

IN SEARCH OF JUSTICE AND HEALING: THE LEFT-BEHIND FAMILIES OF EJK VICTIMS IN DUTERTE’S WAR ON DRUGS

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This article examines the left-behind families of extrajudicial killing (EJK) victims under President Rodrigo Duterte’s war on drugs. It looks into the lives of the EJK-bereaved, most of whom are mothers and wives, and their search for justice and healing following the shock of losing their husbands and sons, who are usually breadwinners of the household. The ethnography sheds light on the realities that come with single motherhood and as heads of the household, as well as the everyday fear, angst, and violence the families continue to face in light of the killings. Moreover, it attempts to unsheathe the layers and gray areas involved in grief and the pursuit of justice. Apart from the women’s narrations of their experiences in their conscious waking lives, it also turns to their experiences with the unconscious and the supernatural through symbols gleaned from visitation dreams and apparitions from the deceased.

Keywords: *Extrajudicial killings, drug war, drugs, grief, ethnography, Philippines, Duterte*

Subalit ang higit na nagbibigay sa akin ng lakas ng loob
Ay ang malalim nating pagsasamahan:
Habang ako’y pumapatay, kayo nama’y nanunuod.¹
– Albert Alejo, S.J., *Sanayan Lang ang Pagpatay* (1993)

“*Huwag! Huwag wag kayong magpapaputok, andito po
yung mga anak ko, natutulog.*” [‘No! Please don’t shoot, my
children are here, sleeping!’] – ‘Gina’

¹ [However what most gives me courage / Is our deep association: / While I am killing, you are watching.]

A murdering State: the Philippines' War on Drugs

State-empowered violence and human rights abuses, such as extrajudicial killings (EJKs), torture, and enforced disappearances, among others, exist the world over. In Argentina, the “tradition of a monopoly of violence by the state” (Taylor 1999:62) was most horribly witnessed during the The National Reorganization Process [*Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*, or “*El Proceso*”] of the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina for seven years, and it led to the word “*desaparecidos*” [‘the disappeared’] being added to the world’s vocabulary. Official accounts say there were nearly 20,000 *desaparecidos* in Argentina’s *El Proceso*, also known as the “Dirty War” from the years 1976 to 1984, with fewer than 600 found and identified, although human rights groups say the figure is “at least 30,000” (Hernandez 2013). The cited number is based on an estimate that “for every one of the disappearances reported, there could possibly be two more cases unreported at the time” according to the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, which also noted 9,225 political disappearances from the Dirty War reported during 2003 (EAAF 2007:21).

In the Philippines, reports about human rights violations and extrajudicial killings became rampant during the martial law suspension of the privilege of the writ of *habeas corpus* under Ferdinand Marcos’ administration. Over 100,000 persons were recorded by Amnesty International to have been victims of martial law. These cases include 70,000 arrested, 34,000 tortured and over 3,000 killed by the military and the police, from 1972 to 1981 (Galvez 2018). Meanwhile, the Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance (FIND) documented 1,993 *desaparecidos* during martial law (ABS-CBN News 2018). Under succeeding presidents, FIND has identified 825 cases of enforced and involuntary disappearance in Corazon Aquino’s term, 94 during the Fidel Ramos administration, 63 under Joseph Estrada, 346 during the term of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, and 31 during the administration of Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III (Gavilan 2018).

There were forty-five reported cases of involuntary disappearances under Rodrigo Duterte in 2018, a small number which is believed to be under-reported. Such incidents persist with impunity, especially as a result of the current government's war on drugs; “(f)ear has gripped the communities, making it extremely difficult to document cases” (AFAD 2019:7).²

² [The Philippines has “the first and only anti-enforced disappearance law in Asia” (R.A.10353 2012), however it has hardly been implemented (AFAD 2019:7).]

According to the Philippine National Police (PNP), from July 2016 until May 2018 over 4,000 drug suspects were killed in the campaign against illegal drugs, whereas an estimated 20,000 more are under investigation as possibly drug-related (Felipe 2018). The Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency's latest #RealNumbersPH update, states that 5,526 drug personalities have died in anti-drug operations as of June 2019 (Gonzales 2019). While the Drug Archive Philippines³ independent listing based on media reports of killings from July 2016 to the end of 2018 reports that more than 7,000 drug suspects have been killed in the drug war (Subingsubing 2019). The true number of EJK cases continues to remain muddled. Reports from the government as well as human rights groups and even the media show conflicting data surrounding EJKs are conflicting, and "lacks accuracy in terms of facts and context" (Santos & Ebbighausen 2018). There seem to be no reliable numbers for Duterte's drug war.

