

WELLBEING IN CARING: THE ALAGA SYSTEM AMONG FILIPINO CATHOLICS IN BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

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This study examines a caring system among Filipino Catholics in Brussels, Belgium. By ‘caring system’, I refer to relations involving ‘carers’ (*taga-alaga*) manifesting concern for and acting upon the needs of their ‘care-receivers’ or *alaga*, [literally: ‘the taken care of’] who are either newcomers to Belgium, or undocumented migrants, or workers that had been abused by their employers. Implicit in this system are Roman Catholic-associated moral values (as stipulated in the Scriptures, Church doctrines and mission statements, reinforced through rituals, using local habits) that Filipino Catholics appropriate as they handle their life-experiences in Brussels, Belgium. The article is divided into three parts: first, the constitution of the Filipino Catholics’ understanding of wellbeing; second, a description of the caring system and duties and responsibilities of the *taga-alaga*; and, third, a consideration of the making and remaking of parameters of the relations among *taga-alaga* and *alaga*. Following Kleinman (2009), I argue that in their pursuit of wellbeing within the shifting conditions of the diasporic context, caring practices transform subjectivities, rework life-relations, and reframe the religious meanings that accommodate and enliven local values.

Keywords: Filipino diaspora, Roman Catholicism, morality, subjectivity, care, wellbeing.

Introduction

Around four thousand of the ten thousand Filipinos in Belgium live in Brussels (which has about one million residents) [Gaspar 2008, OECD 2009]). Of these, 80% are Catholics. Given my strategic location as a participant observer in the Filipino Catholic Chaplaincy, I gained access to

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the experiences of the Filipino Catholics in Brussels.¹ These experiences were differentiated in terms of the magnitude of their struggle and depth of being inured to their social position in Belgium. As a Filipino newcomer to Belgium in 1997, I had struggled to adjust to the food and language of the predominantly Belgian community of Louvain, the small city adjacent to Brussels where I was assigned. To ward off the feeling of alienation, I took every chance to leave my community every weekend to accompany a Filipino priest in his rounds among Filipino Catholics' small group meetings that took place in the living quarters of Filipinos in Brussels, Belgium.

"Hypocrites!" I remember labeling to myself these Filipino Catholic migrants in Brussels, Belgium during these meetings. They seemed to be very religious on the surface, typically involving themselves in activities in line with Roman Catholic teachings. On other occasions however, they manifested conduct unbecoming of Roman Catholic believers. In reacting this way, I admit I am conditioned by my expectations; my subjectivity as an anthropologist also carries along my ideals and the evaluative frame that go with these as a Roman Catholic Brother.

Later, I realized that these ambiguities lie on the surface level. There is more to uncover in the life of Filipino Catholic migrants. They maintain a system of relations among themselves marked by interdependence, obligation and commitment, in the process gaining a sense of wellbeing in Brussels, Belgium. Wellbeing refers to attaining quality of life, but also approximating the image of what constitutes a 'moral life'. The idea of moral life points to doing what is right that merits rewards/blessing; the opposite of doing what is wrong that is meted punishment through suffering. Among Filipinos who seriously describe themselves as Catholics, allusion to the 'moral' life implicates Roman Catholicism. This is how I got into the project of making sense of the conditions that breed uncertainties in the life-relations of Filipino Catholic migrants in Brussels.

¹ In 1997, the Filipino chaplaincy was established in Brussels and along with this was the appointment of the first Filipino Chaplain. In the same year, I was an intern of the CICM in Louvain, a city close to Brussels, where I came in contact with the Filipino Catholics in the area. CICM stands for *Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae* (Latin for the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary) and is a Roman Catholic male religious missionary institute founded in Belgium. Internship is the last among the initiation stages of CICM. It is a "direct experience of the reality of the missionary life and work of CICM through a prolonged missionary training" in the country of destination (CICM Constitutions, Art. 70). The CICM community in Louvain was then my base.

There have been several initial forays into the ways Filipino Catholics define Roman Catholicism and live as Catholics and into the reasons why Filipinos embrace Roman Catholicism in varying degrees. Some Filipino scholars examined Roman Catholicism experienced by Filipinos as attuned to the Filipino psyche (Mercado 1974, Miranda 1989, Zialcita 2005), or in conflict with it (Covar 1993, Salazar 2000, Bulatao & Gorospe 1966). For others, Roman Catholicism is the context within which Filipinos practice individual freedom (Jocano 1981), their age-old system of solidarity and reciprocity (Lynch 2004), or participate in social change (Alejo 1990). Other notable writings have probed the missionary project of Roman Catholicism in the Philippines and ambiguity of conversion among Filipinos using the *pasyon* (Ileto 1979), confession (Rafael 1988), and icons (Bautista 2010) as media.

