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An Economy of Sacrifice: Roman Catholicism and Transnational Labor in the Philippines

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An Economy of Sacrifice: Roman Catholicism and Transnational Labor in the Philippines

Sencho Roman is a 40 year-old technician from the Philippine province of Pampanga who, for most of the last 15 years, has whipped his own back to a bloody pulp in a ritual commemorating Christ's Passion on Good Friday. He began self-flagellating on behalf of his mother, Meling, who worked as a domestic helper in Hong Kong in the late 1980s in the hopes of paying off a family debt. Through an embodied empathy with the suffering of Christ, Sencho's flagellation was a means of appealing for God's positive intervention in alleviating the family's financial situation. Years after his first whipping, he too would leave Pampanga to take up employment in the Middle East, a challenge he took on with a self-confident machismo gained from the ritual experience. "No problem," he recalled, "If I could flagellate, I knew I could handle Saudi." Narrating this had brought back memories of his mother, who had since passed away due to illness. "My flagellation is painful to the body, even though I'm a man. But that's nothing compared to how she sacrificed for us in Hong Kong. She's the real hero… she's the martyr."

One of the more enduring legacies left behind by the late Philippine President Corazon Aquino is her valorization of the heroism of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) like Meling. In April, 1988, Meling was among the many OFWs who gathered at Hong Kong's Saint Margaret's Church to hear Aquino tell them that "it is not only your relatives who are grateful for your sacrifices but also the entire nation." The President reiterated her government's assurance of absolute support for their welfare. For indeed OFWs were not merely overseas workers. She called them "*bagong bayani*," — the "modern-day heroes" who, through the economic benefits generated by their "sacrifices," are enhancing not only their own material conditions, but ensuring the very survival of the Philippine nation itself (PMS 1992).[1]

It might seem counterintuitive that the heroism evoked by Aquino does not emphasize a physical rootedness in the nation, but a departure from it. But as historians Rafael (2000) and Ileto (1998) have argued, the discourse of heroism in the Philippines is not simply premised on a notion of organic patriotism *per se*, but upon the example of a pantheon of nationalist-martyrs like Jose Rizal and, significantly, Aquino's own late husband, Ninoy. These were individuals whose lives, as Rafael put it, "merge into a single narrative frame that harked back to the themes of the [Passion of Christ]… of innocent lives forced to undergo humiliation at the hands of alien forces" (2000, 211). It makes sense, then, that many heads of state since Corazon Aquino have made constant and frequent references to the "suffering" and "sacrifice" of OFWs. For these are terms that resonate with a widely shared cultural and religious idiom in which a Filipino brand of heroism and Christ-like sacrifice are two sides of the same coin.

In this paper I seek consider the ethnographic depth of the idiom of OFW hero-martyrdom by discussing two themes. First, I examine how Roman Catholic institutions in the Philippines play a crucial role in legitimizing the state's neoliberal agenda by infusing the discourse of modern-day

[1] It was indeed significant that President Corazon Aquino had not delivered her speech in a public auditorium or convention center, but in Saint Margaret's Church. For many transnational workers, religious spaces are places of solace in which emotional and material support may be acquired, both from Church-based advocacy groups as well as from informal support networks (Ahmed 2010; Fresnoza-Flot 2010). Aquino would have known that her message would be particularly resonant in that context, because it suggested that an important part of hero-martyrism was the institutional support provided by Filipino Roman Catholic Church (henceforth, the "Church") towards OFW welfare.

heroism with notions of Christ-like martyrdom. This infusion, typically through official pastoral letters and published bishop statements, forms the ideological basis for the cultivation of what I would term an 'economy of sacrifice.' This is, in essence, an ethos of capital accumulation that is premised upon a discourse that valorizes the bodies of victimized transnational agents as 'fallen martyrs.' I show how the Church hierarchy in the Philippines depicts the necessary demands and contingencies of global capital as coterminous with the soteriological ideal of Christian salvation.

