ENGAGING WITH OVERSEAS FILIPINO WORKERS IN HONG KONG: HOW WAS IT PUBLIC ANTHROPOLOGY?

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This paper examines my engagement with the overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in Hong Kong while I was a United Board Fellow at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Using key informant interviews and participation-observation, I wrote and published several articles, both in a professional journal and in popular media, about the OFWs' cultural activities and performances which helped to amplify their identity as talented and skillful people, away from their stereotype as ordinary domestic helpers in Hong Kong. Was I practicing public anthropology? Based on the related literature I propose a hierarchy of public engagements which includes the following: providing information and awareness-raising, designing programs and projects, implementing programs and projects, contributing to policy making, advocating certain modalities, and resorting to activism. I consider myself to be at the base of this hierarchy of public engagement and I was not able to go beyond it. I experienced both contextual and institutional barriers in pursuing further my engagement with the OFWs particularly on political and economic issues.

Keywords: *Public anthropology, engagement, overseas Filipino workers, domestic helpers, United Board Fellow, Hong Kong*

Introduction

I was in Hong Kong from January to May 2012, not primarily because I intended to study the overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), mostly domestic helpers, eking out a living in this metropolitan city of diverse ethnicity. What brought me there was a United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (UBCHEA) fellowship grant for a semester with the Department of Anthropology of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (to learn about its research organization and management) but it turned out to be also an opportunity to witness and experience the various cultural activities of the OFWs, especially the staging of the annual *Sinulog* Festival, about which I

later decided to write and publish on. Since 2009, the OFWs in Hong Kong have celebrated the Sinulog on every last Sunday of January, coinciding with the same celebration in the Philippines (particularly in Cebu City, where this festival has its roots). I did not expect to find this festival celebrated in Hong Kong and I was excited to trace its beginnings in Hong Kong and to appreciate how the OFWs managed to celebrate it every year.

This paper is about my reflections on my engagement with certain groups of OFWs who had accepted me into their organizations while I was studying the festival and their other cultural activities. In writing this paper, I contemplated if what I did was public anthropology or just plain ethnography. I went with some OFWs around Hong Kong to experience how they spent their Sundays, to witness some of the cultural events and performances they organized or participated in, and to interview them on their experiences during these celebrations. Those engagements ultimately resulted in some articles I wrote about them and their cultural performances. Did my writings benefit them or did I just satisfy my inquisitiveness that gave me the opportunity to publish articles? If indeed my writings had benefited them, in what ways could I contribute to their cause of promoting Filipino cultural identity in a place where they are generally perceived as second class people?

I had several key informants during the three months that I decided to engage with the OFWs. They particularly came from the Visayas and Mindanao because I was more comfortable with them. The Sinulog Festival is associated with the Bisayan-speaking Filipinos (like me). Although I had also opportunities to meet and interact with OFWs from the north, I became closer with those in central and southern Philippines. My key informants included the officials of OFW associations, performers, and other personalities who were behind the staging of their cultural performances. I attended their meetings, birthday parties and other celebrations, observed them practice for forthcoming cultural events, as well as simply hung out with them in public places during Sundays. And while I had close and personal encounters with the OFWs, I was also professionally and intellectually enriched by my interaction with anthropologists of The Chinese University of Hong Kong. I experienced both worlds in Hong Kong: the academe and the world of other Filipinos in HK.

Engaging Public Anthropology

Low and Merry (2010) wrote a comprehensive review of the development of engaged anthropology in the United States as well as the diversity of its practice which was very helpful in order to assess if my engagement with the

OFWs in Hong Kong relates with the essence of 'public anthropology'. They discussed the dilemmas faced by anthropologists who find working with and for certain publics both gratifying and challenging or frustrating. But there appears to be no simple measure to determine if one anthropologist is more engaged than the other because they practice anthropology in various ways and with different objectives. Meanwhile, Lamphere (2004) and Adams (2005) have simply described 'public anthropology' as extending anthropological knowledge and expertise for the benefit of certain publics beyond the academe, and the services could be of any kind. This is a straightforward understanding of public anthropology that incidentally fits with my belief of what it is all about when an anthropologist is going to be publicly engaged.

