

Spiritual Sojourners: Muslim Filipinos traversing contested landscapes at home and abroad.

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with migrant Muslim Filipino sojourns in Saudi Arabia. In particular, we focus on the way that Islamic belief and practice figures and is refigured in the experiences and imaginings of their travels and travails and practices of place making across landscapes that are sacred and profane and sometimes both simultaneously. We emphasize the contested nature of landscapes not only because of the varying gendered relations of power that enable and constrain their sojourns and inhabitations, but also because religious belief and practice is often both the idiom and object of social struggles for recognition at home and abroad.

Key Words: Islam; Migration; Translocality; Landscape

Introduction

This paper brings together two bodies of research: that focused on changing Muslim identities and contested notions of Islamic belief and practice in the Philippines (Horvatic 1994, 1997, McKenna 1997, 1998) and that focused on migrant Filipinos and the experiences and consequences of their translocal (re)productive labour within a global market economy (Constable 2007, Parreñas 2003, Stasiulis and Bakan 2005, Tyner 2004). Our aim is to resituate ongoing discussions and debates about Islam and Muslims in the Philippines in a translocal social field and cultural imaginary (Johnson 1998a, Levitt and Schiller 2004, McKay 2005, McKay and Brady 2005, Werbner 1999). We ask, what are migrant Muslim Filipino encounters with Islam in the Middle East, how are those encounters shaped by their prior imaginings of people and places, and what might the effect of those encounters be in ongoing reformulations of Islam? We highlight migrant connections to the lives, concerns and conversations in their home place, and foreground the ways that migrant encounters and stories of their travels and travails in other places are caught up in debates over what Islam is or ought to be among Muslim Filipinos

Though we emphasize translocality, we attend to the landscapes that shape and are shaped by the various forms and formulations of Islam at home and abroad. By landscape we refer to a) symbolic and cultural imaginaries by means of which people talk about particular places and spatially conceptualize their worlds (Cosgrove 1998) b) people's embodied experience of living within and moving between particular places (Ingold 2000, Tilly 1994) and c) the social corollaries and political consequences of the way people experience and talk about place and their own and others relationships to and with place (Bender 1993, 2001, Carrier 2001, Johnson and Clisby 2009). Religious identities, sentiments and understandings are often an inextricable part of those processes and relationships. Religion not only provides ways to, 'distinguish and demarcate, describe and redescribe, deterritorialize and reterritorialize' (Ivakhiv 2006: 126), it also informs people's orientation towards, experience of, and attachments to particular places and landscapes. The notion of religious or spiritual landscapes within and as part of a field of social struggles is a particularly useful analytical lens or language to think about the situation of migrant Muslim Filipinos and their ways of talking about and conveying their experiences of living and working within and across places and landscapes that are (often simultaneously) perceived and experienced as sacred and profane, liberating and confined, transcendent and terrifying.

What follows draws both on previous ethnographic research in the Southern Philippines and on a recent multi-sited ethnographic study in Saudi Arabia and the Philippines.¹ What we present here thus has a temporal as well as spatial dimension. Part one situates Saudi Arabia as a destination for Muslim Filipinos within the social context and cultural imaginaries of Muslims in the Philippines, including the debates over Islam that emerged during the latter half of the 20th century. Part two draws on a series of ethnographic vignettes to demonstrate some of the ways that Islam figures and is refigured in migrant encounters with people and places in Saudi Arabia.

Our starting point is with a group of Muslim Filipino migrant women workers in Madinah. Those women derive spiritual solace and cultural capital from working in that holy place, but they also talk about it as a harsh and at times hostile social, cultural and geographical environment. That ambivalence informs and builds on a widespread discourse both in their home country and in diaspora that separates out Islam from Arab people and culture and uses the former to challenge their domination by the latter. The final set of vignettes drawn from encounters in Jeddah, focuses on the ways that for some migrants, married women and men

in particular, Islam has become central to carving out a much broader and more encompassing life project as long-term residents in Saudi Arabia. That does not mean that they come to identify more closely with the nation and nationals in and alongside which they are living. Rather engagement in Islamic renewal and mission is reinforcing a sense of Filipino national belonging and identification within an imagined supranational community of believers.

Situating Saudi Arabia in the Muslim Filipino cultural imaginary.

Filipino migration to the Middle East dates from the late 1970s. Since that time the scale of migration has increased, the number of host countries expanded, the range of occupation diversified and the work force feminized. Today the Middle East region as a whole is home to the most diasporic Filipinos (outside of North America), with Saudi Arabia being the destination with the largest numbers of Filipino migrants, estimated at some 1.3 million.² As a destination for migrant workers, Saudi Arabia looms large in popular imaginings in the Philippines, as evidenced by the recent film, *Katas ng Saudi* (literally, sap of/from Saudi). It is also commonly regarded to be one of the toughest places to work because of its strict Islamic morality and the sometimes poor conditions of employment. Though it is the most frequent destination for overseas Filipino workers, it is generally seen as second best and as a hoped for stepping stone to living and working in Australia, the UK, the USA or Canada (see Johnson 1998b, Liebelt 2008).

Muslim Filipinos make up a small proportion of the overall numbers of Filipinos working in Saudi Arabia, their numbers estimated to constitute roughly 10% of the Filipinos in that country. Muslim Filipinos like their Christian compatriots are employed across a range of occupations from construction workers to engineers, beauticians to health care professionals. The majority are domestic helpers. While Muslim and Christian migrants share many of the same assumptions about and experiences of work in Saudi Arabia, Muslim Filipinos have a much more complex relationship to that country and to the Middle East as a whole.

