americans and others, at least some of whom are considered *a priori* to be better trained than he is. Further, to qualify for a professional position the applicant must have satisfied a number of requirements, including minimum residence of five years, passing of the State Board Examination, and in-service training. Frequently the job is a government position demanding American citizenship as well. Faced with these requirements, the newly arrived Filipino professional sees himself barred from the positions for which he hoped to compete. One of my informants, an engineer, stated it in these terms.

I hate to say this but I'd rather speak with candor and frankness. I hate to see newcomers like me, especially those in the profession, working as dishwashers, busboys, waiters, waitresses, carpenters, or being a rodman in a survey team.

When we applied for our visas as professionals, we were strictly screened and barely got qualified. There are lots of immigration requirements to meet and lots of questions to answer. It usually takes months or even years to complete the paper requirements just to qualify. With all these hardships, we have big expectations and hopes that there is also help that will guide us to a job in line with the classifications we have applied for.

He further complained that "after working so hard to meet the professional classification requirements, it was discouraging to find ourselves thrown into a world of undetermined destiny." He felt frustrated that there was no agency in Hawaii to assist newcomers like him find a job commensurate with his professional qualifications.

Another informant, an agriculture graduate, expressed similar feelings about the discrepancy between his expectations and what opportunities were open to him when he reached Hawaii. "I felt I could have a better future here. I knew, or at least I was told, that as long as you were in good health and wanted to do work, you could find a job here in Hawaii. But I am still jobless." Since he had had no success since his arrival in 1967, despite applying to so many places for work, he expressed the hope that he might be hired as a laborer on a sugar plantation in Oahu sometime in 1970 at the rate of \$2.25 an hour.

There are many more examples that I could give to illustrate the problem of job placement, but the limits of this paper make it advisable to add only one more. I met a physician who works in a Honolulu hospital as an orderly because he was not allowed to practice medicine. Here was his complaint.

The fact that you know you know better than most of the personnel in the hospital and yet you are not professionally considered equal to them is frustrating. This is especially true when you are told they do not trust your training in medicine or at least they make you feel they don't. But I cannot go home now. I have to accomplish what I came here for, and it will take me five years before I can be allowed to practice. But I don't mind. I need the experience.

This informant placed fourth among the top 10 who passed the medical board examinations here in Manila in 1967.

In other words, looking for a job in a complex urban center like Honolulu is, to quote an old timer, "like looking for a needle in a haystack. You need to have the best of luck, the best of qualifications, and the best connections. Then you are all right. Otherwise, you have to swallow your professional pride and take whatever jobs are available in order to survive."

The problems faced by the non-professionals are not quite comparable to those who are professionals and college-degree holders. High school graduates easily get jobs as hotel boys, waiters, gardeners, and laborers. Their major adjustment problems involve communication, housing, and interpersonal relations. The stereotype created by the earlier laborers and present-day drifters from the plantations places these newcomers at a disadvantage. Other ethnic groups look down upon the non-professional Filipinos as "inferiors." In fact, one young girl (a Japanese) expressed this view quite succinctly by saying, "If I brought a Filipino boy home, my mother would order me out of the house. I'd tell my mother to go to hell, but I'd show the boy to the door." Because of this discrimination, young Filipino boys often get into trouble — thus compounding their adjustment problems rather than resolving them.

Children of the new immigrants shy away from school because of communication problems. Inadequately trained in the English language, they start to pick up the local pidgin English; this becomes an irritant in their interpersonal relations with those children in school who speak only standard English and with their teachers. Dr. Herita Agmata, a Filipino doctor who works at the State Department of Health and who deals with the problems of immigrants, relates that incidents have occurred in the past where a pupil was confined in a closet because his teacher had problems with him; teacher and pupil could not communicate with each other, and when troubles arose, the child was punished.

Domestic problems come next to those involving employment and interpersonal relations. If one examines the pattern of post-1946 im-

migration, he discovers that most of the newcomers came not as unconnected individuals but as members of families or kin groups who were already established in Hawaii. It is an immigration requirement that newcomers be sponsored by someone who can vouch for their economic support in the islands.

For his adjustment to the new society, his family is the most important unit for the newcomer — it is his world. Within and around it, he develops new visions of his future or suffers deepening frustration. In the course of this adaptation, his problems affect his sponsor-kinsman. The strain placed on the resources of sponsor-families, many of whom have limited housing facilities, bring about numerous conflicts, even among siblings. A few cases may be presented to illustrate this.

