

## Snapshots on Filipino Islam and its Propagators

by  
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### Propagators' Thursday Nights

On my second month in Jeddah I came to learn of the November Islamic Lecture Series at the Saudi-German Hospital from Israfil, one among the young *Balik-Islam*<sup>1</sup> I came acquainted with one man who aspires to learn more from the Qur'an. And considering that he and his family live in the ground level of the apartment of his sister-in-law's where I also am living, I was provided with convenient transport for going to and returning from the lectures. Similar to the preference of other migrant workers, I felt safest going out at night when in the company of people one is most familiar with. From our residence, the drive to the lecture takes less than twenty minutes.

**A Lecture on the Rights of Spouses** by Dr. Yahyah, a psychologist-Islamic Scholar, at the Saudi-German Hospital, Jeddah , November 22, 2007

The lecture started at 9pm as usual. Most of those attending may already have refreshed themselves, if not taken dinner with their families, since most offices in the Kingdom close at 2pm. Some were nurses who were coming directly from their hospital duties. Compared to all other Thursday lectures organized for potential religious propagators, this generated the most questions from the audience and the lecturer was most responsive. The exchange went on beyond the usual 11pm closing time kept in previous lectures I had attended. While these were also held at this grand hospital complex, the earlier lectures were held in smaller lecture rooms that accommodate only about 50 participants with a space set apart the women, at the back, while the men occupy the front space closer to the lecturer. The relegation of women to the back, however, seems compensated for by the "serving" role the men played during the break: snacks are served to the ladies by the men. During the exchange, questions from the men seated in front are accommodated first, of course, but this does not hinder women to put forward their questions. More written questions directed to the lecturer come more from the women, while questions from men are mostly articulated verbally; the men had the floor.

This *Rights of Spouses* lecture was held in the big auditorium, perhaps to give recognition to the exceptional stature of the lecturer, addressed by everyone as 'Doctor', hence I assumed him to be a Ph.D holder in Psychology. However, there is a common practice to address one with a degree who has earned the respect of the locals, Dr, from which perhaps foreign professionals, as those in this lecture, took the cue.

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<sup>1</sup> Informed that Islam reached the Philippines earlier than Christianity, propagators coined the term *Balik-Islam* to refer to Filipinos who revert to Islamic faith. The term *balik* means a returnee to the faith. Hence rather than converts, they claim that *reverts* is the more fitting term.

These were some of the comments and questions from the audience:

- A poor man who marries gets poorer, how should it be then?  
Answer: Allah promised assistance to a man who came to him in this predicament.
- What happens to those who did not receive Islam, those without religion?  
Answer: When [the Day of] Judgement comes they will know.
- On sexual intimacy, what is Islamic guidance?  
Answer: We are not like animals; before the conjugal act, take into consideration the emotional state of the woman
- How about women who commits an offence?  
Answer: she gets punished; even before Islam came, women had rights already; restrictions on woman are cultural, Islam is culture.
- If a woman admires a guy who is already married...?  
Answer: Islam is a religion of modesty; one should not dwell on it – “close the door”
- How should women carry their rights, how to apply Allah’s teachings?  
Answer: Knowledge of Allah; that Allah is mindful; the husband is the provider, this is his responsibility; the wife as much as possible must attend to the home and children, they must not be cared by strangers
- On bridewealth?  
Answer: Giving [*mahr*] this is “not buying the woman”, it is parental recognition, a gift for their toil in raising their daughter
- How about divorce?  
Answer: It must be thought through carefully before doing it. Many people will be affected.

The next day I had conversations with the other promising lady Islamic propagators [and one male Balik-Islam] who were at this lecture. They found the lecture very interesting but we did not have time to talk at length about it since they were preparing for work.

### **The Dawah Centre**

On Fridays, they go to the Dawah Centre for their lessons, to listen to lectures on Islamic ways, and learn Arabic to enable them to read the Qur’an. They come in groups. They were introduced to the centre by a friend or relative, or they may be working in the same workplace. Israfil is one of them. His regular attendance at the Dawah Islamic programmes gave me the opportunity to ride in his car, consistently taking the backseat, never beside him. One rule here is that the front sit beside the driver is usually reserved for the wife. I learned this from the very first time he drove me to the Centre. His wife would have also liked to join Israfil but she must assists at the beauty clinic on Thursdays and Fridays which are the peak days. Clients, Filipinas and their local counterparts off from work, come in droves.