Secondly, I focus on the ways in which the economy of sacrifice is manifested in, and indeed reliant upon, two forms of corporeal discipline. I begin by examining how OFW 'labor brokerage' — that is, the pre-deployment training programs run by state-endorsed placement agencies – inculcate forms of embodied self-discipline among prospective OFWs. These programs are designed to enhance the export-competitiveness of Filipino OFWs through the cultivation of what I would term 'export-quality sufferers' – transnational agents who have been trained to externalize moral values and comportments of docility and subservience in the pursuit of overseas work. I then examine export-quality martyrdom through the perspectives of OFW men like Sencho, who have engaged in Holy Week Passion rituals of self-mortification in the province of Pampanga. These rituals, which involve the voluntary infliction of pain on the body, channel not only an empathic condolence with Christ, but also a strength of inner fortitude that enables the confrontation with all sorts of tribulations outside of formalized ritual spaces. Having actually embodied Christ's own Passion, how does *he* confront an export economy that is rationalized by rhetorical pronouncements about martyric sacrifice and suffering?

There have been several scholarly works that have discussed the OFW experience in neoliberal contexts. There has been a strong emphasis on the social outcomes and costs of overseas labor, particularly where OFW experiences are conditioned by specific ideological notions of Filipino race and gender (Aguilar et.al., 2009; Choy 2003; Constable 1997, 2007; Guevarra 2010; MaKay 2013; Ong 2006; Parreñas 2008, 2001; Pertierra 1992 and Tyner 2000). Other works have highlighted the process in which state policies on labor migration craft, and in some ways compel, specific commitments to the nation in spite of OFW dislocation (Franco 2011; Hau 2004; Rodriguez 2006, 2010; Tadiar 2009; Weekly 2004). Relatively fewer works have gone into great detail about how the Filipino remittance economy is an inflection of religious agency, particularly among men.[2] I seek to make a contribution to this scholarship in ways that resonate with the insights of scholars such as McKay (2011) and Pinggol (2001), who have analyzed the "re-masculinization" of OFW heroism, and that of Aguilar (1999), Johnson and Werbner (2010) and Lopez (2012), who consider the OFW experience with respect to the affective and religious aspects that condition socio-economic motivations.

In focusing upon Passion rituals, I do not argue that all OFWs are effectively self-mortifiers, or that participating in the economy of sacrifice is physically tantamount to ritual pain infliction. However, I do argue that the mechanisms of the state and Roman Catholic rituals are similar in that they are both arenas in which transnational labor power is cultivated as modes of religious agency: (1) in labor brokerage, the crafting of obedient and servile wills as forms of commodity (Asad 1987; Foucault 1986), and (2) in self-mortification rituals, the forming and re-forming of empathic agencies in which a certain understanding of "suffering" emboldens male OFW responses to the vicissitudes of the transnational economy.

MARTYRIC BODIES IN AN ECONOMY OF SACRIFICE

[2] It is instructive to note that men now make up the majority of OFWs. See Ericta (2012).

On June 21, 1988, two months after her Hong Kong speech, President Aquino issued Proclamation No. 276 which established the bagong bayani awards: an accolade that was meant to "acknowledge acts of sacrifice which has led to demonstrated results for the individual, the family and the nation." In December 1990, the President herself officiated the ceremonies, delivering a speech that was again infused with commemorations of the sacrifice (*pagsasakripisyo*) and suffering *(pagmamalasakit*) of the OFW. But what was interesting, also, was that the bagong bayani were explicitly lauded for the economic returns of their efforts, proclaiming that the beneficiary of the hero-martyr's sacrifice was "above all, the economy" (Tigno 2012, 25-26).