First, and most obviously, that country is home to both Makkah and Madinah, and hence an important site of religious pilgrimage. Work in Saudi Arabia offers the opportunity to undertake the *hajj* or go on *umrah*, the latter a more limited pilgrimage that may be undertaken at any time. Second, from the vantage point of a minority population in a

predominately Christian country (roughly 5% of the population) that has been among the most impoverished (Gutierrez and Danguilan-Vitug 2000: 196-7), the prospect of living and working in an affluent country as part of the religious majority is extremely significant. Saudi Arabia in other words is an example of an alternative and in certain respects longed for Muslim modernity.

That does not mean, however, that 'Saudi' is unambiguously represented or imagined to be the good society. Like their Christian compatriots, Muslim Filipinos share many of the same negative stereotypes and prejudices about Arab people, fed in part by migrant stories that circulate widely. However, the ambivalence that some Muslim Filipino people articulate about Saudi Arabia may also be related to recent struggles and contests over Islamic belief and practice in the Philippines.

It is impossible to give a thorough account here of the ways that Islam is being reformulated and contested among various Muslim groups in the Philippines. One recurrent issue is the distinction between 'local' or 'traditional' cultural beliefs and genuinely Islamic beliefs and practice (e.g. Jundam 2005). Until recently most ordinary Muslims regarded everything they did to be Islamic because they understood themselves to be Muslims (Horvatich 1994, McKenna 1997). That sense of having been Muslim since time immemorial was reinforced in the context of colonialism where Filipinos were divided first and foremost according to perceived religious groupings (Pertierra and Ugarte 2002). In the post-independence era, where the Filipino was normatively assumed to be Christian, Muslims became hyphenated national citizens further consolidating the taken for granted assumptions linking self and other ascriptions of Muslim identity and ways of doing things.

It is only with the emergence of nationalist and separatist movements and encounters with reformist variants of Islam in the second half of the 20th century that Muslim Filipinos began to make distinctions between Islam as a set of religious beliefs and practices and as a cultural and political identity. The paradox is that while Islam was increasingly valorized as a distinct national identity, an imagined community of fellow Filipino Muslims transcending the particularities of ethnic identity (referred to by nationalist as *bangsamoro*, the Moro nation or people), the question of what is and what is not Islam and of the different sorts of more or less genuine Muslims has become more contested. Whereas previously the issue of who was and was not a real Muslim sometimes featured in inter-ethnic status distinctions

between different Muslim groups, e.g. in Sulu those who historically self identified as Tausug often regarded the Sama or Samal (the so-called *luwaan*) as un-Islamic, what was and was not Islamic increasingly became the focus of intra-ethnic discussion and debate.

Those discussions have often focused on different ‘ways of knowing Islam’ (Horvatic 1994). Among the Tausug and Sama, *ilmu*’ (from the Arabic *ilm* meaning science or knowledge) was up until recently popularly understood to be a form of esoteric knowledge. In more recent times the idea of *ilmu*’ as a form of esoteric knowledge or spiritual power or potency has been increasingly deemed by advocates of reformist Islam to be un-Islamic, the remnants of ‘traditional’ cultural practices at odds with Qur’anic teaching. What is emphasized is *ilm* understood, as in the ‘original’, as science and knowledge. As applied to Islam, it is about learning to read, understand, interpret and test the claims of others against the Qur’an as the word of God.

In the former way of understanding, the world is enchanted in so far as it was seen to be full of spiritual potency. People, men in particular, would sometimes journey to seek out those people and places perceived to have greater concentrations of potency in order to acquire and enhance their own *ilmu*’. In the latter way of understanding, the world has become disenchanted in so far as it no longer to be approached or encountered as the source of spiritual power or potency. The quest for esoteric knowledge was replaced by the quest for textual knowledge. “People no longer make lonely and frightening quests in search of [ilmu]’... Now, they open books.” (Horvatic 1994: 822).

Older people and those without much formal education were more likely to be proponents of the traditional view, younger people and those with more formal education, secular and religious, the reformist view. Gender was also important in so far as those who articulated more reformist views of Islam emphasized that the pursuit of truth and understanding was and ought to be equally open to both women and men, whereas in ‘traditional’ ways of knowing Islam it was generally men that were able to acquire the strongest *ilmu*’,³

In practice, however, the situation was far more complex than any simple divide between those who held reformist views and those who did not. Those people that defended traditional ways of knowing Islam also supported calls for an increased knowledge and understanding of the Qur’an and increasingly turned to and sought to justify their own religious beliefs and

practices through the appeal to various religious scholars and texts. Those people that articulated more reformist views might in times of life crises defer to and solicit the help of traditional ritual specialists and host traditional ceremonies, such as thanksgiving prayers (*duwa'a salamat*) and death celebrations and remembrances (*paghinang tu', pitu'*).