A, a resident in lower Kalihi, came to Hawaii in 1964. Two of his younger married brothers sponsored his coming. *A* finished a bachelor's degree before he left the Philippines. He had a steady job at the same time that he was managing the family farm. But attracted by stories that "you can better yourself in the U.S. if you are willing to work hard," he decided to try his luck. He wrote to his brothers and they willingly sponsored his coming. The two brothers were laborers in a construction company.

A, however, failed to get the job he expected. He took odd jobs that came along, like dishwasher, bellboy in a hotel, and gardener. Because of the high cost of living in Honolulu, he had to depend on his brothers for a livelihood. This set-up has made him unhappy: the job he has is not in line with what he thought he could get, and he is disappointed. But he refuses to come home because "the people in my town expect that I am already somebody, having gone to Hawaii. Yet I am nobody. As to my stay here, I will get it over with. In the Philippines I used to give orders; here I have to follow my younger siblings. I depend on them for a livelihood. My job is not steady and the remuneration is not enough for my expenses here."

C's case contrasts with *A*'s account. He was an employee in one of the private companies in Honolulu. One day he received a letter from his married brother *M*, asking if he could sponsor his coming to Hawaii. *C* readily consented. His wife did not think well of the proposal but did not articulate her objections.

M did not get a job right away when he arrived. He applied to a number of places but was turned down. So he accepted whatever odd jobs came along. Having saved a little, he decided to bring his wife and two children to Honolulu.

Because his income was not sufficient, *M* had to lean

back on *C* for economic support. Housing problems likewise forced him to request *C* to allow them to stay at their house. Meanwhile *C* and his wife started to quarrel about this indefinite stay. Their own savings began to dwindle and the small house was crowded. *M* and his family promised to move out as soon as they were financially able to meet the high cost of rent in Honolulu. *C*'s wife threatened to file for a divorce if the husband's siblings continued to live with them.

Old-timers. Permanent residents in Hawaii are sometimes known as old-timers, or OT, but some of them are still not American citizens. Like newcomers, they have the problem of adjustment to the multi-racial environment of Honolulu, and there was a time when they too had difficulty getting a job, but the length of their stay in Hawaii has partially solved this problem. Many of them have become American citizens, and are by this fact in a better position than the newcomers. Because the stereotype of "being Filipinos" is not favorable, many of them, especially the young people (the children of the original families, born in Hawaii or in the Philippines) refuse to acknowledge that they are Filipinos. They claim instead to be Spanish or Portuguese. If their skin color is too dark for this, they say they are "cosmopolitan," that is, of unknown ethnic identity resulting from intermarriage. This kind of evasion is understandable because, as one informant stated, "that's the only way to get a job and stay in it. Not many employers want to hire Filipinos." With more and more second-generation Filipinos getting college education and occupying responsible positions in both the Government service and private companies, "this ethnic-denial mechanism" for social and economic adjustment is losing its hold on the young people, who are now becoming proud of their Filipino ancestry.

Another group of old-timers faced with adjustment problems are the retired plantation laborers. Recruited as laborers in the prime of life, many of them are now aging and unemployed. Their contracts with the plantations expired, their savings insufficient, they are unmarried and without a source of livelihood. The lucky ones return to the Philippines, but others have to suffer it out in Honolulu.

In 1950, 25,000 of the 43,000 Filipino males then in Hawaii were 35 years of age or over. Of this group those who are still alive and have not returned to the Philippines are 50 years of age or over. Those receiving old-age assistance from the government's welfare program grow steadily in number. The Department of Social Services attributes the increase in Filipino old-age recipients of welfare assistance to the following factors:

- (1) Most of the Filipino males were employed on plantations, and so were not covered by Social Security arrangements; hence they do not have old-age and survivor's insurance to fall back on;
- (2) A large majority of the older Filipino men are either single or widowed, with no families to depend on;
- (3) These Filipinos were unable to get other types of employment because at the time that the plantations were mechanized, they were in their 50s and 60s, too old to be trained for other positions, especially since they had limited education or none at all.

Following the example set by members of other ethnic groups who established homes for the aged, a number of Filipinos with big homes have opened their doors to aged Filipinos and members of other ethnic groups. These established families provide care, room, and board for old people and are duly compensated, in return, by the Department of Social Service.

Some of these old unmarried men have found another way to cope with the problem of having no family. They live together. There are many boarding houses in Honolulu occupied by retired, unmarried Filipino males. Exceptions to this pattern are five groups with which I chanced to be acquainted. They live in the old section of Honolulu, along Maunakaea and Britania streets. Each group is composed of at least three males who cohabit with one woman. Of the five women, two are Filipinas in their late 20s, one is a Chinese mestiza, one is a Puerto Rican, and the last is of *haole*, or white, descent.