## Jeddah's Islamic Centres

There are seven Islamic Centres in Jeddah. The biggest centre which coordinates all other offices is located at Alhambra, considered the posh district of Jeddah. Other centres, such as the Sarawat Islamic Centre, my informants say, is the smallest and least known to Filipino workers. At the Alhambra Islamic Centre I met Brother Hassan, one of the young propagators.



Logo of the Alhambra Islamic Centre

Hassan came to Saudi at the age 18. Although under age, it did not impede his entry into KSA. He was spotted by no less than an employer who came to Pangasinan, his province, looking for workers. Direct hire was still the practice at that time. He was barely one year into college then, despite the inability of parents to send him to school. He insisted on enrolling just to be qualified to enter the army. He thought being enrolled on an R.O.T.C. (Reserved Officer's Training Course) could make entry possible. On the first semester break, he thought of applying for a job. An Arab recruiter came to their place. He was spotted by this Arab who asked him: *Are you interested in having a job?* The man was looking for a gardener. Despite his young age, after a month his papers arrived and he was taken to this place, an office in Jeddah.

When he arrived at the employer's office, he could see no garden. His employer said he would be a tea boy: prepare tea, serve as a messenger, just like any office boy. In the succeeding weeks he discovered there were lectures on Islam. This is how he started. Some years later, he married a Filipina also working in Jeddah and had children, all raised in Jeddah. At the same time, he had the chance to enrol into a university at Makkah. He travelled an hour every morning and another hour back to his place every day together with his children who were also enrolled in a grade school there. At a certain point he stopped, since he found this too taxing.

He said there are other Filipino workers as interested as he is in Islam. When fate forces him to return to the Philippines he dreams of connecting with some 10,000 Pangasinenses he met at the Centre; many of them were already back in the Philippines. He

hopes to revive their faith and to continue with Islamic ways. In addition to this he also intends to go back to his farm and hopes to expand into some small business.

Being more advanced than the other eager brothers, he works full time at the Centre while his wife is full time mother and house manager. Brother Hassan reviews the programmes of all Islamic centres in Jeddah, conferring with other brothers and sisters working as teachers to other Balik-Islam Filipinos. They regularly review their curricula.

### **Islamic Centre Programmes**

I first got hold of the Dawah Islamic Centre programme specifically for Filipinos after looking for programmes in some of the other Centres. Within the Dawah Centre brochure there are other sections devised for other Asian Muslims: Indonesians, Malaysians and Pakistanis, among others. For Filipino learners the Centre offers seven levels of study that run from four months to several years, depending on the regularity of attendance. Since most who go to the Centre are non-Muslims, the first stage is called 'Orientation to the Islamic faith'. Readiness for the induction rite called *shahadah* includes understanding the Five Pillars of Islam ( *shahadah*, bearing witness to God's oneness, *salah*, the five daily prayers, *saum*, fasting on Ramadan, *zakah*, the tithe of 2.5% of earnings, and *haj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca; and the Seven Pillars of Faith (Allah, Angel, Revelation, Prophets, Judgment, and *Qada/qadar*, Predestination and Destiny). New members are likewise instructed on proper ablution before doing *salah*; they are introduced to stories from the Qur'an, they are supervised on correct Qur'anic reading exercises and ways of worship. After their introductory course, they are formally enrolled into Level 1 which offers Basic Arabic, and Oneness of God, where they continue to learn ways of worship. Level 2 advances their Basic Arabic, Regulations in the workplace and *correct life* from morning till night. Learners move to the next level after passing examinations. Level 3 continues with their Basic Arabic, Mastery of the 99 names of Allah as well as acquainting them with the life of Mohammad in Makkah. Level 4 again continues with Basic Arabic, plus lessons on the Treasures/the Forbidden or Haram, the 40 Hadiths and the Life of Mohammad in Madinah; and Level 5 along with Basic Arabic, they get introduced to the Men around Mohammad, Ethics, and more on Mohammad the Messenger.