How did imaginings of the Middle East and Saudi Arabia in particular figure in the processes outlined above? First note that people often talked generically about Arab people and culture, and only secondarily about particular groups of people and places identified in terms of particular countries. However, during field work in Jolo in Sulu in the early 1990s, Johnson found that it was Saudi Arabia that dominated popular imaginings of the Middle East and the Arab world, a development that not only reflects its position as a destination for pilgrims to Makkah but also the expansion of Filipino migrant workers during the 1980s to that country (Johnson 1998a, 1998b).⁴

Saudi Arabia, among other Arab countries, was often cited as a positive model of a modern Islamic society in those contexts where people variously a) emphasized the importance of being able to read, understand and interpret the Qu'ran, and b) called for stricter adherence to the teachings of Islam and the implementation of Shari'ah law. In other contexts, however, where people talked about their religious practices and beliefs and their cultural identity as Muslims as under threat by reformist Islam that was often attributed to the influence of Arab missionaries – sometimes though not always specified as 'Saudi'. In such a context, it was also suggested that the new teachings reflected Arab *cultural* imposition rather than actual Qur'anic injunction. For example, in a discussion related to the then still relatively novel practice of veiling, a group of older Tausug and Sama women and men rhetorically asked, 'Do we live in the desert, do we ride on camels?'

That does not mean that people consistently expressed contrasting positive and negative views of Arabs or of Arab countries. Rather, most people appeared to be genuinely ambivalent. People who cited 'Saudi' as a good model of an Islamic society, might also recount the stories they heard about the mistreatment of Filipino domestic workers in that country. Similarly people who challenged the authority of Arab missionaries might in another conversation talk about how blessed they were to be the keepers of the holy city of Makkah. All of those opinions, moreover, were likely to be articulated by people who suggested that if given the chance they (or their sons or daughters) would like to work abroad

and while work in America (or another ‘Western’ country) was, as among their Christian compatriots, the place they would most like to visit and work, ‘Saudi’ was still seen to be a very good option.

Among the various reasons that people gave for why they wanted to work abroad, the desire to see the world and experience different ways of doing things was mentioned as a primary motivation. Though never explicitly articulated, there is an interesting parallel between the passionate desire to work abroad that people, women in particular, expressed at the time and the emergence of reformist Islam with its insistence on the need to acquire knowledge and understanding and the emphasis on the fact that this was something that both women and men could and should do. In fact though the lone journey to obtain spiritual power had for some been replaced by ‘opening books’, in the case of work abroad it was clear that just opening a book or watching the television just would not do: there was a world out there and people wanted to travel to and encounter it.

The above characterization was based on ethnographic research nearly two decades ago. Based on our present research the evidence suggests that the reformist view of Islam is now predominate among the ordinary Muslim Filipinos that we encountered, mainly migrants and their families living outside of traditional Muslim areas in Mindanao and Sulu. That does not mean, however, either that Muslim Filipino migrants have simply embraced a strict Wahabist interpretation of Islam or that they are in any sense now less ambivalent about ‘Saudi’. Muslim Filipinos articulate a variety of views both about ‘Saudi Arabia’ as a country and Arabs as people and often use Islam as a way to critique and contest their position in that country as elsewhere in the Gulf. However, as we argue below, it is also viewed more positively by some as a place of spiritual discovery, to increase faith and test understanding. It is also a place where Filipino Muslims contribute to and claim a respected place among the wider community of believers.

Confinement and sacrifice in sacred places.

Our starting point is with a group of Muslim Filipino migrant workers in Madinah where fieldwork in Saudi Arabia commenced. Among the group of eight women that Pingol met there, most were either single or had left husbands and children in the Philippines and the majority were long time residents, some having been there for seven or eight years. Trips back home did not seem that frequent. One woman had only been back to her home place

once in 7 years. Her mother had visited during Ramadan a few years previously and they had undertaken *umrah*, a visit that sustained her through those long years of separation.

The women highlighted the spiritual significance of Madinah, one woman describing it as, '[T]he best place. A holy place.' However, they also talked at length about their predicaments working in that place. Though they were already familiar with migrant stories and rumours about the religious police and what they described as the leering gaze of local men, what they had not apparently been prepared for and what they most commented on, was the extent to which their lives were physically constrained and spatially restricted. Pingol's own brief experience of being confined to quarters and cooped up in a Madinah hotel - in certain respects and of course for a very limited amount of time - mirrored those accounts and gave her some sense of the experiences that those women conveyed to her.

That confinement in Madinah was due to the fact that she was a non-Muslim in Madinah and completely dependent on her Saudi colleague Nada Elyas, a PhD student at Hull University, who had been entrusted with her guardianship and care by the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh.⁵ For those migrant women, all of whom were Muslim, their sense of confinement was attributed to two interrelated factors, their long working hours and their status as single or lone women. Single or lone women were more likely to be made to work overtime (without extra pay) and cover for married women who were given leave to attend to their husbands and family. Single or lone women workers were also not allowed to rent their own flat. Rather they were compelled to stay in the accommodation provided for them in the hospital compound. Without a husband or other male relative actually physically present who would either accompany or give them a covering letter, single and lone women migrant workers found it difficult if not impossible to actually leave their place of work, 'You sleep, you keep to your room. You can't go out.' It was precisely for that reason the women were happy to have an occasion to meet a fellow compatriot somewhere other than their place of employment.

