

Sailing in Venice: Negotiating Filipino Transnational Identity in Venice, Italy

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Abstract

A number of Filipino families seek migration to another country as one of few means to achieve social mobility. In the past decades, the government's labor export policy has pushed many Filipinos to find jobs overseas. Today, there are around 3,500 Filipinos leaving the Philippines everyday to look for a better job or a better life. This paper aimed to synthesize the researcher's experience during his integration with a Filipino community in Venice, Italy while teaching Filipino language and culture to migrant children and youth. The focus was to identify signs that these Filipinos negotiate their identity in a foreign land. Using the concept of transnational migration, it was found-out that Filipinos in Venice, Italy negotiate to maintain and in forming their Filipino identity while living and integrating with an Italian society.

Introduction

The Philippines is a country wealthy of natural resources, but over the years, it has remained to be a third world economy. In 2012, some 25.2% of Filipinos were poor, which was around 23.7 million people, based on the poverty report of the National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB) now part of the Philippine Statistical Authority (Dy 2014). At the second quarter of 2015, the unemployment rate in the country is pegged at 6.4%, one of the highest in the Southeast Asian region (Salvosa 2015).

According to Migrante International (2015) International, the number of Filipinos leaving the country due to chronic joblessness and low wages has increased from 2,500 daily before 2009, to 4,018 in 2010, and to 6,902

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daily by 2015. Thousands of Filipinos flock international airports everyday to look for a better life abroad. Today, there are 12 to 15 million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) including the undocumented ones (Migrante International 2015).

These statistics have prompted our department to organize an educational and cultural program that caters to Filipinos abroad, especially the youth. In mass media, you will see images of young Filipinos abroad being not aware of their roots. The portrayals of these Filipino migrants are very alarming since, more and more Filipinos are seeking for a better life in a foreign land.

The Manunggul Sails to Venice

In 2015, the Department of Filipino of the De La Salle University in Manila, Philippines, together with the Filipino Community of Venice, Mestre-Terraferma in Italy, and the Chiesa della Fava, launched the Manunggul Jar Project. ***The Manunggul Jar Project: Education Program on Filipino Language and Culture in Italy (Second Year)*** is part of the university's program for internationalization and for community engagement aimed at bringing young Filipinos abroad closer to their Filipino identity through teaching and immersing them into the Filipino language and culture. Similar to a manunggul jar with an external structure, inner beauty, and depth, this program involves Filipino scholars and educated going overseas (the external structure) to further deepen OFW families' understanding and appreciation (depth) of their mother country's language and culture (inner beauty).

In the era of globalization and the existence of the Filipino diaspora phenomenon, it is imperative for Filipinos to continuously develop and nurture their collective identity and appreciation of their own country. This program aims to teach and develop the overseas Filipino youth's knowledge, skills, and appreciation for the Filipino language, and to strengthen their cultural ties with the Philippines. It is hoped that through this program, Filipinos in Italy would all the more become united in promoting and nurturing Filipino language and culture, as their own way of expressing their collective identity. Thus, for one month from June to July 2015, we went to Venice, Italy and taught Filipino language and culture to more than a 100 young Filipinos aged 5 to 19.

Venice is a city in northeastern part of Italy which is composed of 118 islands separated by canals and connected by bridges. It is known for its beauty, architecture and works of art. The whole city including its lagoons is listed as a World Heritage Site. It is also known as “Queen of the Adriatic,” “City of Water,” “City of Masks,” “City of Bridges,” “The Floating City,” and “City of Canals.” (Wikipedia 2015)

In 2009, Venice has 270,098 population in which 25.7% are pensioners and 14.36% are aged 18 and below. For the past decade, Venice has experienced a decline in their population. With this, an estimated 9.8% of its inhabitants are foreigners who are primarily from other European countries and some from Asia, like the Philippines. (Second Chance, 2010). According to the Filipino Community in Venice, there is around 2,638 documented Filipinos living and working in Venice, Italy. Most of these Filipinos are working in lodging and restaurant industries as laborers and service crew.

Ciao? Ciao! Ciao!

