

Diasporic Dreams, Middle Class Moralities and Migrant Domestic Workers among Muslim Filipinos in Saudi Arabia.¹

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Abstract

This paper is about middle class Muslim Filipinos in Saudi Arabia, their discourses about and relationships with migrant domestic workers in that country. For this group of people, Saudi Arabia is not simply a temporary stopping point to a better future elsewhere. Rather it is also a place where certain middle class aspirations may be realized in the present and where their religious affiliations as Muslims may be seen as enhancing rather than detracting from those dreams and imaginings. As part of a large and diverse diasporic community of Filipinos, middle class Filipinos routinely interact and socialise with other working class Filipinos. They often provide succour and support for those among their compatriots who labour under the most difficult and legally unprotected conditions. Some employ migrant domestic workers in their homes, many of whom are irregular or in common parlance *takas* (escapees). At the same time, they reproduce and reinforce many of the gendered stereotypes of domestic workers that often suggest moral failings of one sort or another. The simultaneous embracing of and distancing from domestic workers reflects the anxieties of those, particularly women, whose tenuous hold of middle class status is accomplished through but also at risk by the precariousness of their sojourns abroad in the Kingdom.

Key Words: Class, Gender, Diaspora, Muslim Filipinos, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Middle class Asian migrants are a largely unreported and under-researched diaspora in the Middle East. Most research on Asian migrants in that part of the world tends to focus on lone, often female domestic workers, who, according to the more general stereotype, are compelled by their children, their parents or the state to leave their home and travel across the world in search of remittance dollars, selling their labour to harsh task masters who subject

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them to the most difficult of working conditions, doing the jobs that no one else wants to do in countries routinely characterised as being the most religiously fanatical, socially conservative and politically oppressive. Recent work has begun to complicate that one dimensional view, attending to the diversity of different migrant experiences in the various receiving countries and highlighting the importance of the Gulf both for middle class and elite Asian migrants and diasporans (Caroline and Filippo Osella 2000, 2008, 2009, Vora 2008, Gardner and Nagy 2008, Nagy 2008, Gardner 2008).

As a contribution to that more nuanced understanding of Asian migrants to the Gulf, this paper considers the nature of the dreams and predicaments of middle class Muslim Filipinos in Saudi Arabia. One of the contradictions they confront is between their dreams of raising a family in an affluent and Islamic country in relatively well paid professional employment and the knowledge that they will never acquire full membership in that country or be able to fully capitalise on their own or their families economic or cultural resources in that place. Like the middle class Indians in Dubai described by Nora (2008), middle class Filipino Muslims in Saudi develop affective attachments to that place. However, that sense of belonging is not only established as producers and consumers of its economy. Rather, their attachments and claims to belonging are established and articulated through their imagined and practically engaged religious identification as diasporan Muslims with the sacred homeland of Islam. As with the Keralese Muslim entrepreneurs, middle class Filipino Muslim migrants view the 'Gulf' in general and Saudi in particular as a literal and metaphoric space of possibility where economic and religious aspirations are not just compatible but inseparably entwined (F. Osella and C. Osella 2009).

At the same time, they are all too aware of their legal exclusions from citizenship in the host society, and they similarly talk about forms of racial inequalities and abuse they encounter there. Though not as affluent as the elite Indian diasporans in Bahrain documented by Gardner (2008), their professional status - together with their ability to mobilize an Islamic ethical discourse – similarly affords them some limited entitlements and protections that are frequently absent from the conditions facing other migrants. That links into the second dilemma or contradiction that characterizes the situation of aspiring middle class Filipino Muslims in Saudi Arabia: that is, between their affinities for, chosen social interactions with and enforced proximity to their working class compatriots and their ongoing struggle for distinction from them.

Parreñas's (2001) comparative class analysis of Filipino domestic workers in Italy and Los Angeles provides a useful point of departure in thinking about the situation in Saudi

Arabia I describe here. In that work, Parreñas presents contrasting case studies of migrant domestic workers' sociality and describes the contradictions between a sense of collectivism and solidarity and a sense of competition and alienation. In Italy, domestic workers' shared class status and marginal position in the host society fosters a sense of ethnic and national solidarity, a feature of Filipino migrant social practices widely noted by others (Pinches 2001, McKay 2005). In Los Angeles, by contrast, migrant domestic workers are part of a much larger Filipino migrant community that includes people who occupy a range of class and status positions. In that situation, class differences among Filipinos override ethnic and national solidarities and generate a sense of alienation among migrant domestic workers. They are positioned at the bottom of the status hierarchy and are excluded from sociability with higher status Filipino-American immigrant settlers.

In Saudi Arabia, as in the USA, there is a large and diverse group of migrants living and working in that country. Differences in class and status, as well as religion and ethnicity, importantly inform both their varied experiences of living in that country and their discourses about and affective relations with one another. At the same time, Filipinos in Saudi Arabia, in common with many migrant groups in the Middle East, have far fewer formal legal rights than they do in the USA, and the experience of racialized exclusions they and others face, commonly reinforces a sense of national solidarity. That situation is by no means unique. Nagy (2008), writing about Filipino migrants in Bahrain suggests that an overarching and self consciously stylized Filipino national identification is constructed in reaction to the perceived racial stereotypes that Filipino women in particular encounter among both Bahraini nationals and other foreign expats. Significantly, however, while national identification transcends ethnic and linguistic distinctions, it does not appear to transcend class distinctions in the same way that it does in the Saudi context. Similarly, while middle class Indians in Dubai articulate a diasporan identity, they both pity and revile the many working class Indians that work in that metropolis and appear to have little if any significant social interaction with them (Nagy 2008).