The three Filipinas came to Hawaii as the brides of old-timers. However, upon arrival they found that the OTs they had married were only plantation laborers, and not the wealthy bridegrooms they had been described as back home. Young as they were and frustrated in their expectations, the young brides soon attracted the attention of the younger Filipino males, a situation which strained their relations with their husbands. The latter became unreasonable, I was told, "in their suspicions" of the wives' behavior. One of the wives ventured an explanation: "They were like these younger males when they were young themselves; that is why they are always suspicious about your behavior."

Before long the young women drifted away from the plantations and found jobs in Honolulu as hostesses and, later, as part-time prostitutes. When an opportunity presented itself to have a stable home, without slaving in the bar for as long as there were customers, and without being tied down by marriage, they readily accepted the proposal to become the woman of the house for a number of males who, in turn, were delighted with the arrangement. One of the male informants said: "At least, you know you are not being fooled by the woman of your money."

The problems of the aged and needy Filipinos are displayed unflatteringly to passersby in downtown Honolulu. Having nothing to do, a number of them have become habitués of the pool halls and of Aala park. Pronounced "Ala Pak" by pidgin-English speakers, this prominent landmark at the south entrance to Honolulu's downtown area is a gathering place for old people, mostly Filipinos. Nearby, in the downtown Nauuanu Stream triangle, Filipino old-timers can usually be found engaged in a Chinese number game called *che fa* or *hueteng*. The game is considered illegal, but the frequent arrests that occur do not stop the old men from playing it.

The Other side of the Picture

So far we have been describing the hardships that Filipinos encounter in Hawaii. But there are also successful Filipino immigrants, now

well assimilated into the American way of life, retaining nonetheless their distinctive Filipino mannerisms. Compared with other ethnic groups, haoles excluded, Filipinos have an enviable record. Relative newcomers — hardly 60 years there — Filipinos have successfully broken into the upper social strata of the Hawaiian social world. The Chinese and the Japanese came first, so naturally they presently dominate the system. But there are Filipinos, and Americans of Filipino ancestry, who occupy prominent positions in both the government service and in private establishments.

To date, there are six Filipino members of the State Legislature of Hawaii, a circuit judge, a former chief of police, school superintendents, educators, and government lawyers. In business, Filipinos are prominent in real estate, insurance, travel agencies, banking, and other lines of endeavor. They also occupy important offices in the labor unions.

The general prospect for Filipino assimilation into American society is bright. Further, by sheer numbers, Filipinos can wield strong political power in Hawaiian politics, if they unite. Therein lies the challenge that faces the Filipinos

in Hawaii: Can they submerge regional and personal sympathies in favor of an overall identity, where there is no Ilocano, no Bisayan, no Tagalog, but only a Filipino in a new land.

Note

¹The major reason for my being in Hawaii in 1969-70 was to write up the results of a study of folk medicine I had made in the Laguna de Bay area. I was at Honolulu as a Senior Specialist of the East-West Center's Institute of Advanced Projects, and a research fellow of the University of Hawaii's Social Science Research Institute. The Institute of Advanced Projects was replaced July 1, 1970, by a number of programmatic institutes, each concerned with a different problem area for research and study.

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Relatives are important

Levels of wealth and poverty have something to do, then, with kin support. The more one's security is bound up in automatic reliance on the kindred, the more likely he is to favor the continuation of that system. People living on a subsistence level and therefore dependent on a traditional scheme of mutual responsibility among kinsmen have little choice but to cling to the norm. Similarly restricted is the wealthy businessman investing in a new corporate venture. The key positions of treasurer, purchasing agent, supply clerk, and personnel manager require trustworthy people. Relatives can generally be depended upon for loyalty and for working long hours with little pay — valuable qualifications that supersede skills, at least in the early days of the business.

To summarize, extended kinship ties retain their significance in so far as they are functional in the society and provided alternative non-kin groupings remain generally unavailable. Although kin-biased economic and political arrangements may decline in the face of more productive, merit-oriented non-kin arrangements, their enduring contributions to the emotional needs of the individual remain unchallenged. From Mary R. Hollnsteiner, "The Filipino Family Confronts the World," in Responsible Parenthood in the Philippines, V. R. Gorospe, editor (Manila, Ateneo Publications Office, 1970), pp. 40–41.