This paper is based on interviews and observations that I made while staying in Venice, Italy for almost two months. I was able to talk to the parents and the youth on their experiences living in a foreign land. With this, I have assumed that these Filipinos in Venice, Italy are negotiating their identity as Filipinos, not just working abroad, but with the intention of living their lives in this foreign land. It has been evident that Filipinos are being influenced by this environment in terms of their language, taste, way of living and thinking, their faith and sense of community.

Ciao is one of the most common words being used by people in Venice. Italians use this word to say “hi,” “hello,” or “goodbye.” They say this whenever they come across people that they know or one way of recognizing a person. In Filipino language, it is equivalent to “kumusta,” or “paalam.” But Filipinos in Venice do not just say “ciao” once, they actually say it twice, “Ciao! Ciao!” as a manifestation on how they unconsciously negotiate their identity, as they consciously know that saying it twice is very Filipino.

Filipinos are very fond of repeating words twice. During the Miss Universe 2010 pageant, our very own Venus Raj said in the question and answer portion said major twice, a major major problem. Nicknames in the Philippines are usually repeated like Jayjay, Jhunjun, Jekjek, Raprap, Lenlen and so on. Negotiating the identity is one of the tendencies of what

Filipinos do while living abroad. They don't fully embrace the identity and culture of the host country; instead, they still maintain and appropriate the Filipinoness within the community. This paper tries to identify the signs of these negotiations in their identity formation, which, results to the creation of transnational identity.

Italian or Filipino or Filipino Italian?

Does ones identity change if he's been living in a different environment for a long time? What if an Asian looking, brown-skinned kid lives and grows up in a country where everyone is white? Do these kids identify themselves as Filipinos or Italians? How can you call someone Filipino when he does not even speak the Filipino language or has not been to the Philippines? These are just some of the questions that lingered in my mind when I was staying in Venice and doing this study.

According to Stuart Hall, "identity is the process that constitute and continuously re-forming the subject who has to act and speak in the social cultural world. Addressing, both the experience of racial identity and the nature of the political subject, by focusing on the process of identification, a concept that allows the critic to destabilize the popular notion of fixed identities that is often at the heart of ideologies associated with identity politics." (Ewing 2004)

Identity is always dynamic, always changing, though some things still remain the same. It is always being reconstructed and deconstructed. Identity is both political and personal; the individual is always a subject of negotiations for identity and a product of conflicting identities. Identity formation is power relations wherein it could be imposed by an individual, a community, or the society where the person lives. But in a more progressive perspective, the process of identity formation, the person is not only a passive receiver of concepts of identity being presented to him/her; rather, he/she is an active participant with other social actors and structures that are both equal and hierarchical. These social factors, such as the family, neighbors, relatives, friends, and even the church, are very significant in the identity formation (Maedsen at Naerssen 2003).

It is in this regard that we see how Filipinos cope up with the differentiated culture and identity that they face in everyday. "A culture is conceived to consist of established habits, values, attitudes, and practices that are wide-

ly shared, that have historical roots, and that are differentiated in diverse ways from the characteristics of other cultures. When people are born into or otherwise acquire a set of such habits, values, attitudes, and practices, they have an identity that links them to the culture. Identities, in other words, are embedded in cultures, but they are nonetheless micro-phenomena in the sense that it is individuals who internalize, maintain or abandon a culture's characteristics (Rosenau 2004)."

Venice remains true to its rich history and culture. It is a city created by people living above the water for centuries. The old structures that surround the city reflect the way they value and take care of their society's past and its future. Italians have high regards to themselves as Italians. They are proud of themselves, of their history and culture. The Philippines, on the other hand, have a long history of colonization, 400 years under the Spaniards, four decades under the Americans, and a few years under the Japanese. Scholars and historians are still trying to establish the country's past before the era of colonization.

According to Monsignor Luigi Ramazzotti of Venice, "I don't know why, perhaps the Philippines, as a country, which was conquered, and (the Filipinos, they) never conquered themselves, they are not facing themselves, they always submit themselves. I think this is very wrong." Many critics say that Filipinos has no sense of history, thus, could easily be lost with his identity. The question on how do Filipinos protect their identity and culture in a land where its inhabitant has a strong sense of their identity, remains.

