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Overseas Migration: A Filipino 'Fixture' Forms a Nation's Future

by Jeremaiah Opiniano



We are pleased to spotlight in this issue of Pacific Rim Report the work of one of the Center's younger professional fellows.

Journalist Jeremaiah M. Opiniano received the first Yuchengco Media Fellowship for Young Professionals awarded by the USF Center for the Pacific Rim for fall 2006, during which time he was in residence at the Center to conduct research and interviews on overseas Filipino workers and migration and development within the Filipino diaspora, do an internship at the Mercury News, and study advanced journalism at USF. He is president of the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) Journalism Consortium, a nonprofit media-civil society coalition based in Manila that is doing migration journalism, Opiniano also serves as executive director of the Institute for Migration and Development Issues (IMDI), a young civil society organization whose focus is

immigrations and development. In addition, he currently teaches journalism at the University of Santo Tomas where he pioneered a course in migration journalism.

Opiniano has authored numerous articles and several monographs and books, including the book Our Future Beside the Exodus: Migration and Development Issues in the Philippines (2004) and Good News for the Poor: Diaspora Philanthropy by Filipinos (2005). He holds a BA in Journalism and a Master's degree in Professional Studies-Development Communication from the University of the Philippines Open University.

We are pleased to spotlight in this issue the work of one of the Center's young visiting fellows. Opiniano's three-part series sheds light on issues surrounding the international migration of Filipinos—a 'fixture' of everyday life in the Philippines—and on the effects this continuing exodus has on the future of the country and on those in the diaspora itself.

Readers are encouraged to disseminate the contents of this Report as widely as possible among interested parties, with the proviso that its publication by the USF Center for the Pacific Rim be acknowledged.

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Overseas Filipinos Wonder Why They Are 'Heroes'

BAY FAIR, California — Rodrigo had white spots on his denims, rubber shoes, and fingers. Those on his fingers matched Rodrigo's white hair. The undocumented worker's white spots are paint from a recent home service job he did for a friend.

Inside a five-car intercity train, Rodrigo, a Filipino, blurted out boldly in Filipino language: "I am getting homesick! Let them know I am a 'TNT' (an undocumented foreigner who's always in hiding or *tago nang tago*).

Yet 'global Filipinos' like Rodrigo, legal migrants or not, do not find it strange to be working abroad, even while they are homesick, overworked, and struggling to speak Dutch, Japanese, or English. For some eight million or four generations of Filipinos in 193 countries, the world has been their archipelago, becoming just like their mother country.

What confuses many Filipinos who toil abroad to support their families and relatives back home is why their country has assigned a patriotic role to them.

Hero, Hard Worker

Rodrigo learned about his 'heroism' through media reports—the government has repeatedly called overseas Filipinos as *bagong bayani* or

'modern-day heroes'. "I think I am a hero for my family," said this handyman who has a degree in civil engineering and who manages to remit US\$1,000 monthly and another US\$4,000 yearly for his five children's schooling.

Overseas Filipinos, writes former Philippine Labor Secretary Patricia Santo Tomas, "are hailed as heroes because they work hard, often under conditions that are difficult and significantly different in terms of culture and work practices they knew back home. It is considered a necessary sacrifice to provide a better future for the family," Santo Tomas' piece for the *2005 World Migration Report* claimed.

Husband and wife Tony and Elenita Manuel (not their real names) are also 'out of status' in the US. While they also remit US\$1,000 monthly to siblings and nieces from both sides of their families, the 'hero' tag puzzles them also.

"We don't feel like heroes. We can't even explain to others why are we heroic," said Elenita, a dental assistant. Maybe because her husband Tony sends five nieces in Marilao, Bulacan to school. However, he said chuckling, "I still do not want to be called a hero just because of that."

Computer programmer Vanessa Bonifacio, however, who is working in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, does feel heroic. Her relatives had worked abroad and had helped her finish high school, so she also went overseas to work and support others.

