

Religion, Sacrifice and Transnational Labor in the Philippines

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Good Friday observance in Barangay (barrio) San Pedro Cutud, in San Fernando, Pampanga, Philippines



In April, 1988, the then Philippine President Corazon Aquino stood before Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) in Hong Kong's Saint Margaret's Church to assure them of her government's assurance of absolute support for their welfare. "It is not only your relatives who are grateful for your sacrifices," she said, "but also the entire nation." For indeed OFWs were not merely overseas workers. She called them "*bagong bayani*,"—the "modern-day heroes" of the nation who, through the economic benefits generated by their "sacrifices" are ensuring the very survival of the Philippine nation itself (PMS 1992). In December 1990, the President herself officiated the ceremonies for the Bagong Bayani awards, delivering a speech that again commemorated the sacrifice (*pagsasakripisyo*) and suffering (*pagmamalasakit*) of the OFW. In that speech, *bagong bayani* were explicitly lauded for the economic returns of their efforts, giving the distinct impression that the beneficiary of the OFWs sacrifice was "above all, the economy" (Tigno 2012, 25–26).

Historians Vicente Rafael (2000) and Reynaldo Ileto (1998) have argued that the discourse of heroism in the Philippines is not simply premised on a notion of organic patriotism *per se*, but built upon the example of a pantheon of nationalist-martyrs like Jose Rizal and, significantly, Aquino's own late husband, Ninoy. These were individuals whose lives, as Rafael put it, "merge into a single narrative frame that harked back to the themes of the [Passion of Christ] ... of innocent lives forced to undergo humiliation at the hands of alien forces" (2000, 211). It makes sense, then, that many Heads of State since Corazon Aquino have made constant and frequent

references to the "suffering" and "sacrifice" of OFWs. For these are terms that resonate with a widely shared cultural and religious idiom in which a Filipino brand of heroism and idealized constructions of Christ-like sacrifice are two sides of the same coin.

Aquino's conflation of economic and soteriological returns of overseas labor is a rhetorical expression of what I would call an "economy of sacrifice." This is an ethos that, to be sure, seeks to perpetuate the inward flow of foreign capital through the systematic and sustained deployment of productive transnational agents. Just as significantly, it is a religious ethic in which the pursuit of capital is seen as a form of both ethical and pious virtue—an association that is rationalized through rhetorical endorsements of sacrifice as a positive value. However, as opposed what Weber (1905) described as a Protestant ethic that extolls the virtue of frugality and financial reticence, the OFWs are lauded as heroic sufferers in generating capital, and are encouraged to partake in modes of virtuous hyper-consumption. As Aguilar puts it, this is a form of transnational religious agency that is sustained by the "balm of commodities and the consumption of modernity" (1999, 98).

There have been several scholarly works that have discussed the OFW experience in neoliberal contexts. There has been a strong emphasis on the social outcomes and costs of overseas labor, particularly where OFW experiences are conditioned by specific ideological notions of Filipino race and gender (Aguilar *et al.*, 2009; Choy 2003; Constable 1997; 2007; Guevarra 2010; McKay 2013; Ong 2006; Parreñas 2008; 2001; Pertierra 1992; Tyner 2000). Other works have highlighted the process in which

state policies on labor migration craft, and in some ways compel, specific commitments to the nation in spite of OFW dislocation (Franco 2011; Hau 2004; Rodriguez 2006; 2010; Tadiar 2009; Weekly 2004). Relatively fewer works have gone into great detail about how the Filipino remittance economy is an inflection of religious agency, particularly among men. In spite of the rich scholarship, more work needs to be conducted on this theme in the same vein as the contributions of McKay (2011) and Pinggol (2001), who have analyzed the “re-masculinization” of OFW heroism, and that of Aguilar (1999), Johnson and Werbner (2010) and Lopez (2012), who consider the OFW experience with respect to the affective and religious aspects that condition socio-economic motivations.