Unfortunately, not so many people outside of the academe understand or even appreciate what anthropologists are doing or can do for contemporary society and the environment because of some stereotypes about the discipline as being more interested in tribal and preliterate societies or in the indigenous peoples (Lamphere 2004). As McGranahan (2006) commented, those who have never personally interacted with anthropologists tend to pause and wonder upon hearing the term "anthropology", suggesting some gaps between the discipline and the public who are their sources of information and whom anthropology is supposed to serve or benefit. Anthropologists also see this gap realize that we are perceived as intellectuals who are confined in universities teaching or doing research and fieldwork, but publishing our outputs only in journals or books, and presenting papers in conferences among fellow anthropologists, while the public is on the sidelines (see also Adams 2005, Borofsky 2011).

So while anthropologists aim for becoming more engaged with the public by offering services or being with them in their struggles for certain political causes, whether solicited or unsolicited, popularizing the discipline is also a form of engagement. Moreover, anthropologists now are also engaged as psychotherapists, cross-cultural social workers, international development workers, environmental workers, and public or community health workers aside from teaching (Schultz & Lavenda 2005). These are examples of how anthropologists reach out to various publics (Lamphere 2004). Engaged anthropology is for those who have a commitment to an "anthropological practice that respects the dignity and rights of all humans" (Low & Merry 2010:204) and who believe that anthropology has something to contribute in the promotion of social justice.

Low and Merry (2010) have listed some forms of engagement in public anthropology which include the following: sharing and support, teaching and

public education, social critique, collaboration, advocacy, and activism. These forms of engagements are certainly activities beyond the normal activities of anthropologists inside the university. And I should say that these activities must be the major distinguishing marks between those engaged and 'disengaged' anthropologists. As to whether or not these activities are also within the domain of applied anthropology, as argued by some, I would agree with Lamphere (2004) that the interests of applied anthropology and public anthropology converge for the benefit of a certain public. However, this is not within the scope of this paper to elaborate or resolve, and besides, there had been several debates on this matter between the two camps within the discipline (Lamphere 2004, Straight 2009, Borofsky 2011).

Based on my review I believe that there is actually a hierarchy or escalation in the forms of engagement that anthropologists may have with certain publics. These forms can be rated in terms of the degree of involvement and the intensity of commitment of anthropologists to pursue some goals that they may consider to give the maximum benefits to the public they are working with, within a given period of time. The level of collaboration being forged between anthropologists and the public is an additional measure, but the classification is not necessarily linear because these are not sequential all the time (see Fig.1). My thinking was initially inspired by the forms of engagement identified by Low and Merry (2010) and further informed by James (2010) who has said that publicly engaged anthropologists should go beyond simply describing and analyzing suffering to providing relief to this suffering.

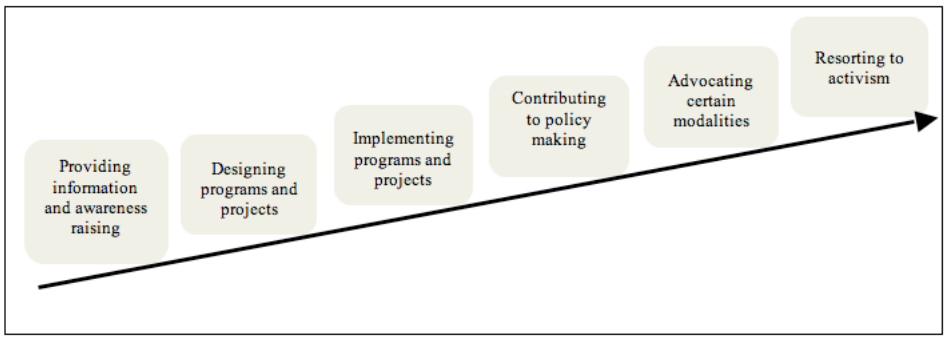

Figure 1. Forms and stages of public engagement.

The classification of public engagement I propose offers anthropologists a wide range of options for working with and for certain publics unless they are not pressured by intellectual and organizational barriers (see examples from Low & Merry 2010:212). At the base is providing information

generated by ethnographic encounters but with less intense engagement either because of the objectivity or neutrality expected of scholarship or because of other ethical considerations. On the top end is resorting to activism with very intense engagement and which will more likely involve engaging in a power struggle to pursue an agenda together with the public. Found in between these points are designing programs and projects, implementing them, contributing to policy making, and advocating certain modalities which may be offshoots or end points of information generation depending on the context for engaging the public. This is also where the convergence between public anthropology and applied anthropology may be felt more.