The sense of confinement was the case for single and lone women workers not just in Madinah but throughout Saudi Arabia. Muslim Filipino women (whether single or married), like their Christian compatriots, are not used to being physically constrained or spatially restricted in the ways that they experience in Saudi Arabia: indeed, the very fact that they are able to leave their homes and travel abroad with or without the support of their family is

testament to that fact. The experience of confinement also has to be put into the broader context of the very different physical landscapes that they encounter in Saudi Arabia. Many of the migrants that we spoke to in Saudi and in the Philippines respectively commented on the contrast between the dry, barren and hostile desert environment and the warm, lush, green tropical environment of their home places. They often commented on the process of adjusting to, and the impacts of, the different ways of living in that environment, where the scorching heat of the long summer season means that people live most of their lives indoors in artificial environments and only rarely venture outside their homes, offices and shopping malls and then only at night.

For migrant Filipino workers, those differences are not experienced as an exotic landscape of Arabian nights, rather it is experienced first and foremost as a *taskscape* (Ingold 1993), where the temporal rhythms of life and work in that place may further reinforce their sense of confinement. While for their employers and the people they care for and serve, the evening brings with it welcome relief and opportunity to venture outside, for female migrant workers it is often the period that their services are most required and their labour most demanded. Thus though that particular group of nurses did not elaborate on their perceptions of the landscape *per se*, they did note that in outpatient departments, it was busier at night than during the day because that is when patients preferred to come out, especially during the height of the summer period. Similarly maids working in private households described how the fasting period of Ramadan – coinciding with the height of the summer period – is the most taxing for them as they are on call through most of the day and night preparing meals during the day and serving food throughout the night.

The taskscapes that these women experience may be seen as one, if particularly extreme, example of the situation that have been described and discussed at length by other researchers and writers on the predicament of female labour migrants (Constable 2007, Parreñas 2003, Pingol 2001a, 2001b). Like their Christian compatriots working elsewhere, these Muslim Filipino women also employ a language that converts the hardships and difficulties of that taskscape into an imagined moral landscape of suffering on behalf of their families. That suffering takes on a sacred dimension in the context of places like Madinah. ‘Life here maybe difficult, pay is low,’ but they made the right choice, they are privileged to work there. ‘Madinah/Makkah are the holiest of places, they are closest to Allah.’ As other women

explained, the work and service performed, and sacrifices suffered, were not simply for benefit in this life, but for the life hereafter and would be rewarded a thousand times over.

Though religion might be seen to simply reinforce their compliance as docile bodies, religion and Islam in particular are by no means seen by them as legitimating their mistreatment or the inequalities they experience. Islam does provide the promise of reward (and justice) in the life hereafter, a comfort that helps them endure and gives meaning to their long sojourns abroad. However, it is also a resource for contesting their subordination and pressing for recognition in the here and now. Thus, while migrants acknowledge that Saudi ways of doing things are informed by Saudi religious beliefs, they do not themselves construe those ways of doing things and treating people as necessarily being about, or in accord with, Islam: rather it is often attributed to Arab *culture*, an essentializing Orientalist discourse that returns and refigures the racisms they themselves encounter (Liebelt 2008).

I am Muslim! Contesting religious dispossession in Damman.

Hadja Miriam is a Yakan woman from Basilan that Johnson met in Manila in July, 2008. Hadja Miriam and her husband have now been living in Manila for a number of years, following her return from several sojourns abroad as a care worker and domestic helper in Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the mid to late 1980s. They live in a house that she paid for with the money she earned abroad. Though she no longer works abroad herself, other close and distant family and friends frequently pass through their house on their way coming and going between Basilan and the Gulf. Hadja Miriam conveys both a sense of pride in her achievements as a former migrant worker, and a sense of regret that she was unable to fulfil her ambition to complete her nursing studies and return to work abroad earning a higher salary. Those ambitions were only vicariously realized, with her help and support, through a younger sister (a nurse, now married and living and working in Makkah) and her daughter (working as a med tech in Asir).

Hadja Miriam's first job at the age of 23 was as a care worker for an elderly woman, the mother of a wealthy businessman in Damman. While taking care of his mother, she was able to travel with them to the USA and Europe where they stayed in grand hotels and homes. Though she recalls those travels with nostalgia, her life and work was not without incident, as she disclosed when asked her about her relationship with the woman she cared for.

Hj. M: First, first, she hate me too much. For sev, for one month, two months, she don't like me. She told me I am just a converted Muslim, I'm not a real Muslim.

MJ: She told you that?

Hj. M: Yaah..! She don't, she don't want even I touch [her] dress. "You are dirty, I don't want you". But I just, ahh.., always pray.., "Lord please.. Ya Allah! Ya Allah!" Like this. Then, every time I finished my work, I sit down on the sala [the sofa] beside... What I did, I am, I am reading my Qur'an, I am crying, "I want to go back to Philippine". I told them, "Why are you like this? Why your grand parent like this? I came to Saudi, I am poor Filipino; I [wanted] to work with you because, you, I know very well, you are the... model of an Islam. Is that, you are an Arab people, [] the Qur'an, is ahh, go down here in Saudi Arabia, and you know it very well the law of Allah. So why did you treat your aahh.., helper like this, like that?" They are just laughing [at] me, I am not a Muslim [they said].

MJ: Oh like that..