Although life is much better overseas, Bonifacio said, "It is hard to deal with people who are not the same race as yours and to stay away from your loved ones."

The 'real heroes' are Filipinos in countries where Bonifacio and others live, suggests 'Arnold', a physical therapist from Ventura County, California. "They (overseas Filipino workers or 'OFWs') remit almost all their earnings, while we (immigrants) only send some money to show to relatives we are still important."

Heroes or not, Filipinos here tend to work very hard, he says. "Filipinos here in the US want a secure future, and then [to] enjoy [life]," said Arnold, for whom his six-day work week of 12 hours a day is normal.

Former co-worker Alberto Oliveros just bought a house in San Francisco, but still works harder: 12-to-16 hours a day for four to five days a week. The lure of doing extra hours at Laguna Honda Hospital is important for Oliveros' US\$5,000 monthly mortgage and the *padala* or remittance for his mother in Hong Kong and siblings and relatives in San Nicolas, Ilocos Norte.

On a day off and fresh from resting leisurely on his sofa, Oliveros rushed out clad in a green nurse's outfit: "I 'have to work' from 11 p.m. 'til the next day. That's an extra US\$50 an hour," he said, "so it's a waste to miss it."

It was the search for gainful employment that led reed-thin Lolita Galicia to Brussels, Belgium, where she became a virtual prisoner at the home of a diplomat. The then 59-year-old worked for a mere 100 Euros a month for ten years, until compatriots in the *Samahan ng mga Manggagawang Pilipino sa Belgium* (Association of Filipino Workers in Belgium) rescued her in 2003.

"I was so happy when I finally saw sunlight on my first day of freedom," said Galicia, who still works as a servant but on better terms.

Hard-up

The state-run Commission on Filipinos Overseas estimated there are now 7,924,188 Filipinos in 193 countries. Filipinos are temporary migrants, mostly contract workers in other countries and known as overseas Filipino workers or "OFWs." But many are also permanent residents and naturalized citizens within their host countries, as well as undocumented migrants. Some contract workers even have gone to poorer countries like Chad and Swaziland.

Being hard up plus the chance to be elsewhere, led 15 males from Ilocos Sur province to till sugar plantations in Hawai'i, arriving on December 20, 1906 in the first recorded Filipino overseas emigration in the 20th century.

Emigration surged from the mid to late 20th century, with doctors, nurses, and petitioned relatives arriving in the US. When the Philippines was struggling economically, then-strongman Ferdinand Marcos and his labor minister Blas Ople started a labor export program in 1974, coinciding with an oil boom in the Middle East.

Since the 1980s, more female migrants have left the Philippines to staff middle class households and nightlife industries in various countries. The controversial deaths of 22-year-old dancer Maricris Sioson in Japan and 42-year-old domestic worker Flor Contemplacion in Singapore during the 1990s spawned a national outcry, forcing a look at the welfare of some four million Filipinos abroad at that time.

Unskilled and service workers have been the face of the Filipino abroad. The Filipinos in Alaska in the 1920's were longshoremen or workers in salmon canneries. Now Filipinos are in diverse occupations—drivers, sales and construction workers, engineers, doctors and nurses, venture capitalists, accountants, seafarers in almost all of the world's ocean-plying vessels, and many, many more.

From 1975 to 2006, Filipinos abroad sent US\$105.831 billion in remittances through commercial banks, enough to keep the Philippines afloat with consumer spending and foreign currency. Migration makes up for the Philippines' lack of foreign investments and high unemployment, increasing families' small incomes.

“Overseas migration by Filipinos is undergoing an evolution,” Santo Tomas said at a June 2006 breakfast forum before businesspeople in Makati City, “and we are seeing it right now.”

Visible problems such as parentless Filipino families both in the Philippines and abroad and the vulnerabilities of women and men doing unskilled jobs are among the offshoots of the ‘OFW phenomenon’. The Philippines’ growing dependence on remittances obscures the urgency of finding a more stable and reliable development strategy. Even obvious gains such as cash-inundated rural areas have led to dubious signs of progress such as the rise of gigantic shopping malls.

