

‘Snapshots’ on Sociality: The Filipino Community Formation in Riyadh

by
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Shepherdess Ani

It was a day at the ‘hospital’ (clinic for renal patients). While Ani took time out from Lorrie’s bedside she came into the waiting room where I was sitting, not to keep me company but to make important calls on her mobile phone. It was her husband who needs her more. Every time Lorrie goes through his twice-weekly dialysis, Ani must be at his bedside. She observes, however, that her constant presence upsets the other patients. Lorrie looks the most attended to while they come ferried by their driver or someone from their families, to be collected once their treatment is finished. Lorrie has Ani at his beck and call. Ani says the other patients feel envious.

Moreover, there is another case, of the woman waiting for action at the Embassy about her exit visa. She was advised by Ani not to leave the safety of Kalinga (the shelter for *takas*¹ women), but Belma probably missed her usual routine; perhaps life in Kalinga is boring for her. Or did she want to earn her own keep? Despite no longer being deemed fit to work she herself insists she still feels fit to work after her mild stroke?

Belma had a stroke five months ago. This January morning she arrived at the villa. Coming out of the room I share with Lorrie and Ani, I see, fresh from the washing machine, garments on the clothes line hung up to dry. Some are Belma’s while the others are those of Yeng, the villa’s front.² Belma has come to volunteer, her exchange for bed and breakfast, as well as to ask Ani how soon she can go home. Ani promised she will follow up what the Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO) can do for her.

Ani intercedes for Belma

She presses some numbers on her mobile phone, starting with very apologetic tone for disrupting a bureaucrat’s time.

“Are you busy? Can I have your time? This is about Belma, she says her papers are with Sir Lenor. Belma is ailing. She came to us this morning asking when she can leave. I happen not to have the number of Sir Lenor, I only have your number sir...yes, sir, yes sir, now sir I am ready ... Sir Lenor’s number ah 0505 6904 6656” (some numbers repeated).

“There was Sidi, one who used to work with the POLO who can facilitate the exit of our compatriots. He can do it fast. He speaks Arabic, he is one who can easily enter the Social Welfare Administration (SWA) office. So once papers reach SWA it is he who goes and negotiates for the action on these cases. Sidi does it fast. He even does booking and securing plane tickets for some who can’t do these tasks by themselves.”

¹ *Takas* refers to Filipinos who have left their employment and are therefore deemed illegal residents in Saudi Arabia.

² ‘Front’ refers to the resident qualified to negotiate with the owner to rent the apartment/villa.

Ani presses another set of number to contact Sidi but gets a “cannot be reached” signal from the server. She admires Sidi for his Arabic competence, written and oral. When he was dropped from the Embassy, the Manggagawang Kapit-Bisig (MKB, translated: Workers’ Union) pushed for his reinstatement at the POLO. He got the job back. He was disowned by the bosses because they knew that Sidi made special deals with employers just to get their signatures for the release of the workers in question. He made smart manoeuvres. Signatures can be obtained for a fee³.

“But we don’t know exactly how this goes. Anyway, we are relieved because due to Sidi’s efforts, critical cases such as one who is pregnant, not married and just escaped from an employer can be spared from severe punishment...

“Belma is making things more difficult. She probably gets bored at the Kalinga. She was there for a month, cannot wait [any longer]. The officers kept telling her she can leave in three weeks. She insisted on going out so she was told to keep calling the officer. She is just bumming around. That’s why I was getting irritated this morning. Once, when she came again, I admonished her: ‘Belma, don’t you realize you spend 40 riyal for taxi a day, instead of spending that on your medicine or to make calls? That’s why you hear me say “are you still here?” Not everyone can take you in. They don’t have time for you. Or if you come to my house but I am going out, I cannot just leave you there alone. What if something happens to you and you are alone?’ Am I not right?

“She does not really listen. She is stubborn. If you leave Kalinga, let’s see if you can arrange your exit⁴. How her husband pleads, ‘*Pangulo*, I keep calling POLO every day, there seems to be no progress.’ How will they be attended to, with Belma outside? We told him to leave his wife there, she is better off there. Just visit, bring food for her. But they (the couple) are stubborn, so stubborn. How would she be ignored if she is there, seen every day?!

“Belma’s appeal was presented to the MKB general assembly on October 19, 2007. In that meeting the amount for a plane ticket was generated. Sir Lenor at the POLO was approached to assist her. From this solicited money, Belma said she also gave some amount to someone to facilitate things. Two weeks ago she called asking for an additional amount. She said only 500 riyal was with her. This was handed to a couple who bought the plane ticket for her. And she needs maintenance, a box of Flavex costs 280. I was hoping to get [some money] from a friend, I am still hoping...

³ Signatures of several parties are solicited in teasing out employer-worker conflicts. For mutual benefit or in case where worker’s extreme unfair treatment is obvious, employer must not be made to look too bad, without ignoring proper recompensation of offended worker. Sometimes reported offenses by either employer or worker are fabricated for one reason or another. Signatures are also needed in securing documents for exit visa.