Many police officers turn to the rhetoric of "*nanlaban*" ('fought back' / self-defense) when put under scrutiny for the killings of drug suspects. It is a rhetoric that was introduced by the President himself as justification for killing by the police. However politicians, officials of the Church, as well as families of EJK victims, have claimed that in many cases the evidence was planted; the police officers allegedly place drugs and guns next to the victims' bodies (Yap 2018, Santos et al. 2017). Public opinion also rejects the "*nanlaban*" tales of the police, 54 percent of those surveyed in a noncommissioned survey by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) last 2017.

Out of the thousands of suspected drug pushers and addicts killed in the drug war, only one victim has thus far attained justice. Seventeen-year-old Kian delos Santos, who was killed by policemen in a small alley just a little way past their home in Caloocan last August 2017, was accused by cops of possession of a gun and firing it at cops while they gave chase. But on November 2018, a little more than a year after delos Santos' death, the Caloocan City Regional Trial Court convicted PO3Arnel Oares, PO1Jeremias Pereda and PO1Jerwin Cruz of killing the teenager. They were sentenced to *reclusion perpetua* or up to forty years behind bars (Subingsubing 2018).

³ A project led by the Ateneo School of Government at Ateneo de Manila University, De La Salle Philippines, the University of the Philippines-Diliman, and the Stable Center for Investigative Journalism at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.

The conviction comes as a silver lining to the many more EJK families whose loved ones were unsparingly killed by police officers, and who hope and strive for the same justice. But beyond any ruling of the court (or lack thereof), what palpably remains are those ‘left-behind’, who have no choice but to endeavor to continue on living. These are the widows who were robbed of their husbands, the mothers who were robbed of the children they carried and nurtured, and the children who were robbed of the chance of having a father.

Paghilom: the EJK families and the ‘Group Nobody Wants to Join’

Past the street hawkers, thrift shops and numerous establishments selling bibles, rosaries, crucifixes and life-sized saints in the streets of Manila, a certain group of people gathers weekly inside one of the rooms of a Catholic missionary congregation. The meetings are clandestine, to outsiders at least, whose questions of “Where are you going?” are answered with white lies like ‘to the market’, or “*diyan-diyang lang*” (‘just around’) when relatives or neighbors would ask them where they had been. These evasive responses have a somber underpinning— they are intended to protect the identities of those under the church-organized healing intervention for families of EJK victims.

The Paghilom Program was established in 2016 by an activist priest who also has personal experience of the drug problem who I first met during the burial of an EJK victim in Manila North Cemetery in June 2018. As a response to the thousands of killings under the drug war, the program offers five aspects of support to “EJK families”: food and healthcare, psycho-spiritual intervention, legal assistance, education assistance and livelihood assistance. The healing program’s scope encompasses all families of victims of the drug war, including the minors and adults who were killed in the crossfire (“collateral damage”⁴). However, most of its participants have been the families of EJK victims who were allegedly associated with drugs, either as supposed former users and/or pushers, as kin or friends of those believed to be/have been engaged in drug use and/or drug pushing, and families of victims of mistaken identity or “frame-up”.

Paghilom was inaugurated with an estimated 20 families in the first batch under its wing. The fourth batch of families held their first meeting in the

⁴ [In July 10, 2019, 3-year-old Myca Ulpina, the youngest known victim of the Drug War was buried in Rodriguez, Rizal. (Santos 2019)]

beginning of October 2018 with 15 families onboard from the slum communities of Caloocan and Tondo, and Taguig. For the first six weeks, the sessions were presided over by workers from the Commission of Human Rights (CHR) and later by the Center for Family Ministries (CEFAM) of the Ateneo de Manila University. Ideally, the program is 12 Saturdays or 3 months long. They then have a 3-day retreat afterwards, and then a theater acting workshop for their play, which is the culmination of the program. The play, which is usually a depiction of their stories of injustice and serves as therapy for their loss, is showcased to varied audiences. Previous batches have performed their plays at venues in educational institutions and at the headquarters of the Philippine Vice President.

However, noble and borne out of good intentions as the program may be, the truth remains that with more batches under Paghilom comes the reality of the increasing number of EJK victims in the country. Which is why, for every successful culmination of a batch comes the fervent hope of it being the last.