In the transnational context, several scholars have rendered Roman Catholicism as capable of recognizing and accommodating other belief systems (Klassen 2005). Hence, Roman Catholicism is viewed as instrumental to the social bridging of Filipinos in Brussels, Belgium (Leman 1999).² While these authors may have varying reasons for putting Roman Catholicism at the center of their ethnography, they have unveiled historically-constituted cultural and social processes that figure in the ways Filipinos translate and regulate the meanings they associate with Roman Catholicism.

It was Cannell (2005) who stated that anthropologists who would engage Christianity (which Roman Catholicism forms a part of) as an ethnographic object have to start with “real” Christians, meaning “anyone who seriously so describes him or herself” as one (given the various permutations of Christianity). Animated by Cannell’s presupposition, I launched this research with the premise that Roman Catholicism is socially and culturally embedded, seeking to explain the underlying conditions that generated the aforesaid ambiguities. Fortunately I was given opportunity to probe further into the case of the Filipino Catholics in Brussels as they interact with their fellow Filipinos and face the shifting conditions of their diasporic context, wherein their sense of ‘wellbeing’ wrestles with the conception of ‘moral’ behavior, and engages Scripture, Church doctrines, religious organizations, and rituals.

² Roman Catholicism also provided jobs for Filipinos in Tokyo (Mateo 2000), enabled a sense of nostalgia among gay Filipinos in New York (Manalansan 2003), and helped ventilate the struggle of OFWs from Antique (Cruz-Lucero 2006).

To broaden the perspective, I have also followed the lead of Kleinman (1999, 2007) who suggested attending to people's subjectivity so as to understand concrete constellations of people forging their lives around what they deem most at stake. Borrowing from Kleinman (1997), these stakes are born out of and shaped by the 'local world'. The 'local world' does not only refer to the traditional village or neighborhood but also to institutions, transitory communities, and/or transnational networks.

For the Filipino Catholics in Belgium, their local world is grounded in larger social arrangements of citizenship, work and residency. Within these social arrangements, most Filipinos, being foreigners and undocumented, can only find jobs in the service sector. "*Kudkud*", which literally means 'brushing the toilet bowl', is the term Filipinos in Brussels used to describe their source of income. As of 2009, majority of these Filipinos were women, working mainly in the services sector as caregivers, caretakers, housekeepers, and domestic helpers (POEA 2009).

The continuing influx of Filipino *kudkud* to Brussels, Belgium is spawned by Brussels' changing character as the 'heart of Europe' (Corijn et al. 2009), which means being at the crossroads of the continent's busiest highways and high-speed train networks and hosting European institutions, and other international institutions, such as NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization). This generates employment for lobbying, consultancy, the media, and an array of embassies, and regional delegations.

The *Office National de l'Emploi* (ONEM) under the Ministry of Labor of Belgium does not readily issue work permits to non-Belgians (Philippine Embassy Belgium n.d.). Moreover, there is no bilateral agreement between Belgium and the Philippines on Filipino labor deployment. As a result, most of these Filipinos had been, at one time or another, in an illegal situation in Belgium (cf Mozere 2005:181 for similar findings among Filipino migrants in France). In many cases, to avoid suspicion they would go to a transit country (like the Netherlands) and later on enter Belgium by train. Others were first brought along as tourists by relatives already working in Belgium (by virtue of 'family reunification', to be discussed later) or by friends, a Belgian husband or employer who served as guarantor or sponsor. In more extreme situations, Filipinos have crossed into Belgium illegally by hiking across the borders of a non-Schengen country. The rest landed in Brussels as cultural exchange students, or *Au Pair*³, or as professional recruits of multinational companies like *DHL* and *Procter and Gamble* in the 2000s.

³ A French term, meaning 'on par;' the philosophy behind an international cultural program, availed of by men or women between seventeen to twenty-seven years old:

Following an amnesty for illegal migrants in 1999, the Belgian state granted some Filipinos Type D residential cards which referred to a long-term residential status (relative to the European Union standard), valid for five years (Landen 2009). In 2009, another moratorium was approved for undocumented migrants with children (Uy 2009); it was applied for by a number of Filipinos of which several were approved. With the election of the right-leaning political parties in the northern part of Belgium however, the program was halted. As a result, a number of applications for amnesty were left pending.

A considerable number of those Filipinos granted amnesty were naturalized Belgians⁴ who, soon after, became dual citizens (Filipinos and Belgians). There are also Filipinos labeled “temporary migrants” who are employed by diplomats. The rest are the undocumented who, being undeclared, unprotected, and illegal, have to take in “*travail noir*” or ‘black jobs’.

