

## **A Critical Race Perspective on the Filipino Identity**

Hello everyone, my name is Sy. I'd like you to think about 2 questions:

*What ethnic group do you most identify with? How much do you know about that group?*

Today I would like to discuss with you my project "At the Threshold – A Critical Race Perspective on the Filipino Identity." I titled the project "At the Threshold" based on previous research I conducted on Filipino-Americans, where I observed that, like me, many Filipino-Americans found it difficult to define themselves. This is captured by one person's definition of Filipino: a "Roman Catholic, English-speaking Malay with a Spanish last name and a predilection for Chinese food."

The purpose of this project stems from my desire to do social justice work in the Philippines. But after my observations with the perceived liminal identity of Filipino-Americans, I decided that before I go further, I have to go deeper, to what it means to be Filipino in the first place. In other words, my social justice aim, begs a post-modern question...that I believe will help me gain a better understanding not only of who I want to help, but how.

*So, how does racial ideology operate in the Philippines?*

There has been an ongoing debate amongst scholars as to how to answer those questions, but never before with a critical race lens. Since the Filipino identity is an ethno-racial concept, this project asserts that applying a Critical Race lens to Philippine Studies will be mutually beneficial to both fields. For Philippine studies, applying a critical race lens can help understand the following aspects of the Filipino racial identity: The process of racialization, the Philippines colonial history and the imagined mono-ethnicity of the country's diverse population. For critical race studies: a case study of Filipinos gives an alternate view from the Eurocentric concept of race, challenges the black and white binary prevalent in critical race discourse and most importantly for my project: it demonstrates race as a social construction.

The methodology for this research consisted of developing a critical race framework and a literature review of Philippine history. I also had the wonderful opportunity to travel to the Philippines where I conducted interviews with Filipinos of various ethnicities, and observed key cultural events. To explore my research questions, I found many interesting answers. For this presentation, I will describe 3 of the most noteworthy ones here: First, by applying critical race theory's theme of social construction to Philippine studies, I'm going to define Filipino identity based on the social construction delineated by time, and then by space. Next, through analyzing interviews with Filipinos of various ethnic identities, I'm going to connect those definitions to how Filipinos in the Philippines define themselves. Finally, I'm going to elaborate on an alternate conceptualization of race given by an ethnic minority within the Philippines. Let's begin with time.

If we are going to make a temporal delineation of Filipino identity, then we are defining Filipinos by when the identity originated. For Filipinos, this is in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the Spanish began their occupation of the archipelago. The term "Filipino" was originally a racial designation for Spaniards born in the Philippines used to distinguish themselves from the

“brown-skinned aboriginal people” born there. It was only at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that those peoples appropriated the name – changing it from a racist term to the nationalist one as we know it today.

If we are going to define Filipino identity based on a spatial delineation, then we are defining Filipinos by geography, as in, all the peoples that have inhabited the land now known as the Philippines since the beginnings of human history. This transcends (colonial) time and leads us to consult an anthropological perspective. The theories on Filipino ancestry generally agree that there were two major waves of migration to the archipelago. The Austroloids whose Philippine descendants are the Aeta and the Austronesians whose Philippine descendants are the Malay. The Aeta migrated around 30,000 years ago. Next, the Malay migrated 14,000 years ago, and ended up dominating the land and constitute the ancestry of the majority of Filipinos today.

In reference to these theoretical definitions, I conducted 24 interviews with Filipinos of various ethnicities to see how they define their racial identity for themselves. Some of the questions I asked were: “What does being Filipino mean to you?” and “What is your ancestry?” Interestingly, in virtually every interview, the following adjectives were used: Colonized, mixed, adaptable, and resilient. (In addition to other words such as intelligent and hard-working, of course.) To quote one respondent: “Filipinos have been colonized so many times, we are a mix of a whole bunch of different races. But that also makes it really easy for us to assimilate into different cultures.” I found it important then - and very interesting - to find the word for “race” in Tagalog (the country’s lingua franca). The closest word is “Lahi” which accurately translates as “bloodline”. So when I asked participants about their “Lahi”, or ancestry, most would exhibit minimal awareness of Malay roots, exemplified in the following quote: “I know we were from the Malay. And that’s why we look like the Indonesians and Malaysians. We are all the brown race. But I don’t know much more than that.”

Continuing with the notion of Lahi being a racial marker for Filipinos, the population can be divided by Malay and Aeta. It is the Aeta that I would like to discuss now. The Aetas define themselves as “Ang Unang Pilipino”, translated as “The original Filipino”, which is in congruence with the anthropological theory that their Australoid ancestors were the first to arrive on the land. If Filipinos are a minority within the greater global context of race, the Aeta are a minority within a minority...because their members are vastly smaller in numbers, constituting an estimated 1 to 5% of the population, and because their presence is virtually absent from dominant Philippine society.

Amongst some of the many things I found fascinating about this group, was their conceptualization of race. In regards to Lahi, the Aetas place humans into 2 categories: Kulot and Unat. Kulot meaning curly, and Unat meaning stretched...hair. To be clear, the Aetas do not distinguish race by skin color, only hair. When I asked an Aeta participant if he sees a difference between himself and I based on skin color, he said that he noticed I had lighter skin than him, but what ‘mattered’ was how different our hair was.” I pushed further and asked him if he notices a difference between me, someone he perceives as a Malay Filipino – and a European, and he answered similarly, that the only important thing was that both the European and I were Unat, meaning that we had “stretched hair.” This leads me to connect the Aeta’s

history of being dominated by the Malay and then the Europeans thousands of years later. And I wonder if this suggests that the Aeta categorize humans based on who conquered their people.

We have seen how we can define Filipino identity with socially constructed delineations based on time, and then based on space. From my interviews, we saw that Filipinos define their heritage as mixed with different cultures and/or bloodlines. And we discussed an alternate view of race offered by the Aeta. From this work so far, I have concluded that Filipinos are marked, both by themselves and within the greater global context, as perpetual colonial subjects. I argue that this keeps Filipinos on the lower half of a faulty binary of colonizer/colonized and oppressor/oppressed. I've also observed that Filipinos are unclear about their ancestry are completely severed from their ancestral roots. Finally, I hypothesize that the alternate view of race offered by the Aeta, suggests an inversion of the process of racialization from the perspective of indigenous peoples.

For future research in critical race studies, I will continue to incorporate the delineation of space and time as a dimension of analysis in racial formation theory. For Philippine studies, I want find a more accurate ancestral makeup of Filipinos, especially in regards to the amount of Spanish and Malay bloodlines. I want to continue to analyze Filipinos ancestry with the hopes of repairing the severed connection between Filipinos and their roots, and with the assumption that this would contribute to decolonization theory. Finally, I want work closely with the Aeta, understanding them within their own context, and verifying my theory of their conceptualization of race. In general, I would like to go depth into Philippine studies, then expand the breadth of my studies to other races and ethnicities, and their diasporas...eventually doing a comparative analysis of the diasporas in the United States.

I like to end this presentation by re-addressing the titling of this project "At the Threshold". While it was originally based on the perceived liminal identity of Filipinos, the impression I hope to leave you with about critical race studies and Filipinos, is this: I asked one of the Aeta if he placed any value on the fact that we were of a different "lahi". He answered, "Of course not, it just lets me know where you are from, but we are both brothers and sisters of this earth." This leads me to conclude that by recognizing a long history and diverse population, I think what Filipinos really are at the threshold of, is connecting us, all of us, back to our roots, that we are all human in the first place.