The protection and comfort of the circle

Within the four walls of their meeting room, mothers and wives of EJK victims gather in a circle of chairs for ‘psycho-spiritual intervention’ every Saturday from morning till noon where the bereaved are encouraged to share their hurts and hopes with each other (Fig.1). Although not initially acquainted, they view each other as one big family to turn to for comfort. The stories they tell each other are contained only within the group’s circle of chairs, a space where they can shed their inhibitions and lean on each other for support. The families vow that their stories shall never be shared beyond the circle and the walls of the building. If asked, they are not allowed to disclose where they went and for what purpose.

The women are only silent when outside of their meeting place. As I observed, they bear no reservations when it comes to sharing their experiences and hurts to one another. These are continuous during the actual sessions, and even curiously surface in personal and quotidian conversations with each other that do not revolve around the drug war.

I was introduced to the women during the first official session of the program as both a researcher and a journalist. My posturing as a journalist allowed me to carry out this ethnography, although still blundering blindly, with some kind of familiarity and access to the field. Thus it is unclear to me just how and when exactly I officially “started” the ethnographic study with

the EJK communities when I am, for lack of a better term, already ‘entangled’ in this undertaking. It felt more, to me, as an extension and a continuation of what I am already presently attempting to do, but now carrying not only a journalist’s perspective, but also the discerning eye, the *pakikiramdam*, the ‘ineluctable solicitude’ or the *ishra* (Abu-Lughod 1986) – the living together and sharing of lives – that comes with doing ethnography.



Figure 1. EJK families sit in a circle to share their stories.

I felt that I was welcomed in the circle early on when a priest told the women during the introduction that ‘they should not worry about me’, that I could be trusted even though I was a journalist.⁵ After this acknowledgment, I no longer felt that I was an omnipresent observer, but a part of the group. Looking back at it now, I think I was more conscious of the idea that I was bothering them and encroaching on their sessions than they were. They did not show any hesitance towards me (and if they were, they were very good at hiding it) and were warm, overly friendly and touchy. They would also ask about me and look for me whenever I would miss a session due to work, and

⁵ This was one of the reasons why I did not want to be identified as a journalist during my fieldwork, but as a researcher. Knowing that the families of EJK victims have become untrusting of the media, I was deeply concerned that they might feel that I was just after their narratives in order to publish a story.

shared with me details about their lives that they would not share during the sessions in front of everybody.

I honestly believe I would not have been able to gain the women's trust if I had engaged in "parachute interviewing". I had been warned that the women have become anxious towards the media due to fear of being targeted by the police and by the way the drug war continues to be covered both by the local and international media (as it should be). While it is the media's job to report and inform the public of the killings, the women's general feeling of angst stems from the amplified publicity given to EJK victims, their families and their area in light of a killing; the feeling of being spotlighted, and the fear of being targeted by the police if they speak out. When their names or faces are posted or published, it jeopardizes their safety.

There are some families who are brave enough to face the camera or be interviewed, but many of them actually do not want to be interviewed and prefer to keep to themselves, especially on what should be private, vulnerable and solemn moments such as a funeral or a burial. However, it is inevitable for the media to go to the scenes of the killings and in the area and homes of the victims which they have to report about. The issue is when a photo or a report of a killing circulates online and the EJK families have little to no control over its virality. Being in a state of virality or being in the glare of publicity is not a normal occurrence that an average and common private citizen experiences in their life and being viral, whether in the form of sensitive photos or written reports, could feel unnerving, if not daunting, to them who are already at high-risk and experiencing turmoil and immense grief, and whose lives and work do not involve holding the attention and interest of an audience or the public (e.g. entertainment industry). There are cases too when families of victims would frequently be asked or harassed by the media for interviews.

(I have had to confront my own act of writing about the women's experiences. That there are many risks involved in engaging with the families of EJK victims is a point noted by Gideon Lasco (2018), when he wrote about the challenges in doing anthropology in the time of the war on drugs in the country. Trust, he said, is a crucial element in creating lasting relationships with research participants and putting attention to them can risk compromising their security and safety. We must minimize these risks to their lives at all costs by doing responsible ethnography, by anonymizing the study site as well as the participants' identities while still putting their narratives at the very center.)