The Filipinos’ lives and relations with others have ‘edges’ that are contingent on their being migrants in Brussels, Belgium. Edges refer to experiences of ‘redescription’, which consider people in terms other than their own (Lambek 2003:4), or which undermines its own purpose (Ortner 2006:146). Edges can also mean moments of being at and outside the margin (Csordas 2004:167), or still, occasions of recognition that people themselves are not the authors of their own problems, hence cannot do something to improve their conditions.

Faced with life’s edges, what matters most to people becomes more evident. Such realization is made even sharper through the transformative experiences of repair, re-moralization, and regeneration (Kleinmen 1997). In these instances, subjectivities return to the symbols and interactions that condition their predispositions, even as they reconfigure, re-pattern, and at time, completely reinterpret them. In the case of the Filipino Catholics in Brussels, predominant among these symbols and interactions are Roman Catholic theodicy and resources (Gauchet 1999). By “theodicy”, I refer to causal explanations on suffering. This subjectivity, according to Plummer (2001), is best viewed in people’s narratives for, as he said, ‘narratives are *documents*’ of life.

in exchange for supposedly light housework and babysitting they render to their host families *gratis*. In commonplace practice, however, it is understood as cheap domestic labor. (See for instance Smith 2008)

⁴ According to the European Migration Network: National Contact Point Belgium (2009), the total number of Filipinos turned Belgian from 2004-2007 is 1,529.

Hence, I interviewed 44 Filipino Catholics, selected to take account of the range of age, gender, residential status, and leadership positions in the Filipino community in Brussels, from February to September 2009 and from July to August 2011. Seven of those 44 are the ‘carers’ or *taga-alaga* I mention in this paper. To protect the anonymity of my interviewees and those who are implicated in this research, their names are either withheld or hidden behind pseudonyms.

The constitution of wellbeing

The moral principles or guides to realizing wellbeing that Filipino Catholics forge along with their fellows in Brussels is clearly informed by Roman Catholicism and concomitant resources. However, as the aforesaid Philippine scholars and Cannell (1999, 2006) have adequately shown, Filipino Catholics’ interpretations of these moral precepts are modeled on their “habitus” or predispositions. The sense of wellbeing is inseparable from everyday routinary practices.

Filipino Catholics in Brussels are predisposed to care for their *alaga* whose living conditions are like to “the poor” in the Bible (e.g. the Beatitudes), Church doctrines, or their religious organization’s mission statement. Such *alaga* are either undocumented, partially documented with pending cases, and/or newly arrived in Belgium. According to these Filipino Catholics, the *alaga*’s current status in Belgium reminds them of ‘God’s task’ that they have to fulfill.

Implicit in the moral precept of caring for the downtrodden, however, is a culturally constituted social exchange between the *taga-alaga* (‘carer’) and the *alaga* (‘care-receiver’).⁵ Within the arrangement, *taga-alaga* occupy a dominant position over their *alaga*. The exchange between the *taga-alaga* and the *alaga* as individuals follows a patron-clientage model which employs “*utang na loob*” or ‘debt of gratitude’ [literally ‘debt of the inside’] as central operating value.

Cannell (1999) has reviewed how *utang na loob* has two political meanings. In the patron-clientage model, indebtedness between unequals is thought of as an immense debt that could never be repaid but must be acknowledged repeatedly by acts of deference by the person occupying the indebted lower position (see also Hollnsteiner 1961). Iletto (1979) however showed how the flow of debt can be inverted such that the higher position is occupied by the indebted, and which became a principle for leadership that rallied the masses in the Philippine revolution. This implies, for Rafael

⁵ Such could be a complex interplay of relations (see Rafael 1988 and Cannell 1999).

(1988), that “neither an ordinary source of gifts nor a privileged interiority” is accountable for the debt (Rafael 1988:126).

For Filipinos in Brussels however, their concern is for their “poor *kababayan*” (countrymen) instead of the more encompassing ‘poor’ in the Bible. By going beyond their strong self-family orientation toward their immediate *sakop* [circle of kin and dependents] (cf Andres et al. 1986, and Mercado 1974), to care for poor *kababayan*, Filipino Catholics in Brussels consider this moral precept as expression of their being Catholics. This Filipino Catholic ‘poor-orientedness’ that is however confined mostly to fellow Filipinos is imbued with the notion of *pakikipagkapwa* [‘other-orientedness’]. The prefix *pakiki-*, for Mercado (1974), makes the value to give priority to the collective over the individual self emotionally intense and compelling for Filipinos. However, Filipino *kapwa* [‘fellow man’] is limited by the principle of *sakop* [literally, ‘scope’]. According to Mercado the basic *sakop* is the family, including the extended family of the father and the mother (1974:50). Apart from the familial setting, *sakop* can extend to the *barkada* (small peer group). Also, *sakop* can be extended to ethnic or regional affiliations. The bigger *sakop* may be provincial or national (*kababayan*). In the Belgian setting, “*kababayan*” refers to national affiliation.