A positive step in this direction is to unpack the discursive conditions that undergird the idiom of OFW hero-martyrdom. Firstly, one could argue that the extent to which an economy of sacrifice can resonate with a religious idiom of Christ-like martyrdom relies upon the state’s ability to obfuscate its own role in contributing to the volatility of transnational work, as well its failure to mitigate the need for labor export in the first place (Franco 2011; Tadiar 2009; Tyner 2000). This, in turn, is premised upon the promulgation of a discourse in which the casualties of overseas deployment are valorized as the paragon of the highest civic and pious virtues. Roman Catholic institutions in the Philippines play a crucial role in legitimizing the state’s neoliberal discourse by further infusing the ideal of modern-day heroism with notions of Christ-like martyrdom. This infusion, typically through official pastoral letters and published bishop statements, forms the ideological basis for a discourse that valorizes the bodies of victimized transnational agents as “fallen martyrs.” In the discursive linkage of remittance capital to both immediate and transcendent reward, the economy of sacrifice is packaged as new space on which OFWs can channel all sorts of nationalistic and pious agencies. In this way, the Church institution and the state in the Philippines depict the necessary demands and contingencies of global capital as coterminous with the soteriological ideal of Christian salvation.

It can also be argued, secondly, that the economy of sacrifice is sustained not just through a conflation of patriotism and martyrdom but through actual corporeal regimes as well. This occurs as part of a process of “labor brokerage” which, following Guevarra (2010) and Rodriguez (2010), refers to the activities of non-governmental institutions working in concert with the state in molding OFW bodies into productive economic units. This involves, among other things, the regimented implementation of body techniques in the process of pre-departure training, through

which OFWs have been trained to deploy certain ethical and moral values about Christian self-effacement and humility onto translational domains. Such programs are designed to enhance the export-competitiveness of Filipino OFWs, fashioning them into transnational agents who have been trained to externalize moral values and comportments of docility and subservience in the pursuit of overseas work. It is, as Foucault has put it, an “investment of the body, its valorization, and the distributive management of its forces” (1977, 138) towards the cultivation of what I would term “export-quality martyrs”—agents of transnational capital whose tradable labor power is premised upon their embodiment of Christian virtues of willing, servile obedience.

Thirdly, the effectiveness of these investments of the body is, to an extent, contingent upon the process in which OFWs have looked to their ritual acts as a distinct arena of corporeal and sentimental self-fashioning, both before and during the pursuit of overseas employment. Ritual is a way of crafting modern selfhoods and a source of courage, strength, perseverance and fortitude for OFWs. This is the case among OFW men who have engaged in Holy Week Passion rituals of self-mortification in the province of Pampanga. These rituals, which include the performance of self-flagellation and nailing by a wide range of Roman Catholic devotees (both men and women), are ways in which Kapampangan OFWs channel modes of empathy (*darama*), not only with Christ, but with relatives, friends and others. It is in having actually embodied Christ’s own Passion that ritual flagellants confront an export economy that is rationalized by rhetorical pronouncements about sacrifice and suffering. To the extent that the rituals channel those virtues of humility and self-effacement that are resonant in the disciplinary regimes of labor brokerage, self-mortifiers embody have shown that rituals of pain infliction in the Philippines are not just anachronistic imitations of medieval piety, but acts constitutive of *modern* selfhoods. Through their ritual agencies, OFWs craft a sense of resilience and perseverance in transnational domains, even while they are encouraged, by the state, the Church and its brokers, to accept the potentially fatal consequences of their economic roles.

Concluding Notes

I do not argue that all OFWs are effectively self-mortifiers, or that participating in the economy of sacrifice is physically tantamount to ritual pain infliction. However, I do argue that the mechanisms of the state, the Church and Roman Catholic passion rituals are similar in that they are arenas in which transnational labor power is cultivated as modes of reli-

gious agency. Both the process of labor brokering and the rituals of self-mortification are disciplinary regimes that construe the body as both the object and vehicle for the cultivation of ethical and pious dispositions. In this sense, we can place Corazon Aquino's statements about *bagong bayani* into a more ethnographically nuanced perspective. In the pursuit of overseas labor, OFWs craft their own modern religious subjectivities. In this sense, their responsiveness to a political economy that monetizes their labor power cannot simply be reduced to a mere susceptibility to the state's rhetorical claims, nor can it be explained exclusively as a pursuit of economic rationalism.

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