⁴Exit visas are issued by the Philippine Embassy after a review of a well served contract, equivalent to a clearance, which will enable the worker to come back on a clean slate.

“I am really annoyed by her now. I tell her, you have your own two feet, take your own steps so you can exit. You need to be in the queue. They will see that you have an ailment, they will not ignore you. The *TNTs*⁵ are even attended to how much more with you who have an ailment.” She preferred to stay outside [the Shelter] and relies on us to follow up her papers. We have done our part. Lorrie was in the hospital on that 19th of October. With the letter from the Consul containing her appeal and after Lorrie called the MKB officers that Belma will be there - they raised money for her ticket.

Finally, it was at the end of January or beginning of February 2008 that Belma got her exit visa. The delay was also due to the car accident on Dec. 27, 2007 where Sir Lenor was fatally injured. POLO officers were on a convoy to grace an induction of officers of another Filipino workers’ organization, the Agwi group in Sakaka City, at the northern Al Jouf region. Sir Lenor with other POLO officers were on an Isuzu Trooper along Lina Road, between Hafr Al-Batin and Al-Rafa, some 450 kilometers north of Riyadh. It was about 4:30 pm when one of the car’s rear tires exploded, the vehicle overturned repeatedly. The car was a total wreck. Sir Lenor was unconscious when taken to the King Khaled Military Hospital, 100 kilometers away from Riyadh. The other officers who were with him were treated with minor injuries; Sir Lenor remained comatose in the Intensive Care Unit for several days. When Sir Lenor’s mother arrived, after an officially negotiated trip from Manila, disconnecting all life support system was decided as the saner and kinder move. The Agwi group deferred their activity due to this unfortunate event.

Belma, who hoped obtaining her exit visa be through Sir Lenor’s intercession, called Lorrie and Ani once she arrived in the Philippines, telling Ani that she had gone to a church, lit a candle for Lorrie’s health.

Takas

Ani remembers there was one, Rachel, who called begging for help. Rachel is ferried to different employers by her agency. She is brought to a new employer every two months, which she finds strenuous. She keeps adjusting to different employers. One employer was so mean. She always felt starving. Even when with the agency she finds it impossible to escape; they (the workers) are not allowed to go out. For workers like this, Ani and Lorrie instruct them to find a way, days before their agency will fetch them, to find shelter in any Philippine school. They give numbers to call, those of Welfare Officers, since they have a green [vehicle licence] plate. They can be collected there. Then, Ani says, just within that week after I gave her the numbers,

“Rachel called, she was already at *Kalinga*. I got goose pimples because she was crying. She just learned upon arrival [at the shelter] that her son had just died, hit by a car! She wanted to be home immediately to see her child! I called Sir Sidi! Three days later I called her number

⁵ *TNT’s*, tago ng tago, translated: undocumented in hiding, refers to Filipino workers when they evade deportation not necessarily for a crime but for expiry of worker’s contract but still need to stay to get a paying job to sustain family back home.

again, not within reach anymore...she must have left. Very fast, I thanked God... I thanked them...they said they cared for their *kababayan*. I was much relieved. How pained she was, she wanted to see her child. On anguish such as that, after learning she has finally gone home, I felt as if I was just cleansed, like the relief you get from a much needed bath,. I did not know where she was fetched...she was at the *Kalinga* when she called. Thank God, she was not neglected at all.

Janitress Ani

On Thursdays and Fridays, supposedly the weekend, POLO has been holding an IT training session for about 50 Filipino workers of various occupational groups. It runs for about seven to nine weeks. Provided are two programmes, one group learning about hardware, which aims to make them assemble their own PC and to troubleshoot; and the other group, on acquiring skills on various software applications. Lectures go on for about six hours a day. Lunch is sponsored by one company while Filipino lecturers work for free.

With such big numbers, maintaining the facilities requires not just the once-a-week cleaner hired by the office. The *cleaner*, Ani, comes with Lorrie once and laments how toilets need more scrubbing. Ani prides herself, being always behind Lorrie on how MKB became the most trusted organization by no less than the *Amba* [their endearment towards the Ambassador]. MKB's requests to hold their gatherings within the premises of the embassy is always approved since they always manage to put all things in order, keep the premises spotlessly clean right after their events.

On one week-end she joined Lorrie at the POLO. Upon entering the office, she took off her abaya, searched for disinfectants and cleaning tools. By mid-day she was almost done when I saw her cleaning the common sink before entering the Ladies. I asked her if she is paid for doing the task. No, she said, but those coming for training could at least contribute to the janitorial services for the day to buy cleaning supplies. There was a janitor, she says, but his job was terminated. Perhaps there was no budget for this service. Lorrie cleans although it is not supposed to be his job. He actually holds a job item in the Manila office but he was assigned to Riyadh considering the kind of leader he proved to be, for MKB, in those years he was employed as driver to an Arab household, His assistance in protecting and rescuing workers in distress proved him to be such a reliant de facto POLO officer. Yet he is silent about this, only few employees at the POLO are aware of this. Having lived with them I saw that his dedication is undeniable.