In Saudi Arabia, Middle class Filipino Muslims not only deploy a transcendent diasporan Muslim identification to articulate a sense of belonging in Saudi Arabia. They also cultivate ethnic and national identifications with and attachments to home country and home place that enable and mobilize social connection between them across class and occupational status, predisposing them to celebrate together and come to each other's aid. Of particular significance here is the way that support is given by taking in and employing migrant domestic workers who have left or run away from abusive employers. As I demonstrate, that

situation is structured both by the particular ethnic positions and class situations that minority Muslim groups occupy in the Philippines and by the specific situations that they encounter in Saudi Arabia.

Parreñas's analysis primarily concerns migrant domestic workers and the way that the stratification of the Christian Filipino community in Los Angeles affects them. In this paper I am primarily concerned with married middle class professional Muslim Filipinos who live together with their children in Riyadh.² Their experiences of and discourses about fellow mainly Muslim Filipino migrant domestic workers provide a lens through which to analyse and understand something of their lives there and the dilemmas that they face and encounter.

It is precisely here, moreover, that Parreñas's class analysis is usefully linked with those gendered analyses of transnational families (Pingol 2001, Parreñas 2005, Silvey 2006). Though there are new forms of family arising from adjustment to absent spouses, institutionalised norms and regulatory ideals of sexuality, marriage and the family both in the home and host societies continue to stigmatise and exacerbate the inequalities and difficulties of migrant women's transnational reproductive labour (see also Manalansan 2006, Constable 2009). Extending that analysis, I emphasise the class dimensions of the idealised heteronormative nuclear family, especially in the context of migration and diaspora where residence with one's spouse and children in the migrant destination society is often both an aspiration and measure of middle class achievement. That is equally, if not especially, true for Muslim Filipinos in Saudi Arabia as it is for others in Europe and North America, where marital, family and residential status reflects the social distinction of some migrants as much as other factors, such as employment in one's chosen occupation. The two are of course materially linked in so far as the latter facilitates and enables the former. My interest here is the way that those material differences are registered and expressed as moral or symbolic distinctions.

As already indicated, one expression, in the Saudi context, of the care and compassion of middle class women and men for their fellow compatriots is assisting migrant domestic workers. At the same time, migrant domestic workers ease the lives of middle class families

² It is important to be clear that unless otherwise specified, I am talking about Filipino Muslim experiences in Saudi Arabia in this paper. The reason for that is because the research on which this paper was based was primarily with Muslim Filipinos. I am therefore unable to comment in a knowledgeable way on whether or not and in what respects Christian Filipino experiences in Saudi Arabia are different from that of their Muslim counterparts. The choice to study Filipino Muslims reflected both the chosen aims of the research – to investigate the importance of the religious imagination among migrants in a place considered sacred to them – and was an enforced necessity as the local sponsor, the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, made it a condition of research that we focus on Muslim rather than Christian Filipinos owing to political sensitivities about prohibitions on religious gatherings among non-Muslim groups.

in Saudi Arabia, even as their presence in the home reinforces their class distinction. It does so in a number of ways. First, the very fact that middle class Filipino migrant families are able to afford a domestic worker in their home is evidence of these middle class families' greater affluence. Second, the primary role that migrant domestic workers play is to take care of children, whose presence - in the case of professional couples - and absence (in the case of the domestic worker) confirms both the material success and the moral superiority of their Filipino employers.

Just as migrant domestic workers in middle class migrant households make plain the distinctions between them, they also expose the shakiness of their female employer's position since without domestic labour in the home the latter risk losing their jobs in a situation where domestic work is defined as women's work and there are rarely extended family members available to call on for support. Leaving employment not only threatens a woman's claims to professional status, but also significantly reduces her quality of life in Saudi Arabia, far more than would be the case at home in the Philippines. In fact, the more general argument I make in this paper is that despite their differences, it is the similarities and proximity between middle class and working class migrants in Saudi Arabia, and in particular the precariousness of the former's class and status position, that leads them to highlight and extend their superior status. That is especially true for married middle class migrant women who, though occupying different symbolic and material positions, struggle with and against the possibilities and constraints of prevailing Islamic gendered normative ideas of femininity, as lived and experienced in the Saudi diaspora. These bind and separate them from domestic workers in class-specific ways.

Situating Filipino Migrants in Saudi Arabia

There are well over one million Filipino migrant workers in Saudi Arabia (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration 2007a, p. 43). Saudi Arabia continues to be the destination attracting the largest number of Filipinos (with some 90,000 new hires in recent years) and is second only to the USA both in terms of remittances and the total number of overseas Filipinos (ibid, p. 5). Though the predominant image of Asian migrants in the Middle East is of the domestic worker (in the case of women) and the general labourer or construction worker (in the case of men), the more than one million Filipino migrants living in the country can be found across many economic and occupational sectors of Saudi society. They work as accountants, artists, beauticians, book binders, clerks, computer programmers, drivers, doctors, electricians, engineers, farmers, fire fighters, gardeners, herders, IT

technicians, jewellers, knitters, labourers, machinists, managers, midwives, nannies, nurses, optometrists, pharmacists, statisticians, scientists, teachers, tailors, upholsterers, university professors, vets and waiters, to name just a few (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration 2007b).