Hj. M: So, one day, I read Suratul Waqi'ah, [paused] when the old woman pass.., she wake up already, around 10 o'clock. I heard the words, if I am not mistaken, [paused] "*ijha waqa'atil waqi'atu...*" [...] "*la'akiluna min sajarim min jaqqum, fa ma liuna min hal butun...*" I remember, I read that word, [...] she told me, "why did you say like that word?" I said, "Mm.. Mama" - then I, I learn already a little Arabic - "Mama, it's a word from..." "Hadha Qur'an?" [She said] I said, "yes..! *A' anti tari fi iqra' Qur'an.*" Because she don't [speak English], she only [speaks] Arabic. I said "yes! I am a real Muslim. [] I am not, I am not a fake Muslim, I am not a convert Muslim, I, I am a Muslim. Aahh.., my grand, grand, grand parents is a Muslim. *Hadhat min jadda, jadda, jadda, I am a Muslim!*

Hj. M: She come down [to] me, and hug me tightly: "You *are* a Muslim. You are very good woman, you can read Qur'an, unlike me I cannot read Qur'an". She told me like that, she cannot read Qur'an, while I am, I can read Qur'an. And she hug me, and she kiss me and she is crying too, she told me even, "[You are my] daughter".

There are a number of points we wish to draw out of Hadja Miriam's moving account of her early encounters. The first point to make is that for migrant Muslim Filipinos like Hadja Miriam the denial of their faith is felt and experienced as a fundamental challenge and violation of their person. Because they feel that they (like their forebears before them) have

lived and defended Islam in difficult circumstances in their home country, for someone who they regard to be a fellow believer to cast aspersions on their own faith and belief provokes both profound humiliation and righteous indignation. In fact, it is precisely that sense of defending one's belief acquired and distilled in many Muslim Filipinos from early on as part of their *habitus*, that we suggest provides both a catalyst for and a means of expressing social agency in those diasporic situations where they might otherwise simply comply with and bear the everyday humiliations of subordination.

The second point relates to the way Hadja Miriam describes her strategic use of space within the home. Though her challenge may simply appear to be a 'weak weapon', the account she gives of her action and her claims to recognition are not 'hidden transcripts' (Scott 1990, cited in Constable 2007: 177): they are direct and unmistakable. She sits on the *sala*, a term that is in the Philippine context to refer to that place and/or piece of furniture in the 'front' of the house where guests are received, lets her tears flow and expresses her desire to return to the Philippines, i.e. a thinly veiled threat to leave the family and walk out of her place of employment. As a guest and stranger from another country ('I came to Saudi, I am a poor *Filipino*'), she suggests that there is a not unreasonable expectation that they might treat her in accordance both with Arab cultural norms of hospitality and with claims to be a 'model of Islam', in effect returning their challenge by asking them to demonstrate that they are actually genuine Muslims. Finally, reciting from the Qur'an forces recognition: those verses re-locates the intimate space of the home within the sacred space of revelation and resituates their encounters and the glaring inequalities of power within a moral universe where she, no less than others, is entitled to be treated in accordance with Allah's will.

Hadja Miriam clearly enjoyed recounting how the elderly woman finally conceded defeat and publically endorsed Miriam's claims to be a Muslim, in the process admitting that she herself was unable to read from the Qur'an. Miriam was also moved by the elderly woman's claim to adopt her as a second daughter. She explained that the elderly woman had sheltered her from the demands of the rest of the household and ensured she was not called upon to do extra work for them. She also described how she lived for a time with the woman in a palace in Paris and spent long summer days walking in the gardens together. However, for Miriam this was no fairy tale ending. Becoming an adopted daughter refigured, but it did not completely transform her situation: she was still an employee. Miriam cared for the woman for a period of three years. She said she left because her employer, the woman's son, reneged

on a promise to give her leave to make the pilgrimage to Makkah. She subsequently found employment as a domestic helper in Qatar: there she reported working for a family who helped her make the *hajj* and visit her sister who had, in the meantime, started working as a nurse in Makkah.

***Da'wah* in Jeddah: Muslim Filipinos on the Road to Makkah**

Thus far, the ethnographic vignettes presented above have drawn attention to the ways that Muslim Filipino women in Saudi make sense and struggle with the demands of difficult working conditions, uncomfortable and alien environments and unwelcoming hosts. In what follows we foreground stories from encounters with Muslim women and men in Jeddah who spoke about their situation in more positive terms. For these migrants Islam was not only a source of comfort or a resource in confronting exclusionary discourses: rather Islamic belief, practice and mission were described as central to their sense of purpose and well being in that place.

The initial gate-keeper for Pingol's ethnographic encounters in Jeddah was a Filipino woman, Sanada, who had converted to Islam and was active in a local *da'wah* centre for Filipinos. She and her husband, a Lebanese Palestinian, agreed to let her stay with them and their two children as a paying guest in their home, a small apartment that also served as beauty parlour. Two things are important to flag up and clarify. One corollary of the Filipino diaspora in the Middle East has been a noticeable process of conversion of Christian Filipinos to Islam: the *da'wah* centre in Jeddah for example counts some 3,300 Filipinos as having passed through their doors since it first opened in 1988. Among both Muslim and Christian Filipinos such converts are referred to by their Filipino co-religionists by the moniker, *balik Islam*, people who have returned to Islam and are distinguished from those who were born and raised as Muslims. Such reversions are often celebrated by 'born' Muslims: an affirmation not just of their religion but also more broadly of their history and identity as Filipino Muslims. That is, while the idea of reversion to an original state of being appears to be a widely held theological position among Muslims, in the context of the Philippines it takes on added significance in that Muslim Filipino nationalist discourse often claims that the Philippines was effectively Islamized prior to Spanish colonization.