Awareness about Filipinos has been rising thanks to television and soap operas. Migrants’ increased buying power has made them a target of market opportunities and investments, further enhancing the ‘heroes’ tag.

University of the Philippines anthropologist Michael Tan said, “I don’t know if overseas Filipinos think of themselves [as heroes] in a literal sense, but they certainly know how important their migration is for their families, and maybe to some extent, for the national economy.” Elenita and Tony Manuel do know. They also manage to enjoy themselves somehow in the US despite being ‘illegal’. “Good thing we haven’t been caught,” Tony said.

Can Overseas Filipinos Save the Philippines?

SAN QUNITIN, Pangasinan — Hectares of rice paddies tilled by farmers with their motor *kuliglig* still form the foundation of this fourth-class municipality’s economy. But even as the *kuliglig*’s engines hum, more than just rice fields can be seen in this town’s *barangays* (villages). Belgian and American-style concrete houses have mushroomed here for more than a decade, replacing many of the town’s *bahay kubo* or nipa huts that stood until the late 1980s.

Meanwhile, representatives of the Philippine-based realty firm Robinson’s Land spoke to some prospective buyers in the US about its condominium units. For condominium units in the Philippines worth US\$140,000, Robinson’s agent Ferdinand Adriano offered a patriotic sales pitch: “Contribute to the development of the Philippines!”

These are signs of the new Philippines, which its nearly eight million citizens abroad are transforming into a migration-dependent nation. Filipinos working abroad have seen their lives improve, though the Philippines remains barely afloat. More migrants continue to go overseas, making migration a fixture of the economy.

Human rights advocates, economists, and sociologists insist that despite its immediate economic benefits, migration should not be an explicit development strategy of the country in lieu of more stable alternatives.

Glowing

The 2006 Globalization Index of A.T. Kearney and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace surveyed the integration of countries in the global economy, and ranked the Philippines number one in “remittances and personal transfers” in the 2004 and 2006 surveys.

As a result, the Philippines’ overall standing among the world’s globally integrated countries has risen to 31st this year, from 54th in 2004. Migration has lifted rural Philippines from abject poverty, according to a recent study by University of the Philippines economist Dr. Ernesto Pernia, who assessed the impact of remittances on poverty alleviation and regional development.

Remittances have provided higher purchasing power per capita to the bottom 40 percent of Filipino households in the regions. Pernia’s computations also showed remittances raising consumer spending and investments in human capital and housing.

Filipino families are happy with their economic bounty, such as Araceli Orante’s household with its marbled home in San Quintin. Rural communities also receive donations from abroad, among them the US\$16,000 educational center in San Quintin’s remote farming village of Labuan, courtesy of town mates working in eight countries.

The Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas credits remittances in recent months with hiking the peso’s value relative to the US dollar and bulking up dollar reserves. Businessmen also view migration positively. Tycoon Jaime Augusto Zobel de Ayala calls overseas Filipinos the country’s “comparative advantage” in the global market.

“We should embrace [migration],” Zobel de Ayala said during a June 2006 breakfast forum in Manila. “It is a source of strength for the country, and thus we should find ways to structure it in a way that provides benefits to us. We need a competitive Filipino worker abroad for us to survive.”

In that same breakfast forum former economic planning secretary Cielo Habito expressed reservations, however: “I am reluctant to agree.” “Do you agree that migration should be the development strategy of the country right now?” Scalabrinian priest Edwin Corros asked. No one answered.

Glooming

While it is hard to compare the social and economic benefits and drawbacks of migration, the apparent social costs to Filipino families, communities, and sectors are a cause “of great concern,” wrote Dr. Maruja M.B. Asis of the Scalabrini Migration Center.

“Are people losing hope in carving a future in the country?” Asis asked. That’s what the nationwide polls of the nonprofit survey group Pulse Asia seem to be saying. Three in ten Filipinos (or 30 percent of respondents to a 2006 Pulse Asia survey) want to migrate, compared with 26 percent in a 2005 survey.