Relative to other countries where migrant Filipinos live and work (outside of the immigrant Filipino population in the United States), Saudi Arabia in fact offers not just the most but the greatest range of employment opportunities. Female domestic work and male manual labour together account for twenty-five per cent of Filipinos migrants, but the remaining seventy-five per cent work across a wide range of occupations (see Table 1 below). That may be compared to the situation in many migrant destination countries where there is preponderance of Filipinos in a single occupational niche: female domestic workers accounting for the majority of overseas Filipino workers in Hong Kong, Singapore, Jordan, Lebanon, Italy and Spain; female caregivers for the elderly in Israel and the UK; female entertainers in Japan, and male and female production, i.e. factory, workers in Taiwan and South Korea. In the Gulf States, Filipinos are primarily employed as domestic workers in Kuwait and Oman, while Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain are more like Saudi Arabia in the overall range of occupations that they hold in those countries. Saudi Arabia, however, has the highest proportion of migrant Filipinos working in Professional and Technical occupations (seventeen per cent), with roughly equal numbers of women and men - though clearly segregated along gender lines: women work predominately in nursing and other health-related professions and men in various engineering sectors.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Recent writing on the middle classes in the Philippines has emphasized variously its relatively small scale and minimal growth in the latter part of the twentieth century, and their concentration in the capital region of Manila. Scholars have distinguished in occupational terms between the 'old', the 'new' and the 'marginal' middle classes (Pinches 1996, 1999; Bautista 2001; Kimura 2003). The 'new' middle classes refer to professional and technical workers and wage and salary earning administrators, executives and managers while the marginal middle classes refer to wage and salary earning clerical workers. The 'old' middle classes refer to non-professional, non-technical self-employed landowners and merchant traders (Kimura 2003: 265). In Saudi Arabia there are relatively few clerical workers and fewer managerial level positions. The middle class Filipinos there are primarily professional and technical workers, some of whom may also be entrepreneurs setting up small business

ventures on the side. As the figures in Tables 2 and 3 suggest, though the relative proportion of Filipinos across all middle class occupational categories is slightly lower than that in the Philippines as a whole (nineteen per cent in the Saudi-Arabia as compared to twenty-four per cent in the Philippines), the proportion of professional and technical workers is significantly higher than in the Philippines (seventeen per cent as compared to seven per cent).

INSERT TABLES 2 &3 ABOUT HERE

If Saudi is an important, if relatively overlooked and understudied, destination for Filipino professionals in general (Pinches 1999: 281), then it is even more so for Filipino Muslim professionals. Muslim groups in the Philippines are among the most socially disadvantaged and impoverished (Gutierrez and Danguilan-Vitug 2000: 196-7). Educated Muslim Filipinos have fewer opportunities for professional employment in the Philippines than their Christian compatriots (see Table 4). That is not just because there are fewer

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professional employment opportunities in predominately Muslim areas in Mindanao, but also because Muslim Filipinos are, or at least perceive themselves to be, unfairly discriminated against by employers in majority Christian areas such as Manila where the majority of professional jobs are. Saudi Arabia, by contrast, is seen by Filipino Muslims to offer the prospect of employment in which their religious affiliation as Muslims is at the very least not going to count against them and is more likely to count in their favour.

For educated Filipino Muslims, their sojourns to Saudi Arabia are situated as part of a longer term trajectory of upward social mobility both for themselves in the present and for their families in the future. One example is the family of Buddi and Amira, a married couple who live with their four children in Riyadh. Amira has been living and working in Saudi Arabia since 1992, when she first became a hospital pharmacist. The move to Saudi Arabia was part of consolidating her own and her family's middle class status. This was based originally on a barter trading business in the Southern Philippines and subsequently on a currency exchange firm in Manila. Buddi has been living and working as an IT specialist in Saudi Arabia since 1993. His move to the Kingdom builds on a longer series of advances in his family's status - from a poor barangay to a middle class neighbourhood in Zamboanga and from there to Manila where he completed his college degree. From his base in Riyadh he has helped initiate the Young Moro Professional Association back in the Philippines and has co-founded the Tausug Network, an online community of both diasporic and nationally based Muslim Filipinos from Western Mindanao and Sulu. For both Amira and Buddi, obtaining a university education and professional qualifications, and finding well paid employment

abroad in their chosen careers, secured the cultural and economic capital of their new middle class status.

Filipino Muslims making middle class lives in Saudi Arabia

Though life in Saudi Arabia was rarely described as ideal, there were a number of factors cited by middle class Filipino Muslims that made it not just bearable but even a significantly better place to live than the Philippines. In addition to the opportunity to work in their chosen fields, professionals earn significantly more (tax free) than they do at home and considerably more than fellow production and service workers. Such wage differentials mean that there is more money to remit and invest in property and business ventures both at home and abroad. It also means more disposable income to spend in Saudi Arabia on housing, transport and other consumer items, though none of the middle class professionals I encountered were conspicuous consumers on the scale of the 'new' rich, aspiring middle classes in the Philippines (Pinches 1996, 1999).

Those employed in professional occupations are also more likely to have better working conditions, with health and other benefits (often absent in the Philippines) and in some instances paid annual leave, as opposed to holidays that are simply taken at one's own expense between contracts. One of the most important benefits of a professional occupation, however, is the status and financial wherewithal accorded by Saudi immigration laws to bring over family and dependents, including visiting parents or siblings.