### **Hassan**

As one who holds some administrative function, he had the privilege to accord me his time and be the officer to close the office after all the others had left. Since we both happen to speak Ilocano, he welcomed this chance and the conversation branched out to many things: how Filipinos observe Eid, where in Jeddah can one find more Filipinos. What stood out in these many detailed bits of information was my question on what makes Ramadan a period to remember. In response he mentioned that Oud chips sell high during Ramadan and Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Kabir. Oud comes from South and Southeast Asia. A lighted oud chip can leave behind an aroma that gives off incense smoke and its fragrance can remain in men's *thobe* (male white garment) and *ghutra* (male headdress) for hours or days.

## **Abla Salima**

I took note of a 20-minute conversation with her after her class at the Jeddah Dawah Centre. Abla Salima is one among the many promising propagators of Islam.

I met Abla Salima briefly on the day she collected me from my place to a hotel where her kin were staying having come to Jeddah for *ummrah*. At the hotel I met a group from the Philippines: an Islamic scholar, a doctor cousin, the governor's wife, a former congressman's wife, her husband's friends, her own mother, and other relatives also working in Saudi Arabia.

Abla Salima is a born Muslim from Maguindanao, one of the three big islands in the Philippines. She finished BSc Zoology, and took an M.A. Public Administration but did not finish her thesis. Between teaching zoology and Islamic related courses, she sticks to the Islamic, but she says she can accept teaching Mathematics, in Jeddah which is easier to recall than Zoology.

Abla Salima told me she is devoted to teaching Qur'an and further memorizing/mastering the Qur'an. In fact, her son won in the Qur'an Recitation competition, *Bulilit* (Children's) Category, culminating the Eid events in October 2007.

Her husband is very supportive of this passion of hers. They already had seven children when she was still studying to prepare herself for this. Her husband took over practically all her duties in the house, preparing the kids to school, doing the cooking, laundry and cleaning on his day off. He is an engineer in a big construction company, of fine stature but almost frail when compared to the labourers who directly labour in construction. He definitely exudes gentle, office-executive kind of body movements. Although also Born Muslim, only in 2006 did he show interest in studying the Qur'an as well.

Now that Abla Salima teaches at the Dawah centre, she follows with great interest her former students when she meets them, encourages them to keep going. For herself she plans to go forward towards a deeper understanding of the Qur'an.

In a previous meeting I remember asking her where they would be as a family after spending some years here, in Saudi Arabia. She said she would prefer to stay in Jeddah, in Saudi, because life here is closer to the Islamic life she idealizes compared to Muslim life in the Philippines.

### **Notes on the Jeddah Dawah Centre (November 2, 2007)**

A poster on the wall behind the administrative officer indicates the number of graduates. The lady officer said there are already more than that now. There are 3,330 who've passed through since they started the Islamic Studies programme in 1988. The venues ranged from a room at one of the mosques or in the classrooms of some schools, until one of the

managers found donors for this lot, and others for the structure that came to be known as *waqf* (building for Allah).

One is reminded that Mohammad the Prophet prophesised that there will be a time when man will build high structures. According to the new Muslims (Balik-Islam) this was meant as a warning that therefore high structures were not pleasing to Allah. They seem to have come to learn that there is a policy in the Kingdom that limits the height of buildings to four storeys only. *Walang pataasan* (no surpassing one another) my regular guide says. But from an engineer informant I learned that there is no such regulation in the Kingdom; and that Mohammad's forecast of high structures is not to be interpreted that way.

One Friday I arrived at the centre at about the time the classes start. There is a group of new students, one whom I met for *shahada* ('Witnessing', Declaration of Faith), while others are still to be inducted. The teacher tasked to orient them is one I also met on my previous visit. So again, I asked to observe the introductory session. We were ushered into a small room, five of them, mostly in their 30s to 40s, one from Kuwait, another from Damman, three from KSA as their first migrant destination. Their teacher emphasises the meaning of *shahada* as the time they profess their belief in the oneness of God; that all happenings are by destiny. For them to be distinguished from non-Muslims one sign is that they wear the *tarha*, the veil, indicating their complete submission to the will of Allah, hence the need to study Islam. This knowledge is so immense, she says, that even if she has entered into this fold ahead of them, there is still a lot for her to learn. Recognising that they come from a Catholic orientation she says that Islam could be simple, just listen, the guide is here, as Jesus said, I am the Way. Jesus greets his followers, "peace be with you", in contrast to non-Muslims who just say hello. To converts like her following the ways of the prophets, my understanding is, that is, the closer one is to their ways, the holier one would be.