In the sharing of stories, each person in the circle is able to freely express themselves uninterrupted. Giving a listening ear takes precedence over the offering of advice. I observed that although the women did not initially know each other (despite sometimes coming from the same slum communities), they never showed hesitation nor shame to bare themselves and openly shared their stories. The sessions are emotionally charged and are always filled with tears of despair. Some women would break down every time they told their story. Some were so keen on sharing their story that they would repeat it every chance they could get, even though it had already been shared in the previous weeks. Linda Green (1999) observed something similar in her ethnography of the Mayan Indian widows who lost their husbands, sons and other families due to state violence in rural Guatemala during the 1970s and the mid-1980s. The Mayan women recounted their stories in vivid detail without prompting and continued to do so again and again throughout the time she lived with them.

Perhaps the women gain something in the retellings of their stories. According to the Argentinian Marcelo Suarez-Orozco (1992), testimony is a way of healing and also a censure of injustice, its concept holding overtones of the subjective and private, as well as the objective, juridical and political. More than internal catharsis, perhaps the act of repeated utterance also gives the women the power to openly and freely condemn the horrors that were committed to them, even if it means uttering these stories in just one room, amongst themselves, from the chair where they sit.

In a frantic and desperate tone, repeating out loud the injustices committed to them, the EJK women's narratives are forthright in their imagery of cruelty and barbarity. They describe their husbands and sons begging for their lives to be spared, and being mocked and scorned by police officers before being shot. Phrases like "*pinatay, kinaladkad lang parang baboy*" ['slaughtered and dragged like a pig'], "*initsa lang*" ['tossed'] and "*nilagay sa sako*" ['stuffed in a sack'] are often heard.

Sabi ng asawa ko, 'Wag nyo akong patayin kasi ina-antay ako ng mga anak ko'. 'Buhayin niyo na lang ako,' sabi niya, 'ikulong niyo nalang ako, wag niyo kong patayin.' Kasi inaantay nga siya ng mga anak ko.

[‘My husband said “please do not kill me because my children are waiting for me. Let me live, just imprison me, don’t kill me.”] – Gabriela

Two themes emerge from the women's narratives: 1) their lives' seeming 'dispensability', based not only on the killings received from the hands of the police but also their inhumane treatment of the bodies; and 2) how families were also rendered homeless by the killing. The stories of 'Gabriela', 'Gina', and 'Moira' who live in Parola, Tondo and Taguig, reveal that violence and police presence has become a part of their everyday life, with the police officers continually on the prowl through their communities.

Gabriela recalls that she fled their house after her husband was slain out of fear for her own life, citing incidents of police officers arriving at their house and peering through the windows as if to check if someone still remained inside ("*patingin-tingin*"). She now wanders the streets by day and retires either to the Barangay Hall or the SVD headquarters, which have become her 'imagined home'. Meanwhile, her children have been left in the care of her relatives.

Gina's husband was killed outside their house on July 2018 while she and their four children lay in bed just upstairs. He too was gunned down outside their house and also begged for his life for the sake of his young children. Today Gina lives alone, having sent her four children to her relatives in Capiz province following threats to their lives from police officers, who she described as "*pabalik-balik*" ['coming back again and again']. She sleeps in different houses, relying on the compassion of neighbors, friends and some families in Manila.

Moira lost her husband in 2016. She insists that 'revenge' was the motive. According to Moira, they were at first falsely implicated – "*nadamay lang*". (In our conversation, Moira entertained the idea that her husband may have used drugs, but he did not engage in drug-dealing.). Moira and her mother were not aware that some of her brother's visitors included big time drug pushers. When the police raided her brother's house they included Moira and her husband's house in the operation since it was in the same compound. The PNP also took away their belongings ("*inubos lahat ng gamit namin*"). So she and her husband filed a complaint to the Southern Police District. Before this, the police had told them an 'arrangement' ("*areglo*") could be reached to clear their names for ₱300,000, but Moira and her husband did not agree to the settlement. After an initial evaluation their complaint was forwarded to the NCRPO (National Capital Region Police Office) on Sept. 6, 2016. Her husband was gunned down the very next day, Sept. 7. Moira husband's case is one of first suffering robbery and extortion that ended in "EJK".

Like Gina and Gabriela, Moira and her children fled their home. They had no place to stay for many months as they eluded police officers. ‘We moved out, lived here and there. My children stopped going to school because of the trauma’ [*“Kung saan-saan kami nakatira. Tumigil sa pag-aaral mga anak ko”*], she told me one time. After attending its first few weeks, Moira did not finish the Paghilom program.