The most visible social cost is at the family level. Left-behind spouse Lisette Bernal and sons Migui and Gabby of Naic, Cavite try their best to endure the absence of the head of their family. Says Migui, “I miss my dad, but I cannot tell him to come home because he has to work abroad for us.”

Separation from the family also weighs on the worker abroad. “I have waited 20 years to see my daughter again here,” says Los Angeles-based employee Eliza, who does not want to disclose her full name. “But it won’t happen because her immigrant visa application in Manila just got disapproved.”

Employment- and immigration-related problems hound thousands of Filipinos abroad, but “those problems only affect a few of the number of Filipinos who migrate annually,” former Philippine Labor Secretary Patricia Santo Tomas told businesspeople in Manila.

The continued exodus of skilled workers is draining the health, airline, and software development sectors. But why worry, asks Santo Tomas, when “we have too much labor supply?”

Despite increased migration, the numbers of unemployed and underemployed continue to rise, says Ateneo de Manila University economist Fernando Aldaba.

Entrepreneur Pol Gravador, who came to San Francisco in the mid-1970s, concurs, saying, “We have so many people and the poor have more children.” Gravador has financed the immigration of nine relatives to the US.

The Philippines’ reliance on migration mirrors families’ dependence. Eliza and son ‘Luis’ continue their US\$400 monthly remittance to a son and his family in Santa Rosa, Laguna, who keep asking for more. But Eliza’s savings are not growing.

“I think we should discipline them, Luis told his mother over the phone while explaining a savings strategy. “Yes my son,” the mother replied. “If they only know how hard we work here. They think we are faucets of money abroad.”

These stories have made the advocacy group Center for Migrant Advocacy-Philippines firm in their belief that migration should not be a ‘permanent development strategy’. “We are not ready to give up our dream of establishing a vibrant Philippine economy, and to do otherwise is to lose hope for the nation’s future.”

Hoping

“What do we do then to turn the country around?” asked Consuelo Dacanay, a former airport screener. Despite her own recent job loss, she thinks Filipinos should migrate if they have the chance to do so.

“We might as well maximize remittances for more investments,” Aldaba said.

Former Saudi Arabia-based engineer Tony Ranque agrees. At a savings and investment road show in Geneva, Switzerland, Ranque lectured that “love was a reason for Filipinos’ migration, love should also make migrants save and make their money grow.”

Rodolfo de Guzman, a United Nations employee, was eager to learn where he can invest his money to make it grow and help compatriots back home at the same time. “This approach should be encouraged,” he said, “and the government should not depend on migration.”

Some immigrants believe that developing a sense of collective well-being is important as Filipinos scatter in the diaspora. That’s why Gravador’s is always busy in San Francisco’s South of Market (SoMa) district, holding arts workshops, supplying food for poor World War II veterans, and tutoring Filipino kids.

All it takes, Gravador says, is “a direction that will make them join you.” But building trust among fellow Filipinos is never easy. When Filipinos have money and the sprawling houses, Gravador notices some of them “don’t care anymore. That’s sad.”

Migration Erodes National Spirit

STRASSEN, Luxembourg — Cake figurines and imperfectly cut pictures in Remie Becker’s home on Rue d’Eglise outline the history of Filipino immigration to Europe’s investment capital.

The figurines are for all occasions -weddings, baptisms, birthdays, debuts—since Becker is always the *ninang ng bayan* (godmother of the community). Meanwhile, a big picture frame in the living room displays a collage of more than 200 smiling Filipinos whose

pictures have been cut and pasted together by Becker.

Becker is the Filipino pioneer in tiny Luxembourg. She arrived here in 1978 as spouse of aviation safety specialist Hans Becker. Remie is always available for parties, help, and even leading all-night mahjong sessions with Perla Aachten, the second pioneer.

Becker provided compatriots moral support, advice, financial aid, and even temporary shelter, hoping that touching migrants' lives will make them do the same for others abroad and in the motherland.