The second point is that the women and men who were positively inclined towards life in Saudi Arabia were generally observed to be part of a married couple living together in that

country. That is important because as already suggested lone female workers often have a more precarious and physically constrained life: even their attendance at the *da'wah* centre – one important opportunity for social interaction with fellow Filipinos outside of the home – was tightly controlled and monitored by their employers. Married women whose husbands live with them in Saudi Arabia, especially those who worked outside of the home, have greater freedom of movement though they are still reliant on their husbands to ferry them around and/or accompany them when they go out.

Those two things meant that encounters with Muslim Filipinos in that city took place in a much broader range of social events and occasions – whether engaging with or observing the varied clientele that came to Sanada's beauty parlour, talking to religious teachers and their students at the *da'wah* centre, attending Qu'ranic reading contests and participating in religious celebrations or other social gatherings with married women and their families. What linked the people at these various occasions and events together were a commonly articulated devotion to Islam, a dedication to learning the Qu'ran and a sense of being part of a larger community of fellow believers with whom they shared a common purpose.

Sanada Learns from the Qur'an

Sanada was already a *balik-Islam* before coming to Saudi following her sister who reverted when she married a born Muslim from Mindanao. Sanada came to Saudi to work as a beautician in a hospital. With her savings and the support of her husband Yusof, she was subsequently able to establish her own saloon attracting Filipina, Arab and Western clients. The beauty shop also provides a venue for other reverts to the faith to congregate and was the place Sanada celebrated Eid with her mother, sister and four female friends. Guided by her *abla* (teacher) at the *da'wah* centre, Sanada served just one main dish with fruit for dessert. A simpler meal would better please Allah, Sanada suggested, contrasting it to the banquets with overflowing food that were beyond the capacity of ten guests to consume. Afterwards, Sanada read from the Qur'an and the women talked about how the scripture might be applied in their lives.

For Sanada, learning Arabic enabled her to better understand and appreciate the Qur'an. Her Arabic studies originally provoked the ire of the hospital administrator where she first worked. 'I did not hire her to study, she was hired to come to work', she heard her supervisor say. Her room was just across from the administrator's office, she was coming out and they

met in the corridor. The administrator's face was so stern, and Sanada recited in her mind a verse that she had mastered for precisely such an occasion:

Surah 20. Ta-Ha

25. (Musa (Moses) said: "O my Lord! Open for me my chest (grant me self-confidence, contentment, and boldness).

26. "And ease my task for me;

27. "And loose the knot (the defect) from my tongue, (i.e. remove the incorrectness from my speech) (That occurred as a result of a brand of fire *which Musa (Moses) put in his mouth when he was an infant*). (*Tafsir At-Tabari*)

28. "That they understand my speech.

'Why do you need to go and study', her supervisor asked? She answered that she would like to read the Qur'an in Arabic. In an instant the administrator's demeanour changed, and her request was approved. After two years, Sanada went to the administrator's office to thank her for by then she was reading the Qur'an. 'So are you coming to ask for more?' 'No, madam', she said, 'there are others who need it more'. The supervisor signed, right then and there the document that authorized a pay increase. But no pay increase reached her. It was five years later that the administrator came to know that something wrong was going on in the personnel office, but Sanada had already moved on.

Sanada's story resonates with Mariam's story (above) in the way that each strategically makes use of their public statements of religious devotion to transform a social space and situation, to compel those in positions of power to listen and take cognizance of them. Though she did not recite it out loud, the text Sanada had memorized not only emboldened her, but was ready to be spoken, a strategy of enunciation that was recalled by other especially lone female migrants. There are also parallels in the way that each challenges the economic and racial hierarchies they confront: for Sanada it is by contrasting the lavish feasts of the wealthy with the simple feast of the devout.

There are also some important differences not least of which is the fact that unlike Mariam, Sanada was living with her husband and children in Saudi Arabia and was able to establish her own business with an independent income. Though both make use of their ability to read and recite from the Qur'an, Sanada, as with many of her fellow Filipino Muslims (both born

and *balik* Islam), were actively engaged in learning both to read and understand the Qur'an in Arabic in ways that further challenges those who might otherwise claim authority over them. As they repeatedly stressed, the relationship between teacher and student was not one of master and servant, but rather that between fellow believers who were the same in the eyes of Allah. Finally, whereas for Mariam her religious faith and identity allowed her both to negotiate her status and fulfil some of her ambitions abroad (sacred and otherwise) and return to the Philippines with her dignity intact and her head held high, for Sanada as for many others, religious devotion is central to the way that she is carving out for herself a longer term life project living as a 'born again' Muslim believer in Jeddah on the road to Makkah.

Reconfiguring and rediscovering national belongings among a universal community of believers.

Among the reasons that women and men in Jeddah gave for why they felt so at home was that they felt closer to God, privileged to live in close proximity to Makkah. As one woman said, 'As long as I can stay here, I stay here because of the nearness to Makkah, [I feel], in the way to Madinah, very calm, peaceful. He [the prophet] was buried there; he migrated there when he was thrown out from Makkah.' Here, among this particular group of migrants - married, living together, outside of domestic employment - *umrah* was something to look forward to as an outing rather than as a rare occurrence. Pilgrims from the Philippines, among them the friends and relatives of (usually born Muslim) migrants, also pass through Jeddah. Being able to host and facilitate those visits to Makkah reinforces both social status and connections with people at home.

