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Diversity of the Philippines in Queens

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Introduction

With at least 65 different native minority groups, more than 7,000 islands, and a history of Spanish, Japanese and American occupations, a "Filipino" identity has so many varied influences that the most appropriate representation might be a native Tagalog term - "**halo-halo**" (meaning mix-mix). Indeed it has been said of the Filipino that:

*Their foot is Malaysian
Their stomach is Chinese
Their heart is Latino
and, their head is American.¹*

And yet, added to even this fusion are elements of spiritual and religious beliefs that have their roots in Hinduism and Islam. In spite of this, however, Filipinos do share a common material culture that is drawn from the islands' endemic biological diversity. As a result, although influences in Filipino [cuisine](#), [crafts](#), [healing arts](#), [song and dance](#), [games](#), [language](#) and products are diverse, it is because these material and artistic traditions were reproduced in the Philippines (with a S.E. Asian Pacific climate and environment) that these certain traditions may still be claimed as "authentic" Filipino.² On the other hand, just as biodiversity infuses and supports cultural arts and traditions it is through the sophisticated local cultural practices and knowledge that the value and/or utility of S.E. Asian plants are also revealed and supported.³ Hence, it is also often through the mediums of culture e.g. the arts of living, celebrating, and meeting economic and subsistence needs, that persons from multiple and diverse countries, roots, religious faiths, and even class backgrounds still may access and appreciate Filipino plants as a "green-gold".

Festival of the Islands

However, for the diaspora of Filipino cultural practices (and the plants engaged with) to stay alive after they are transplanted, they often need appropriate spaces to be reproduced. Often in "neighborhood New York"⁴ there are only a few [spaces](#) where biodiversity and cultural diversity resources are vividly displayed and valued in their complementary relationship to each other. The Queens Botanical Garden (QBG) aspires to be one of them - which is why it invited members of the Filipino community to its grounds in order share how their cultural practices value plants. Based on the joint research and planning of QBG and the Foundation for Filipino Artists the [Festival of the Islands](#) was held on August 22nd.

Conclusion

With a transcultural movement increasing in the world as a whole, a straddling of worlds, identities, cultural practices, languages - and of course use of regional plants - becomes more and more mixed. The boundedness and purity of a culture and its practices as a whole, in fact, seem less important than the way a community will chart its future values and determine how much of those will continue to reproduce unique relationships with their cultural practices, values and plants. It is a question perhaps Filipino communities, for all of their mixed cultural influences, may be best able to answer.



Left: The festive and esteemed "halo-halo" (mixed with tropical fruits, ice cream, green rice crispies) duels as a favorite Filipino dessert and as a metaphor for the vibrant mix of cultural influences that make up Filipino identity.

Right: Young Filipina-Americans from the Foundation for Filipino Artists pose in traditional costume before their performance at the Festival of the Islands hosted by the Queens Botanical Garden.

¹*Interview:* Tristan and Aida Allas - Queens Residents, July 18, 2003; Corpus Christi School; Woodside, New York.

² While the issue of "authenticity" is not of immediate concern to many Filipinos, Filipino natural and cultural resources, e.g. native land, craft, and knowledge, have increasingly become packaged, privatized, mined and distributed for profit abroad. Therefore the question of who has the "right" - intellectual, cultural, private or otherwise - to profit from these resources has become laden in recent years by disputes over claims of "authenticity" which suggest prior or premiere ownership and rights.

³ See Frommer (2003), *The Cultural Right to Reproduce Traditional Medicinal Knowledge in Zimbabwe*. McGill University.

⁴ Term coined by Sanjak (1998).