Reversals

University of the Philippines anthropologist Dr. Michael Tan and others are searching for inspiring stories of Filipinos helping one another achieve self-sufficiency, which could perhaps stem the flow of migrants.

One story is that of Cecilia Icaonapo, who turned her savings as domestic worker in Singapore and Taiwan into a *sari-sari* store in Bagong Silang, Caloocan City. The nonprofit group Zone One Tondo Organization then lent Icaonapo and 49 other former overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) additional capital, and she's staying put because the store rakes in PhP39,000 (US\$783.13) monthly.

Icaonapo says, "The *sari-sari* store is my dream business. I am comfortable with it." But helping Filipinos who come back to the country is, to some observers, like a band-aid.

Although many migrants fare well abroad, they and the country are caught in a spiral Luxembourg-based migrant advocate Dennis Yaun thinks has become repetitive. (See Figure 1)



Luxembourg's Filipino pioneer Remie Becker shows the cake figurines (top of the photo, in the middle) that have marked the entry of some 800 Filipinos in Europe's investment capital. Majority of are spouses of Europeans.

Photo by Hans Becker

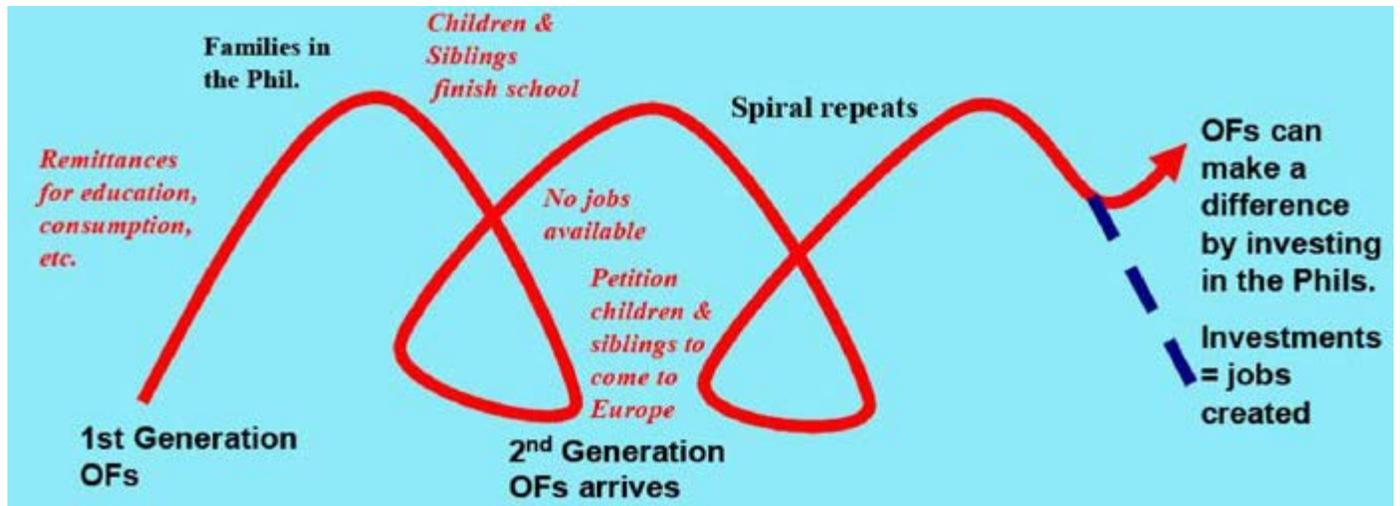


Figure 1: "Spiral of Filipino overseas migration" (by Dennis Yaun, Luxembourg) In Economic Resource Center for Overseas Filipinos (2005)

"For as long as development problems continue to propel Filipinos in the homeland to migrate and force compatriots abroad to remain settled elsewhere, the spiral of migration continues," Yaun explains.

Reservations

Conditions back home have led Filipinos to make 'individually rational' decisions to migrate, says economist Fernando Aldaba of Ateneo de Manila University. "But from [Philippine] society's point of view, is this rational?"

