

Becoming Pilgrims in the ‘Holy Land’: On Filipina Domestic Workers’ Struggles and Pilgrimages for a Cause in Israel¹

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This paper argues that rather than merely economic, Filipino Christian care and domestic workers’ migration to Israel is a deeply transformative process of embodied subjectification, imbuing their religious practice with imaginative meanings. Filipino pilgrimages to holy sites in Israel sacralise the humdrum and sometimes degrading realities of their work, enabling them to transcend through performance the ‘migrant’ label assigned to them by contemporary migration regimes in the international division of labour. Becoming pilgrims (and tourists) in the ‘Holy Land’, migrants discover alternative life narratives, which position them on a journey within a sacred geography at the centre of Christian devotion, suffusing their movements along transnational networks and migration routes. By interpreting ‘Holy Land’ pilgrimages as dynamic and at times awkward encounters with the sacred, inflected by Filipinos’ legal, social and economic status in Israel, the article shows the creative fusion of pilgrimage, tourism and migration achieved by migrants in their transnational journeys.

Keywords: Israel, sacred landscape, Filipino migration, pilgrimage, Catholicism, evangelical Christianity, care and domestic work, subjectivity

Introduction: On Migrants, Pilgrims and Tourists

This article explores Filipina² care and domestic workers’ pilgrimage journeys and sanctifying encounters in Israel. As embodied performances, I argue, they transform symbolically and experientially the wider journeys embarked upon by Filipinos in the migration process. The paper thus

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² In several places in this article, I use the term ‘Filipina’ instead of the gender-neutral adjective ‘Filipino’ in order to stress the female-gendered aspect of this account. In Israel, over ninety percent of care and domestic workers recruited from the Philippines are female, as were almost all my interlocutors.

reveals the fusion of pilgrimage, tourism and migration in a relationship which, I suggest, is deeply transformative and affective. Contemporary pilgrimage, Coleman and Eade (2004) suggest, should be analysed in the broader context of intensified global mobility. Framing pilgrimage as a form of mobile performance, they attempt to show 'how pilgrimage can provide opportunities to reflect upon, re-embody, sometimes even retrospectively transform, past journeys' (2004: 18). But despite references to intensifying circuits of mobility in late capitalism, the relationship between contemporary international migration and pilgrimage as a transformative individual and communal journey is yet to be fully theorised.

Migration movements have been associated with processes of actively sacralising diasporic space. Catholic Italian immigrants sacralised the streets of Harlem in an annual festa in honour of the Madonna del Carmine they imported from Polla (Orsi 2002); Cuban emigrants make pilgrimage to the shrine of 'Our Lady of Charita', smuggled out of Cuba to Miami (Tweed 1997); Filipino migrants from Cebu dance with their imported icons of Santo Niño in Auckland, New Zealand (Tondo, this volume). Sufi international labour migrants process through British cities, sacralising the 'land of infidels' while remaining devoted to the order's sacred centre in Pakistan (Werbner 2003). By contrast to these examples, the process of sacralisation through journeying described in this article is one of first discovering and then experiencing the sacred in the land of migration. This at times implies, I show, a subjective (re)interpretation of their journey as sacred *ex post facto*, and therefore as a pilgrimage in the process of *becoming* one.

Filipino migrants typically narrate their migration moves to Israel as the outcome of both economic need and a desire to travel, to see the 'beautiful places' depicted in the Bible and experience the 'holy land' familiar to them as Christians from early childhood, and thus imbued with emotion. Filipino migrants are, as will become clear, pilgrims and tourists not only in a metaphorical sense; they may regard themselves so even before they actually embark on their journeys and, in a very concrete sense, perform being tourists and pilgrims by collectively travelling the country and creatively relating to it.

The relationship between pilgrims, migrants and tourists has been addressed primarily in dyadic terms. One such dyad recognises the conflation of tourists and migrants (Hall and Williams 2002): so-called 'lifestyle migrants' are permanent 'residential tourists' who converge on aesthetically attractive Mediterranean 'non-places'.³ Both migrants and tourists travel, and therefore both seem to embody the current era of

³ See Benson (2009), Benson and O'Reilly (2009) and Holert and Terkessidis (2005) for reviews of this literature.

accelerated transnational mobility. Deconstructing the modern 'travel myth' which ignores the experiences of migrant-servant companions of privileged cosmopolitan travellers, James Clifford (1997) suggests that perhaps 'pilgrimage' offers an illuminating comparative term for 'subverting the constitutive modern opposition: traveller/tourist' (1997, p. 39).

This points to a second dyadic juxtaposition, that of pilgrimage and tourism. Against the disjuncture between pilgrims and tourists posited by Bauman,⁴ others see these two forms of travel as shading into each other: 'a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist' (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 20). In his article on the phenomenology of tourist experiences, Eric Cohen (1979) asks: under what circumstances does tourism become a form of pilgrimage? Distinguishing five modes of tourist experiences, he argues that the 'existential mode' (ibid., pp. 189-192) is phenomenologically analogous to pilgrimage (see also Cohen 1978). Cohen draws on Victor Turner's notion of pilgrimage as a liminal phenomenon or interlude, enabling pilgrims to experience a sense of 'communitas' in which secular structures are erased (Turner 1974; Turner and Turner 1978, p. 230). Although this idealised vision fails to take account, it has been argued, of competition and contestation at long-established pilgrimage centres (Sallnow 1987, Eade and Sallnow 2000), it is nevertheless the case, as I show in the present article, that for Filipina pilgrims, pilgrimage is experienced as an uplifting moment, transcending mundane social divisions and the often harsh realities that constrain their daily lives as migrant workers.

Israel provides a fascinating case study for examining the triadic relationship between migration, tourism and pilgrimage. Firstly, Jewish immigration to Israel – termed 'return' or ascent (Hebrew *'aliyah*) rather than (im)migration in state language – has religious connotations, being – at least within the dominant Zionist discourse – a return to the geographical, political and spiritual centre of the Jewish people. Even within secular Israeli discourse, the homeland, *Eretz Israel*, is a sacred space to be continually re-marked and appropriated, for example, by nature hikes (Ben-Ari and Bilu 1997; Ben-David 1997). 'Holy Land' pilgrimages and tourism were already politically and economically significant well before the founding of the state in 1948 (Cohen-Hattab 2004), so that, in Feldman's words, in Israel/Palestine 'the sacralization of places through scriptural attributions and liturgical performance has been the common currency of political claims to space, and textually directed movement through that space has constituted visitors as pilgrims' (2007, p. 135).

