

Aming Kahirapan at Kaunlaran (Our Struggles and Prosperity)

Incorporating the Methods of Historical Trauma
to Pave a Pathway Towards Success

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It is often easy to blame oneself for how one feels and behaves, but rarely do people question why they are this way to begin with. Frequently, members of the Filipino Kalihi community have a subconscious negative perspective of themselves that hinder them from achieving their full potential. What many fail to realize is that traumatic events that occurred generations ago play a significant role in how the community and others view it today. This concept is called colonial mentality manifestation, and by recognizing it as one of the root causes of the community's struggle and feelings of shame, the community can create steps towards using its methods to pave a pathway towards success. To do this, (re)sources of wealth within the community must be reclaimed. This essay challenges Filipinos in Kalihi to have conversations about their struggles, why they exist, and how the group, collaboratively, can move forward to change the narrative from stories of struggles to practices of prosperity. In a greater sense, other communities can challenge themselves to do the same in efforts to empower their community as well. In turn, after reading this piece, one can ask oneself, what struggles and wealth can be claimed and how will they help one to succeed?

Growing up I had a difficult time grasping the idea of “thinking outside the box.” It wasn’t because I couldn’t think creatively but because at home I was taught to work hard towards filling the box: the *balikbayan* box. In a Filipino immigrant’s residence, you will see boxes that are strategically packed with useful goods to send

back to our families in the Philippines. This box is a constant reminder as to why all the hardships of being away from home will be worth it in the end. You continuously work diligently so that you can see your family’s happy faces when they finally open the box. As you slowly stuff these boxes, you realize that you’re not alone; there’s a



This work was an assignment for a class instructed by Aiko Yamashiro and it touches on many controversial issues and struggles specific to my community: Filipinos in Kalihi. As a member of the community it saddens me to see my friends, family, and neighbors ashamed of who they are for reasons that are not even their fault. In this essay, I not only discuss the causes of our struggles but I also offer a possible solution towards using that struggle to attain success and prosperity. This work closely relates to my academic goal, which is to obtain my Masters in Public Health with a specialty in Social Behavioral Health and then attain a Medical Degree. Ultimately, I hope to be an MD, MPH who can apply all this knowledge to empower my patients and my community to become healthier, wealthier, and successful.

whole community behind you doing the same thing. When you go to work, school, or even just to the store you realize that everyone is just trying to fill their *balikbayan* box. There is wealth in having a community with a common goal; it means you have people who understand you, can talk to you (in your native language), and are willing to help you with their knowledge, stories, and experiences. I realize that packing this *balikbayan* box is a collective effort. I see myself as a *balikbayan* box sometimes; constantly working with my community to be supplied with knowledge, stories, and love that I hope will be useful one day to help others. However, as I equip my box I have to acknowledge the fact that it was never empty to begin with. In me, I contained struggle and shame that was put in by those before me and often grows as I allow others to fill me. But how did someone place things in my box before me? And how do I, with the support of my community, make room to allow myself to have that shame and struggle, but still be progressively filled with resources that will help me and those around me prosper?

We often are so pessimistic and fixated on the problems that arise in our lives that we are unable to see the goodness that are right in front of us. On a personal level, I can say that there are times when I am so consumed by my own problems that I forget the wealth I have. As a first-generation college graduate, product of two immigrants from the Philippines, and resident of Kalihi, there are times when I feel as if all the odds of becoming successful are against me. This is a sentiment that many of my peers feel as well. With many of the members of my community being first, 1.5, or second generation Filipinos in Hawai'i, many of us have this negative mentality and sense of embarrassment about who we are and our place in this community. For a long time, I wanted to change that narrative, and change our stories of struggles into practices of prosperity. Though to move forward in that direction, we must first look back to see, call out, and name the stressors of my community.

Ultimately, Filipinos in Kalihi have a difficult time succeeding because we are ashamed of who we are and what we have, which are all effects of historical trauma. My community internalizes labels like "poor" and "dumb" because they don't speak English fluently or because they come from a place like Kalihi. Why can't they just ignore it? Why is this such an obstacle for my community? My simple answer is historical trauma. My community has this subconscious negative stigma about itself because of traumatic experiences that have happened not only in the present day but date far back

to incidences that happened generations ago. This is attributed to a colonial mentality in the article "Colonial Mentality: A Review and Recommendation for Filipino American Psychology" by Psychologists E. J. R. David and Sumie Okazak. Colonial mentality (CM) can be found amongst Filipinos and Filipino Americans, described as the long-term psychological effects of colonialism and internalized oppression (David & Okazak, 2006, p. 2). The experiences of a Filipino today are because of all the events that have been happening since 1898, when the Philippines were under the United States' (US) power. During the American occupation, the US used education and military forces to spread English, American values, and this idea that America was a land of "opportunities and wealth" (David & Okazak, 2006, p. 7). The US instilled this idea that they were superior to the Philippines in power and culture. The American influence can still be seen today, especially when the former president of the Philippines "ordered the use of English as the primary language for instruction" (David & Okazak, 2006, p. 8). That kind of act tells people that the Filipino language alone is inferior and if we want to be superior we must speak English like the Americans. This is why upon arrival to Hawai'i, so many Filipinos want to lose their native tongue, and why they feel so ashamed when people make fun of their accent when speaking English. My community feels lower in status, dumb, and slow just because they're Filipino.