This migration of Filipinos in Venice is not just an issue of how Filipinos would cope- up with working conditions in a foreign land, but also, an issue of ethnification. Most of the Filipinos in Venice would love to remain true to their identity as Filipinos and loyal to the Philippines, but part of them also wants to be in a foreign land, not just for a short period of time, but for the rest of their lives. The elders are bringing their families from the Philippines in Venice. This process, according to Jonathan Friedman, aims for integration/ assimilation. "This refers to the movement of individual subjects from the world of the migrant group into the world of the host group. It takes numerous forms but it always consists in the appropriation of a new reality by the subjects involved. Ordinary social life here is part of the majority society but certain events and occasions that mark specific identity are kept separate (2004)."

But based on observation, this is not just a simple integration or assimilation. Clearly, Filipinos in Venice are exerting some efforts to maintain their Filipino identity. There is a subtle resistance to be fully under the host country's way of living. Life in Venice or life in Europe in general, is so much different compared to life in any part of the Philippines. So does the question, what identity is formed by Filipinos living in Venice?

“The classical image of an immigrant is that he or she makes a home in a foreign place, adapts to another environment, and then assimilates the culture of the receiving country. Linkages and ties with the home country gradually fade away and what remains is perhaps the (unlikely) dream of returning upon retirement...This transnationalism (belonging to both to the community of the host country as well as to the community in the country of origin) can create many conflicts, both in everyday life and at higher levels (Madsen at Naerssen 2004).”

The concepts of transnationalism, migration and identity are interrelated to the broader concept of state borders. With the advancement of technology, these borders have become just physical borders. People from distant places can easily communicate and relate with other people in an instant. The internet has the potential of making these borders, thinner and distances nearer in the future and will open more opportunities and realities in defining transnational identities.

“In time, migrants will develop their identities on the basis of dual attachments to both the host country and the country of origin. Hence, the development of transnationalism that, in addition to the feeling of belonging to two national identities also includes behaviour and activities that connect two countries (Madsen at Naerssen 2004).”

On this part, I will be identifying the signs wherein Filipinos in Venice have manifested their negotiations in the development of transnational identity.

Language and Identity

According to Monsignor Ramazzotti, “Filipinos who are living in Venice should learn the language for their living in Italy.” Thus, he gives free language lessons everyday in the afternoon to Filipinos and other migrants, especially to those who just came to Italy. The children have to take Italian classes for almost a year before they would be able to enroll in a formal

school in Italy. Meanwhile, those who want to work have to learn the Italian language as well. This is how important the language is for Italians.

The importance of English education is very high in Philippines. It is not just a language of communication, but a language of power. Many Filipinos believe that fluency in the English language will give better opportunities in the future, and comes with a high regard in the society. Thus, it is possible to meet Filipinos who were born and grew up in the Philippines who do not speak and understand the Filipino language.

This was also true in Venice. From the 50 children aged 5-13 who attended the language and culture program that we have organised, almost 80% of them do not speak the Filipino language anymore. They speak Italian. They use Italian at home and in school. A parent of one of the kids shared that when they visited Philippines, her daughter did not talk to her cousins and she even said that her cousins should also learn how to speak Italian so they could talk to her.

According to Anthias (2009), “Migrants and their children (and grandchildren) live their lives across borders and in ways which include a range of experiences of people, beliefs, practices and participation around the world. Those living in Italy, for example, have lives which are impacted not only by their own, or their parents’ countries, but also by those of their friends and relations who have migrated to other countries, as well as the global connections and images found within their society of residence. People negotiate different set of social relations – for example and particularly – in terms of gendered norms and practices and in terms of how they should behave. These negotiations are linked to social class, gender and racialisation processes, which in turn link with the resources they can marshal, such as forms of human and social capital, language and so on.”