Middle class Filipino Muslims often mentioned the stability and security of life in Saudi Arabia compared to that back in their home place. They cited the absence of crime and violence and the stricter moral codes as reasons they preferred not just to live in Saudi Arabia but also to raise their children there. Irrespective of whether they regarded themselves as especially pious, Muslim Filipino migrants also talked about the importance of living in a country that was 'modern', affluent and Islamic, and about how important it was that their being a Muslim was not, as it was back in the Philippines, a hindrance or barrier to social belonging or advancement. Those who did present themselves as more observant, moreover, often highlighted the importance of living in a place where daily public life was organised around prayer times, when shops shut and prayer mats were rolled out. Going on *hajj* and *umrah* pilgrimage was an important bonus. For middle class people, however, these were not just once-in-a-lifetime experiences, as one man put it, a 'consolation prize' for a life of abject menial labour. Rather, pilgrimage to Mecca and Madina were integrated into their annual

calendar and the projected life course of their children. They looked forward to praying at the Haram mosque during Ramadan and taking a son or daughter on their first pilgrimage.

All of this is not to suggest that life in Saudi Arabia was idealised. No matter how long they live there or how many times they renew their contracts, migrants still have little hope of becoming either permanent residents or citizens. They are also forbidden to own property. These constraints not only limit their long term prospects and sense of belonging in that country, but restrain their conspicuous consumption. Though cars and petrol are relatively cheap, and for most middle class families a car was one of the most visible material markers of their status, the cost of housing was considerably more expensive than in the Philippines, especially in major urban areas such as Riyadh. Most people I knew were loath to pay exorbitant rents for something they would not be able to keep. Like Filipino migrants elsewhere, they invested their money in houses and property back in the Philippines.

The one thing that middle class people repeatedly talked about was the perceived racist attitudes and prejudices of people in the host society. That widespread feeling of racism engendered a sense of Filipino national identity and camaraderie, of being fellow *kababayans* (McKay, this issue; Ong 2010) that cuts across both class and religious divides. Among Filipino Muslims in particular, that shared experience of racism also reinforces the conviction that despite the religious advantages of living in the homeland of Islam, birthplace of the prophet, Saudis were not necessarily any better or truer Muslims than they were. Their perceived lavish and conspicuous wealth, on the one hand, and the unfair and demeaning treatment of their employees, on the other, was repeatedly cited as evidence of Saudi spiritual poverty. For some middle class people, this was a self-consciously articulated reason for living in modest and simple ways.

Though Arab attitudes towards Asians, including Filipinos, were seen as particularly extreme, middle class Filipinos also talked about those racial attitudes as part of a more widespread and global system of inequalities based on national and racialised identities:

‘Saudis were racist,’ Amira said. She was paid 7500 Riyals a month, but they would hire a Saudi to do the same job for more: British, Americans or Europeans, twice as much again. ‘Just because you are white, does that mean you are really more educated and better at the job than we are?’ Amira pointedly asked me later. ‘That,’ Amira said, was the reason she was giving up her work as there were no prospects for promotion. She was ‘fed up with her Saudi work colleagues.’ Though she was the pharmacist, the male Saudi clerks looked down on her and treated her with disrespect (fieldnotes, April, 2009).

Issues of race clearly intersect with those of gender. For women, more so than men, living together as a married couple in Saudi Arabia significantly altered their experiences of life in that place. Married middle class women, have easier and greater access to a range of social events and places through their husbands, from eating out in restaurants and shopping to attending or providing religious events at da'wah centres. At the same time, their increased dependency on men for access to the world outside the home and workplace reflects the general downward shift in public social status of women in Saudi Arabia and in some ways offset the gains in economic and social status acquired through their employment in their chosen professions. They are nevertheless generally better off than single and lone migrant women, with comparatively better working conditions and more leisure time than those employed in domestic or factory work. The strict gender codes that effectively exclude lone women in public spaces mean those lone migrant women's ventures out are largely restricted to group activities often organised by their employer. They are also more likely to be asked to work odd hours and weekend shifts than their married counterparts with children.

Filipino Muslim women routinely talked about the various restrictions they faced especially on movement. Most were already in the habit of wearing the *hijab* prior to living in the Kingdom. They compared their situation in Saudi Arabia both to what they experienced at home and, just as tellingly, to their white Western counterparts who were not only paid better but also lived in more salubrious, gated communities and who were much less restricted and subject to surveillance. While there were aspects of the Saudi ways of doing things in matters of gender that were seen by some women as more in conformity with the moral precepts of Islam than in the Philippines, most women thought that the norms and sanctions in that country were too 'extreme', reflecting different cultural practices and traditions (*adat*) rather than Qur'anic injunctions. Their wariness towards men in the host society, moreover, often combined both an anxiety about being called to account for a perceived violation of the gender code and the suspicion that men they encountered, be they police, *mutawah* (religious police) or civilians, may have 'something else' on their minds. Thus, as more than one woman told me, the first thing she checked on leaving the house is whether she had their residency papers (*iqama*), indicating her professional employment, and a copy of her marriage certificate. The two together provided some security and guaranteed a safe and trouble-free passage to her destination.

Employing a Filipino domestic worker

Muslim Filipino women, like their Christian counterparts, are generally regarded as the primary carers for their children and generally in charge of household affairs and domestic duties. This is a view reinforced by Saudi gendered norms. Middle class Filipino migrant women shoulder in practice the lion's share of the responsibility for care in the home. It is they who initiate the search for a domestic worker since they find the prospect of being tied to the house without employment unbearable. Without domestic help to free them for work, they not only experience a loss of status but may also face isolation.