However, even as Filipino Catholics in Belgium have circumscribed ‘giving care’ to their poor *kababayans*, the sacrifices they have made to accomplish this task are so huge their effort cannot easily be undermined. It has entailed opening their homes to their *alaga* and having less time for the family they deem significant.

Yet according to these Filipino Catholics, they ‘do not count the sacrifices’ they have given to their *alaga* (in allusion to the prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola sung during masses held in the Chaplaincy, “Dearest Lord, teach me to be generous, teach me to serve you as I should, to give and not to count the cost...”). And in spite of the difficulties attached to their tasks, they ‘do not lose hope’. The source of hope is the Scripture where Jesus’ story of redemption is written and the Mass where it is retold.

For the *taga-alaga*, Jesus’ redemption is made real in their own lives. For example, the case of Percival who converted to Catholicism: he testified that his loved ones’ surviving sickness and, later, surviving floods, triggered a spiritual vision of God’s intervening power in their lives, represented by material images of the Miraculous Medal of Mary and the Lord of Pardon. Another example is Jose’s two near-death experiences, which sparked visions of the bloody hand of Christ on the cross and of reaching the gates of heaven where God told him it was not yet his time. In both situations,

Percival and Jose became aware of a calling in life to serve the Lord. Having a second vision, in the case of Jose, reaffirmed this calling and made it even stronger.

To borrow another Biblical passage, for the Filipino Catholics in Brussels, ‘only a few are chosen’ to be *taga-alaga*. As proof of being chosen, the *taga-alaga* highlight how God designed circumstances for them to encounter their *alaga*. One found her *alaga* in a train station, on her way to a religious gathering; the other met her *alaga* while strolling in a Saturday flea market in one of the parks in Brussels.

Moreover, as perceived by the *taga-alaga*, their ‘calling’ to care for their *alaga* has to be coupled with capabilities which they refer to as “gifts from God” (alluding to two Bible passages).⁶ Hence, *taga-alaga* tend to highlight the training they went through and skills they had previously acquired. For example, for one Filipino Catholic, his sense of community service was initially heightened by having worked with the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (IFCTU) that fought for the rights of the oppressed workers. This spilled over to his calling, exemplified by his joining the *Pag-ibig sa Diyos Catholic Community* (PDCC) in the Philippines. When assigned by IFCTU to work in their office in Brussels, Belgium, he continued the mission of PDCC. In the absence of an organized true Church community for Filipinos in Brussels, he felt compelled to care for the spiritual lives of the Filipinos.

For the case of another Filipino Catholic, he felt that the principles of the organization were not being met by leaders and members of the PDCC, he was convinced to leave the group and go one step further for the Filipino community in Belgium to attempt to unite the then existing three Filipino groups under one Chaplaincy. He did not leave PDCC by himself however. Other members who were convinced of his stand followed him; they left the organization as well and joined him in the Filipino Chaplaincy. This compelled him to act as a *taga-alaga* and his followers as *alaga*.

Duties and responsibilities of *taga-alaga*

For Filipino Catholics in Brussels, wellbeing means the welfare of their fellow Filipinos. This is evidenced by the *taga-alaga* wanting to improve the quality of life of their *alaga* in a situation of displacement or lack of

⁶ “Many are called but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:16), and “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed” (Luke 4:18).

residency in Belgium. It is also stretched to include making the *alaga* aware and conscious of the moral principles that promote their group's welfare, animated and enacted in concrete terms.

In the process, however, the *taga-alaga* control and manage their *alaga*. This may be viewed as characteristic of the reflexive character of Filipino Catholics to appropriate and interpret their moral values to serve their varying and multiple interests, and in-line with Kleinman (2007) who bestows a huge amount of consciousness to the actors' strategizing around what actors deem important. At the same time, however, it is in contrast to Kleinman who seems to have missed viewing actors as differentiated in their struggles within the social matrix of local inequalities and of power differentials where they are embedded. Because of this subjectivity, the Filipino Catholics have a different experience from others even though they may use the same localized Roman Catholic-associated moral values, practice within a familiar system of relations, and operate within a similar social milieu, i.e. Brussels.

A common practice of the *taga-alaga* is to create an alternate family for their *alaga* in Brussels. This is possible because they belong to and oftentimes, head a Filipino organization in Brussels. They can therefore oblige their group members to share in the responsibility of caring for the neophytes, to make them feel they are "at home away from home".⁷

The *taga-alaga* teach their *alaga* to be familiar with European cultural practices that are not ordinarily done in the Philippines. In situations when the *alaga* are required to negotiate in French for example, the *taga-alaga* take time off to be with their *alaga*. If a neophyte *alaga* might not have been a wine-drinker back home, and so was not familiar with uncorking wine bottles and using a wine glass, the *taga-alaga* also take pains to teach how to do this. They also make the neophytes feel secure about attending parties that last even up to past midnight because they will drive them home when the party ends.