Should we condemn these kids for not speaking the Filipino language? When the fact is that they are just speaking the language of the people that surround them, they are just using the language that their friends, classmates, and teachers use. The parents lamented that their children are more fluent in Italian compared to them. “It is important to note that the so-called second generation is not a unitary category and is fractured by social differences of gender, class and racialisation as well as different opportunities and exclusions which relate to international, national and local policies

and institutions. They are themselves impacted on in transnational and translocational contexts, often in contradictory ways. Traditionally, the incorporation of migrants and their children has been seen as linked to the countries of destination and their structures of exclusions and inclusions, as well as to the cultural tendencies of the migrants themselves (Anthias 2009).”

However, it is interesting to note that these Filipino children may not speak the Philippines’ national language, but they do speak their parent’s mother tongue. There are more than 7,000 islands in the Philippines and there are eight major languages and more than a hundred dialects spoken in the whole country. And, these Filipino children in Venice speak both Italian and a Philippine dialect such as Ilocano and Bisaya. So why bother teaching them the Philippine national language? It is because it is the main essence of a national language, to have a meeting point whenever people from different parts of the country, who speak different languages, can still communicate in a common language, which is the Filipino. And this observation also reflects the negotiation in identity formation.

Faith and Identity

“I myself was born on a foreign state, so I know how to live and the difficulties of living in a foreign country. I wanted children who are born here to have that kind of characteristics, that they should know their own culture, their own language, their beautiful way of behaving, caring of the family. These children must know their own roots, know where they come from. Only if they know who they are, what their identity is, they can integrate in Italy. This is because they might lose their own roots, and become not Italian, not Filipino, but somewhere in the middle. And that is very bad. Here in Venice, the church works closely with the civil organization. It is important that we do something for the community,” Monsignor Ramazzotti said.

Italy is the center of Catholicism in Europe, meanwhile, the Philippines is the only Catholic nation in Asia. Because of this, it is not hard for Filipinos to seek for churches and avenues where they can practice their faith in Venice. You can see a Catholic church in almost every corner of the city. In the Philippines, the church plays an important role in communal relations and dynamics of the community. It is the center of many traditions and practice for Filipinos.

It is important to take note that most of the churchgoers in Venice are actually Filipinos. When we went to Venice, we were housed in Chiesa della Fava, headed by Monsignor Ramazzotti. It is not just our home, but it has been the home of the Filipinos in Venice. Every Sunday, Filipinos would fill the whole church for the mass, which is quite uncommon in churches in the city. Thus, the church has been very good and accommodating to the Filipinos.

The church has provided venues for all the activities of the Filipino community. It supports all the projects of the group. It has assigned a part of the church for meetings, and even classes of the Manunggul project. The Monsignor has always been there for the community, from baptism, wedding, sickness, birthday and even death. According to Darwin Gutierrez, the president of the Filipino community, “Fr. Ramazzotti is a very important person in the community. He is like a father and a mother to us. He’s been helping every one of us, from spiritual to financial, moral and legal support. And he does it for free.”

The church has opened the Service Infopoint. “Here in Fava, we have the Service Infopoint, where youngsters who are born here, are doing free community service, to help in documentation works, social security of the Filipinos here and to bring the Italian local government closer to the community. It is a link, and the services are for free. The youngsters are doing that so that they become more aware of the local government, local agencies, work, social security, labor, rights, hospital. It is also important to learn, that paying taxes gives you right,” Fr. Ramazzotti said.

“Identity is a site of struggle, relating to strategies of power, recognition, representation and redistribution. Identities also have a performative aspect related to social participation and action, and to systematic repetitions of actions. In many cases, identity claims are linked to religious or political values and practices (Anthias 2004).”

So how do Filipinos negotiate their Filipino catholicism, their Filipino faith? The Catholic Church is one and the same in every country, but its dynamics change depending on how people practice it. And this was evident on how Filipinos has maintained certain Filipino traditions in practicing their faith. They have a Santacruzian which is being done in the Philippines wherein women dress in Filipiniana, the traditional Filipina dress, and

make a procession within the community.