The other reason for contentment, people among this group said, was that their life and work fit in with their religious inclinations and obligations: food was *halal*, people wore 'Islamic' attire, shops closed and prayer mats rolled out at the call to prayer. The physical landscapes might be alien, but that was made up for by their sense of immersion in a complete *taskscape* organized around religion and was positively contrasted with their experiences of life back in the Philippines in which the routines of life rarely catered for and more often than not militated against Islamic practice.

However, though their accounts of that *taskscape* seems far removed from those described by single and lone female migrants, that does not mean they completely identified with those

landscapes or that they were or desired to be integrated into the social and cultural life of the host society. On the one hand, what was talked about and emphasized was a kind of cosmopolitan belonging and identification with a larger and supranational sisterhood and brotherhood of Islam. On the other hand, the reality of their social, if not always, working lives was that most of their contacts and connections were with and among fellow Filipinos. Indeed, one aspect of those more positive affirmations of migrant life was the way that Islamic *da'wah* has paradoxically reconfigured and reinforced Filipino national identifications.

In part the consolidation of national belonging is not surprising, a product both of the migrant situation where nationality is a seemingly natural point of affiliation, reinforced by the widely shared perception among Filipino migrants in Saudi Arabia that they are treated as racial inferiors by Arabs. However, it is also that Islam may actually reinforce a shared national identification as Filipinos, rather than be a marker of cultural, political and religious exclusion and separatism as it is in the Philippine context. This was well illustrated at a Filipino Qur'an recitation competition held at the German Saudi Hospital. A representative from the Philippine embassy, a born Muslim, thanked the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for sponsoring the event and for bringing Muslim Filipinos from North and South together. That was followed by a power point presentation to the assembled guests by one of the organizers, a balik-Islam from Cavite, south of Manila: the presentation was delivered in Pilipino, the text was in English and the audio – recitations from the Qur'an – were in Arabic. The speaker's points were as follows:

- 1: You are chosen by Allah, take pride in being a Muslim, an example of goodness;
- 2: No matter how the powerful use their wealth to mislead, a believer will not get carried away;
- 3: In the 70's, Muslims in Mindanao were almost extinct, but now there are Filipino Muslims in every city in the world!

In Saudi Arabia, *balik Islam* Filipinos discover a new national affiliation in their shared religious expression with born Muslim Filipinos abroad. Conversion to Islam enables people, who hail from different and perceived antagonistic faith and ethnic communities in the Philippines, not only to find commonality with born Muslim Filipinos based on religion, but also to discover similarities overshadowed in the Philippines by stereotyped

representations of the other. On their trips back to the Philippines, reverted Muslims may also discover something of the discrimination and exclusion that Muslim Filipinos routinely encounter from the majority population, sometimes find their relationship with friends and family strained and their sense of belonging in their home place called into question. 'Born' Muslim Filipinos come from a situation in which their national belonging has been and continues to be contested and questioned both by dominant society (for whom they are always alien) and within Muslim nationalist discourse in that country (that posits 'born' Muslims as constituting a separate nation). Together, in diaspora, they find a renewed sense of a shared national identification as Filipino Muslims. The site and context of and for that national belonging is not in the Philippines, but rather outside of their home country in 'cities across the world', living among and in fellowship with an imagined universal community of believers.

Conclusion: Ambivalent Locations and Sacred Spaces

R: Even though you're a Muslim... even though you're a Muslim... as long as you are... as long as you are not an Arab like them, they look down at you.

MJ: Why is it like that?

R: That's the common attitude of the Arabs. [In fact,] the reason why God sent amongst them... [Short pause]... the Prophet Mohammad is because they had that bad attitude ever since the beginning. [Translator's comments: that is the time of *Jahiliyya*. This is the time prior to the spreading of Islam in the Arab peninsula: literally means "The Era of Ignorance"].

R: But when it comes to religion... the complete religion is with them.

MJ: Do you have the same religion?

R: Yes, just the same Islam. Islam... the religion Islam... [Short pause]... in this world is only one.⁶

Previously anthropologists have suggested that the majority of ordinary Muslim Filipinos do not identify with Islamic nationalism and have only a vague awareness of the World of Islam (*dar-ul-Islam*) beyond their immediate horizons of experience (McKenna 1997: 63, Kiefer 1986, 14, cited in McKenna). While that characterization may have been accurate in the past, it does not reflect the situation at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century. Muslims from different parts of the Philippines are travelling in increasing numbers to live and work on both short and long term basis to other parts of the 'Muslim world', and, in Saudi Arabia, Islam is also central to the reformulation of Muslim Filipino national belonging

in diaspora. Those new found Islamic national belongings resolves some of the contradictions that characterizes the situation of migrant Muslim Filipinos in that place and brings together disparate groups of Filipinos in ways that are, as yet, unimaginable in the Philippine context.

At the heart of the matter, we suggest, are Muslim Filipinos' ambivalent encounters with people, places and landscapes in the homeland of Islam. The ambivalence that these migrants articulate is by no means completely unique to them or to the migrant situation in Saudi Arabia. Filipino migrants elsewhere frequently express ambivalence about living and working abroad separated from loved ones and family back home especially parents and children. It is also a regular feature of migration, exile and diaspora in post-colonial contexts. Tolia-Kelly (2006, 2007) for example, shows how for British Asians, English landscapes such as the Lake District may be talked about and experienced both as a natural paradise and as a site of fear and terror. Those ambivalent encounters with that landscape are the product of a dominant discourse that links a racialized English culture to an essentialized rural English nature and that refuses to acknowledge migrant affinities for, knowledge about and attachment to landscapes that occupy a sacred place in the national imagination.