Working abroad is the right thing to do, San Jose, California-based airport screener Consuelo Dacanay says, and not even her own difficulties will stop her from prodding Filipinos to do if given the chance. The former schoolteacher says "second-raters will be left [in the Philippines], and there will be no more life back home."

Filipinos overseas can now vote in Philippine elections, and physical therapist 'Arnold' can always use his US\$60,000 BMW to drive from Ventura County to the Philippine consulate in Los Angeles. "But even if the consulate is my next-door neighbor, I will not go there. My vote will not mean anything anyway."

Aachten, 59, invested some PhP20,000 (317.61 Euros) in a microfinance rural bank in Bukidnon province, and the deal's not bad: 10 percent interest per annum, compounded over five years, and the rural bank has now lent to at least four poor Bukidnon residents start-up or additional capital for small enterprises because of Aachten's investment.

But luring other Filipinos to join a new investment group in Luxembourg was not easy. "They told us we'll just rake in money from them, and they'd rather use the membership fee as wager for *tong-its* (a Filipino card game). You will just be irritated at them, although I don't generalize Filipinos are all like that," says Aachten.

Some have given up on their homeland. At the Filipino Community Centre in Toronto, Canada, a Filipino in his early 60s saw news about the Philippines on CNN. "There is no more hope in the Philippines," the white-haired Filipino said, "and I will not go back there."

Does migration undermine the national, collective consciousness and encourage selfishness then? Melen MacBride of Stanford University isn't surprised if it does: "Filipinos have been attuned to being islanders going to safe places to protect themselves."

Filipinos are left with no other choice but migrate overseas, says Corazon Raymundo of the Demographic Research and Development Foundation in Manila. "If we are in a no-choice situation, we are not getting anywhere but down."

Relationships

Once abroad or even upon their return to the Philippines, however, Filipinos always try to build a community regardless of their circumstances.

Filipinos are able to be together in a makeshift place. Next to a Luxembourgische restaurant and three floors upstairs is an apartment with six narrow rooms where Filipino families live and where karaoke singing enlivens Friday nights.

Another is inside a workplace. At San Francisco General Hospital, 4:30 p.m. is 'Filipino time'. Lunch boxes and the Tagalog banter from some of the 4,000 Filipino nurses come out. It's not always friendlier, though. "Filipinos will try to always out do and pull each other down, and that's why they do not get promoted here," said Renato Balitan.

A small canteen in Novaliches, Quezon City not only keeps former Singapore domestic worker Maria Luisa Tayco busy, but also determined. Before her return, Tayco and some 50 domestic workers formed Pinokyos Welfare to send in-kind and cash donations to support poor children. Their goal was to teach the value of supporting children's growth because mothers like her had to work abroad.

She cannot get rid of the Pinokyo spirit. "I just placed a can at my canteen with the name 'Pinokyos' in it, as PhP0.25 for every meal bought goes to the can."

Some communities are in actual neighborhoods abroad, says MC Canlas of the nonprofit Filipino-American Development Foundation. One is in nearby Daly City where the Filipinos are a third of the population, and the other is in San Francisco's South of Market district where a Filipino plaza or *poblacion* is located.

