

Sacred Journeys, Diasporic Lives: Sociality and the Religious Imagination among Filipinos in the Middle East¹

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Introduction

The Philippines is one of the leading labour exporting countries in the world, and Filipino migrant workers have been widely dispersed to localities in the Middle East, Europe, East and Southeast Asia and North America. There is now a substantial body of work on this vast migratory movement, much of it focused on and contributing to understanding the predicament of female domestic workers (Constable 2007, Parreñas 2001, Stasiulis and Bakan 2005, Tyner 2004). This essay moves beyond the focus on inequalities associated with Filipino migrant labour, to attend to the ways that those migrants transcend their isolation in work contexts by seeking sociality with fellow Filipinos in religious congregations. We ask: how does religion figure in the social life and imaginings of diasporic Filipinos, their moral imaginings and inscriptions of faith on sacred landscapes? This is particularly significant for Christian or Muslim migrants moving to countries that are also historically places of pilgrimage holy to Christianity or Islam. Hence, our research focused on these migrants' experiences in the Holy Land, the birthplace of Christianity, and Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam.

Filipinos are one of the largest groups of migrants in the Middle East (numbering some 1.5 million), making the region home to the largest population of overseas Filipinos outside of North America. While there is much that might be said about the differences among Filipinos and their varied experiences

¹ First hand empirical research among Filipinos living and working *in* the Middle East is scarce. Research for this project was funded by the AHRC (UK) Diaspora, Migration and Identity programme and was carried out by a team of researchers based at the Universities of Keele and Hull under the direction of Pnina Werbner and Mark Johnson. The majority of the ethnographic research was carried out by the projects' post-doctoral fellows: Claudia Liebelt (Keele) among Christian Filipino migrants and their families in Israel and the Philippines, and Alicia Pingol (Hull) among Muslim Filipino migrants and their families in Saudi Arabia and the Philippines. Mark Johnson (Hull) carried out additional ethnographic research on Muslim Filipino migrants who have worked in the Middle East while Deirdre McKay (Keele) is conducting research with Christian Filipino care workers who have moved on from the Middle East to work in the UK

living and working in different Middle East countries, our aim is to highlight how attention to religion and sociality enables us to reconceptualize the experiences and agency of lone Filipino women (and men) within this diaspora.

Overseas Filipino Workers and transnational relations of reproduction

Filipino migrants, women in particular, have popularly figured as ‘maids to order’: people who leave the poverty of their home country to work as domestic servants in another country in pursuit of a better standard of living for themselves and their families. The substantial body of research on this topic contextualizes and complicates that popular stereotype describing and theorizing key features of this major form of population movement in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. First, this literature situates Filipino migrants within capitalist-dominated labour flows and distributions of global economic power. The analysis highlights the growing dependence of the Philippines (and other developing Southern States) on migrants’ remittances, arguing that the state creates and then super-exploits a feminised and unskilled migrant workforce (Parreñas 2001, Pertierra 1992, Stasiulis and Bakan 2005, Weekly 2004, c.f. Gibson, Law and McKay 2001). Second, it explores critically the complex bureaucratic structures and discursive practices that have evolved within and across sending and receiving states to ensure the production of such compliant and self-disciplining subjects.

By documenting the assemblage of discourses and bureaucracies governing domestic worker migration, this literature has explained how the circumstances of their labour migration tend to negate workers’ individual rights and curtail their capacity to act collectively to change their working conditions. Though attentive to the way that Filipinos resist their oppression through ‘hidden transcripts’, these Foucault-inspired Feminist critiques also emphasize the way that everyday acts of resistance are nonetheless circumscribed by the internalization of the regulatory ideals of the good ‘foreign’/‘national’ worker (Constable 2007, Parreñas 2001, Tyner 2004). Third, this literature describes how broader structures of race, gender and class are reproduced in everyday working practices and intimate spaces of the employer’s household. It explores how the incorporation of Filipino domestic workers into a global system of reproductive labour and care-work causes migrant women from relatively poor countries to assume the domestic and emotional labour of middle class women in more affluent countries. Migrants’ own children, in turn, are left in the care of husbands, grandmothers and other relatives at home, in the Philippines, a pattern often reproduced from one generation to another, with daughters following their mothers into overseas migration (Bakan 1995, Bakan and Stasiulis 1997, Barber 1997, Constable 2007, Parreñas 2005, Pingol 2001; for a

recent critique of the ‘care chain’ literature from the perspective of Filipino migrants see McKay 2007).