In the remaining sections of this paper, I will demonstrate instances or events to support my claims about the form of engagement I had with the OFWs during the limited time I was in Hong Kong. I will also show several opportunities for engagement which I failed to take because of some obstacles and difficulties serving as barriers, and which have similarities to the experiences of other anthropologists (cf. Low & Merry 2010). As a prelude, I believe my engagement with the OFWs was at the base or initial stage, which I could have actually pursued up to the level of activism. Or in between, if I had stayed for a longer period of time and if I had been in Hong Kong for reasons other than my fellowship, I would have been able to work with them in fighting against discriminatory laws and unfair labor practices. The limited time and the nature of my fellowship grant were contextual and institutional barriers, respectively.

Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, parenting roles are shifted to domestic helpers as both parents are working, and consequently the demand for domestic helpers is high (Wong 2011:7). Foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong are paid a minimum of HD$3,580 (almost ₱20,000) per month. In 2009-2010, the Hong Kong Immigration Department Annual Report reflected that out of 273,609 domestic helpers registered, about 48% or 131,332 came from the Philippines (HKID 2011). However, the Filipino domestic helpers are now overtaken by the Indonesians which constitute 49% of the above figure while the rest come from Thailand, India, Sri Lanka and other countries (HKID 2011).

Based on the official statistics of the Hong Kong Immigration Department, the population of Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong increased from 124,903 in 2008 to 126,357 in 2009 and leaped to 131,332 in 2010. Since the demand for Indonesians by Chinese employers had

increased in the 2009-2010 period, I wondered about the shift in preference of Chinese employers (other employers are expatriates). I learned that Filipino domestic helpers had been the most sought-after in the past because they were hardworking, and more importantly they could speak English and could assist in the school assignments of their wards. However, the Indonesians, the most sought-after group at present, are perceived to be more subservient, can speak Cantonese, and foremost, are "willing to accept salaries much lower than the minimum allowable wage" (Regalado 2010). My Indonesian friend who was also a United Board Fellow confirmed that their migrant workers for Hong Kong are not permitted to leave Indonesia if they are not proficient in Cantonese, a major official language in Hong Kong.

A Filipino social psychologist who studied migrant workers in Hong Kong has opined that the decline in the preference for Filipino domestic helpers is negatively correlated to the increasing number of the elderly in the present population (Betty Cernol-McCann, pers. comm. February 11, 2011). The current median age in Hong Kong is about 40.7 years old with women living longer than men – women have a life expectancy of 86.1 years while the men have only 79.8 years. Since not so many of the elderly Chinese can speak English, the Indonesian domestic helpers are preferred, aside from the perception that the Indonesians do not complain and talk or fight back. Perhaps the Filipino domestic helpers complain often because they are better educated, and even professionals, who know more about labor rights. The information campaign for ensuring or promoting the welfare of OFWs by vigilant church-based and non-government organizations handled by Filipinos in Hong Kong must have helped raise such growing awareness.

OFW associations and weekend activities

As of 2011 about 160 OFW associations were registered with the government of Hong Kong whose memberships were either defined by place of origin in the Philippines, ethnicity, religious orientations, interests and activities, professions, and locale of employment. This number does not only describe the cultural diversity of Filipinos, but it also shows the sense of community and the vehement desire to continue to belong while in Hong Kong, just as well as it reflects their sociable nature. Some of these associations were also church-related and cause-oriented. However, not all OFWs belonged to organized groups, some had only cliques and were interested in merely hanging around and socializing with other Filipinos. Incidentally, differences in personalities and principles explain the presence of two or three associations for the same town, province, or region. There were also two alliances or federations of OFW organizations coming from the same geographic areas. Either the newly-formed group had splintered

from the original group or a group formerly affiliated to an alliance decided to sever its ties and became independent or went to another group.