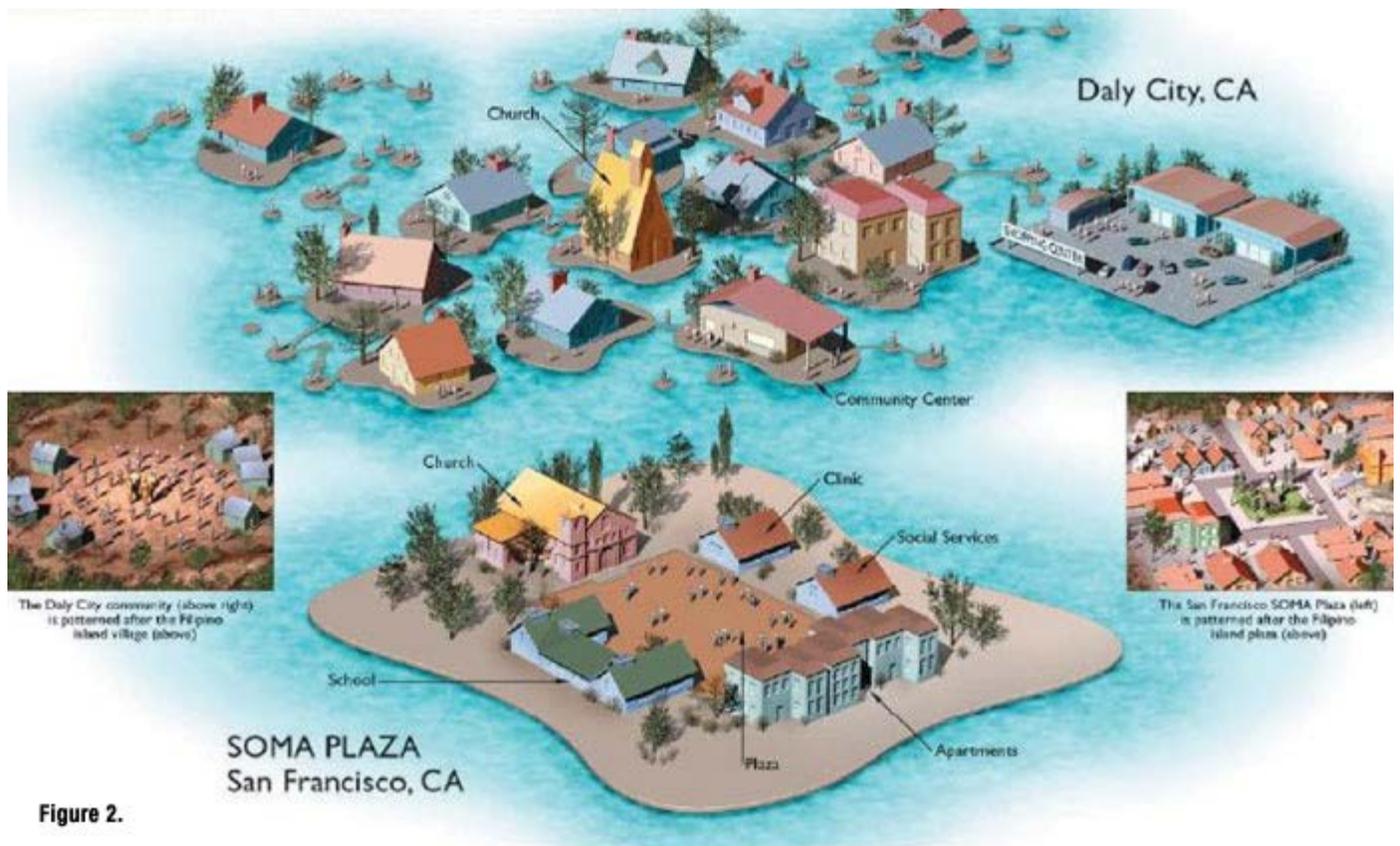


Figure 2.