The *taga-alaga's* strategy to win the allegiance of their *alaga* can go as far as providing work to the *alaga* and visas to their *alaga's* families. In one case a *taga-alaga* sponsored a number of his townmates to work in Belgium. Those he sponsored then invited their relatives to migrate to Belgium. In his words, what happened was they 'hailed' their relatives over ("*hakutan ang nangyari*"). It was made possible due to the *taga-alaga's* having earned the

⁷ Just as Filipinas in Hong Kong continue to make themselves 'at home', away from home, so much so that when they return to the Philippines they feel they are in a different place (Constable 1997:225).

trust of his employers, such that he was able to convince them to sponsor the visas of his Filipino friends. (That time, he said, it was easier to get a visa unlike these days.)

There are some *taga-alaga* who have convinced their Belgian husbands to assist Filipinos. A Filipina observed that her husband is not the only one who had been helping Filipinos, “even his parents” do so. Such help has ranged from bringing to the hospital a *kababayan* about to give birth, or giving aid to someone detained in the police station. She recounted how “even at 4 a.m., you can wake [my husband]; money, everything, he has done it for them with me, *ha*, rice, name it.” Her husband also gives attestations to hasten the processing of undocumented Filipinos’ application for regularization.

The values performed and animated by Filipino Catholics in Brussels revolve around “*sakripisyo*” (sacrifice), social hierarchy, reciprocity, “*padala*” (sending or transmitting gifts or money), and “*hatiran*” (escorting to or fetching at the airport).

There are situations where the *taga-alaga* are expected to side with their *alaga*. Kleinman (2006:1-3) is right when he says the interpersonal relation can condition the interpretation of moral principles. There was, for instance, an *alaga* who was accused by a housemate of having an illicit relation with a married man. When a simple misunderstanding turned into serious bickering with his *alaga*’s housemate, the *taga-alaga* intervened and sided with his *alaga* all the way.

The *taga-alaga* also teach their *alaga* the moral principles of the group, reinforcing them in particular events, which the *alaga* are obliged to participate in. As illustration, despite their hectic weekend activities, the *alaga* are expected to join summer tours organized by their *taga-alaga*. Alongside weekend gatherings, such tours are a chance for the neophytes to act according to their social standing and the collective values, and to show that they know the ‘proper’ time to reciprocate.

When the group tour I joined reached the image of the *Santo Niño* in the Church of the Virgin Mary Victorious along Mala Strana Street of Prague, I noticed Amparo and Carla snubbing Celia. The reason was, it turned out, that Celia did not follow the unwritten protocol to let the *taga-alaga* walk ahead on their way to the church. Since Celia was an *alaga* of Amparo, she was expected to walk behind Amparo. The fast pace of Celia slighted Amparo. So Amparo resolved that they would put Celia in her place when they got the chance. It was only when they were called to meet the priest in the sacristy that the tension between Celia and Amparo cooled off. As soon

as they entered the room, the priest greeted them warmly, “Oh Filipinos!” Then, they all encircled the table, with the priest standing at one side. The priest said a prayer, followed by the blessing of the Holy Water, the pictures and the miniature images of the *Santo Niño*. At this point, tears welled up my companions’ faces. Celia hugged Carla, Amparo, and four others. Amparo whispered, ‘It’s your fault, you keep on leaving us behind’ (“*Ikaw kasi eh, nang-iiwan ka*”). This shows how religious rituals maintain group solidarity and, as a result, reinforce the existing structure of relations within the group.⁸

In cases of *despedidas* (get-togethers for departing Filipinos), the *taga-alaga* emphasize their efforts to give priority to carrying the gifts or money of undocumented *alaga* over and above their own belongings, indirectly stating their concern for the disadvantaged. A *taga-alaga*, narrated how they packed their luggage in such a way that the “*padala*” or money sent by her undocumented *alaga*, is put underneath their own belongings. Just in case they exceed the allowed baggage weight, they could easily discard the ones on top, which are usually their personal belongings, thus leaving the gifts sent by their friends intact. Her husband added that they are not so concerned about personal belongings left behind because these would be taken care of by those who saw them off at the airport, who would keep these until their return.