From the women’s narratives, the police officers showed a complete disregard for human life in executing unnecessary “shoot-to-kill” despite the suspects’ pleas. They all said that the suspects were unarmed, and that autopsies revealed that they died of multiple gunshot wounds from “double-action trigger” shots. The manner of “cleaning up” after the act – the way bodies were handled in a callous manner – also confirms for them the dispensability of the EJK victims, majority of whom live in marginalized and poor communities. Nanay Elena’s son was shot multiple times before being stuffed in a sack but he was not yet completely dead and struggled inside the sack, prompting the police to shoot him again until he finally stopped moving. The sack was then tossed inside a pedicab.

The loss of a life partner/father coupled with the continued harassment from the police officers throws the lives of the bereaved in disarray, struggling to cope with the absence of the father and husband as well as with the threat to their own lives. Their homelessness, brought about by trauma and fear in the aftermath of the killings, shows the extent of the disruption and harm done to the family. The “home” ceases to be safe nor a haven where they can find refuge. The mothers desperate to find and build a home where their lives are out of danger, or to send their children away.

Delayed justice, fear and loathing in the Time of *Tokhang*

The pursuit of justice through legal process, to hold the perpetrators accountable and bring them to court, may be seen as the most logical course of action in response to the killings. However this sentiment is not expressed by the women. Many of them remain uncertain, mainly out of fear for their lives, but also with many believing that as they are poor, they do not have sufficient influence for justice to fairly favor their side. However, a part of the Paghilom program is legal assistance to write sworn statements. The women are asked to write down their experiences in a format which can be used should they pursue a court case in the future.

The women share a common sentiment that they will not pursue a court case during the Duterte administration. They seem passive, but although it

appears contradictory for them *not* to actively pursue justice, considering their desperate contexts, the women cannot and should not be blamed for their refusal or deferral of pursuing justice. Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) in her ethnography of the people of the shantytown Alto do Cruzeiro in Timbauba, Pernambuco, Brazil, had pointed out a ‘culture of silence’ among them such that although they know the perpetrators behind killings and disappearances of their young black men, they refuse to speak out due to fear of being “marked.” The same can be gleaned in the EJK families’ experiences. Threats and return visits from the police compel witnesses to the killings to keep silent to avoid being themselves targeted.

Natakot po kami kasi binalikan po ako ng mga pulis, sabi ng pulis damay-damay na daw pati mga anak ko po. Sabi ko, Diyos ko po, ayoko po, yung mga anak ko walang kaalam-alam.
 [‘We are afraid because the police came back to say that my children also are implicated. I said, “Oh God, please no, my children know nothing at all.”’] – ‘Luz’

The women’s silence and refusal to share about their clandestine meetings to outsiders reflect the precarious and violent climate they live with every day. Silence, for them, is a means of survival, at the same time however, it is also a “mechanism of control enforced through fear” (Green 1999:69), in deep anxiety or dread of the police officers who regularly return to their areas (*pabalik-balik*).

In an added blow to the families, the circulation of “EJK waivers” came to the fore in 2018. Police officers allegedly make EJK families sign a waiver, which states (in Filipino) that the signatory is ‘no longer interested’ in having the police investigate the killing of their kin (See 2018). ‘Luz’, who was in the first batch of the Paghilom program, stopped attending after police officers came back for her. She shared that she was forced to sign the EJK waiver and that she did it without reading nor understanding the document,

“Pinapirma po nila ako, hindi ko po alam, hindi ko na po binasa. Kasi ayokong mawala ang mga anak ko.”
 [‘They made me sign it, I do not know what it said, I did not bother to read it. Because I don’t want to lose my children’].

While some women desire to pursue justice for their loved ones, they feel they have no choice but to ‘set it aside’ in the current political climate. “Delayed justice”, some might say, “is justice denied”, but their resignation

is borne out of the belief that nothing fruitful would come out of it under the Duterte administration, *especially* under the Duterte administration.

‘Nanay Esther’, whose husband was gunned down by police officers in 2017 while he was washing clothes in the *eskinita* [narrow street] outside their home, says, in a defensive manner, that she has always sought justice for her husband, however she cannot accomplish anything while Duterte is still President. She vows to pursue justice once his term is over.

Ang gusto ko po talaga mangyari, ang talagang nilalaban ko mula’t sapul, kaya lang wala po akong magagawa hanggang si Duterte nakaupo, wala po kami magagawa... Pero pagdating ng araw na wala na siya, bubuklatin ko po yan.