⁴ Bauman (1996) see the shift from pilgrim to tourist notion of pilgrimage in metaphorical terms, as a shift from modern to postmodern life projects

Shortly before 2000, about a quarter of all tourists entering Israel (approximately 700,000 persons) were estimated to be Christian pilgrims (Collins-Kreiner and Kliot 2000). This number has risen since, but remains contingent on the degree of real or perceived security for travellers in the region.⁵ Special programmes, such as 'Nazareth 2000', have been developed to attract and accommodate large numbers of Christian pilgrims (Cohen-Hattab and Shoval 2007). Many of these pilgrims are short-term visitors from North America, Australia and Europe, whose pilgrimage performances, narratives and practices have been analysed in several studies (cf. Bowman 2000; Collins-Kreiner and Kliot 2000; Feldman 2007). Ignored, however, are the thousands of resident Filipino, Indian, Sri Lankan, African and Latin American labour migrants who have entered Israel in growing numbers in search of work since the 1990s. These now form a substantial part of the pilgrimage flows to Christian holy sites in Israel and the Palestinian West Bank.

Although Filipino Christian migrants to Israel are unable to translate their religious identity into legal citizenship claims, they do claim moral citizenship as Christian diasporics (Liebelt 2008) and, indeed, the significance of Israel's status as the 'Holy Land' for Christian labour migrants to Israel has been recognised (Kemp and Rajman 2003, 2004; Sabar 2007, 2008; Willen 2007a). Yet the organisation, performance and meaning of pilgrimages for these migrants remain to be explored. This was the task I set myself as part of a recent, two-year anthropological fieldwork project in Israel, in which I accompanied so-called 'foreign' migrant workers on their journeys through the 'holy land'.⁶

Travelling the 'Holy Land': Pilgrimages for a Cause

Filipinos have been recruited to work in Israel since the mid-1990s, following a government decision to support a shift of the geriatric care system from public institutions and hospitals to care in private homes. As part of Israel's growing population of so-called 'foreign workers', Filipinos are subject to a state-regulated employment process, which stresses the temporariness of their presence, restricting it to care giving, mostly as so-

⁵ Thus, the number of visitors plummeted after the outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising in 2000. In 2007 and 2008, pilgrimage to the Palestinian occupied territories boomed, with an estimated two million foreign visitors crossing the border from Israel in 2008 and the Palestinian Authority's Minister of Tourism expecting 40,000 visitors for Christmas in Bethlehem (cf. Press Release of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Record incoming tourism to the Palestinian Authority', 24 November 2008; Ha'aretz and Reuters, 'Thousands of pilgrims flock to Bethlehem for Christmas', Ha'aretz English Online Edition, 24 December 2008).

⁶ Research for this article was conducted as part of the AHRC-'Footsteps' project (PI Prof. Pnina Werbner), based at the Universities of Keele and Hull (UK) from 2007-2009.

called live-ins in the private homes of employers, six days a week (cf. Kemp and Raijman 2008, Willen 2007). Despite their legal, social and political exclusion from citizenship and belonging in Israel, Filipinos have succeeded in organising collectively and appropriating their own spaces. They have done so most especially in Tel Aviv, the metropolitan centre of Israel's coastal strip, where most migrant domestic workers are employed. In southern Tel Aviv, tens of thousands of migrants come together to spend and celebrate their weekly day off work on Saturdays or Sundays, share rented flats, go shopping, organise picnics in public parks, send remittances to family in the Philippines, or attend church.

Each weekend, travel agencies, Filipino magazines, regional associations and church communities also organise pilgrimages to holy sites in Israel, promoted by their organisers with posters, adverts or flyers. Among these is the Catholic lay group 'Pilgrimage for a Cause', whose pilgrimages, in contrast to many others offered to Christian labour migrants in southern Tel Aviv, are non-commercial and self-organised. Pilgrimage for a Cause was established by two Filipino migrants employed in Israel as domestic workers who, in 1996, started organising pilgrimages for Filipino co-workers to the holy sites in Israel and the Israeli-occupied Palestinian West Bank. As a Catholic lay group, Pilgrimage for a Cause is affiliated to the Franciscan St. Anthony Parish Church in Jaffa, the one church most heavily frequented by and most strongly associated with Filipinos in the Tel Aviv area. Accordingly, a priest of St. Anthony typically accompanies the pilgrimages as a spiritual guide. Initially, the lay group was led by a priest of American origin who had transferred to St. Anthony Israel after being stationed in the Philippines for several decades. He soon became very popular among local Filipino Catholics, not least because of his fluency in several Filipino languages. By the time I started research on Pilgrimage for a Cause in summer 2007, Father Malachy had died and been replaced by Father Benjamin, a priest of Ghanaian origin. By then, both founders of the group had left Israel and had been replaced by Yolanda,⁷ who organised the pilgrimages with three other Filipina volunteers.

The name-giving cause to which the revenues of the pilgrimages are donated varies, but, as Yolanda typically emphasises at the beginning of each pilgrimage, early in the morning, shortly after the pilgrimage coach leaves St. Anthony's, they go to 'the poor' in the Philippines. Thus, Pilgrimage for a Cause donated \$1,050 to help the victims of the mudslide in Leyte in 2005, sent several hundred US dollars to support the victims of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (the only non-Filipino project to date) and supports a Catholic orphanage in Manila on a regular basis. The largest

⁷ The names of Filipino interviewees have been replaced by pseudonyms throughout the article.

single project of Pilgrimage for a Cause was the construction of a chapel in Yolanda's hometown in South Cotabato, where, so Yolanda likes to emphasise for new pilgrims, the Catholic settlers from the northern Philippines (among them her own family) have to take a tough stand against the local Muslim population. In 2007, the newly consecrated chapel in South Cotabato was a source of pride among the more regular pilgrims. Accordingly, the volunteers put up pictures of the chapel's construction in progress and its first fiesta on the blackboards of both the church and the south Tel Aviv flat which Yolanda shares with almost twenty other Filipina Catholics on her weekly day off work.