According to one *taga-alaga*, ‘you are aware that you are bringing home something for the impoverished family of a fellow migrant worker (otherwise, they will not be sending these gifts) and you are obliged to safely hand it to the family, once you agree to bring home a *padala*.’ So, they see this kind of reciprocity as an obligation. The vacationing migrant is not only accountable to the sender. S/he is also accountable to the expectant family of the sender – the recipient of the sender’s hard work and sacrifices.

In accepting *padala*, however, the value of *pakikisama* interplays with reciprocity. When the Filipinos going home to the Philippines for vacation give precedence to the *padala* of friends, at the back of their mind, they are not only accommodating these as token of *pakikisama* but they also think of future vacations. When these friends go home, they are expected to extend them the same favor, hence, there is an implicit expectation of reciprocity.

The *padala* is not accepted indiscriminately. One *taga-alaga* told me that she only accepts *padala* from friends and/or relatives—‘people that she

⁸ This resonates with Lynch’s observation of the way Filipinos (Roman Catholics) support “the sense of oneness in the average local community” and, at the same time, reinforce the existing system of relations (Lynch 2005:211-14).

knows' (*kakilala*). She invokes the cultural value of personal relations to impose limits on the *padala* she will accept while applying the (religious-moral) precept of concern for other people. She accepted the *padala* of her *alaga* even if the recipient is far from her home province in the Philippines. She related that there are cases where the owner of the *padala* gives extra money for her transportation to reach the receiver's place if the place is quite far. She sighed, 'this is really a sacrifice' ("*sakripisyo talaga ito*").

The *taga-alaga* oblige their *alaga* to serve as 'back up' as they or another *alaga* push the rules on airline baggage allowance to the limit. Kleinman (2009) has noted that the presence and support of friends and family cushion the emotional impact of risk taking and transgressing rules. The *taga-alaga* and *alaga* ensure that belongings that go beyond the excess weight limit set by airlines can somehow be brought on board without having to pay for it. Based on the accounts of the Filipino Catholics I interviewed, different airlines have different rules on carry-on and check-in baggages, and sometimes there can be leniency on the rules. Some airline employees may show partiality in enforcing the regulations. The *taga-alaga* are already familiar with which are the strict and lenient airlines. One may allow three kilos extra while another will permit only two kilos but with leeway on carry-on bags. They usually avoid airlines that do not give any leeway for excess baggage.

To ensure that excess baggage will not be wasted in the event they will be rejected by the airline, Filipino Catholics departing from Belgium bring their escorts for assistance. One of those escorts normally has a car. The others stand near the check-in counter, ready to carry back home any *pasalubong* (gifts) that exceed the allotted weight for check-in luggages. These are given back when the vacationing Filipino Catholics return to Brussels. Thus, accompanying somebody to the airport is a significant activity for Filipino Catholics in Brussels. In this reciprocity of favors, one can tie or be tied to the other.

Remaking the parameters of wellbeing

The shifting material conditions of diasporic context make and remake the parameters of the Filipino Catholics' system of relations and in the process their conception of wellbeing. The personal impact of being *taga-alaga* can elicit a feeling of being 'blessed by God', which may be expressed through gaining social capital, or tested by way of an *alaga's* desertion. In the face of desertion the Filipino Catholics' subjectivities return to and calibrate the Roman Catholic ideology that revolves around God's assurance for people

who suffer, and God's punishment that is meted on those who have caused them to suffer.

The social gains of having *alaga* center on the principle of 'personal recognition' (*pagkilala*). Among the Filipinos in Brussels, Belgium, there seems to be a hierarchy of jobstanding. Generally, they call themselves *kudkud* to refer to their work that is confined to the services sector. In their thinking however, a household *kudkud* is lower than a butler or chambermaid, which in turn is less than a hotel *kudkud*. Moreover, Filipino migrants' social standing is proportionate to the status of their employers. For example, a Filipino whose employer happens to be the representative of the "most powerful nation" is socially ranked higher than a Filipino whose employer is a mere embassy staff. In addition, such gainful employment has opened doors for them, providing useful connections to people they can term as *kakilala* (people they know).

Confined in the service sector as "*kudkud*", of lowly status, the Filipino migrants in Brussels can resort to the *taga-alaga* system to uplift themselves in the eyes of the community and, to a certain extent, the Brussels regional government. The *alaga* relationship merits respect and acknowledgement (both in Belgium and the Philippines). It is also tied to the rediscovery of purpose by Filipino Catholics who have reconsidered their moral options now that they are nearing retirement.

Taga-alaga are recognized and respected individuals. One Filipino Catholic revealed to me that what matters most to the *alaga* is the *taga-alaga's* 'personal connections' (*kakilala*) from whom they can ask favors. This statement prompted me to recall two incidents: one was an exchange I had with a Filipina helper who worked for the Director of Prison in Brussels, the second was a dinner with the Filipino chambermaid of an ambassador's residence. In both cases, the Filipino migrants would boast of their *kakilala* or 'people they know'.

