

## Notes on the Filipino Migrant Workers

### Pinoys Abroad: Stories and Observations from the Migration Frontlines

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#### What He Did For Love

They said it happened in the Eastern Region of Saudi Arabia in 1989. A bachelor Filipino in his 30s was working for a maintenance company as an electrician. While doing some electrical work in the house of an Arab expatriate doctor, he met the doctor's wife. In due time, they fell in love (or whatever) and had an affair. As the "repair work" of the Filipino became more frequent, the husband probably had suspicions and one day came home unannounced and found his wife and the Filipino in a compromising position. The wife cried rape. The Filipino was arrested.

It was said that during the trial, the hapless electrician admitted to the crime and was sentenced to die. One winter day after Friday prayers, he was beheaded in a public square. To the very end, he protected the name and honor of his lady love.

#### Lonely Hearts Club Bonding

It was a perfect match (or a cruel joke made by the jesting gods): hordes of Filipino workers housed in labor camps in Saudi Arabia and an army of Filipina domestic helpers in Hong Kong. Both groups homesick and willing recruits to the Lonely Hearts Club. Their tenuous but effective link and matching instrument – the pen pal pages of Filipino comics. Their letters cross and their feverish correspondence begin. Some couples plan to meet in Hong Kong, even and especially those who are already married in the Philippines. If it is a status symbol

to have a wife or lady friend in Saudi Arabia, it is likewise a prestigious honor if your boyfriend visits you in Hong Kong.

Domeng, a co-worker, bragged that he passed by Hong Kong during his slated vacation to the Philippines where he spent a week in a rundown hotel with his girlfriend. Their lovemaking, he boasted, was torrid and frequent ("Tulog lang ang pahinga.") We were certain he was not just spinning a yarn. He had a picture of a stark naked lady lying in bed to back up his story. Although he is married and has three kids, he was considering leaving his family for the sassy girlfriend. In the end, sense (or guilt) prevailed. He continued supporting his family.

### A Strong Man Cries

Edong, as we called him, was a tall, burly man and a regular tough guy who operated forklifts in the storage yard of a chemical plant. He has three wives and seven kids with them. For a time, he was my roommate in a row of rooms rented out by a local. Once a week, we rented out our room to a jueteng financier where the winning number was drawn and the bets evaluated. Every "draw" night, a big number of bettors and kibitzers converge on our building. As a cover, the financier laid out a table groaning with food and a 3-layered cake. A lookout was posted at the gate of the building and on the rooftop. If a local happened to stray into the building, the financier's men broke out into the "Happy Birthday" song and explained to the local that a birthday celebration was going on.

Edong had a cache of "sadiki" (locally fermented gin produced by Filipino "chemists") hidden under his bed and every weekend, i.e. Thursdays and Fridays, he drank himself half-blind while playing "tong-its" or any card game.

One Christmas day, Filipino tenants of the building gathered together to celebrate. We looked for the missing Edong who was usually the life of a party. I knocked at our room and entered. He was lying on his bed sobbing mutedly. A companion tried to comfort him by uttering the standard line of contract workers to depressed colleagues: "Huwag kang mag-alala. Mahal ka 'nun." ("Don't worry. She still loves you.") He sobbed harder and his shoulders shook. We left him to savor his Christmas blues.

### Bagong Bayani?

Since the travails of the Filipino migrant continue to be relevant and a "hot" issue, several private and government organizations are giving out awards to our so-called "bagong bayani." I suppose the primary criterion is that the nominees should give honor to our country and showcase our achievements and noble qualities as a people.

Filipino migrants have been called for years the country's new heroes. So much so that there arose critics who say that it is wrong to call them as such for they work in foreign lands simply to earn well and give themselves and their families a better future.

The Filipino migrant is certainly not a hero in the mold envisioned by the ancient Greeks who see a hero as a legendary figure endowed with great strength and abilities like Hercules. The modern world has a more realistic view of what constitutes heroism and what makes a hero. The Italian author Umberto Eco says that a real hero is always a hero by mistake, i.e. a hero by accident. Before circumstances and fate conspire to turn her or him into a hero, she or he dreams of being an honest toward like everybody else.