This was Nora's problem, a midwife married to a computer programmer. She had been at home looking after the couple's three young children, the eldest of whom was six and the youngest still an infant. Sitting in her home and within earshot of her husband she eagerly recounted to me stories about her colleagues and her work in the hospital and disclosed her desperation to go back to work. She was bored and out of sorts, confined within her home, she said, waiting every evening for her husband to get home from work and reliant on the occasional visits of family from another city for sociability. Once their youngest had stopped breast feeding, she was determined that they would find a nanny so that she could resume her work once more.

Employing a Filipina domestic worker in Saudi Arabia, however, is by no means a straightforward process for non-Saudis. For Filipinos there are effectively two ways to secure someone to work in the home. The first is to rent a work permit/visa sponsorship from a Saudi national. This is what Buddi and Amira did. The worker was a distant relative (sister's daughter of Buddi's maternal grandmother) who the couple referred to simply as 'Aunty'. They paid a Saudi contact a one off payment of 8000 Riyals (roughly equivalent to the man's monthly wages) for the use of a sponsorship visa (*kafala*) for a domestic worker and driver. One visa was used for the aunty, the other for Buddi's nephew who worked as a technician outside of the house. However, the Saudi contact had recently had her first child and she wanted a nanny, so she was no longer willing to rent out her sponsorship visa for a domestic worker. This meant that she was unwilling to renew Aunty's visa and Aunty had to return home leaving Amira in something of a dilemma which I discuss further below.

The practice of buying, selling or renting work permits and visas is reported by Filipinos to be widespread in Saudi Arabia. However, from what I was able to observe and what was reported to me by others, it appears that many people do not bother with acquiring legal papers and may simply take in and informally employ a domestic worker who has left her Saudi employer. In fact, with the exception of Buddi and Amira, all of the domestic workers in the homes of my middle class acquaintances were reported to be *takas*, literally on

the run or ‘escapees’; that is, domestic workers who had left their Saudi employers’ homes and were now living and working illegally, without papers, outside of the terms of their work visa, which remains tied to their original sponsor. Some have no passport and identity card (*iqama*) as these were still held by their previous employer.

Domestic work in Saudi households was often described both by domestic workers and by others, including Saudis, as being something of a lottery. Some domestic workers were lucky and found themselves working for good Arab employers who paid decent wages, on time, treated them with respect, set and kept to agreed working hours, and sometimes paid for or assisted them and their families to go on Umrah and Hajj. The less fortunate, however, found themselves working for harsh employers in households where they experienced emotional and physical abuse. As a recent Human Rights Watch report (2008) on domestic work in Saudi Arabia makes clear, whereas there are now some legal rights and protection for non-domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, there are few legal rights or protection for domestic workers. These remain almost entirely at the mercy of their employers’ whims. Three of the four domestic workers that I met in the homes of fellow Filipinos told me they left their Saudi employers because of physical and, in one case, sexual abuse. Another had been the victim of contract substitution: trained as a teacher, she signed a contract in the Philippines to work as a medical secretary. On arrival in the Kingdom she discovered that her contract had been sold to someone who expected her to work as a domestic helper. She left the family when the eldest son started making sexual advances towards her. The day she walked out on her employer she called a taxi to take her to a busy shopping centre. There she called a distant cousin who came and picked her up. The cousin’s wife was a nurse working in the same hospital as the woman that she now worked for.

Taking on a Filipino domestic worker who is *takas* into one’s home is not only a way to obtain a nanny or other household help. As important as that is, for those migrant households with young and school age children where both partners work, and in the absence of extended family to assist with childcare, it also acknowledges moral responsibility. Affording protection to *takas* is about responding with pity and compassion (*maulung*) to those in need. It is linked to a discourse common among middle class Filipino Muslims as well as among domestic workers themselves that characterises those who abuse their domestic workers as irreligious and uneducated. It further articulates the need for ethnic and national solidarity in the face of common experiences of social exclusion and marginality. Taking in irregular domestic workers potentially places each party in a precarious legal situation. Domestic workers who leave their employers’ household face the risk of

imprisonment and deportation; those who harbour escaped and irregular workers face heavy fines or deportation if caught.

The practice illustrates the importance and extent of Filipino social networks (de Regt 2008). In Saudi Arabia, those networks of family, kin and co-diasporans cut across class divisions. They often have one or more married, middle class men and women at their core. Those who provide a safety net for their compatriots also play a key leadership role in the various Filipino voluntary organisations. These range from worker's associations to sports groups that raise money for charity at home, offer advice and assistance for fellow migrants, set up madrasahs or simply arrange basketball tournaments. While the membership of some of the groups is more diverse than others in terms of religious, ethnic or place-based affiliation, the majority appear to cut across class lines: men tend to predominate and take a more active public role in those associations. In addition to the more formal voluntary organizations, there are also loose affiliations of people who regularly meet and socialise privately. Those groups are less likely to cut across religious and ethnic divides but will nonetheless cut across class lines. Middle class women are more likely to play an active part in these groups as hosts, sponsors and facilitators for social events and functions that range from informal evening and weekend gatherings in someone's home or a rented villa to formal occasions such as weddings, *hakika* ceremonies and religious festivals. Such occasions enable and indeed are sometimes deliberately planned in such a way as to afford less affluent and working class migrants, especially lone female domestic workers, the chance to meet and interact with fellow Filipinos in a relatively safe and protected environment.

It would thus be mistaken to construe the situation described here as one in which middle class people have simply made a virtue of necessity (the need for domestic help) and taken advantage of another's predicament (the escape of domestic workers from abusive employers). At the same time, it would be wrong to gloss over the way that the unequal and legally unprotected relationship between Filipino domestic workers and their Filipino employers remains. Escaped women continue to be vulnerable and reliant on the good will and behaviour of the people for whom they work. Though they may no longer be physically confined in the same way that they are in some Saudi homes, their social indebtedness to the people who have provided them with sanctuary, and their anxieties about being caught by the police without their residency papers, act to further constrain them.