FILIPINO ISLAND COMMUNITIES

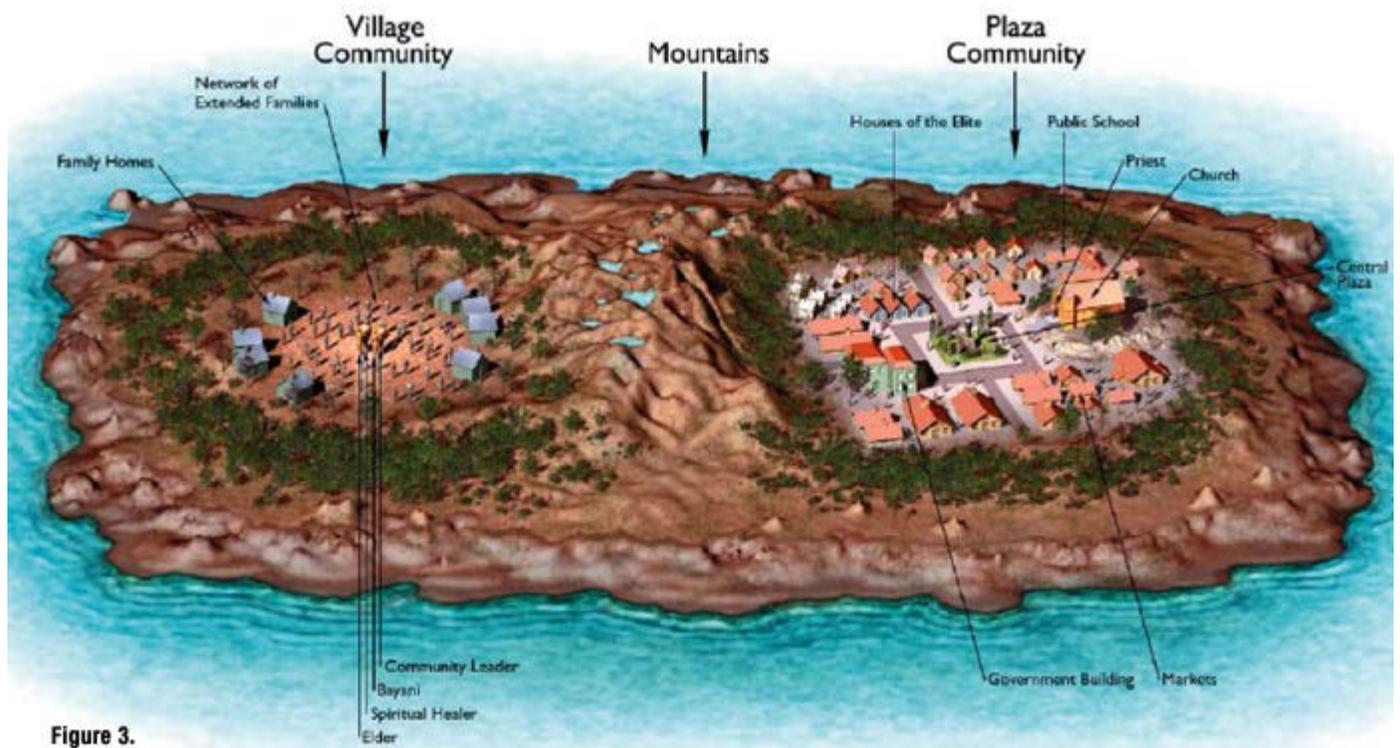


Figure 3.

Figures 2 and 3: Illustrations of Filipino communities in the host country, particularly the "village community" in Daly City, California and the plaza or "poblacion" community in San Francisco's South of Market (SoMa). In MC Canlas and the Wildflowers Institute (2002)

SoMa has a Filipino-dominated church and elementary school, a residential complex for low-income Filipinos, a Filipino community center, a mini-mall with a Filipino restaurant, money transfer agents, a mini-grocery, and other businesses. SoMa is where many first time Filipino

immigrants have settled with other foreigners since the 1920s, and it is the ideal Filipino community abroad, Canlas says.

Some observers are worried about the long-term implications for the Philippines. “All this migration has further eroded our weak sense of nationhood—and without that, the Philippines and Filipinos everywhere will not develop,” says Tan. “Some people abroad will then think of the Philippines as the world’s backwaters.”

Overseas migration will not stop, Tan concedes. To turn the phenomenon is a daunting task. Former International Labour Office migration branch chief Manolo Abella says the Philippines need to have a 10-percent domestic growth rate for 23 straight years to attract compatriots to go back home.

But Tan is not optimistic. “Filipinos who go abroad become even more individualistic and more disdainful of the Philippines.” He is aware that there are “many good and nationalistic Filipinos abroad, but they remain a minority.”