The modern hero does not consider his deeds honorable or he simply downplays his achievements. President Kennedy was asked how he became a hero (in the Pacific as a captain of a PT boat during World War II). He replied: "It was involuntary. They sank my boat."

And so it is with the Filipino migrants. It was not their doing that our country is unstable, that our economy, in a manner of speaking and depending on one's perspective, has "underperformed" or has gone to the dogs. They were forced by circumstances to venture forth into strange lands to seek employment and a new life.

But in doing so, they have propped up our economy and papered over the corruption, mismanagement, and inefficiency of our bureaucrats and politicians. As a bonus, they have spread our culture, our traits, our sense of humor, our worldviews, and our joy of living, the world over. Former Philippine Ambassador to Jordan Ruperto Dizon said that King Abdullah II of Jordan was raised by a Filipino governess. You can see the trace of the Filipino influence in his easygoing and tolerant ways.

If heroism involves sacrifice, then the Filipino migrant qualifies. It is no joke to be in unfamiliar ground. I remember when I first went to Saudi Arabia as a contract worker in 1990. I was in the plane with

a Filipina in her late 30s. She was very thin and she was wearing a long, loose skirt much too big for her small frame. She was clutching a handkerchief and softly crying throughout the flight. And then she took out pen and paper and began writing a letter to her family. After the plane landed in Dhahran Airport, a tall Arab, probably her recruitment agent, took her away to work for some local family.

I have forgotten her name but the image lingers. It was a display of homesickness like no other. You could also see it among the men in the labor camps who, after a hard day's work and before sleeping, cross out another day in their wall calendars – as a reminder that they are working for and looking forward to their vacation leave, to the day of homecoming.

And so it is probably proper to give the Filipino migrant even a small measure of recognition and keep the somewhat deferential sobriquet of “*bagong bayani*.” To say to them that we care. To remind them that their efforts and sacrifices are appreciated. To tell them that those who are left behind have not forgotten.

### Remittances and the “Padala” System

According to the Bangko Sentral, overseas Filipino workers (OFW) remitted US\$8.2 billion in 2004. I believe this figure of OFW remittances is grossly underestimated. The cited amount was remitted through official banking channels but a significant portion is remitted through informal means, as follows:

1. “Pakipadala” system – whenever a co-worker or a friend goes on vacation, a Filipino abroad sends not only goods or that “something special” but also a few pieces of good old Uncle Ben (US\$100 bills) for his family and relatives. When I had my first vacation in 1991, it took me two days to deliver the cash envelopes of six friends to their families residing in different parts of Metro Manila.
2. **Cargo** companies based in the Middle East also accept remittances and many of these companies do not course said remittances through banks but through their own representative offices in Manila and the provinces – delivering the same “door-to-door.”
3. Before going on vacation, the typical Filipino migrant saves money for several months, money to be splurged on a “major project” or

on “good time” back home. He brings the money in cash, usually strapped to his belt bag along with his passport and other valuables. Further, the OFW exchanges his foreign currency for the peso not in a bank but through a foreign currency dealer, which offers a slightly higher exchange rate than the banks.

Wonder not therefore why, despite the perceived money crunch, the malls, specialty stores, and restaurants are still full and doing good business. Enough money is circulating in the system to keep the economy on its feet.

A militant organization, recognizing the clout of remittances, floated the idea of appealing to Filipino migrants to stop their remittances as a means of pressuring President Arroyo to resign. This idea, however, goes against the grain of Filipino family values. The migrant, perhaps to compensate for his absence, tends to “spoil” his family and relatives back home.