The export of labor has been the largest source of revenue for the Philippines for the past few decades. The Philippines ranks among the highest exporters of foreign labor in the world, and the trends have been increasing steadily over the past few years. There are around 10 million OFWs , with 2012 surveys estimating the rate of deployment at 2.2 million people over a mere six-month period, collectively sending back bank remittances of as high as USD$21.39 billion (Alegado 2013; Ericta 2012). The rationale of this burgeoning remittance economy has been founded on the more recently contested premise that the accumulation of foreign capital is the key to national social development,[3] and that the government has a mandate to facilitate the institutional mechanisms to support this.[4] As such, the rhetorical force of Aquino's statement was reliant upon the implication that OFWs were not forcibly driven out as a matter of government policy but were, rather, virtuous individuals who were *voluntarily* pursuing their vocations in an open, democratic labor market. And while Aquino linked these pursuits with the prospect of religious transcendence *in the afterlife*, it was simultaneously a reiteration of the state's ideological promise that overseas work would yield material and economic reward *in this life,* provided that OFWs maintained their roles as drivers of the remittance economy.

The conflation of economic and soteriological returns of overseas labor is the basis of what I would call an 'economy of sacrifice.' This is an ethos that seeks to perpetuate the inward flow of transnational capital through the systematic and sustained deployment of productive economic agents. This is, essentially, a religious ethic in which the pursuit of capital is seen as a form of both ethical and pious virtue. However, as opposed what Weber (1904) described as a Protestant ethic that extolls the virtue of frugality and financial reticence, the economy of sacrifice encourages the conspicuous partaking in the material rewards of sacrifice in this world. Aside from the formal bureaucratic apparatus that facilitates the deployment of OFWs, the economy of sacrifice involves a whole host of commercial institutions – such as banks, loan-financing companies, cell phone companies, malls and food chains, to name a few – who coopt the "buzz phrase of new heroism" in enjoining OFWs to spend their earnings on all sorts of goods and services for their loved ones (Franco 2011). The economy of sacrifice, then, is an ethic that rationalizes the monetization of labor

[3] It could be argued that the economy of sacrifice resulted from the failure of the state itself, particularly the Marcos-era regime of "developmental authoritarianism" (Hau 2004, 230). This regime first instituted the export of Filipino labor as a temporary measure within a broader socio-economic policy raising local production efficiency. Developments outside the Philippines, namely the Middle East oil boom in the 1970s, and the rapid growth of East and Southeast Asian tiger economies from the1980s opened up opportunities and demand for Filipino labor, which continues to be the top generator of revenue for the Philippine state. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the 'temporary' solution to the government's inability to formulate sound economic, political and social solutions to poverty became a cornerstone of its development plans (Hau 2004, 231).

[4] From the 1970s, the Philippine government saw to the creation of bureaucratic infrastructures tasked specifically with facilitating the offshore placement of workers and to maximize the economic impact of their inward remittances. The Central Bank of the Philippines (BSP), for example, has an Economic and Financial Monitoring Group whose main rationale is to frame OFW labor power in quantifiable dollar terms

power, whose agents are lauded as virtuous sufferers in producing capital, even while they are encouraged to partake in modes of ethical hyper-consumption. As Aguilar puts it, the transnational labor economy is sustained by the "balm of commodities and the consumption of modernity" (Aguilar 1999,98).

The extent to which an economy of sacrifice can resonate with a religious idiom of Christ-like martyrdom relies upon the state's ability to obfuscate its own role in contributing to the volatility of transnational work, as well its failure to mitigate the need for labor export in the first place (Franco 2011; Tadiar 2009; Tyner 2000). This, in turn, is premised upon the promulgation of a discourse in which the casualties of overseas deployment are valorized as the paragon of the highest civic and pious virtues. There are many examples of OFWs who have paid the ultimate price in the course of their overseas deployment, such as Maricris Sioson, a 22 year-old entertainer, who died under mysterious and contested circumstances in Japan in 1991, and Flor Contemplacion, a domestic helper in Singapore, who was tried, convicted and later executed for double murder in spite of mitigating evidence to name just a few (Franco 2011, 140).