Middle class Filipinos claim to pay better wages to their Filipino employees and provide a more congenial and culturally familiar setting, though not necessarily more comfortable. Domestic workers eat with the family and share the same food, though they live

in generally more cramped and less salubrious accommodation than that provided by their Saudi employers. I was only able to meet and talk with *takas* women in the presence of their employers, so it was impossible to confirm that their situation was as cosy and congenial as it appeared on the surface to be. It seems reasonable to suppose that the same cross-cutting kinship links and social networks that helped facilitate their escape also help to ensure they are treated reasonably well by their Filipino employers. Nonetheless, based both on Pingol's observations and conversations with other women who had left Arab employers and were working as irregular migrants in non-domestic situations for fellow Filipinos and what is widely reported of domestic workers relations with their employers elsewhere (e.g. Constable 2007, Lan 2006) there are also good grounds for thinking that those women are far more ambivalent about their work situation than they chose to reveal to me. Moreover, as I describe below, alongside talk about domestic workers that often emphasises the harsh regimes they face and that force them to leave their Saudi employers, are other ways of talking about fellow migrants that cast them in a much more ambivalent light.

Middle Class Moralities and the other side of Takas.

I recall an encounter. It is seven pm in Riyadh and Buddi and I are sitting in one of the many American style fast food outlets drinking coffee and eating Buddi's favourite chocolate and cream-filled donuts. We are waiting for a call from two couples who have agreed to introduce me to two domestic workers living and working in their households, both of whom are *takas*. While we wait, Buddi relates his own views of 'DH' (domestic helpers) and 'takas' as he refers to these women. He says that while some escape because of abuse, others leave to try and find better paid work. Domestic helpers don't follow their Saudi bosses' orders, he told me, because they think there is the possibility of escape and finding some new and better work. He laughs and shakes his head. He tells me that as soon as they are in one job, they are calling friends or being called by others who tell them there is another place to work with a higher salary, nicer boss or better living conditions. Even he had a bad experience with a previous maid, a *takas*, who they had taken to work in their home. They had gone on holiday to visit Amira's brother in Dammam, and he asked his own brother to check in on the house and maid while they were away and to keep an eye on things. He returned early with his eldest son. When he got home he found that his maid had invited a boyfriend around to the house. He said that he dismissed her but didn't tell Amira the real reason. Rather, he told her that the maid had some trouble and went to relatives. He knew she would be really angry not just with the maid but also with his brother for not keeping a closer eye on things.

When Buddi told me that domestic workers do not obey their bosses, there was a glimmer of admiration in his eye. He recognised that like him, they too are active agents and risk-takers who have gambled a good deal for the prospect of a better life. At the same time, his knowing laugh, his designation of them as DH and takas, and the swift shift in tone and tenor as he spoke about them signalled the significant differences he recognised between them. Domestic workers are by his reckoning trapped in an endless and ultimately quixotic quest for the perfect employer. By contrast, he had already achieved some measure of success as demonstrated among other things by the fact that he was employed at a decent wage in his chosen career; that he was setting up a web development business on the side with a Sudanese colleague; that his wife and children were living with him; that they were able to drive their own car cross-country on a holiday to visit relatives; and finally, that they had the means to pay for a *takas* domestic worker in their home.

That statement of class difference and privilege, however, is not just predicated on the unspoken distinction between the educated professional and the uneducated unskilled service worker with nothing to offer but their labour. Buddi was aware that not all domestic workers are uneducated and that educated professionals sometimes find themselves working as tea boys and nannies. Rather, it is more fundamentally predicated in the eyes of Filipinos on moral character and divine blessing. Success in finding and holding a good job, whether professional employment or not, is variously attributed to personal ability, hard work, determination, strong moral character, good fortune and divine blessing (*ridjiki*) in a situation where it is commonly agreed the odds are routinely stacked against you. It is, in other words, a narrative of struggle in which God rewards those who help themselves. Failure to find and hold on to successful employment, while also understood to be a matter of bad luck and difficult circumstances, is implicitly attributed to some perceived character flaw, be it indolence or immorality.

The following story provides an illustration of this moral judgement. It concerns Adam, a middle class man who employs a *takas* in his home, who was able to overcome adversity through talent and application. Adam had initially been hired in the Philippines as an IT specialist. On arrival in Saudi, however, he discovered that his contract had been sold on to and substituted for another, that of a teaboy in a bank. According to the story, the bank manager eventually observed his hard work and intelligence and when one of his tellers was off sick and Adam asked if he could take over for just one day, his boss agreed. When his boss saw what a good job he had done, he was made permanent and subsequently promoted to supervisor.

Pinches (1999) has shown that the discourse of hard work and enterprise is a general feature of the way that new rich and aspiring Christian Filipino middle classes in the Philippines distinguish themselves from the old elites. Similarly, new middle class Muslim Filipinos contrast themselves from corrupt political and economic dynasties in the Southern Philippines. On an everyday basis, however, it is not the old-style elites back home with whom middle class migrants compare themselves, but rather the sorts of people that they encounter and interact with on an everyday basis in Saudi Arabia. These are, on the one hand, Saudi nationals, who are often routinely characterised in stereotypical ways as lazy and uneducated, and who in some sense occupy the place of the old elites in the Philippines; on the other hand are their fellow Filipinos, specifically those identified as working class.