### The Japanese “Treasure” in Mindanao

I have been wondering for years why the Japanese established a consulate in Davao City. There were rumors that it was because of the treasures buried by Japanese soldiers during World War II at different sites in Mindanao. In the end, I learned that they are in Davao primarily to interview, and issue residence visas to, Filipinos of Japanese decent. The consulate even issues residence visas to spouses, children, and to third and fourth generation descendants. Upon arrival in Japan purportedly to reunite with long-lost relatives, they are deployed as farm and factory workers.

While conversing with the head of a Japanese descendant foundation, I had an *Aha!* moment, a moment of revelation. The Japanese do not want to admit that they have an acute labor shortage and that they need foreign manpower to fill the gap. Under the guise and pretext of inviting Japanese descendants to Japan for family reunions, they cover up their manpower deficiency. The treasure is found not below the ground but above ground – the treasure is people dreaming of a better life for themselves and their families.

## Jobs Galore

When I served as the Officer-in-Charge of the Regional Consular Office in Davao City, I used to provide orientation to each new batch of students coming to us for "practicum" or on-the-job training. They are usually graduating students of economics, marketing, management, political science, and commerce. I candidly tell them that their courses are passé ("pinagdaanan o nilampasan na ng panahon") and not attuned to the needs of a globalizing world. That is, if one is aspiring to become an overseas worker.

Per my observation, the jobs in demand in the Middle East and other outposts abroad are:

1. Health workers – nurses (obviously), x-ray technicians, physical therapists, and medical technologists. Experienced nurses are moving away from the Middle East and onward to the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. It's harder to crack the U.S. nursing market – you have to pass the Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools (CGFNS) and the English language exam and, upon arrival, you are given three chances to pass the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) or State Board.
2. Information Technology technicians, computer programmers and graphic designers – apply to all types of companies but most especially for advertising firms, promotion departments of big companies, and IT units of manufacturing and industrial firms. There is, however, less demand for mere computer encoders or computer science graduates, more for computer technicians and programmers.
3. Accountancy graduates, preferably Certified Public Accountants (CPA), whom they call Chartered Accountants overseas. They get higher pay than mere commerce or management graduates or even Masters in Business Administration (MBA) degree holders.
4. Architects and engineers – in demand for industrial and manufacturing plants, oil refineries, and construction companies. When assigned "offshore," they pull in higher pay and benefits and are granted more frequent vacations, not only in the Philippines but in other countries as well.

5. Beauticians, hairdressers, tailors, and fashion / interior designers – occupations dominated by members of the Filipino gay community overseas. Another subset are the lady drivers, mostly "tibo" in their own parlance.
6. Skilled workers – welders, masonry workers, furniture and cabinet makers/designers, printing press operators, dental technicians, layout artists, auto mechanics, heavy equipment operators, electricians, electronics repairmen, and other Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA)-accredited skills.
7. Teachers – especially in math and the sciences at the primary and secondary levels; the U.S. needs more teachers and they are needed by the burgeoning Filipino communities overseas.
8. Chemists – in industrial plants.
9. Marine engineers and able-bodied seamen – around thirty percent of merchant ships and luxury liners worldwide are manned by Filipinos.

## Employment Trends

We are seeing a shift towards more specialized skills. If there are market niches, so there are employment niches. Specialization of course calls for further training and study, and the challenge for our policymakers and training institutes is to find qualified teachers who can teach these skills and prepare the teaching modules. As technology advances, the need to upgrade one's skills and knowledge becomes more pressing. We have heard the janitor called a "maintenance engineer" and the driver a "moving vehicle apparatus technician." We now have such job titles as "forest and environment management specialist," "surgical technologist," "video game developer," "events promoter," "freight cargo handler," "security equipment installer," "scaffolding assembler," "body massage specialist," "claims adjuster," "seminar organizer," and "technical writer."

In recent years, there has also been a shift away from manufacturing and towards services. Most of the new jobs available are in the services sector. Aside from the skills and jobs mentioned beforehand, Filipinos likewise excel abroad in the following services sectors: as salespersons in malls and specialty stores, receptionists in hotels and business

establishments, service attendants in gasoline stations, telemarketers, and medical representatives.