These organized OFWs were a force that could be mobilized for activities that the Philippine Consulate or their church wished to undertake or would assign to the OFWs—like the Philippine Independence Day Celebration, interfaith rallies, and intercultural presentations involving other ethnic groups in Hong Kong. However, the OFWs could only participate during Sundays and statutory holidays when they were free from work. During these days they usually invaded major public spaces such as malls, restaurants, beaches, coffee shops, videoke bars, parks, gardens, train stations, and even passageways, particularly in Central and Admiralty parts of Hong Kong. The OFWs had established "territories" in these public spaces, areas which they had recognized as "ours" and "theirs". In these public spaces OFWs would be seen sitting on mats or cartons, playing cards, enjoying meals, conversing, laughing, watching videos, sharing photographs, texting or calling over mobile phones, chatting online with their laptops, giving manicures or pedicures, giving massages, or performing many other activities by which they could meaningfully spend their free time (see also Valbuena 2008).

I regularly went to a Catholic church in Central and it was always crowded such that one had to wait or line up for half an hour in order to be comfortably seated. Similar to other churches in Hong Kong frequented by Filipinos, the usherettes and choir members of this church were OFWs. Those who were members of church-related organization would even stay the whole day in the church. Others preferred to stay in outdoor spaces. There were also OFWs who were busy practicing traditional and modern dances for presentation during public celebrations which they organized or were invited to by other groups. I observed on several occasions certain groups rehearsing some ladies for their talent presentation, or practicing how to walk for the beauty pageants which were commonly held during anniversary celebrations of some organizations. Sundays were also for going to the Philippine Consulate, where government offices are located—to pay some dues, process their passports and contracts, lodge complaints, or see to other matters.

The downside to being domestic helpers

Happy faces were noticeable among the Filipino domestic helpers who were together during Sundays (see also Valbuena 2008) but each had problems to tell regarding work conditions and relationships with their spouses and children who were away from them. On Sundays and other statutory

holidays when they were free from work to reconnect with friends at Central and elsewhere allowed them not only to regain physical strength but also to be psychologically and culturally reinforced, being alone and away from home. A Philippine Consulate official remarked that it was only in Hong Kong that the domestic helpers were given free days and spaces to be themselves away from work and their employers. But the facts of battling over illegal and excessive placement fees collected by agencies, low wages, maltreatment by some employers, and poor working conditions remained. The OFW newspapers circulating in Hong Kong had lots of stories about fighting for fair treatment (e.g., Mandap 2011, Roncesvalles 2011a). I was never directly engaged with an association of OFWs behind this struggle, but I was a member of the Facebook group that discussed the problem.

Foreign domestic helpers' contracts are limited to two years per employment and require them to leave and to come back for another contract. This is designed to prevent them from gaining residency. On October 1, 2011 the Hong Kong court ruled that foreign domestic helpers were entitled to resident status if they qualified, but this decision was rebuffed when the Hong Kong government appealed to the higher court (Chen 2012). The Immigration Ordinance, which was the basis for refusing residency status to all foreign domestic helpers, categorically states that "a person shall not be treated as ordinarily resident in Hong Kong… while employed as a domestic helper who is from outside of Hong Hong" (Roncesvalles 2011b). Those affected and their sympathizers considered this discriminatory since other Filipinos and foreigners doing business and engaged in professional practice in Hong Kong were enjoying residency rights. The domestic helpers, who may be working with some of these foreigners, were denied such rights. This was an issue that an anthropologist could have been engaged with, but I was not able to do so because of an institutional barrier—it was beyond the expectations of my fellowship.

Being with organized migrant workers

Through another United Board Fellow from the Philippines who had previously met some OFWs in Hong Kong coming from his hometown in Mindanao, I was able to establish links and eventually became an honorary adviser of one group called *Samahang Migrante ng Lebak* (SMILE), which was organized when I was there. I supported their desire to unite as a group in Hong Kong in order to serve not only their personal needs but also their families, and town mates in the Philippines. This group was affiliated with the Mindanao Migrant Alliance (MinMA) and that affiliation broadened my networks for where to go and whom to engage with during Sundays at Central. This alliance was more devoted to cultural activities promoting the

identity of the people from Mindanao and expressing their desire for peace in their respective provinces.