Such moral distinctions may reflect the continuing influence of American culture, shaped by and inflected by shared and distinctive idioms among both Christian and Muslim middle classes, as Pinches suggests (1999). Among middle class Filipino Muslims, in particular, it is shaped and inflected by a modernist Islamic idiom, which Rudnycky (2009a, 2009b), in the context of Indonesia, characterises as ‘market Islam’ (see also F. Osella and C. Osella 2009). Rudnycky notes that this is not a version of the prosperity religion advocated by El Shaddai (Wiegele 2005), but rather one concerned with ‘inculcating the kind of ethical dispositions deemed conducive to greater competitiveness in the global economy’ (2009, p. 187).

Thus, for example, Buddi told me that while his sisters had worked hard and done well for themselves, he alone out of the four brothers had completed his education and had made a career for himself. The others had, literally in the case of his elder brother who died violently as a teenager, wasted their lives on sex and drugs. He too had almost ended up going that way, he said, having achieved minor celebrity status as a rap star in the Philippines. He left his career in music when he rediscovered Islam. His spiritual renewal coincided with his initial sojourn in Saudi Arabia and his first Hajj pilgrimage. Since that time, his focus was on religion and business and, since he got married, his wife and children. His role model was his mother who, though never overtly religious, was good at business. She had taught him about the value of a good name and making the most of the opportunities that life affords you. Following the ‘straight path’, as he described it, provided the self-discipline and focus required for achievement in this life as well as preparing one for the next. There was no distinction to be made between religion and business, he told me. Everything was an act of worship to be done in accordance with the teachings of the prophet.

Moral and religious discourses are also gendered. Fellow migrants know that women in domestic employment work long hours often in the most difficult of circumstances. It is also acknowledged that the work they do is sacrificial, labouring not for their own pleasure or advancement but for others, their children in particular, and their future prospects. ‘At least’, as Buddi told me on another occasion, ‘if they cannot better themselves, they can help to make life better for their children.’ But, as Parreñas (2005) suggests, it is precisely that contradictory position of having to leave one’s children to make their life better through work abroad that discredits them.

For a man or woman or both to have to leave younger and school-age children behind is already a statement of their impoverished social and economic status³. Buddi’s brother, who works as a waiter in a restaurant that primarily caters to Filipinos, lives with his wife, who is a medical secretary, in Riyadh. However, because of their visa status and level of income they are not able to bring their children to live with them. Rather, the children live with his wife’s parents back home. Talking to this brother about his children, it was clear that he not only suffered the pain of separation but also the humiliation of a situation that he blamed both on his misspent youth and his lack of application.

A woman who leaves her husband and children for work abroad may be viewed by the middle classes in particular with even more suspicion and anxiety than when men go abroad to work. The suspicion is that they are not or cannot be proper wives or mothers and this is mixed with anxiety about what sexual misfortunes or misadventures might befall them. Although Saudis widely rely on the labour of lone migrant women in the home, at the same time they regard them as violating gender codes that define respectable femininity. Buddi’s account of domestic workers who leave their employers to seek out better wages and invite boyfriends around to the house, repeats almost verbatim what I was told by other women and men, both Filipinos and the few Saudi nationals I met and spoke with about my research. The

³ Whether or not one is able to bring family is a common measure of success and status among Filipino migrants at least in European and North American contexts. Parreñas (2001, 2005) discusses the citizenship hierarchies in the USA that create distinctions among migrants there. I suspect that Christian Filipinos working in Saudi Arabia may not view separation from their spouse or children in quite the same way that Muslim Filipinos do owing to the restrictions placed on Christian religious observance. In terms of family structure and life course, it was generally expected that children would return to the Philippines and Manila in particular for higher education. As with college age students in the Philippines who move away from family home to attend University, arrangements would be made to ensure that they were looked after by a relative.

term ‘takas’, especially as applied to domestic workers, situates them either as innocent victims or as wily sexual predators. Buddi’s brother, despite his empathy for and reported practical assistance of those who were *takas*, was more direct: ‘some of them [takas] are bad girls, looking for a Filipino guy to take care of them. They say they are looking for a guy, even if [it means] living illegally just to have someone look after them. It may be the last solution [resort], but not many are looking for other work.’

In my experience such pejorative comments were not usually made publicly in the presence of or directed towards someone who is a domestic worker, especially not in front of strangers. The one exception that I observed and was inadvertently drawn into was an exchange that took place between Amira and her sister Smyrna during Amira’s visit to the Philippines. Smyrna, who I had not previously met, lives at home with her parents and works in the family business in Manila, which is where the encounter took place. Over the course of one evening, before and during a shared meal with their parents, and in between other bits of conversation, Amira repeatedly made what I perceived to be derogatory remarks about Smyrna. Dressed in long skirt and blouse and wearing a patterned *hijab*, Amira commented first on Smyrna’s clothing (she was wearing jeans and a t-shirt), remarking that her sister never wore the *hijab* and was always dressed in a sexually provocative manner. Later Amira said to me, ‘Dr. Mark, why don’t you interview my sister about her experiences abroad?’ When I started to ask Smyrna about her experiences, Amira continually interrupted talking over Smyrna and divulging that her sister had been a domestic worker and had never completed her education and that she had supported a good-for-nothing (now ex-) husband and their (now) grown up son who lived with his father in the South. Smyrna, sat picking at her food throughout the meal, tried to ignore Amira and get a word in edgeways. Finally, she left the table without a word and did not return.