In countries where there is large concentration of Filipinos, our embassies, consulates or Filipino Resource Centers managed by our Labor Attaches serve as skills training centers. Instructors from the community offer short-term courses and all of them are volunteers who just wish to upgrade the skills of their compatriots. Classes are held on weekends or "off days" of the workers. After a three- or four-session course, certificates are handed out to the graduates. In the United Arab Emirates, among the courses offered are Basic and Advanced Computer Operation, Computer Aided Design (CAD), Web Page Design, Automotive Basic and Advanced, Tailoring and Dressmaking, Cooking and Dinner Table Arrangement, Ballroom Dancing Basic and Advanced, Basic Accounting for Non-Accountants and Seminars for Engineers and Architects.

There is a need to streamline our recruitment process. It takes an applicant between three and four months to complete all requirements. Our competitors, i.e. other labor-exporting countries, can deploy their workers faster. One foreign recruiter said, "You order a housemaid from Indonesia, she comes after two weeks; you order one from the Philippines, she comes after two months."

The lag in the recruitment process is one of the reasons why many Filipinos venture forth as tourists or undocumented workers. Many become direct hires but they undertake the risk of not being employed at all after spending for the plane fare and other miscellaneous expenses.

With the advent of globalization, labor has become more and more of a commodity and the influence of labor unions has declined. Paradoxically, allowing market forces to determine labor's value has made the lot of workers better. State control has often meant inefficient production and consequently lesser benefits for the worker. The flip side of the coin is the degradation of the security of tenure of workers, including migrant workers.

### A Lesson From Kidapawan and Bislig

During a mobile passport service of Davao Regional Consular Office in Kidapawan City, the mayor informed us that he sought to improve the livelihood of his constituents by embarking on a livestock

dispersal program. The program was a dud, with the repayment rate practically zero. ("Nagkakataon na napipilayan o nagkakasakit ang kambing o baboy na alaga kung bertday ni Totoy o Nene o kung may anniversary ang pamilya.") The city lost more than two million pesos.

To replace the dispersed dispersal program, the mayor set aside three million pesos to fund the placement fees of constituents who have the required skills and qualifications and are applying for overseas work. The city charged three percent interest rate per annum in financing the placement fees. The result: repayment rate of more than ninety and the extension of the program to more beneficiaries.

Bislig City has launched a similar but more ambitious program. It took out a loan of ten million pesos from the Land Bank at five percent interest per annum and charges three percent interest to prospective overseas workers who need financing for their placement fees.

The lesson for Local Government Units (LGUs): If a livelihood program is a loser, divert your resources to the sunrise industry of overseas employment.

### End Notes

Why do Filipinos excel in other countries and why do we give so much of ourselves to foreign employers? It is not just about the money. It is also about the encounter with foreign forces that challenge the resiliency of the Filipino.

Somehow and in whatever manner, Filipino migrants spread Philippine culture and Filipino traits. It is a silent, slow-moving, unassuming yet pervasive influence. For good or ill, their performance and attitude in and out of the workplace reflect on our country. Philippine embassies and consulates represent the Philippines but the Filipino migrant is the reflection of the Philippines and determines how other peoples regard us. They are or should be ambassadors of goodwill.

They have more stories to tell and we need more chroniclers who would listen and record their misadventures, heartaches and triumphs, and take note of the knowledge and technologies that they have gained overseas. The stories could form part of our folklore and the knowledge and technologies learned, if harnessed properly, could hasten our modernization.

The stories they tell could move us and inspire us. As I recall one of my Literature professors at this university say in a different context:

“Let their story speak for itself; let them speak in their own voice and let their silence be broken for a while, for the truth is the most eloquent storyteller.”

### Note

<sup>1</sup> The PT Boat was a small, wooden craft that carried enough firepower to sink a battleship, was faster than anything on the water, and could sneak right up to shore to perform reconnaissance or drop off troops.