In contrast to some evangelical Filipino pilgrimage groups that contract non-Christian tour guides for their pilgrimages, or arrange meetings with residents at the localities they visit, the Pilgrimages for a Cause generally take place in a more exclusively Catholic context. While each pilgrimage also includes stopovers of 'merely' historical or tourist interest, such as beaches or nature reserves, the highlight of each pilgrimage, according to its organisers, is a Catholic Mass read by the accompanying priest at a site defined as sacred by the Church. During the Mass pilgrims are offered the communion and given the opportunity to make financial offerings, which are inserted into paper envelopes and dedicated to special occasions or thanksgivings specified on the envelopes by the donors and subsequently read out by the priest. Moreover, the pilgrimages are structured by the Church's liturgical calendar and, whenever possible, take place during Christian holidays. Thus, three pilgrimages in particular stand out in size and significance from among the ten to twelve pilgrimages organised by the group throughout the year: Palm Sunday and Good Friday in Jerusalem, each marked by large Christian processions through the city, and Christmas in Bethlehem (see Photographs 1, 2). During these holidays, which according to Christian belief mark central historical events of Jesus's life, the pilgrims set out to celebrate and commemorate these events at the very geographical site of their original happening.

In the ritual devotions and processions, Pilgrimage for a Cause forms part of a massive stream of pilgrims, among them thousands of local Christian residents, migrant workers from West Africa, Latin America, Sri Lanka or India, as well as tourists from all over the world. For example, on Christmas Day, 25 December, 2007, almost twenty coaches left St. Anthony for Bethlehem, among them nine organised by Pilgrimage for a Cause.⁸

⁸ This constituted a sharp decrease from the more than twenty coaches organised by Pilgrimage for a Cause alone before 2002, due to the launching of a massive deportation campaign of illegalised labour migrants, many of them Filipinos, by the Israeli government.

Throughout the remainder of the year, pilgrimages are booked by about thirty to ninety participants, accommodated in one or two coaches. These are contracted from a fairly regular group of drivers, exclusively Arab men from Jaffa, some of whom have become well acquainted with the more regular pilgrims. The pilgrimages start early in the morning from St. Anthony's. The pilgrims are seated by Yolanda, with some of the more regular ones and Father Benjamin sitting in the front rows, and those who have signed up for the pilgrimage together sitting next to each other wherever possible.

Filipino pilgrims typically take part in the pilgrimage in small groups of flatmates, friends, or relatives, who pool money for soft drinks and together cook the food to be consumed during the pilgrimage the previous evening. During the year of my research, there were a handful of regular pilgrims. Most of these had been in Israel for one or two years, had just finished paying back the often considerable loans they had taken out to come to Israel, and wanted to visit every 'important' holy site at least once before possibly turning illegal and being forced to leave Israel within four or five years of their arrival.⁹ Others join the pilgrimage in order to fulfil a vow to visit or pray at a specific site during significant moments in their lives as,



⁹ In Israel, employment permits in the nursing sector and – legally tied to these – residence permits for so-called foreign workers must be extended annually and can be prolonged for a period of up to fifty-one months (four years and three months, that is). Since June 2004, migrant care workers have been able to prolong their permits beyond fifty-one months, provided they meet a number of specific criteria (Gilbert and Krieger 2004). My research showed that due to bureaucratic hassles, employers' neglect and frequent contradictory institutional practice, migrants were typically 'illegalised' within the first years of their stay in Israel and subsequently threatened with deportation.

1. Pilgrims during Christmas on the Shepherds' Field, next to Bethlehem, 25 December 2004.



2. Pilgrims for a Cause during the Palm Sunday procession, Jerusalem, 16 March 2008.

for example, shortly before leaving Israel, for healing, the graduation of children whose education one has paid for, the fidelity of partners far away, and so forth.

Once the coaches leave St. Anthony's, volunteers collect the ticket fee (NIS60-100; about \$16-26), introduce newcomers to Pilgrimage for a Cause, and present the pilgrimage schedule. If the accompanying priest is on the coach, he reads out explanations from a guide book (*Walking in His Footsteps*), which he usually carries along during the pilgrimages. While Yolanda sometimes uses a similar book, I never saw other pilgrims using guide books. Some, however, take along printouts with information from the internet about the sites they will visit. In contrast to evangelical pilgrimages, and perhaps surprisingly, I never saw anyone carry a Bible along. This underlines the experiential and embodied nature of the anticipated encounter with the sacred. A prayer is invoked shortly after the coaches leave Jaffa. Sometimes the pilgrims listen to tapes of Christian music, and sometimes also recite the rosary, murmuring the standardised

prayer while flipping the beads of their prayer chaplets between their fingers. With the exception of the annual Night Vigil in Abu Ghosh on the night before Easter, all pilgrimages are day trips and usually take place on Sundays, the weekly day off for Filipina domestic workers in Israel. Due to the relatively short distances in Israel, all destinations are within easy reach from Tel Aviv, with hardly any destination more than four hours away.

While Pilgrimage for a Cause is clearly a Filipino group, not all of the pilgrims are Filipinos. Apart from Father Benjamin (and obviously the anthropologist) each trip includes a small number of non-Filipinos, among them Israeli husbands or boyfriends, as well as Sri Lankan or Indian migrant workers. The latter typically receive much attention from the Filipino pilgrims, who question them about their countries of origin, their working conditions in Israel and their religious practices, comparing them to their own experiences. Due to the presence of these ‘foreigners’, most conversations during the pilgrimage take place in English.

Even without ever having seen the holy sites before, each and every pilgrim appears to have great hopes, dreams and images about them. The sheer resonance of names like ‘Bethlehem’, ‘Nazareth’ or ‘Jerusalem’ creates an ambience of joyful tension and excitement in the coach, especially among the newcomers, who often recall their disappointment at their first sight of the ‘Holy Land’, materialised as the boring and unattractive residential blocks in which they worked or the shabby streets, noise and pollution of southern Tel Aviv, where they socialised on weekends. Now, the vague hope hovers in the coach that the profanity of Tel Aviv is finally to be left behind, and soon one will see and touch the *real* ‘Holy Land’, the pastoral, sacred and ancient land one knew about as Christians since early childhood, read about in the Bible and dreamt of for so long. Others on the coach have been to the respective holy sites before and are now returning to them – for example, to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem – as so many do, armed with new requests and vows, transformed once more through their ongoing stay in Israel.