In an economy of sacrifice, the plight of these individuals are discursively packaged as the unfortunate but necessary costs of pursuing a greater good. And while their cases had galvanized a collective demand for overseas labor rights and industrial action, most notably through Republican Act 8042, Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos act of 1995, the state's evocation of sentiments of pity and empathic solidarity with them further reiterates the nobility of their overseas deployment even when the dangers of such occurrences recurring remains real. For to perish in the economy of sacrifice is not a failure at all, but a testament to the OFW as inheritors of the legacy of fallen martyrs. Indeed Jose Rizal and Ninoy Aquino (as well as the officially-canonized Filipino "migrant saint" Lorenzo Ruiz, about whom I elaborate below) had all but willingly given their lives in the context of overseas dislocation. "For what gives the idea of sacrifice its intellectual and affective edge," notes Caroline Hau, "is the fact that the offering of oneself — conventionally considered one's only true and most valuable possession — cannot be made with any anticipation of reciprocal exchange, of getting anything back, because the gift of life is absolute" (2004, 148). Under this ethic, the heroic body is measured not according to major revolutionary or miraculous acts, but in the everyday toil of fulfilling one's transnational vocation and worldly calling.

What factors contribute to the rhetorical persuasiveness of the state's discourse of embodied victimization in promulgating an economy of sacrifice? Religious organizations, I argue, are crucial in this process, and it is to their role in providing the doctrinal and ideological scaffolding for the economy of sacrifice that we shall now turn.

THE CHURCH AND THE ECONOMY OF SACRIFICE

A few weeks before Corazon Aquino's bagong bayani speech in Hong Kong, the then President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CPCP), Archbishop Leonardo Legaspi associated the pursuit of overseas labor with divine reward, stating that "For every pain, there is also joy. For every sacrifice, there is a corresponding good. Migration of peoples, in whatever form or for whatever reason, has always foreshadowed the unfolding of greater designs of God" (Legaspi 1988). The Church's investment into cultivating an economy of sacrifice is consistent with its mandate as it was promulgated in the Second Vatican Council held in Rome in 1963-65, and reiterated during the CBCP Second Plenary Council (PCP-II) held in Manila in 1991. In these gatherings, Filipino clerics emphasized the Church's responsibility to develop the 'total human person,' which referred not just to matters of mysticism or spirituality, but also to its role in facilitating economic self-reliance among its flock. As such, the Church has provided material support to OFW deployment though its pastoral care institutions such as the Episcopal Commission for Migrants and Itinerant Peoples

(ECMI), the Apostleship of the Sea (AOS) and the Centre for Overseas Workers (COW). These organizations not only provide assistance to alleviate the burdens of transnational dislocation, but also lobbies for workers' rights through the legislative process.

This idea of a spiritual basis for the economy of sacrifice was strongly resonant in CBCP Pastoral Letters from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s. In 1995, for example, the CBCP "Pastoral Letter on Filipino Migrant Workers" strongly endorsed the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act, affirming the relevance of the words of Pope Pius XII who, in 1957, reiterated the virtue of persevering through hardship as a way of acquiring the fruits of salvation. The 1995 letter characterized the experience of overseas labor within a logic of persisting through moral and physical tribulation, pointing to the example of "our migrant saint" San Lorenzo Ruiz, the first Filipino who was martyred while serving in overseas mission. The letter provided tacit endorsement of state discourse by emphasizing a moral component to the remittance economy, whereby OFW remittances contributed to "the material *and* spiritual good needed for [Filipinos] upliftment" (Morelos 1995). OFWs should be thanked for the "manifold sacrifices they have undertaken for us here at home. Their endurance in the face of adverse conditions, their determination to turn risks into opportunities, their courage in the face of real physical threats." (Ibid. 1995).

What is reiterated in such statements is a transnational martyrdom that is not tied to conventional forms of renunciant asceticism but oriented towards capitalist accumulation in pursuit of good standing in an economy of sacrifice. Compared to state discourse, Church leaders more acutely highlight the dangers and volatility of OFW deployment, as well as the possibly corrosive effects of transnational labor on the moral lives of OFWs. But rather than promoting a monastic self-denial and withdrawal from the economy of sacrifice, the Church institution promotes the idea that martyric virtue is no longer to be found in suffering poverty, but in the ethical pursuit of material and economic upliftment. As Ellwood put it:, "The idea that poverty could be a state of blessedness in itself, a favorite of preachers as recently as a century ago, is now hopelessly discredited… even the most conservative pulpiteers nowadays exhort their poor to get ahead, but to do it by nonviolent means" (Ellwood 1988, 137).