[‘What I really want, what I really have been fighting for from the start except I cannot do anything, for as long as Duterte sits we cannot do anything... But when the time comes that he is no longer there, I shall open this up.’]

Other women would leave justice in the hands of God (Divine fatalism), while some renounce their faith and shift the blame and anger to God (Divine nihilism). Nanay Elena says she is at peace with the thought of her son’s killers never being convicted in court because although she is powerless, God is not. Although many had witnessed the slaying of her son, they are unwilling to testify in court. Her solace is that her son’s killers’ time will come one day.

Ipinasa-Diyos ko nalang, wala naman akong magagawa. Wala naman akong ilalalaban, wala akong yamang pera. Ipasa-Diyos nalang, di naman habambuhay buhay yan. Mamamatay din yan.

[‘I’ve just left it to God. Anyway there is nothing I can do. I have no wealth or money, I have nothing to fight with. Just leave it God, anyway they will not live forever. One day they too will die.’]

Women who resorted to blaming God for their tragedy renounced their faith. ‘Melissa’, every now and then in the sessions, would express anger at God and tearfully question the session’s priest-facilitator and the other women how God could allow such a terrible thing to happen when she and her husband were so devoted in their faith.

Bakit ang Diyos kahit anong pananampalataya at pananalig binibigyan pa rin kami ng ganito? Bakit ganito ang Diyos?

Napakalupit niya sa amin, bakit ganito pa? Nagagalit po ako sa Diyos ngayon. Sobrang galit po ako sa Diyos ngayon. Nananalig kami sa Iyo, nananampalataya kami sa Iyo pero bakit ganito ang ginawa Mo?

[‘Why has God given this to us in spite of our worship and faith? Why is God like this? He has treated us so harshly, why? I am angry at God right now. I am so angry at God right now. We have faith in You. We worship You. Why have You done this?’]

Her questions were unanswered by the other women, but one time the priest spoke up during a session and told Melissa that ‘he had nothing to say to her, only that if there was one thing God could be doing at that very moment, it was that He was also crying with her.’ He said, ‘Jesus Christ was a victim himself’,

“Tumatangis ang Diyos ngayon. Si Hesus din ay dumaan sa ganiyan. Umiiyak Siya dahil umiiyak tayo.”

[‘God is crying right now. Jesus also went through the same thing. He is crying because we are crying.’]

The commonly held refusal to pursue justice or to defer it, and the attitudes of divine fatalism and nihilism among the women at first surprised and disturbed me. However, when I placed the responses into each unique context, I gleaned that such responses are not absurd at all. What justice will the EJK families find? With their waking lives beset with fear and threats, are these not reasonable responses to circumstances no woman should ever have to face in her life?

In that moment, in their subjective circumstances, their responses were most reasonable and sound. Refusing or deferring justice is not a sign of cowardice nor weakness, nor an indication that the women do not care nor love their husbands and sons enough not to *actively* fight for them. I do not think, either, that delayed justice is necessarily justice denied, at least in the women’s cases, when they, despite their powerlessness and precarious circumstances, attempt to decide for themselves *when* justice should be taken or *where* it should come from, such as the Divine. Their answers do not come from the easiest of places. I echo the sentiments of Scheper-Hughes (1992) who, in her attempt in understanding the Alto women’s stoicism and casual air towards their infants’ deaths, described their indifference as a “reasonable” response to “unreasonable constraints and contingencies” (Scheper-Hughes 1992:400).

What I have drawn from the narratives is that pursuit of justice must take the backseat so the women can focus on something they deem more important. The EJK mothers and wives' fierce desire is to protect themselves and ensure the safety of their paternally-orphaned grand/children. The fight for survival could not get any more palpable, and who else but these 'left-behind women' can sustain the remaining alive? While many of them have expressed hopelessness and helplessness, often citing their poverty and powerlessness, they, in incredible moments during the sessions, would express their desire to rise from their tragedy and rebuild their broken homes once again— starting with what matters the most: preserving life, the lives of their children, the living over the dead.

Visitation dreams and apparitions

“The deceased continue to appear in visions, dreams and apparitions. They make demands of simple pleasures and creature comforts explicit.”
 - Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death Without Weeping* (1992:231).