In writing about the pilgrimage practices of Greek Orthodox, English and Irish Catholics as well as international evangelical Protestants in Israel, Glenn Bowman (2000) comments on the stress on ‘textuality’ in Christian ‘Holy Land’ pilgrimages. For Catholic pilgrims, he notes, the image transmitted through the Bible is important, not the place; somewhat surprisingly, pilgrims in his observation did not display strong emotions at particular holy sites, in contrast to their more emotional expressiveness at other times, for example, during the mass held after visiting such sites (2000, pp. 115f.). As became clear during my own research, Filipinos’ encounters with the holy at the different sites were at least as diverse as the sites themselves, at times deeply emotional, at times apparently indifferent. During holidays, the holiest Christian sites in Israel and the Palestinian

occupied territories, such as the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem where, according to Christian doctrine, Jesus was born, or the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where he is believed to have been crucified and buried before resurrection, are crowded with hundreds of pilgrims, pushing forward to reach the holy site, overseen by police officers and local guards. These tell pilgrims to move on, keep silent, not take pictures. Church guards at the sites appear to be especially annoyed with Filipinos, reprimanding or even pushing them aside for not dressing modestly enough, failing to switch off mobile phones, taking pictures or happily chattering even at the holiest of holies. In the crush of humanity, pilgrims are happy if they actually manage to reach and touch a holy site for just a few seconds, or take a picture to prove they were there.

Hardly surprisingly, then, and perhaps in accord with Bowman's observations, pilgrims appeared more emotionally touched after rather than during the actual visit to such holy sites at the height of the festive season. By contrast, Pilgrimage for a Cause travellers lingered on, prayed, and displayed far more emotion at less frequented and well known holy land pilgrimage sites. Nowhere was this as clear as during the annual Christmas pilgrimage to Bethlehem, where, after visiting the Grotto of the Nativity mobbed by crowds, the group moved on to visit the Grotto of the Lady Mary. Located beneath a small Franciscan Church in a little side street off central Manger Square, the Milk Grotto, as it is commonly known, offers a calm repose from the city's Christmas bustle. According to both Catholic and Muslim traditions, the irregularly shaped grotto hollowed out of white limestone marks the spot where Mary, while nursing Jesus in hiding before the Holy Family's flight to Egypt, dropped some milk, which subsequently turned the stone of the grotto a whitish colour. For Catholics, according to local belief, scrapings from the stones mixed in drinks or placed under the mattress, in combination with the regular recitation of the rosary, boosts the quantity of a mother's milk and enhances women's fertility. Even though most Filipino pilgrims are initially unaware of the local tradition and customary practice, and Father Benjamin, the priest, who explained it sounded rather sceptical, they embraced it spontaneously. Soon, pilgrims were kneeling down all over the grotto, praying with their eyes closed, one hand touching the white stone, lighting candles, dropping money into the boxes as offerings, eager to scratch little pieces from the rock and later buying sachets of its powder in the adjacent church shop. The walls of this shop are covered with letters and pictures of smiling families and babies, many of them Filipino, giving testimony to what they believe is the healing power of the site. Later on in the bus, it is the charm and miracles of the little Milk Grotto rather than the Grotto of the Nativity that the pilgrims talk about. As I learned during a pilgrimage to Bethlehem shortly before Christmas 2007, several women and two Filipino couples had signed up for

this pilgrimage in order to pray for fertility at the Milk Grotto rather than to visit the Grotto of the Nativity, which they had already visited the previous year. Hence, while the Grotto of the Nativity is still the most featured stop of the Christmas pilgrimage tour, and Filipino Catholics are still clear about it being among *the* most important sites one has to visit while in the 'Holy Land', actual practices during the pilgrimage privilege less known sites.

In choosing their pilgrimage destinations, the Filipina organisers have their own cultural agenda, which at times clearly goes beyond the guidance of the accompanying priest. This became clear, for example, during the regular September pilgrimage to Nazareth. During the pilgrimage in 2007, the group visited and celebrated Mass at the Catholic Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, which was believed to have been erected on the site of Mary's childhood home and the annunciation of her pregnancy with Jesus. Guided by Father Benjamin, the group then walked around the Old City, into Jesus' childhood synagogue, also stopping at the request of the pilgrimage organisers at the Orthodox Church of the Annunciation, built above the site believed to be Mary's Well. After this visit, a lunchtime picnic was held in the nature reserve at Zippori, right next to the assumed birthplace of Mary, as the organisers emphasised. Taking place in September, the Catholic month of the Feast of the Birth of Mary, this pilgrimage was clearly motivated by the widespread and fervent devotion to the Virgin Mary among the pilgrimage organisers and Filipino Catholics more generally (cf. De la Cruz 2009; Wiegele 2005, pp. 123ff.). For several years in a row, and with the exception of Christmas in Bethlehem, no pilgrimage of the annual cycle was more popular among Filipino Catholics in Tel Aviv. Just like Zippori, Mary's Well or the Milk Grotto, the Pilgrimage for a Cause visits include less well-known sites that do not feature prominently in the travels of 'Holy Land' tourist pilgrims. For them the sacred geography of the holy land is intimately known and much expanded beyond the standard itinerary of short-term visitors; theirs is a privileged access to the deeper, more hidden sanctity of the land, as they were also keen to point out.

Rather than being either emotional or 'textual', as implied in Bowman's (2000) analysis of 'Holy Land' pilgrimage, the encounter of Filipino pilgrims' with the sacred at pilgrimage sites is initially awkward and tentative. Coming to a holy site for the first time, most Filipino pilgrims lack knowledge not only of its topography, but of proper conduct and customary local practice. They are taken to sites they have never even heard about, as well as to sites they have heard about all their lives, but have imagined as altogether different. In order to engage with the sacred after the shock of the initial encounter, they either have to rely on what others (the priest, guards and so forth) tell them to do, copy what they see others do or creatively adapt their own devotional practices to the situation.

In many places, Father Benjamin provides the clue as to what to do. When, during one pilgrimage to Elijah's Well in Jericho, the priest mentioned that 'people say the water has purifying power', pilgrims almost immediately started touching the water, washing their arms and faces in it and filling their water bottles with it. In other places, practices are indirectly suggested, as in the church at Mary's Well in Nazareth, where during one pilgrimage the Orthodox priests refused entrance to Father Benjamin in his Franciscan frock, but where the display of pencils and little slips of paper beside the well made perfectly clear what was commonly done. Accordingly, the pilgrims fervently started writing messages and requests to the Virgin Mary, hiding them in the cracks between the well's stones. Filipino pilgrims also apply customs used at shrines in the Philippines, such as rubbing objects (little amulets, handkerchief or pictures of relatives, which they carried in their purse) onto the tombstone displayed at the entrance to the Holy Sepulchre. Finally, they copy Jewish practices at the Jewish holy sites they visit, such as the Wailing Wall or the site traditionally believed to be the Tomb of David in Jerusalem, where pilgrims spontaneously start moving like the Jewish devotees praying next to them or, at the Wailing Wall, walking away from it backwards in order not to show their backs to it disrespectfully, and writing little notes to be hidden in the cracks between its massive stones (see Photograph 3).¹⁰