This dominant focus on work and labour is undoubtedly useful for an understanding of Filipino migrants as a ‘labour diaspora’, but it is far from sufficient as a full account of Filipino migrant lives. A richly textured ethnographic analysis of a Filipino diaspora that gives voice to migrant creativity and sociality beyond the workplace - without ignoring suffering within it - remains largely missing from the literature. Moreover, the focus on migrants’ work conditions tends to ignore the fact that - despite being denied citizenship – many Filipinos become long-term residents in many countries of destination. During their extended stay they develop complex cultural practices and networks of sociality. While migrants’ affective and emotional lives and motivations are no doubt inflected by highly constraining regimes of economic, institutional and disciplinary power, they are neither reducible to, nor exhausted by them. Even when they face continuous predicaments in their work contexts, Filipinos nevertheless find ways of creating spaces for socialising and celebration that deny their image as culturally impoverished ‘docile bodies’.

Beyond ‘Maids to Order’: spiritual sojourns in sacred places

Addressing these gaps in the literature on Filipino diaspora, our project has explored migrants’ emotional and intellectual engagement with the social and symbolic geographies of host countries. Work in the Middle East is often viewed as a stepping stone, and second best, to work in a ‘Western’ country such as the USA, Canada or the UK (Johnson 1998, Liebelt 2008a). However, for Muslim and Christian Filipinos, living and working at the holy centres or homelands of their respective faiths may mitigate the hardships of living in exile and the difficult working conditions. Filipino migrants in many parts of the world talk about the sacrifices they make in order to support their families and loved ones back home. That sacrifice may take on an altogether more religious dimension when - as some Muslim Filipino workers do - they talk about their labour in sacred places, such as Makkah or Madinah, as work whose reward is deemed not only or primarily to come in this life but in the life hereafter. So too, Christian Filipinos describe their work in Israel as enabling them to come into metonymic contact with the holy land and its sacred sites, and portray the challenge of caring for the elderly as part and parcel of their ministry of spreading the gospel (Liebelt 2008a).

For migrants, religion is not simply about the rewards of the afterlife. Their varied religious engagements and familiarity with a sacred landscape may increase their cultural capital at home. Undertaking the *hajj* or *umrah* exemplifies this point. Whereas before, undertaking the *hajj* was impossible for all but the most affluent of Muslim Filipinos, one of the positive benefits of

working in the Middle East, for women as well as men, is that many have been able to fulfil this final pillar of Islam. In the process, they have also increased both their own and their families social standing and prestige. The significance of the *hajj* for Muslim Filipino workers is attested to by the fact that some respondents reported walking out on employers who prevented them from going on pilgrimage.² But equally, there are other examples of employers who not only allowed but positively encouraged and sometimes assisted their employees in making the *hajj*.

Christian Filipinos similarly can gain respect and prestige from people at home who acknowledge them as pilgrims in their journeys to 'the Holy Land'. Working as caregivers in private homes, Filipinos not only learn Hebrew, but get an intimate picture of Jewish culture and religion, especially appreciated as knowledge of Christian roots among evangelical Christians. Catholic lay groups and independent evangelical churches, formed by female Filipino domestic workers, organise Catholic Block Rosary Crusades in Tel Aviv, pilgrimages to Holy Sites in the Galilee, Jerusalem or Bethlehem, and frequently engage in long-distance philanthropy. As with *zamzam* water from Makkah, the films and pictures taken and the devotional items acquired during pilgrimages travel back to the Philippines, supporting migrants' claims that their sacred journeys have enhanced their spiritual knowledge and potency.

Migrants, by establishing religious congregations in their places of settlement, create community away from home. This is a salient feature of migration often ignored in studies of overseas Filipinos, not all of whom are religious. For those who are, religion fills their lives with social events, from congregational meetings and prayers to the joyful celebration of ritual festivals like Christmas or Eid-el Fitr. Some of these festivals may take place in churches or mosques, others in homes where Eid celebrations, for example, bring together migrant co-workers and employers along with their extended families. This regular and recurrent sharing of religious events provides opportunities for migrant workers who may otherwise live relatively isolated lives during the week to celebrate in the company of co-religionists and fellow Filipinos, to gossip, joke and chat while providing advice and mutual aid. Importantly, these ritual events can enjoy broader social sanction in the host societies.

Filipino migrants are well known for meeting and socializing in the more secular contexts of public parks and shopping malls. One of the best documented examples of these is the Sunday gathering of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong (Constable 2007, McKay 2005). Here, Filipinos, largely engaged in domestic work, routinely colonize the space of the central business district after attending church. On the streets, in the parks, and along the pavements, they meet, share food and exchange news and goods with fellow

² See Werbner (1999) for a similar response among Pakistani migrants to the Gulf.

migrants from the same village, town or province in the Philippines. Their village gatherings recreate and extend a sense of ethnic affiliation and village material and cultural economy in a translocal space (McKay 2005). These gatherings are also sites of political agency where migrants form 'home-town associations' that engage in philanthropy and political action at home and support internal migration within the Philippines (McKay 2005, McKay and Brady 2005.)