Consequently, the hardships of my own community today can be seen as what David and Okazak analyzed in their article as the four main ways that CM has manifested in Filipino Americans. CM manifestation has caused my community to think negatively about their Filipino selves, culture, and community, think less of Filipino Americans who failed to be more American, and essentially accept the historical and current oppression because it already happened (David & Okazak, 2006, p. 8). This CM understanding digs deeper when looking at generational differences between those who immigrated and those born in the US. David and Okazak observed how Filipino Americans born in the US have greater CM manifestations like cultural shame and embarrassment because, compared to those who immigrated, they lack positive cultural ties, experience and knowledge about the Philippines (2006, p. 13). Many of the Filipinos who were born here on Hawai'i don't know what it's like to live in the Philippines; all they know is the negative, the labels, and the shame. Second-generation Filipinos in the US often know the Philippines as a third-world coun-

try that has smelly and gross-looking foods that they are too ashamed to eat anywhere but home, despite thinking of these foods as delicious. On the other hand, those who were born in the Philippines can argue that despite all the suffering, life in the Philippines wasn't that bad. First-generation Filipinos in the US have the ability to associate the Philippines with good memories of growing up. I listen to my mom recall all the fun times she had chasing and running away from the ducks at our house, or climbing onto our roof to pick guavas off trees. In car rides home, my friends would look back at when they lived in the Philippines and played games on the street using things like a tin can and a slipper. Not everything about the Philippines is sorrowful; if you really listen, you can almost live the fun times through their stories. So how do we surmount and overshadow the consequences and remnants of historical trauma/CM?

Regardless of all the torment and distress that my community faces, there is this strong sense of resilience because we manage to find wealth in places where others see poverty. The wealth of my community is not monetized wealth. In our society today, it may be difficult to understand that our wealth comes not from our pockets but from each other and within. We know we are poor by socioeconomic means; we work multiple jobs and still have barely enough to live after every paycheck, but because of that we find wealth elsewhere. I conducted my own research asking Filipinos in Kalihi what is wealth (non-monetized) to them. Of the 50 people who participated all of them talked about how wealth was an abundance of happiness, knowledge, skills, support and most importantly, love. The greatest source of this wealth was in their relationships with their family, friends, neighbors, the land, culture and anyone/anything that helped them grow and progress towards success. In Tagalog the word for wealth is *kayamanan*. Although the root word is *yaman*, defined as riches, in *kayamanan* we see the word *kaya*, which means to have power and the ability to do something. Through the responses of my community it really showed how their wealth comes from the things that give them power, and give them the ability to do what they want and prosper.

Admittedly, many members in my community, including myself, fail to see our wealth as Filipinos in Kalihi. It's always there and has been incorporated into our everyday lives; we just don't recognize it until we no longer feel it. One person in the culture shared how she hadn't realized the wealth she had until she left Kalihi. This person was a first-generation Filipino in Kalihi who

decided to go to college in San Francisco. In her story she talked about the emptiness she felt being away from her sources of wealth. She felt weird not speaking Filipino or even Pidgin on a daily basis, let alone hearing it. For a while she felt "deaf." She missed Filipino food and regretted not listening to her mom when she tried teaching her how to cook adobo. For a while she was "hungry." She didn't know she relied on the constant support, love, and presence of her family and friends. For a while she felt "alone." That's when she realized that the wealth she had being a Filipino from Kalihi wasn't something she could find anywhere else. In every way possible she tried to recreate and incorporate all the things she missed, but the experience and feeling was never the same. As a Filipino in Kalihi you are surrounded by and have constant access to this community that in many ways help us every day.

To push my community one step further, how do we learn as a community to not only name our wealth, but also use it towards prosperity? Dawn Mahi, a program officer and coordinator at Kokua Kalihi Valley, in her essay "Kalihi Calls," proposes that "we can excel while not forsaking our indigenous values and identities" (2014, p. 67). Maybe that's the secret, to look back at our indigenous values and identities, to a time before the trauma. Rather than looking at the negative, we must embody the positive. In the same way CM was passed down, causing my community to internalize labels like inferior, poor, and dumb, we need to engrave stories into ourselves that remind us of the wealth we hold. Mahi believes that "we keep traditions alive by passing them down, by telling those same stories over and over again until they become a part of who we are, until we become part of this land, timeless" (2014, p. 67). In place of telling the stories of trauma, we must impart stories of triumph until it manifests in our actions, words, and beings. As a community we need to pass down more pride than shame; we must tell the stories of what our ancestors did *for* us instead of what the colonizers did *to* us. This doesn't disregard the fact that what occurred in history happened but rather it shifts the mentality. Instead of focusing on the damage and our loss, we look at what we have as Filipinos in Kalihi and use that to empower and heal.

As a member of my community, I recognize that to rise above the shame and struggle, we, Filipinos in Kalihi, need to learn and/or relearn who our ancestors were and what they knew to remind us how wealthy and knowledgeable we truly are. We must look at them and reclaim what they had despite what they had to go through. We must also share our experiences and what we know. Then

we can work together to build on our sources of wealth (happiness, knowledge, skills, support and love). Where others see illiteracy, we will show them knowledge in the multiple languages that we have. Where others see incompetence, we will show them skills that have been passed down and taught to us. Where others see hate towards ourselves and those who made us this way, we will show them love for everything and everyone that has gotten us here today. By no means am I suggesting this process will be easy. If it took generations to make us internalize CM, it will take generations to break it, but if we as a community start today we're one step closer. So, what's your story? What have your ancestors and community passed on to you that you can share to make your community wealthy and successful? What will you add to my *balikbayan* box that will help me build a healthier and wealthier community for those who are struggling as well?

References

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