As I mentioned it was only after I had witnessed the Sinulog Festival in Chater Garden that I became interested in writing about the cultural activities of the OFWs in Hong Kong. This popular festival was organized yearly by the League of Visayan Associations (LOVA). And although from Mindanao, the contingent of MinMA had participated for three years in the festival. During the first two seasons MinMa was declared as runner-up and during the 2011 festival MinMA won as champion. I was fascinated with the wonderful and colorful performances by all the participating groups despite the meager time they had to practice and the resources to spend for their costumes.

How the Hong Kong OFWs had successfully organized this festival since 2009 aroused my anthropologist self to dig deeper into the circumstances behind the Sinulog Festival in Hong Kong. Writing about this festival I went around interviewing more people and further expanded my networks of OFW friends. It also deepened my interest to learn more about cultural heritage and diaspora from journals, books, and lectures at the university. I consider the Sinulog Festival and the other cultural events of the OFWs as examples of diasporic expression that connected them with home (Oracion 2011a).

Publishing, inspiring

As I ended my fellowship I also completed an article on the Sinulog. I gave electronic copies of the manuscript to the leader of LOVA and the Deputy Consul General in Hong Kong who both happened to be Sillimanians. My work was the first serious study of the *Sinulog* Festival in Hong Kong because I did not find any articles or books about Sinulog in Hong Kong, (neither in Macau where it was first staged in 2003).[1] Actually, my other major aim in researching and publishing on the Sinulog was to promote the rich cultural life of OFWs to anthropologists in Hong Kong. That was also the reason I chose to submit the article to the *Asian Anthropology*[2] journal

[1]I only found news reports, which proved useful in tracing the beginning of the festival in Hong Kong and Macau as well as identifying the reasons of celebrating it outside of the Philippines, the problems they had met, and how these were successfully overcome (Alvarado 2009, Cayat 2009, Beltran 2010, Agsipo 2011).

[2]As proof of acceptance the editor sent me an email saying: "You've given us a very interesting paper. *Asian Anthropology* is completely full for our upcoming issue, but for the issue thereafter, we'd like to print a version of this as (ethnographic) report". The article may come out in 2012.

rather than to publish it in the Philippines. I was hoping that it would draw out some research interest about the OFWs beyond the stereotype of them being only domestic helpers, and hopefully help to transform this perception. Every cultural event the OFWs organized demonstrated creativity and resourcefulness which is also related to their multiple roles in their families. I admired how ably they managed between domestic work and planning cultural celebrations and performances as well as how they effectively tapped logistical or financial support from business groups in Hong Kong or back in the Philippines. Indeed, two weeks before I left for the Philippines, I introduced a CUHK anthropologist to the OFWs because she wanted to study how these women regarded their roles as mothers and economic providers away from home.

Disseminating what I learned about the cultural life of OFWs in Hong Kong and sharing my impressions was not limited to academic publication. I also contributed articles to *Mindalinao,* the newsletter of MinMA. These articles provided additional perspectives and gave variety to the contents of the newsletter so that it was more than only a compilation of news stories and photographs of events participated in by the members of the alliance. The first article I contributed was on the *Kalilang* Festival[3], which features the different festivals in Mindanao. It is a yearly event of MinMA and signifies their connection to home and culture in Mindanao (Oracion 2011d). The second article was on their winning as the champion of the Catholic Sinulog Festival, demonstrating their participation and excellent performance despite religious differences (Oracion 2011e). The current leader of MinMA is a Muslim.

The newsletter of MinMA is distributed beyond its members; I was told that copies were also sent to local government officials in Mindanao who had supported their activities in Hong Kong (for instance with the costumes to represent the various indigenous peoples in this part of the Philippines). Meanwhile, after the recent floods in Mindanao that destroyed farms and infrastructure and left several homeless families, MinMA sent financial assistance to seriously affected places. This was true for other groups of OFWs in Luzon that sent assistance to flood victims due to typhoons Pedring and Quiel. The Facebook accounts of these groups served as means of

[3]*Kalilang* means a merrymaking to celebrate special occasions like marriage rites and feasts, religious ceremonies, anniversaries, thanksgivings and other social, economic and political activities. This word is associated with the Maranaw and Maguindanao. The *Kalilang* as traditionally practiced has inspired the annual festivals of Nunungan, Lanao del Norte and of General Santos City (see Oracion 2011d).

soliciting contributions from OFWs in Hong Kong. There were also OFW groups from the Visayas associated with a Catholic church that sent goods to the Philippines during times of calamities as well as Christmas (Oracion 2011a).