The encounter with the 'holy land's' political topography during the pilgrimages sometimes produces confusion, uncertainty and awkwardness, especially if the group crosses into the occupied territories (see Photograph 4). When, for example, on the way to Bethlehem, under the administrative and military control of the Palestinian National Authority, pilgrimage buses have to pass through a checkpoint which resembles a highly secured international border, some pilgrims, visibly upset, asked the organisers, 'Are we going to Palestine now?', 'Will they check our passports?', 'Is it safe to go there?' During one of three Bethlehem pilgrimages I accompanied in December 2007, the Israeli border police demanded that the pilgrims get out of the coaches in order to pass the security checkpoint individually. Among the pilgrims, those whose residence or work permits had expired instantly feared that their passports would be checked (which they were not) and that they would be deported. Having joined the pilgrimage in spite of their illegalised status in Israel because they believed it to be under God's protection, their confidence now quickly waned.

¹⁰ While the Pilgrimage for a Cause group stumbled into the Tomb of David rather accidentally (since it was housed in the structure where, according to Christian tradition, the Last Supper on the night before Jesus' crucifixion took place), the Wailing Wall was a popular pilgrimage destination for Filipinos, some of whom travelled there individually all throughout the year, commonly calling it the Wishing Wall.



3. Filipino pilgrims writing 'wishing notes' for the Wailing Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem, 9 April 2005.



4. Pilgrims for a Cause lining up at the Bethlehem checkpoint, 15 December 2007.

Passing the checkpoint that day, they were clearly very anxious, visibly nervous and sweating, some mumbling prayers while walking on.

Whereas Filipinos often refrain from voicing strong political opinions about the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and the so-called

Middle Eastern conflict, the obviously more constrained life-style in Palestinian cities, the checkpoints, political graffiti and concrete wall of the Israeli West Bank barrier, up to eight metres high, now visible during many pilgrimages, provoke curiosity, empathy and at least some political debate among Filipino pilgrims.¹¹ Amidst feelings of awkwardness, curiosity and irritation, most Filipinos make sure at least to document the pilgrimage as accurately as possible (see Photograph 7). In 2004, when digital cameras were not yet widespread among Filipina domestic workers in Israel and I first accompanied a Filipino pilgrimage to Bethlehem, many Filipinos brought single-use cameras, to be used specifically for the pilgrimage. In 2008, practically all Filipino pilgrims brought along digital photo cameras, and many recorded the pilgrimage on a camcorder, if not their own then one they had borrowed for the day.

Pilgrimage is also about connecting persons and sacred places via objects that travel in sacred exchange (Werbner 1998). Thus, pilgrims acquire objects at the sites they visit, filling up water at the Sea of Galilee, Jordan River or Elijah's Well, collecting little rocks on the Mount of Temptation and picking palm leaves and sprigs of olive trees in Jerusalem (see Photograph 5). 'Holy Land' souvenir shops and street vendors are never far from the more popular tourist sites, and Filipino pilgrims are typically ready to buy devotional objects, illustrated books on the 'Holy Land', handicrafts with Palestinian embroidery, soft toy camels, dates and so forth (see Photograph 6). Specific things are bought at specific sites - dates and cosmetics at the Dead Sea, for example, and devotional objects in sanctified Christian places like Bethlehem, Nazareth or Jerusalem. Many also use the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, like other tourists, to buy gold jewellery in the Arab market of the Old City, where numerous jewellers' shops display the Philippines national flag as well as pictures of Filipino customers in their shop windows, and where some vendors have picked up phrases in Tagalog. If the pilgrimage stops in the Palestinian occupied territories, Filipinos often go grocery shopping, knowing that prices are much cheaper there than in Tel Aviv.

While still on pilgrimage, Father Benjamin is asked to bless the devotional objects the pilgrims acquire. If there has been an opportunity to

¹¹ Catholic Filipinos, who often met and sometimes befriended Arab or Palestinian Catholics in their local church communities in Israel, typically seemed more sympathetic towards Palestinian issues than evangelical Filipino Christians, especially if they regarded themselves as 'Christian Zionists' (cf. Kemp and Raijman 2003). However, it is important to note that Filipinos' political positionings in Israel are too complex to be understood through religious affiliation exclusively, also being influenced by widespread antisemitic stereotypes and the political conflict between Muslims and Christians in the Philippines, as well as the differing political positionings and personal encounters of migrants in Israel.

buy these objects before Father Benjamin celebrated Mass, these are put on the altar to be blessed, which is why Mass during pilgrimage is often



5. Filipina Pilgrims touching the water of the Sea of Galilee, 20 October 2007.



6. Filipina pilgrims shopping for souvenirs on the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem, 16 March 2008.

read from behind a large pile of rosaries, crosses, Bibles and religious icons. Pilgrims commonly take it for granted that the blessing mediated by the

priest is especially powerful if it is given at a significant holy site, where, so they explain, God was especially close.

As became clear during my visits to returnees and family members left behind, these objects travel back to the Philippines, where they are proudly presented and displayed as ‘a cross from Holy Jerusalem’ or ‘an icon from the Holy City of Bethlehem’. Apart from employers’ hand-me-downs and groceries, it is most of all ‘Holy Land’ souvenirs like these that fill migrants’ *balikbayan* boxes to their families, strengthening social ties, proving one’s ongoing moral commitment and devotion, while also transporting stories of migration and pilgrimage. Being placed on walls and altars, these objects and the stories attached to them remind returning migrants of their journeys, while fuelling the imagination of the ‘Holy Land’ in those who will never leave and those who have yet to depart.