A curious theme unexpectedly emerged in the sessions with the EJK families: the role of the supernatural and the unconscious (or, to others, the subconscious) in the women's grieving, specifically in the form of visitation dreams and apparitions. In Jungian psychology, visitation dreams, referred to as “big dreams” (Cathcart 2007), are vivid and memorable. According to the dream specialists these are emotionally vibrant and the dreamer remembers them throughout his life, they are recurring dreams.

Visitation dreams and apparitions were commonly shared by the EJK mothers and wives, who each experienced at least one immediately after the killing, and continued to see or sense their loved ones months later on. These visitation dreams and apparitions are met by the women not with fear nor horror, but with simple acceptance. After the first “*pagpaparamdam*” [‘sensing’ of their presence] or “*bisita*” [‘visit’], they even felt expectance and eagerly anticipated these. Through the visitation dreams, the women were able to “communicate” with their loved ones about things and concerns they never got to talk about, though planned to, when they were still alive. The women shared the distinct messages and conversations from their dreams, but sometimes, what was exchanged between them and their loved one was silence. The women experience these messages or signs as a kind of closure given the abrupt ending that was the fate of their husbands. What was left unsaid in real life has made its way into their dreams.

Gabriela was three months pregnant with her youngest child when her husband was killed by police officers. She did not know then the sex of their baby, but in a dream she had right after he was killed, she found herself inside an ultrasound clinic with him. Before the ultrasound was performed, he told her that their baby was going to be a girl. And it was! In another dream she recalled her husband caressing her face and brushing her hair, while promising her that, in life and in death, she would be the only woman he would choose to love and be with over and over again. He also asked her for forgiveness, saying that he was not a perfect man.⁶

The dream may have been an expression of Gabriela's innermost longing. In real life, she and her husband were separated and no longer lived together in one house long before he was killed. She shared that he had been an abusive husband who often physically hurt her and had cheated on her with multiple women. Once, he even attempted to shoot her.

Moira also had many vivid dreams of her husband after he died. A dream that recurred often was of them meeting in a garden. She is always the one who arrives first and waits for her husband. He would always arrive in a hurry, and as if he had somewhere else to go after. He was always silent in these meetings, but Moira, in these dreams, is able to express to her husband her deepest sentiments.

“Nakaupo kami sa ilalim ng puno ng buko, gabi eh. Tahimik siya, di siya nagsasalita malungkot siya. Tapos umiyak ako sinabihan ko siya, ‘miss na kita.’ Niyakap niya ako, ganun lang.”

[‘We were seated under the tree, at night. He was quiet and didn’t speak, he was sad. Then I cried and I told him, “I miss you”. He embraced me. That’s all.’]

In another dream, Moira found herself in a house atop the mountain. Two bridges connected to the house, one with a dark path and the other with light shining upon it. In that dream, her husband told her that he had to leave. He did not tell her where he was off to, but he promised Moira he would come back. He went on his way, walking through the bridge that had light shining on it. [*Nagsabi siya na aalis na siya, sabi niya sakin ‘babalik ako’ pero nakatingin lang ako sa kaniya. Ang dinaanan niyang tulay yung maliwanag.*]

⁶ [*Sabi niya mamatay at mabuhay man siya, ako rin daw pipiliin niyang mamahalin sa buhay niya, mabuhay man daw siya o mamatay, kahit sa kabilang buhay. Sabi niya sa akin patawarin ko nalang daw siya, tapos pasensya na daw na ganun daw siya di raw siya perpekto eh.*]

Apart from her vivid dreams of her husband, Moira and her children would also experience visitations from him. He would make his presence known by making noise around the house. At first, they would hear the rattling and banging of the door, and sounds of the *palanggana* [basin] flying and falling on the floor. When these would happen, Moira would talk to the air addressing her husband, such as inviting him to eat with them. *Madalas ko siyang kinakausap. "O, nandiyan ka pala, halika na, kakain na tayo."* [‘I often talk to him: “Oh you’re here, come, let’s eat already”’]

Apparitions are experienced more by the children than the women. Gabriela’s baby girl would point at blank spaces and corners, laugh and call out to her “Papa.” Nanay Elena never experienced visitation dreams nor ghostly apparitions or *pagpaparamdam* from her son, but she shared that it was her 6-year-old granddaughter who would often see her father in the bathroom. Although Nanay Elena does not believe in the supernatural and would often brush off her grandchild’s tales, she told me one day, in a sheepish tone, that she believes her son’s apparitions happen in the bathroom because when he was alive, he would always take a long time in the toilet, even falling asleep there. (*“Kasi yan yung anak ko minsan nakakatulog sa kubeta yan, matagal siya gumamit ng kubeta.”*)