The former's *kakilala* helped lighten the penalty imposed on a couple of Filipinos sentenced to imprisonment. The latter has a *kakilala* who is, in her words, 'the father of all connections,' by virtue of being the representative of the "most powerful nation." My dinner with the Filipino chambermaid was patterned after a formal state dinner. It showcased her personal network: her *amigas* ('friends') who head several Filipino organizations in Brussels, and their extended connections, an anthropologist, and the Philippine Consul in Belgium, who were all present at the event. And it was held in the residence of the ambassador to Belgium of a powerful nation, no less.

Being a *taga-alaga* is a religious experience.⁹ As attested by several *taga-alaga*, this experience has resulted in profound changes in their personality (cf. Rambo 1999).

One *taga-alaga*, told me that he did not tire of working with his fellow Filipinos in the organization even if they caused him ‘a lot of trouble’. In the course of our conversation, he quoted an elder who had once told him to do something worth remembering as one ages. The truth of this finally struck him now that he is nearing retirement. He realized that he had to do something meaningful to give him a sense of “feel good.” Indeed, he feels he is doing a meaningful job, even if he considers himself only an ordinary migrant worker. Whenever he goes home for a vacation, he takes video shots of his organization’s projects: school buildings, basketball gyms, and waiting sheds in the Philippines funded by his organization.

When a politician running for office sought not only financial help from him but also for votes in the places where key projects of his organization are under way, he felt that he had earned the trust of people, as well as the politicians in his hometown and the Filipino Chaplain in Brussels. The Filipino Chaplain sought his help to visit an undocumented Filipino imprisoned in Amsterdam, by which he felt his work and capabilities being given religious legitimacy. Such recognition boosted his self-esteem: even an ordinary migrant worker could do something like that.

The social capital of the *taga-alaga* hinges on the presence and dependence of their *alaga*. The more *alaga* they have, the more they feel a heightened sense of wellbeing. This is however challenged by changes in migration policies in Belgium, foremost among these policies being the acquisition of permanent residency through petition by a family member, and the granting of State amnesty to illegal migrants to legalize their stay in Belgium (European Migration Network: National Contact Point Belgium [2009]). A risk in maintaining *alaga* lies in the *alaga*’s desire to become *taga-alaga* themselves. Undocumented *alaga* may incite social empathy should they want to leave their *taga-alaga*. Both instances would serve as huge blows to the sense of wellbeing of the *taga-alaga*.

When an *alaga*’s stay in Belgium is threatened, the *taga-alaga* becomes the subject of gossip among Filipinos in Brussels. The content of the gossip revolves around taking advantage of their *alaga*’s undocumented status (and hence, being un-Christian). Alex put up a bar located at the center of

⁹ Per Ramsey (1957), it is a disclosure situation of discovering a possibility of what has been thought as impossible.

Brussels. Wanting to improve the lives of his closest Filipino friends (*kabarkada*), he hired some of them. His business went smoothly for the first year until a Filipino worker who had no legal residency status and therefore no working permit was caught by a government employment agent. He provided his undocumented friend with a lawyer to defend his case in court. But Alex's attempt to save his fellow Filipino from deportation came too late. This, according to Alex, cost his business a lot of money. Not only did he lose an employee, his fine was enormous. But worse, he became the subject of nasty talk among the Filipino community in Brussels like: speculation that his bar was forcefully closed because a lot of illegal drugs were found there, or even that he might be meted [Divine] retribution. 'People can be mean' ("*mga tao talaga*"), he said, shrugging it off.

If *alaga* leave their *taga-alaga* to form or join another group, it feels like a betrayal. Percival and Mona led the PDCC, the first religious organization for Filipinos in Brussels and trained several Filipinos to become leaders of the community. As the organization grew, it was beset by controversies that led to the forming of splinter groups. One of these splinter groups was instrumental in the establishment of the Filipino Chaplaincy.

Taga-alaga take in *alaga* without knowing their respective backgrounds. Percival encouraged his *alaga* to go to confession and hold group discussions. Mona added that some of them had only gone to confession before they got married (e.g. twenty years ago), so they taught them the proper way of going to confession. She said that they just choose their servants 'by faith'. They gave their *alaga* leadership roles that allowed them to be recognized in the community—subtly implying that they should have *utang na loob* to Percival and Mona.

Percival and Mona had recognized leadership qualities in their *alaga* as they participated in their community work. Later they found that their understudy was usurping their position; because he coordinated activities, he became popular to the point that people started thinking he was the leader of the group. The couple said that they did not mind this at first; they had extensive experience handling charismatic groups both in the Philippines and in other Asian countries; they had been holding conferences long before they migrated to Brussels; it was enough that they were serving the Lord they said, they did not need any applause.