I similarly contributed an article about my impressions of the state of the OFWs to a section in *The Sun,* a Filipino newspaper which is published and circulated free in Hong Kong (Oracion 2011b). This article was also an offshoot of my Sinulog research. I had the opportunity to observe the 113th Philippine Independence Day Celebration by the OFWs and wrote my impressions about the event in an article which I sent to the *Visayan Daily Star* newspaper in central Philippines (Oracion 2011c). My aim was to inform Filipinos back home that despite being away from the country the OFWs were celebrating Independence Day with grandeur. The editor modified my original title to *Inspiring Celebration: Independence Day in Hong Kong.* Independence Day is an annual celebration which some Filipinos in the Philippines may not seriously remember or celebrate. The article conveyed the message that what the OFWs did should inspire Filipinos to do the same in their country. One of my OFW friends who participated in the parade (dubbed as *Karosa ng Kagitingan at Kalayaan* / Floats of Heroism and Freedom) said that when she was still in the Philippines she only thought of June 12 as a holiday.

Back in the Philippines, I sent a similar article to the newsletter of MinMA, whose officials had assumed major roles in organizing and managing the Independence Day celebration. This was the reply from one of the editors of the newsletter in her Facebook account before the Kalilang Festival which also featured the search for the *Mutya ng Mindanao* ('Jewel of Mindanao'):

> Thank you so much, Dokie. Inspiring [to] read :-) Will include it in the souvenir program for the Kalilang Festival... Wish you could join us on the 9th [October 2011 for the festival].... ah wishful thinking, *para naay mag-cheer sa among mga* [so somebody could cheer for our] performers. This is the first time that we're bringing Kalilang in Chater Road, the best place to hold a show or embarrass yourself... *depende* [it depends]. Hehehe.

Certainly, the above reply also moved me, it was good to know that the article was "inspiring". I consider every cultural event or performance they staged as not just a celebration per se but a declaration that the domestic helpers have talents and skills aside from doing domestic work. My Taiwanese anthropologist friend remarked that the "Filipinos had staged a

very wonderful and colorful presentation which spoke of their rich history and culture," proof that the cultural performances of OFWs helped in projecting positive images. The preparations they had made every Sunday for the said event and for other cultural performances throughout the year enabled them to direct their energies productively away from what some may consider useless activities (e.g., sitting idly the whole day in passageways at Central), and diverted them from their longing for home and family.

I was back in Hong Kong for a personal trip after the 2011 Independence Day celebration and I was invited to deliver an inspirational message during the anniversary celebration of LOVA. Senator Panfilo Lacson, who had been their guest of honor during the first Sinulog Festival in 2009, was the main speaker. The message of the senator was a continuation of what he had said before—he consoled the OFWs of their frustrations and distrust over some anomalous and corrupt Philippine government officials. He explained how corruption through the misuse of pork barrel had deprived Filipinos, particularly the OFWs, full benefit of what government funds could offer them. He wanted this to stop (Lacson 2009). On my part, I thanked them and applauded their efforts to continue such (religious) traditions that identified them as Filipinos or Catholics in another country.

That was not the first time I delivered an inspirational message during anniversary celebrations of OFW associations. I had done it for MinMA together with the Filipino United Board Fellow from Mindanao mentioned earlier. We were requested to speak during a program which was also attended by some officials of the Philippine Consulate General, media, and business supporters of the alliance. We were honored and given tokens as acknowledgements of our contributions to the group as they indulged in their various cultural activities. The Filipino value of reciprocity is certainly present but personally it was I who gained first from the information they provided me so that I could write about the Sinulog Festival. And what I wrote and published about them was to reciprocate the privileged information.

In general, however, I feel that what I had done may not have been significant enough to produce major impacts on their lives as OFWs compared to if I had worked with the church-related or non-government organizations that served the distressed OFWs in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, I wished that my engagement with some of them as a professor attached to a prominent university in Hong Kong and as an anthropologist who wrote about them could have been a source of inspiration that may have boosted their self-esteem. The social divide between domestic helpers and an academician narrowed as I spent more time with some of them and listened

to their personal stories about their children and marital (even extramarital or homosexual) relations. I have been personally affected by what I observed and heard about their sacrifices to provide a better future for their children or parents and I continue to engage with my OFW friends through Facebook which almost everyone maintains as the cheapest and fastest means of maintaining social networks (see also Ordona 2011:33).