Her son’s friends were also ‘visited’; they would experience being thumped on the head but see nobody around. It was her son’s habit to thump his friends when he was still alive. Nanay Elena’s grandchild, meanwhile, would see apparitions of her dad and express delight, announcing his presence excitedly. She would also say that her dad is not really dead but ‘just resting’, and would come back again, perhaps in a year’s time. (*Sabi niya ‘di naman patay si Papa, siguro sa isang taon babalik siya, ano lang nagpapahinga lang si Papa, babalik rin siya.*)

Such dreams and apparitions can only be interpreted by those who personally dreamt and experienced it themselves. Although the women acknowledged the presence of such they never gave these much thought until they were probed about it. Despite their receptiveness to the dreams and apparitions, they seemed to acknowledge such phenomena as “just there.” There were moments I’ve observed, however, when the women would refer to certain moods and symbols in the dreams that struck a chord in them – a word that was said, an emotion that was exhibited, a specific setting – and made use of them in thinking-through their feelings.

I posit that the visitation dreams and apparitions experienced by the women are neither real nor cold comfort, but perhaps these dreams and

apparitions provide tools that enable them to wade through their feelings of grief and loss.

“Ang paghilom man ay paglaban din” / ‘To heal is also to resist’

The road to healing (*paghilom*) and justice for the EJK mothers and wives is not a linear trajectory. Despite being under the Paghilom program that follows a sequential timeline of sessions, each woman’s pace varies from one another and each woman’s journey is very much personal and subjective. For the EJK mothers and wives, justice-seeking, taking on the role of single mothers and/or as heads of the household, and ‘healing’ overlap.

This contradiction of tending and ‘abandoning’ is the reality that the EJK women move between in determining what is best for their family. With their breadwinner gone, the women mentioned taking up multiple, precarious jobs to support their children in their schooling, including: *paglalaba* (clotheswashing), *pagtitinda ng atay* (selling liver in the wet market), *pagtitinda sa sari-sari* store (selling in a small cottage-industry convenience store), and *pangangalakal ng basura* (trading in trash). What is common among them, however, is the use of “*diskarte*” (‘strategy’) by the women—to get by and find ways (*para-paraan*) despite their fraught and frantic lives, the emotional turmoil of losing their life partner and loved ones, the continued threats to their lives, and, for some the added upheaval and sacrifice of moving their children away for safety.

The survival and well-being of the remaining children take precedence over justice for the deceased. Focused on raising the left-behind children and rebuilding their household, the women’s way of going about the business of raising their grand/children and putting their household back into order varies from woman to woman (I subscribe to no universal ‘maternal thinking’ or ‘womanly ethos’); some women have resorted to taking up extra odd jobs to make ends meet and send their grand/children to school, others have sent their children to the provinces and left them in the care of relatives, far away from the everyday violence of their slum communities.

The priest, after listening to the women express their misgivings and hurt that justice shall never be on their side because they are poor and powerless, told them that healing, in itself, is already an act of fighting back, of not giving in to oppression and to the horrors that befell their lives. I would echo this insight. While legal justice cannot be pursued due to continued police threats and the current political climate, it is not the only type of resistance the EJK families can and are engaging in. While some of the women have

not achieved nor can personally say they have started on the path of healing itself, the struggle to continue to *live* remains as a personally empowering act of dissent in these fraught times.

Epilogue- updates from the ‘field’

On July 18, 2019, thirty-six individuals including eight clergymen, were accused of ‘inciting to sedition’ against the government through alleged involvement in “*The Real Narcolist*” videos supposedly created by Peter Joemel Advincula / “Bikoy” in April.

The Paghilom program launched its seventh batch of families in August 2019.

Acknowledgements

The fieldwork I conducted for this study is also a part of my serialized writing project to report about EJK families, governed by both the urgency in journalism (I write for a leading Philippine news website), and the more prolonged, in-depth participant-observation sacrosanct in anthropological fieldwork. The identities of the families and of the EJK wives and mothers have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the precarious lives of those involved. I am grateful to Fr. Flavie Villanueva, SVD, without whom my work with the EJK families would not be possible. And, of course, to the nanays and ates of Paghilom— thank you for sharing your lives with me and for your courage. I am indebted.

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