In the Middle East, Filipino migrants similarly recreate the conviviality of home and ethnicity in various ways. In Tel Aviv, they colonise the Central Bus Station for karaoke, shopping, self-decoration, clubbing and get-togethers. Elsewhere in the Middle East where public gatherings are more circumscribed, informal and mixed groups of Muslim and Christian Filipinos hire private venues and congregate in makeshift parks (designated *kamsa-kamsa* because of the five Riyal charge), recreating 'fiestas' in desert locales. Here, religious events and congregations, like the more secular social occasions and modes of exchange in Hong Kong, may help to create and enhance a sense of a shared home place in diaspora by fostering close links with particular places in the Philippines. Thus, for example, a pilgrimage group in Tel Aviv-Jaffa donates money for building a chapel to a specific congregation in South Cotabato in the Southern Philippines, while in Jeddah, a group of Christian Filipino converts to Islam (referred to as 'reverts' or *balik Islam*) sends money to support the building of a mosque in their home town in Luzon.

Shared religious practice also draws in co-religionists from other countries and from other parts of the Philippines in ways that transcend ethnic and village localities. Worshiping together simultaneously creates and consolidates a wider sense of shared national affiliation and of belonging to a global community of believers. Muslim Filipinos, for example, both claim what they regard as their rightful place among the universal community of the faithful, but also routinely contrast themselves as Muslim Filipinos to Arab Muslims. For Muslim Filipinos that distinction is often articulated in religious terms: Arabs may have been blessed by being the ones to whom the Prophet and Qu'ran were sent, and hence may have more in the way of religious knowledge and be better informed about appropriate religious conduct and ritual practice. However, what Muslim Filipinos lack in the way of head knowledge they more than made up for in terms of a purity and steadfastness of heart. Just as evangelical Christian Filipinos regarded themselves as missionaries and evangelists in the Holy Land, some Muslim Filipinos saw themselves as performing *da'wah*, calling non-believers to revert and return to Islam (*balik Islam*), and fellow believers, among them Arab Muslims, to renew their faith and examine their heart.

The idea of membership in a universal community of believers is important in establishing a language of shared ethics across divisions of status and power. This is especially so in situations for lone migrant workers who have little

recourse to employment and citizen or residential rights and little or nothing in the form of collective representation. For such people, religion may be an important means of making and pressing moral claims both on fellow workers - to socialize, to exchange, to share - and on employers, even if it is only to persuade them to allow their employees to participate in, if not take time off work for shared religious events. For some migrant workers, religion was the primary language for talking about and defending one's sense of self and personhood. Religion offered a means of expressing social agency in those diasporic situations where they might otherwise be forced to comply with and bear the everyday humiliations of subordination and difficult working conditions in exchange for a relatively small sum of money to send home.

Migrants engaged religion to express their agency in a variety of ways. Muslim Filipinos had recourse to a form of lamentation where emotional outpouring in the form of cries, tears and sobs in 'public' spaces within the home or work place are accompanied by the pointed and vocal recitation of Qu'ranic verses in the presence of their Arab employers. Filipino domestic workers caring for elderly Jews have learned about and drawn parallels between Jewish sufferings and experiences of exile and their own diaspora experiences. This learning enable one group to declare to state policymakers, 'We are the Jews of today' (Liebelt 2008b).

Religion shapes the expectations and experiences of particular places and host societies for both Christian and Muslim Filipino migrants. While a religious stress on self-sacrifice, endurance and good works can, paradoxically, reinforce and consolidate dominant discourses that produce docile and disciplined bodies, religion can, at the same time, facilitate social networks and mobilisation against exploitation by enabling new forms of sociality. Religion is thus an important symbolic resource for people in the struggle for recognition and rights both at home and abroad. Framing forms of sociality and social action within a moral discourse among an imagined universal community of believers not only helps migrants to make longer sojourns bearable, but also opens up ways of negotiating a sense of belonging and cultural citizenship in host nations.

Conclusion

The centrality of religion in the study of migration and diaspora is by no means new. Religion has been a focus of much recent research on new diasporas in the West, and their claims to citizenship (Warner and Wittner 1998). Our goal, however, is not simply to extend religion as the primary analytical lens through which to understand the social lives and movements of another diaspora, that of Filipino migrant workers. Rather the broader analytical and political purpose of our research has been to frame the experience of lone migrants, particularly domestic workers, through an alternative discourse that does not simply reduce them to docile bodies or vulnerable victims. Instead, we highlight migrants'

volitional movements to and creative engagements with places and landscapes that may be sacred or secular and sometimes an alternating combination of both. Filipinos, we show, like other migrant groups, also engage in processes of community formation, networking and moral obligation. These enable them to win recognition and distinction among fellow migrants and those left at home, to recreate a universe of conviviality and sociality, and to re-centre their place of work within an imagined global ecumene of open boundaries and constant movement.

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