Tolia-Kelly's observation of British Asians in iconic English landscapes provides a useful analogue for the situation of Muslim Filipinos in Saudi Arabia. There migrant Muslim Filipinos encounter a sacred landscape that for many is also the site of fear, confinement and above all a seemingly endless round of work and labour. Moreover, notwithstanding the important differences between the experience of single and lone migrant women, particularly those in domestic service, and those of men and married women living with their husbands and families outside of their employers homes and the institutions they work in, what they share in common is a more general perception that they are at best a tolerated alien presence and at worst looked down upon as racial inferiors.

Their claims to place are thus contested not in terms of shared culture or citizenship (that they are denied) but in terms of Islamic belonging. As demonstrated in this paper, migrant Muslim Filipinos invest themselves in learning to read and understand the Qur'an, highlighting their commitment to Islam and compelling recognition from those who might otherwise regard their religious identifications with suspicion and condescension. They also draw a distinction between Islam and Arab culture. That discourse links an essentialized Arab landscape to a racialized Arab culture from which they are excluded and set themselves apart

from. It also denies any necessary relationship or corollary between that naturalized Arab culture and proximity to the sacred. Rather, if anything, that relationship is largely construed in negative terms. The statement quoted above that, ‘the reason why God sent amongst them [...] the Prophet Mohammad is because they had that bad attitude ever since the beginning,’ is strikingly familiar to what an Imam is reported to have said some twenty years previously in Cotabato City, ‘Allah revealed himself to the Arabs precisely because their behaviour was so wicked’ (McKenna 1998: 64). Moreover, the assertion that ‘they have the complete religion’ is not meant to convey that they are in any sense better or more authentically Muslims than anyone else: rather in precisely the opposite manner it also an indictment that having had the complete religion handed to them they ought to be far better than they are.

In sum, in ways that parallel the cultural practices of migrant Christian Filipinos in the ‘Holy Land’ (Liebelt 2008), migrant Muslim Filipinos in Saudi Arabia partially resolve the ambivalences and contradictions they face on a day to day basis by identifying with and claiming a sacred landscape that while situated in a particular place, does not belong exclusively to that place or to the people from that place. Rather that sacred landscape is imagined and experienced as transcendent. That way of deterritorializing a sacred landscape also creates a space for Filipino national belongings outside of and beyond their country of origin in and among a universal and supranational fellowship of faith. Our call to resituate Islam in the Philippines within a translocal social space and cultural imaginary is a critical lens that mirrors migrants’ own ways of making their ways in and through those worlds.

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Endnotes

¹ *The Footsteps Project* is an ARHC (UK) funded research project on the religious life and imaginaries of Muslim and Christian Filipinos living and working in (and beyond) the Middle East in places sacred to them (Project No: AH/E508790/1). The study involves in-depth and ongoing ethnographic research being conducted by researchers at the Universities of Keele and Hull under the direction of Pnina Werbner and Mark Johnson. Research in Saudi Arabia was conducted by Alicia Pingol (Hull) and sponsored by the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies with the support and assistance of Nada Elyas, a PhD student at Hull University. Research in the Philippines was conducted by Alicia Pingol with additional research by Mark Johnson sponsored and supported by the Institute of Islamic Studies, UP Diliman with assistance provided by five student helpers.

² It is impossible to state with accuracy the actual number of Filipino migrants in Saudi Arabia. 1.3 Million is the estimate given by Parreñas (2003: 264), most give a figure of over one million (Philippines Bureau of Labour and Statistics 2003; Pakkiasamy 2004; Ericta 2006; Cabuag 2003)

³ McKenna (1997) suggests that in Cotabato City different ways of knowing Islam were more directly linked to struggles over political authority between traditional elites (*datus*), who sometimes claimed ancestral links to the Prophet, and local clerics (*ustadh*) who became independent *ulama*. Though ordinary Muslim increasingly deferred to local clerics (*ustadh*) as religious leaders, nonetheless still engaged in ritual practices that would be otherwise deemed as unIslamic by those religious leaders.

⁴ Saudi Arabia is neither the first nor the only Muslim identified country in the Arab world to foster links with or support Muslims in the Philippines. From 1955 until 1978 Egypt sponsored 200 Muslim Filipino scholars to study abroad at Al-Azhar University and continued to send Islamic missionaries beyond that period (McKenna 1997: 58). Libya was a supporter and advocate for the separatist movement during the 1970s and it was also during that period that Saudi missionaries and financial support started arriving in the Philippines.

⁵ As a non-Muslim Filipino and a lone woman, Pingol could not have travelled to Madinah on her own. Through her connections in that city - where she herself has been conducting research on the care of the elderly - Nada arranged meetings with Muslim Filipino women working as domestic helpers and working in one of the local hospitals and government

ministry. She also helped facilitate her move to Jeddah when it became clear that long term research in Madinah would be very difficult if not impossible.

⁶ From a taped conversation between Johnson and a Tausug ('born' Muslim) man in Manila, 2008, translated with annotations from Tausug by a student at the Institute of Islamic studies.