Conclusion: opportunities and dilemmas

Earlier, I said that serendipity led me to research and write about the Sinulog Festival and the other cultural performances of the OFWs in Hong Kong. I eventually became interested in heritage management and diaspora, which were topics popular in CUHK during that period I was there. Connecting concepts and theories to what I learned from the cultural activities of the OFWs justified my going outside the university to interview people at Central. But more than that, as I went on engaging with the OFWs in their various social and cultural activities, at the same time I was also intellectualizing my experiences in the university. I was able to connect the worlds of the academe and the public. I had demonstrated how anthropology transcends academic borders for the discipline to become realistically, and not only theoretically, engaged with a certain public. I was also hoping that my publications would open the minds of OFWs to appreciate anthropology beyond their stereotypical notions about it.

Although there were other more pressing issues haunting the OFWs, I chose to work on and highlight more their cultural activities in the hope that this would be image-boosting and socially-uplifting particularly to domestic helpers who had been denied the right of abode in Hong Kong. Their contribution to Hong Kong's economy seemed to be unappreciated; they were just perceived as means to the pursuit of greater economic gains by their employers, particularly the working wives, who delegated to them various domestic tasks.

However, because of my status as a United Board Fellow, I opted not to physically get involved in advocacy activities that would require me to participate in protest rallies and other sorts of mass actions which were held during the time I was in Hong Kong. James (2010:19) has said that activism is one ultimate option for public anthropologists who take the side of the marginalized, however those who also write about them as participant observers may be saddled with ethical questions regarding the objectivity of their ethnographic accounts.

I can subjectively say that in my engagements with the OFWs in Hong Kong I was practicing 'public anthropology'. It was not my main goal for

going there; as a United Board Fellow I had a different purpose and I was guided by the terms of the institution that financially supported my four-month sojourn in Hong Kong (the fellowship had as objectives to intellectually enrich myself and to learn some principles on becoming an effective academic administrator). My going off-campus to reach out to the OFWs, particularly the domestic helpers, was a gesture of service to them in forms and in ways that suited my capacities. Studying and publishing about the cultural activities was intended to reinforce them in their desire to show off to the people of Hong Kong the strong Catholic tradition of Filipinos (as in the case of the Sinulog Festival) as well as the rich and colorful culture of Mindanao (as demonstrated in the Kalilang Festival). These and their many other cultural performances were expressions by which they sought to be seen as persons of many talents and skills, not to be treated merely as domestic helpers (and even denied of a residency status).

How I expanded my horizons and exerted worthwhile effort in public engagement must have been mutually beneficial, but perhaps I gained more compared to the OFWs because I was exposed to two worlds of experiences. The abstractions I encountered in books became clearer in real situations with the OFWs and the questions I asked in lectures were provided better answers from what I saw outside the halls of the university. The OFWs taught me how they sustainably staged cultural events and performances in Hong Kong as a way of preserving Filipino cultural heritage away from home or beyond borders. These had become diasporic expressions that maintained their links with families, friends and other significant people in the Philippines. The publications I produced from engaging with the OFWs exemplified my way of fulfilling the obligation of anthropologists to take a position that can be more advantageous to certain publics. I could have done far more if not for some contextual and institutional barriers. I was in Hong Kong for only four months and I had to meet foremost the academic expectations of my fellowship grant.

Those anthropologists who, like me, fall within the base of the hierarchy of public engagement I showed in Figure 1, are what Adams (2005:437) called "identity amplifiers"—they magnify events and issues that are just taken for granted or being overlooked, because these things have been there and no one questioned or did something big about them. I hope that, indeed, I had amplified the life of OFWs in Hong Kong by raising the awareness of various publics about their cultural activities as well as the social issues or problems confronting them; by helping them to have their voices as a marginalized group in Hong Kong; by giving inspiration as I associated with them individually or collectively; and by connecting them to the academe through my publications. This is something that I have not yet measured

(particularly in terms of 'inspiring' and improving self-esteem); however the time may not yet be ripe for this. For the time being, I can go on engaging with them through Facebook.

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