7. Filipina pilgrims taking pictures with Israeli soldiers on Mount Hermon, 10 February 2010.

Finally, the Pilgrimages for a Cause always also incorporates joyful interludes and practices not directly experienced as holy. Pilgrim/tourists board and dance on boats in the Mediterranean after visiting Elijah’s cave in Haifa, visit the theme park ‘Mini Israel’ after celebrating the Pentecost in Jerusalem’s Old City, float on the water of the Dead Sea after visiting the Mount of Temptation in Jericho, and ride camels or dress up as Palestinians – services widely provided in the car parks adjacent to tourist sites. The pilgrimage organisers agree that, apart from bringing people ‘closer to God’ by visiting holy sites, there also has to be a ‘fun’ aspect to each

pilgrimage, thus providing spiritual refreshment, according to Yolanda, from physically demanding, stressful and tedious working weeks. Yet, by also stressing the importance of making pilgrims see the beauty of the 'Holy Land' more generally, organisers make clear that these apparently secular activities form an integral part of the spiritual experience of the pilgrimage. Accordingly, in January or February, Pilgrimage for a Cause visits Mount Hermon, the site of Israel's only ski lift on the Northern Golan Heights (see Photograph 7). Being timed after the snowfall rather than the liturgical calendar, the entire group goes sledging for hours before moving on to the one holy site of the pilgrimage, the Banyas waterfalls. Not marked by any church building or sign, this is nevertheless a significant site for Roman Catholicism in particular, the ancient Caesarea Philippi, where Jesus called his disciple Peter 'the Rock' and promised him the keys of the kingdom of God, hereby founding, according to Catholic doctrine, the institution of the papacy. When, in 2008, the priest was unable to join the Golan Heights pilgrimage, it took place without the usual celebration of mass. Instead, the group gathered on a meadow beside the idyllic waterfalls, listened to information about its religious significance provided by one of the organisers, read out of an issue of the Filipino magazine *Manila Tel Aviv*, then sang Christian songs accompanied by a guitar that was brought along and, finally, recited the rosary. Having a picnic and chatting in the mild sun of early spring, and still excited after what for many had been their first experience of snow, some Filipino pilgrims jokingly told me: 'Now you can see. We come here to work, but *really*, we are tourists!' – a joke I heard again and again during pilgrimages.

It was during moments like these that elements of the spirit of *communitas*, which Victor Turner argues pervades Christian pilgrimages as 'liminoid' or 'quasi-liminal' phenomena (1974, p. 182), becomes most obvious: as the predominantly female Filipino pilgrims, many of whom hardly knew each other, experience these moments of relaxation and happiness together, they also generously share the food they have brought along, exchange jokes and stories about their employers and work routines in Israel, and confide their hopes and hardships of migration to each other. Anti-structural moments such as these erase their profane identities as racialised migrant labourers and single them out as persons who have accomplished a spiritual journey. As they then sit in the buses on the way back to Tel Aviv-Jaffa, gazing at the landscape passing by, the pilgrims, exhausted from the day's travels, collectively make sense of Israel, comparing it to the Philippines and other countries they had been to, reflecting on its position in the Western world and the Middle East, and wondering about their own roles and options within it. As the bus approaches Tel Aviv-Jaffa, so does the profane routine of their work in Israeli private homes. Frequently setting off late or getting caught up in a

traffic jam on the way back, pilgrims now start worrying about not returning to their work places on time. The pilgrimage organisers, however, are quick to reassure pilgrims that, ‘after all our sacrifices today, we are blessed by the Lord and nothing can harm us.’

Rather than simply being set apart from their everyday lives as care and domestic workers in Israeli private homes, however, as the reference to *communitas* might suggest, Filipina migrants’ narratives and understandings of ‘Holy Land’ pilgrimage clearly go beyond the weekend outings they occasionally engage in.

Filipina Migrants’ Subjective Transformations and the Making of Sacred Geographies

I heard Aida’s narrative of coming to Israel for the first time during one of the Pilgrimage for a Cause journeys. Back in the coach after an early morning church service with Father Benjamin on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and following a visit to Capernaum and Tabgha, two highly significant sites for Christianity that are directly linked to Jesus’ life and teachings, Aida stepped forward, switched on a microphone and ‘shared her testimony’. She had come to Israel in 1997 after working in a factory in Taiwan for two years, leaving behind her newborn son, whom she was forced to support as a single mother. During her stay in Israel back then she attended church and even joined two or three pilgrimages but, as she recalls: ‘I did not pay attention. During the pilgrimage, I concentrated on the view, I did not attach any meaning to my life.’ Instead, she took on part-time cleaning or babysitting jobs on Sundays, even though this risked prosecution, in order to earn as much as possible.

In 2004, she was arrested by the Israeli Migration Police due to her illegal status as a part-time domestic worker and deported to the Philippines. Fifteen months later she was on her way to Israel again, alongside eleven other Filipinos, guided by an agent who promised to arrange entry for her in spite of her earlier deportation. During a stopover in Hong Kong, the Israeli authorities sent back three of the group because they discovered they had been deported from Israel before. Surprisingly, Aida was let through even though she did not change her name or use false documents, she emphasised. ‘I see this as a miracle,’ she said, ‘a blessing, God’s will that I return to the Holy Land for a mission.’ Her becoming an activist for Christ during the time I met her in 2007 was clearly part of that mission. Thus, in summer 2007 she not only joined the organising team of the Pilgrimages for a Cause, but on Friday nights also led a Filipino Block Rosary Crusade processing with the icon of Mama Mary through the streets and Filipino homes of southern Tel Aviv. In sharing her testimony that day, Aida hoped to encourage others to ‘attach meaning’ to their lives, become active

Catholics and realise how lucky and privileged they were to be in the Holy Land, 'able to walk,' so she said, following a common metaphor, 'in the footsteps of Jesus.'

A couple of pilgrimages and rosary crusades later, Aida told me that like many Filipina migrants in Israel, she had applied for work in Canada within the so-called caregiver programme. From then on, whenever we went to one of the many religious events we attended together, she asked me to document her speeches, readings and pilgrimage activities so that she had something to present to the priests and Filipino Catholics in Canada. 'Once they learn about my role in the Holy Land,' she reasoned, 'they must give me a leading position in the Church there.'

As her story illustrates, Filipina migrants who become the breadwinners of their families and face the predicaments of domestic work, are engaged in a deeply self-transforming journey. This journey may last for decades and take them to a number of nation-states, arriving to Israel after Hong Kong, the Gulf States or Taiwan or, like Aida, returning to Israel after a previous deportation, and hoping to migrate on to Canada or the European Union. Typically, Filipinos' narratives of migration were imbued with religious language or come to be so during the migration process. Aida narrated her second coming to Israel as a miracle of return, a blessing and a mission. Others come as part of their religious commitments in the Philippines, especially if they were evangelical Christians there or considered themselves to be Christian Zionists or Jews. Following a popular Filipino conceptualisation of female migration, most interlocutors used the notion of 'sacrifice' to describe their reasons and experiences of migration.