There is also a sect in Philippine Catholicism which is called El Shaddai. And this is also being done in Venice. They have their own Bible study, songs and praises, and sharing of testimonies. For the past years, there is a significant number of Filipinos who have left the Catholic church and have been Born Again Christians. And this phenomenon in the Philippines has also been happening in Venice.

Community and Identity

Most families in Venice are related to one another. In fact, one of the old Church leader said that all Filipinos in the area are her relatives. Some of our students there have been staying for months in Italy. Their parents petitioned most of those children. I've met only a few Filipinos who do not have relatives in Venice. This is why the community serves as a huge family.

Gutierrez said the Filipino community carries out activities and projects to entertain and for them not to forget their Filipino roots. They even help in resolving problems being confronted by Filipino residents and visitors in Venice.

“Cultural security is a dimension of human security consists of the security of personal and collective identity negotiations that are so characteristic of our mobile post modern world. It includes but is not limited to freedom of thought, conscience, language, speech, lifestyle, ethnicity, gender, association, assembly, as well as cultural and political participation. (Tehrani 2004).”

The unity among members of the Filipino community is a step in protecting their interests as migrant workers. It is vital that there is a group that will raise their concerns during hard times. Being a member of a group is also a form on negotiation to maintain their identity as Filipinos.

“Transnational connections help us to understand that at different times and in different contexts people engage and organise differently and their aims as well as related strategies will differ. Variation in the experiences of different generations should not be analysed only in terms of ‘where they were born.’ Instead, the differences that exist socially within migrant populations and their descendants may be linked to stages in the life cycle and

age (Anthias 2009).

The Manunggul Jar Project is an initiative of the Filipino Community so their children and youth will not forget where they came from. During the pre-departure orientation from the Philippines, some youth said that going to Italy is an opportunity for them to have a better life.

January last year, Venice Youth Community Organization (VYCO) was formed through the initiative of community elders. They saw the need to form such a group due to the increasing number of Filipino youth in Venice. The elders say, Filipino youth showed different behaviour as they transfer to a foreign community. Some of them did not show positive reception to changes they are facing. Fr. Ramazzotti said “Those children who came here as youngster, they were different in kind of behaving, very respectful, kind and gentle. And then I saw them changing, they are becoming worse, they are becoming bad. There are youngsters who are kind of rude. When I went to the Philippines, I saw the Filipino culture of kindness, of gentleness, of having the real sense of family and community, something very important.” We’ve met some of those tagged as “problem children” but I constantly reminded myself not to judge them.

But not everyone acted negatively in their new world. Fr. Ramazzoti said “There are children, some who are in best Italian universities, because they are intelligent, they are proving themselves, they become competent, they may become doctors, lawyers. I think that must be the future, the children must be the best; the children must be allowed to improve themselves. And education is the key.” Most of Filipino youth that we’ve met became our partners in teaching children even if they are not really well versed on topics that we were discussing then.

Conclusion

In a month of stay in Italy, I could understand more clearly the situation of migrant Filipinos. Some movies with migration themes showed that living in a foreign country is not really a paradise as opposed to what most Filipinos in the Philippines think. But, within a short time, I understood why some Filipinos have decided to stay in Venice for ten, twenty, or even thirty years and even brought their families there.

If an Individual has a job in Venice, s/he can live a comfortable life, his/

her salary will be enough to provide for self and send money to his/her loved ones back in the Philippines. One also sees where taxes paid in Italy go in the form of efficient social services like education and health services, despite reports of corruption in the government too.

Community leader Erwin Nuguid said “Filipinos in Venice are now more open to getting dual citizenship. One of the reasons is the passport. If you are a Philippine passport holder, you are like a prisoner. You cannot travel to other countries if you do not have US, UK, or other countries visa. The Visa Restriction Index states, Italian passport is third among powerful passports in the world. An Italian passport will allow its holder to enter 172 countries and territories without applying for a visa.

But it is clear to migrant Filipinos in Venice that they will not renounce their Filipino citizenship. The negotiations in retaining Filipino culture and identity will continue, not just to those born and brought up in the Philippines but also to those children and youth born and brought-up in Italy.

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