Whatever the hidden meanings of this exchange, for me it perpetuated the stereotypes of domestic workers prevalent among upwardly mobile middle class migrants. Amira’s outburst also has to be contextualized by her own circumstances, of trying to secure her status as a professional woman. I noted earlier that the ‘aunty’ who worked for her and Buddi had been compelled to return to the Philippines since the sponsorship visa had been reclaimed by the Saudi vendor. Following her departure, Amira left her job as a pharmacist at the hospital because, she said, of the racism of co-workers. Buddi, however, suggested that the real reason Amira was leaving was because there was no longer anyone to look after their children in the home.

When I met Amira again, she was in the Philippines to renew her contract as a pharmacist in the hospital where she had previously worked. The new contract offered more money than before and paid holidays including trips back to the Philippines. It also meant that the couple could afford to pay for the requisite visa and residency papers to hire someone to look after the children, and she was there to collect and accompany Aunty back with her to Saudi Arabia.

Amira told me that Buddi and the kids really missed her when she was away, especially her cooking, since Buddi only cooked the most basic of dishes. Buddi's younger, single sister who worked at another hospital was taking time after her shifts to attend to the children and help with the cooking and cleaning. Buddi had requested that if Amira was delayed in obtaining her visa, she should go ahead and send Aunty on her own. She said that before she left, a friend's husband had jokingly told her that she should let Buddi marry a second wife so that at least they wouldn't have to worry about securing a domestic helper. Her reported retort was that she would rather ask him for a divorce.

Diasporic Dilemmas: Social Proximity and the Precariousness of Class

On a trip to Manila in January, 2010 I was on the phone to Farida, a member of the Young Moro Professional Association. I caught her on her way to the airport as she was about to fly to Marawi City in Mindanao. On hearing about my research in Saudi Arabia and my interest in Muslim Filipino professionals, she told me that she grew up in Jeddah and was a Saudi kid herself. A graduate of the Institute of Islamic Studies at the University of the Philippines, Diliman, she had also been a Chevening scholar at Oxford. When she was looking for a flat in the UK, people asked if she was a domestic worker. 'Everyone thinks that Filipinos are just domestic workers.'

Middle class Filipinos in particular, both in the Philippines and elsewhere, have self-consciously resisted and sought to overcome their stereotyping as a 'nation of servants' in the global economy (Pinches 1999; Amrith this volume). As suggested here migrant domestic workers bear the stigma or moral stain of those whose life does not measure up to the class, gendered and familial expectations of middle class aspirations. The extensive literature on migrant domestic workers has repeatedly demonstrated how racialized assumptions about Asian women's 'natural' skills in care and domestic work are frequently accompanied by attributions of moral failings of one sort or another (e.g. Constable 2007, Lan 2006 and the contributors to this volume). What is distinct about the situation described here is the way that those moral judgements and assertions act not to reinforce social differences between

people who occupy secure and distinctive positions in the racial and economic hierarchies they inhabit. Rather, in the opposite manner, I suggest that it is precisely the proximity of middle class professionals to the social and material worlds and circumstances of their working class compatriots, as well as the tenuous and precarious nature of their attempts to achieve and stabilize a middle class existence in the diaspora that informs the reproduction of the stereotypes that are mobilised to reinforce and maintain the distinctions between them.

Middle class Filipinos encounter the same racial hierarchies as migrant domestic workers that routinely position them as ‘servants of globalization’ despite their professional credentials. Notwithstanding their higher wages, better working conditions and greater disposable incomes, those racial hierarchies exclude them from the most senior and best paying positions. Though they often live for many years in Saudi Arabia and raise their families there, the legal strictures that prohibit both citizenship and property accumulation effectively constrain and reduce the visible markers of class distinctions that might otherwise be the case back in the Philippines or in permanently established Filipino diasporas in North America. It is not just proximity or shared social circumstances that unite them. Rather, as I have also demonstrated, middle class people actively choose to associate and routinely interact with and provide succour and assistance for those who occupy different class and status positions on the basis of shared ethnic, national, religious and place-based identifications. Those affiliations are sometimes further reinforced by family and kinship ties that also cut across class lines.

Finally there is the intimate sharing of gender predicaments that links middle class women and those women who work in their homes, and to whom they sometimes give shelter. On the one hand, working in Saudi Arabia as professionals confirms and enhances women’s middle class status among their fellow Filipinos both at home and in diaspora. But that status may be challenged by racism and sexism encountered in the work place even as their overall role and status in the public sphere outside of work and the domestic sphere is significantly diminished. On the other hand, married middle class Filipino women also benefit both materially and symbolically from their conformity to normative ideals of femininity, living with and taking care of their husband and children. In this situation, unlike in the Philippines, there are no available kin to assist with domestic and reproductive labour, nor are household workers and nannies so easily obtainable, much less nurseries or after-school clubs.

Middle class Filipino Muslim migrants like Amira both benefit from and bear the double burden of their professional and familial status. Balancing class and gendered social

expectations is a widespread predicament for middle class women everywhere. What distinguishes the middle class Filipina migrants described here is the precarious nature of their middle class status. Where no home help is available and a husband is unable and unwilling to give up his job to share household chores, a wife is threatened with a loss of her status, autonomy and income unless she can find a domestic substitute in the home. Ironically, then, the very thing that marks her distinction as a respectable woman, her husband and children, in the absence of a domestic worker confines her to the household. It thus undoes, socially and symbolically, the polarities of class, effectively reducing the status of those middle class Filipino women to the status of an unpaid domestic worker.

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