I sit briefly also with one of the teachers as she is waiting for her class. She confirms that she found peace in choosing Islamic living. Her previous lifestyle accepted drinking, she and her husband frequented events where drinking was the practice; now they don't drink any more. While it is his husband who is an Arab, she claims she started to conform more to the prescribed practices and her husband followed. Now they both observe the rules more diligently.

### **Sis Iman**

How about life on earth? Sis Iman (the name she adopted upon her conversion) cites "Go and multiply". She refers to demography: when there are more women than men, men need to protect women so more than one wife is allowed. She cites common-law wife practice in the Philippines, where a man can have more than one partner which is not legally allowed; thus Islamic marriages is more considerate of mismatches since it allows divorce instead of the "till death do us part" teaching of other churches. So she hopes I will change my mind about not wanting to be converted. In order for her to sit longer in the chair beside me, she brings her stuff to another corner so we can talk some more.

Those attending the lectures comprise the very influential Filipinos here, I surmise, from the many women who joined them in their flat when they hosted one break-of-fasting dinner during Ramadan. Whenever zealous Balik-Islams start to engage me into their missionary efforts I keep reminding myself to be ever careful not to offend them. I tell them that their dedication to their mission to spread Islam impresses everyone who meets them. I see in the faces of their returning students how they want to be remembered as once-upon-a-time in their classes, but due to change of workplace or their employers moving residence, or this and that reason, they can no longer come as regularly any more; but that now they have decided to return, or decided to accept after dodging what others have been telling them.

“For me,” Sis Imam said “it is also an endless search, and the people who read what we write may not be ready to listen also in the same manner as they do when they spread the Word, some may not be ready also.” I remember her husband said ‘this is [just] a job’, when I was introduced to him last night at the lecture. There must be others who are resistant to conversion; as missionaries from other faiths encounter. In previous introductions with other propagators like them, I never fail to say I am always a willing student of any belief. And they have a ready counter and ask, *how do you know which is true?* I evade entering into a debate. I empathize by my use of “‘we’ in our jobs can only do so much; and that ‘we’ [on the other hand as researchers], want to see how and where you are in this that you are doing.” For instance, I asked further on what they heard as a result of the non-Muslims’ in Dasmariñas, Cavite, objecting to the *azan* (call to prayer). The non-Muslims considered it as a public disturbance and the matter was referred to the town mayor. What happened next?

An interruption, another student approaches the lady officer at the desk to say she is waiting for the driver to fetch her. Her employer is angry now, she was expected at 11 and now, did the driver do *salah* in the *masjid*? Sis Iman and I got caught into this little tug of war between the lady officer and the maid who wants to go out although sessions are not over yet; calls to the employer, the lady officer eventually instructs her to wait. The driver has returned to their employer earlier and that he will come back to fetch her.

Sister Iman and I tried to go back to our conversation but there was a sudden shift to stories on maids to explain to me why the centre observes protocol like this. She tells me about a maid who was released by her employer because she got pregnant. The regulations at the centre aim to prevent occasions that bring about problems such as this.

Sister Iman glanced at the wall clock, gathered her teaching kit telling me it was time for her class. I thanked her for her time and requested to meet her again.

### **Talking about other women**

There were others also waiting for friends. They tell me of a case: she was married under Islamic law to a man twice her age. He was an engineer working in Saudi. After they were married she joined him here, then Saudization closed the company to foreign staff, they went home, they started a store, but the income was not sufficient, the husband had a stroke, she came back to earn more here.

Another case: this maid that she knew was never paid, she was given stale food, the fridge was always locked, she was not treated well, she ran to the Embassy. The Embassy called the employer, the employer said she stole valuables, the Embassy said nothing was found in her belongings when she arrived. The Embassy emphasised the terms of employment, the employer claimed the worker signed a waiver that she would not receive pay for ten months, the worker said there was no such paper. The employer apologized, can she be returned to her? This friend who narrated this to me advised her not to return, "Note what happened to that maid at Riyadh, she was murdered by her employer when she agreed to return to them after she complained at the Embassy of her maltreatment!" She listened to her, she just returned to the Philippines.

### **Dismissal Time**

I have the impression that most of them work as domestic helpers (DH). Some request to leave early, for the permit to be granted calls to their employers are made by the desk officer to make sure that their early departure is known and is upon their instruction. *But there are no children around definitely.* It seems this procedure is to assure their employers that their maids will not run away or disappear.