Against the background of the predicaments they face as foreign migrant domestic workers and sole women far from their loved ones, Filipinas construct their migration process as a meaningful and virtuous moral career. To many, domestic or care work in Israel becomes an act of devotion, agreeable to God or even Christ-like. Reflecting on the ordeals she had faced in caring for an employer who repeatedly treated her in a humiliating and abusive manner, one of my evangelical interlocutors, Sandra, told me: 'At first I thought Israel is a Holy Land and the people are holy but ... I could never imagine that there are also hard people to deal with!' Like many Filipina migrants, Sandra – an urban, middle-class woman who gave up a responsible position in a Manila department store to come to Israel – found her situation as a migrant domestic worker extremely difficult. She was separated from her family, including a nine-year-old daughter, and felt lonely and looked down upon as an apparently poor, uneducated foreigner from a third-world country. This did not mean, however, that her faith weakened. Instead, she sought comfort and refuge in her personal worship. She felt that she was especially close to God in

Israel and as a carer of 'God's own People'. From reading the Bible, studying Hebrew and praying during the long, boring afternoon hours at her workplace when her employer rested or slept, Sandra said she derived a sense of calm and even happiness. Eventually, she came to regard the injustices and hardships of her work as trials of her trust in and love for God.

Filipino evangelicals, overrepresented in Israel due to their evangelising effort in the diaspora and the attraction of Israel as a destination country for Christians proclaiming pro-Israeli attitudes and emphasising the Jewish roots of Christianity, typically viewed their being in Israel as part of a project of becoming proper Christians. For them, the term 'Christian' seemed to signify an almost unattainable cultural ideal. Throughout their stays in Israel, women became increasingly devout or 'born again,' gained strength from their faith, or alternatively lost their uncritical belief in religious doctrines and rhetoric while discovering their own spiritual truth in Israel. Their stay in Israel not only allowed Filipino Christians to obtain intimate access to highly esteemed spiritual knowledge such as Judaism and Hebrew; it enabled them actually to undertake a 'Holy Land' pilgrimage. The week before she returned to the Philippines, Rebecca, who had risen to the position of a pastor in her Filipino evangelical church community in Tel Aviv, reflected on her experiences in Israel:

But, you know, our first motive [here in Israel] is to work in the church, to serve here in His land. So that's the only main purpose – to see the Holy Land at the same time, if we can... [...] There's a lot of pastors and Christians [who] want to see the Holy Land. The rich people in the Philippines, they spend a lot of, thousands of pesos, thousands – even millions, because they have children to bring, husbands – in order to do a pilgrimage. But for us, but for us, we work, at the same time we earn money, and we can go around and see the ... you know, where Jesus walked. We touch, we see, we step on the holy sites. And it is, you know, to serve the Lord here in Israel, it's really a blessing and [now] I want to go back to the Philippines and I will bring all the blessings from Israel. (Personal interview with Rebecca, 15 October 2007)

Unlike the rich Filipino pilgrims, who typically stayed for short periods of time only, and with whom migrant come into contact only during church activities, religious mass events or celebrations organised by the Philippine embassy in Israel, Filipina domestic workers stayed, as we have seen, long enough to establish their own sacred geographies in the 'Holy Land'. These sacred geographies are guided both by official maps of Christian holiness and by those they collectively and individually create. Existing sacred geographies were most importantly the Christian holy sites directly linked to Jesus' (and, for Catholics, the Virgin Mary's) life course and teachings. Following in Jesus's (and Mary's) footsteps, all of my interlocutors took part in collectively organised or individually undertaken pilgrimages to

Jerusalem, Nazareth, Bethlehem, the Galilee and the Sea of Galilee. They acquired blessings from ‘touching’, ‘seeing’ and ‘stepping’ on these sites, in Rebecca’s words. Apart from the holy sites, the women also obtained blessings from the powerful religious leaders, miracle-workers and elite pilgrims who were stationed in or regularly toured the ‘Holy Land’, such as Pope John Paul II in March 2000 and Pope Benedict in May 2009, the founder of the Filipino evangelical mass movement Jesus Is Lord, Brother Eddie, in 2005, and a number of American tele-evangelists like Benny Hinn or Morris Cerullo. As testified by numerous pictures hanging on the walls of migrants’ shared flats or returnees’ homes in the Philippines, signatures in their Bibles or objects blessed by these VIPs, Filipina domestic workers integrated them into their religious activities in the diaspora and found them much more approachable than ‘at home’.

Rather than just obtaining blessings, Filipina domestic workers in Israel also engage in active sanctifications in at least three ways. First of all, they sanctify space in Israel that is not defined as holy, such as southern Tel Aviv, Filipinos’ central space for sociality on weekends, often described as Israel’s Gomorrah within Filipino church communities, a socially segregated space within the city polluted by heavy traffic, with visible forms of drug abuse and prostitution. Filipinos sanctified this area of southern Tel Aviv with Catholic block rosary crusades such as Aida’s and evangelical churches such as Jesus Is Lord, which opened their doors within the neighbourhood, hoping to ‘bring light to the heart of darkness in Israel.’ Secondly, their sanctification efforts were also directed at their Jewish employers by praying over them and hoping to ‘share the gospel’ with them. Finally, Filipina domestic workers sanctified their own lives by taking care of ‘God’s own People,’ recognising and fulfilling religious duties, reading the Bible at their workplaces, like Sandra, taking part in training seminars and rising in the hierarchy of their church like Rebecca, or volunteering in lay groups like Pilgrimage for a Cause. Viewed against this background, the notion of the Holy Land or Palestine pilgrimage as ‘the prototype or archparadigm of axiomatic Christian values’ (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 163) acquires a new meaning: rather than the actual visit to holy sites, it encompasses the entire experience of living in Israel. Filipina pilgrims followed in Jesus’s footsteps not simply topographically, but in a deeper, transformative, performative and embodied sense of actual becoming.