As the organization grew, politics started to grip the community they helped organize. Everybody wanted recognition. Splinter groups were discrediting each other in the hope of gaining social capital and more followers. One junior member allegedly attacked the core members of the PDCC and during their discernment period wrote a letter asking for a venue

where they could exercise their religiosity. This aroused animosity from the other members. However, Percival and Mona exerted effort to keep the PDCC intact. A general meeting was called for the purpose of pacifying the growing tension. The meeting was held in a chapel in the couples' house. After an exchange of opinions, it appeared that everything was settled, they even held a party to celebrate the reconciliatory gesture. Everyone prayed before the Blessed Sacrament. That was a Sunday. The following Wednesday, Percival and Mona were taken aback to receive a letter saying that the leaders they had trained were setting up another organization. This illustrates the instability and unpredictability of their relations wherein the dominating may be replaced by the dominated after some time. Furthermore, the desire to replace the dominant is shaped by the former *taga-alaga's* control, hence, socially and culturally constituted (Ortner 2006:145).

Even as they were deeply hurt, Percival and Mona joined the initial stage of the Chaplaincy's creation. In deference to the priest who solicited their help, the couple agreed to sit with the splinter group. However from the start, Percival and Mona saw politics in the proceeding. Percival confides that 'nothing significant is going on in the Chaplaincy', even as he claims that he 'does not want to meddle' in the affairs of the Chaplaincy but is more concerned about those who were allowed to receive communion in church in spite of their alleged immorality. Percival was apparently trying to undermine the moral character of the aforesaid leaders who left his group, while shoring up his.

Percival and Mona interpret their *alaga's* defection as God's test of their faith, and keep faith in God's eventual punishment to the transgressors. During this moment, yet again, they revised their moral judgments towards their *alaga*; what had promised to be morally pleasing in the beginning turned repulsive in the end.

Conclusion

One goes back to the human agency that makes man fallible and, by extension, deserving suffering. I will argue (following Kleinman 2007 and Ortner 2006), that when agents' wellbeing is put to test by life's perils and anguish, the emergent subjectivities return to the same cultural system that first patterned their subjectivities, even as they reconfigure, re-pattern, and, at times, completely reinterpret them.¹⁰

¹⁰ This is similar to Nader's (1997) "coercive harmony" which disguises control in free will.

Taga-alaga became aware of their calling in life, and enacting this calling through caring for their downtrodden *alaga* would give them a sense of wellbeing. As demonstrated in this article, for them wellbeing is connected to rewards reaped through caring for the *alaga*. The *taga-alaga* gain a feeling of self-worth, rediscovery of purpose in life, increasing social capital both in Belgium and the Philippines. These are deemed important especially by those whose work is confined to the domestic sector and who are nearing retirement.

The exchanges between the *taga-alaga* and the *alaga* comprise a complex interplay of relations. The *taga-alaga*'s moral ascendancy hinges on the presence and dependence of their *alaga*. As strategies to maintain their *alaga*, the *taga-alaga* take pains to find ways to improve the wellbeing of their *alaga*. Wellbeing for them also means active involvement in communal activities through which the *alaga* can be 'morally guided' and managed as Filipino Catholic migrants in Belgium.

The *alaga* however, have their own distinct interests, which make their allegiance to their *taga-alaga* unstable and unpredictable. Morally laden gossip and values like *utang na loob* are the check on the excesses of their *taga-alaga*. Meanwhile, in Belgium, aside from the gaps in the implementation of State policies on undocumented migrants, policies can change depending on sociopolitical circumstances. Hence, it is also likely that the undocumented *alaga* would end up legalized later on. This reinforces the instability of their relationship, giving the possibility for *alaga* to become *taga-alaga* later on.

When their *alaga* deserted them (to become *taga-alaga* themselves), the *taga-alaga* used their reflexive power to turn socioculturally mediated religious values to their advantage: they interpret this as reminder or hint of the ultimate power of God over their lives. This personal interpretation of Roman Catholic principle is way within Roman Catholicism and the Filipino network's logic of flattening conflicts and ambiguities.

As demonstrated by the Filipino Catholics in Brussels, Roman Catholic religion apparently plays a big part in their cultural system; it has been a source of idioms and religious practices. However, as this paper has shown, Roman Catholic principles are socially and culturally produced in many ways, by different actors, given their subjectivities.

By appropriating between the three areas, namely, their Belgian-State granted residency, their Filipino networks, and localized Roman Catholic moral principles, the permeability of the Filipino Catholics' sense of wellbeing has a far-reaching effect transcending context and era. It also has the

capacity to provide occasions for personal inflections in social responses and contextual framing of their deepest subjective processes.

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