Conclusion: Becoming Pilgrims in the ‘Holy Land’

Pilgrimages, so Werbner (1998) has argued, imply a threefold renewal. Apart from a renewal of spirit, pilgrims also undergo ‘a renewal of personhood through contact with the sacred, and a renewal of community

through the bearing of what has been in contact with the sacred centre home into the structured, mundane world' (ibid., p. 95). Filipino migrants' pilgrimage practices and sanctifying efforts, as analysed above, are deeply transformative, affective and embodied performances. They constitute a *metonymic* relationship to the sacred in that Filipino pilgrims have to touch, walk and inhabit sacred ground, breathing its air and drinking its water. Moreover, these transformations are tied to a sacred exchange in that '[d]uring pilgrimage, pilgrims shed their mundane persona, often through metonymic giving to the poor or at a sacred site, while they return bearing symbolic substances imbued with the sacred power of the ritual centre' (1998, p. 95). Thus, the donation to charity projects in the Philippines and elsewhere by Pilgrimage for a Cause, the shopping for 'Holy Land' souvenirs as well as the bringing back of devotional objects from Israel have to be seen as connecting persons and places. While during actual pilgrimage tours, pilgrims did not specifically bring material objects as offerings to holy sites, they nevertheless made sometimes significant financial donations at them, in banknotes rather than in coins, and in dollars rather than the weaker currency of Israeli shekels. These offerings are tied to specific requests such as the health and well-being of loved ones back home, the extension of visas, and so forth. Within the context of migration, the objects they bring back function to sustain and create social ties and intimacy across distance and beyond national borders. They help to raise the status of migrants as 'Holy Land' pilgrims, even for on-migration or after their return to the Philippines. Objects acquired at pilgrimage sites are not simply mementos or souvenirs but bits of the sacred, subsequently sacralising the places they are brought into contact with. At the same time they also help migrants to narrate their journeys as tourist adventures and pilgrimages, rather than the typically denigrating experiences of domestic work, restrictive visa regulations and racism abroad that migration entails for them.

The 'Holy Land' in this context is not simply a destination country of migration which Filipina migrants leave after their contracts expire, but has an *affective* force, a transformative capacity. Filipinos who move to Israel as migrant care or domestic workers typically know about and share the interpretation of Israel as *the* historical centre of Christian faith, but generally do not conceptualise their migration as a form of pilgrimage. However, in the process of staying on, their moves are often reinterpreted as bearing a previously hidden or unconscious spiritual significance. They explore Israel devotionally, engage in pilgrimages to holy sites and step in the footsteps of Jesus, as both Aida and Rebecca emphasised, thereby continuously validating the land as a sacred centre. Migration in this specific context can be interpreted as a pilgrimage in that it constitutes a journey that *becomes* imbued with sacredness, not least because it 'ends

up' - for some interlocutors rather accidentally - in a place where religious institutions and discourses, as well as holy sites and persons, are ubiquitous and omnipresent. The dominant concepts of pilgrimage as a liminal performance in Turner's sense, on the one hand, and, following Eliade (1959), as a movement towards a sacred centre, on the other, are brought here into a dynamic relationship.

Filipino migrants' continuous sanctifying efforts and the actual performance of pilgrimages to holy sites in Israel become necessary for many of them, not least *because* their experiences of Israel are described as disappointing, that is, not 'holy' as expected. Subject to the predicaments they face as live-in care and domestic workers, most Filipinos spend their working weeks in rather unattractive residential neighbourhoods in the coastal area and their day off work in the poor and shabby ('sinful') urban space of southern Tel Aviv. Pilgrimage as performative journey therefore very significantly also constitutes an affective spatial transformation for them, from urban neighbourhoods to the beauty of the mountains of the Galilee or Jerusalem at dawn, the vastness of the desert or the immersion in the blue of the Mediterranean or Dead Sea. As Navaro-Yashin (2009) has analysed with regard to the 'ruinated' landscape of northern Cyprus, one could speak here of a deeply *affective* space, that is, a space generating emotions and, for the pilgrim, possessing an emotive energy in and of itself.

In his fine ethnography of Nigerian Muslim Hausa pilgrims who settle in Sudan while going on a pilgrimage to Mecca, Bawa Yamba (1995) analyses pilgrimage as having become a paradigm of everyday life for pilgrims. Even though the Hausa he studied in Sudan have long formed villages, engaged in debt relationships with local people, with many are born and die in Sudan, they continue to regard themselves as pilgrims. Pilgrimage for them 'provided the total context for daily life; it became the ruling metaphor for life, so to speak, generating social action within a process in which the *striving* for the pilgrimage to Mecca was constantly renewed' (1995, p. 182). Similarly, for Filipino migrant domestic workers in Israel pilgrimage too becomes the ruling metaphor for their lives in Israel. Being pushed into the shabby urban spaces of southern Tel Aviv and demeaning care and domestic work, though unwilling to give up hope, Filipina migrants continually seek to discover the *real* Holy Land, since there has to be more to it than that which meets the eye upon arrival.

These multiple transformations take place in a particular geopolitical context which allows the majority of Filipinos to move as 'migrants' rather than as 'pilgrims' or 'tourists'. During weekend tours throughout Israel, Filipina care and domestic workers are temporarily able through performance to transcend the category of 'migrant' that an international division of labour and the Israel migration regime assign them. This transcendence is fragile, however. Just as many women who dream of

visiting the 'Holy Land' have to 'disguise' themselves as migrant workers in order to be allowed to cross nation-state borders in the first place, their precarious position in Israel constantly pushes them back into the position of 'migrants'. During their 'Holy Land' travels, this becomes clear at moments such as the crossing of checkpoints.

When confronted with other Christian short-term visitors or 'rich' Filipino pilgrims, however, migrants come to 'realise' their privilege of being in Israel. While those pilgrims pay a huge amount of money to experience Israel and see the holy sites, as Rebecca and many others pointed out, Filipino domestic workers not only earn money during their stay, but also acquire much deeper insights. Upon this realisation, which some described as a life-changing moment, women came to view their lives as structured by a divine plan, 'recognising' God's will to bring them to the 'Holy Land'. Women came to see their lives as unfinished projects of becoming Christians, being fully committed to caring for weak, sick and elderly Jews. Especially during religious holidays and pilgrimages in the strict sense of the term, amidst tourists and short-term pilgrims from all over the world, they felt they were the *real* 'Holy Land' pilgrims.

In narrating themselves as tourists or pilgrims with a mission, and in being recognised as such by vendors, tour guides and other pilgrims along the way, Filipina migrants transcend, at least temporarily, their position as third-world workers at the bottom of the social hierarchy in Israel. I agree with Yamba that such a phenomenon can be described anthropologically neither as a strategic move nor as a form of mystification (1995, p. 188f.). Instead, it is a form of subjectification, a performative reconstruction and renewal of personhood and subjectivity. Seen from this standpoint, religion does not simply empower migrants: it is an ontology that gives Filipino migrant domestic workers an idiom in which they can sense reality and organise comfort, solidarity and compassion, something that transforms them from those who do the dirty work into morally superior beings – in this case, into Christians.

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