This is not, however, a prosperity gospel in the conventional sense which associates wealth accumulation with divine intervention (Koning, 2009; Wiegele, 2005; Coleman, 2000**)**. Far from emphasizing wealth for its own sake, the 1991 PCP-II identified the dispersal of Filipino workers as one solution to the challenges of declining rates of sacramental adherence in a rapidly globalizing Church.[5] Official CBCP Pastoral letters, as well as published opinion pieces from well-respected Catholic Bishops from the early 2000s, are explicit about "the missionary potential of Filipino migrant workers abroad" (Quevedo 2000), and the congruence between the economy of sacrifice and the Church's missionizing agenda. In the "Pastoral Letter on the Church's Mission In the New Millennium," then CBCP President Archbishop Orlando Quevedo reiterated that "Our overseas workers have in so many instances become missionaries, bringing the Gospel and Faith where these have not been present, renewing and reactivating Christian life and practice where these have been in decline…" (Ibid. 2000). Similarly, renowned Jesuit Father Victor Badillo, S.J., depicts the personal intimacy of domestic work as a platform of evangelical outreach whereby "many a fallen-away Catholic returns to the faith of their fathers led by a child catechized by a *yaya* [maid]… A Filipina, taking care of children left alone by parents keeping up with the Joneses, shares the essentials of the Faith... In Christianizing others, they Christianize themselves." (Badillo 2010). These statements portray overseas work as a spiritual landscape in which religious energies can be renewed, expanded and shared.

[5] Scholars have written about the relationship between spreading the faith and transnational labor. See Liebelt (2008), Johnson (2010) and Lopez (2012).

CULTIVATING THE DISCIPLINED BODY OF EXPORT-QUALITY MARTYRDOM

The convergence between the interests of the state and of the Church in fostering an economy of sacrifice enables it to be operationalized in an embodied way towards the crafting of what I would term 'export-quality sufferers': OFWs who have been *disciplined* to deploy certain ethical and moral values about Christian discipline and humility onto translational domains. This occurs as part of a process of 'labor brokerage' which, following Guevarra (2010) and Rodriguez (2010), refers to the activities of non-governmental institutions working in concert with the state in molding OFW bodies into productive economic units. This involves, among other things, the regimented implementation of corporal techniques in the process of pre-departure training in order to enhance the OFWs competitive advantage.

More specifically, I refer to a labor brokerage that is an inflection of what Rudnykyj (2009) has called a "spiritual economy," which refers to the assemblage of programs and projects among Indonesian Muslim workers that "seek to simultaneously transform workers into more pious religious subjects and more productive economic subjects." (2009, 106). Similarly, labor brokerage in an economy of sacrifice comprises of formal institutions which act to reconfigure the idea of work (with its attendant occupational hazards) as an arena of religious piety. But whereas a spiritual economy for Indonesian Muslim workers involves the inculcation of ethics of accountability, transparency and rationalization, export-quality sufferers are made to embody modes of docility, obedience and subservience, which are Christian attributes deemed commensurable with neoliberal ideals of capital accumulation.

The institutions of labor brokerage provide pre-departure assessment, training and certification for would-be overseas workers in order to help them succeed in the economy of sacrifice. The training provided, however, is not merely the imparting of job-specific skills and knowledge to the prospective OFW, but the inculcation of certain attitudes and dispositions in the application of those skills. Most often, this involves specific bodily disciplines that encourage OFWs to physically deploy acts of self-regulation and self-effacement. For example, in the pre-deployment phase of marketing, female applicants are taught to adopt specific bodily postures -- hands folded, head slightly bowed, and holding neutral reticent expressions (Franco 2011, 53). Similarly, Tyner (2009) describes these embodied disciplinary regimes as they applied to the experience of Filipina migrant entertainers, who were instructed to literally contort their bodies in accordance with the notions of femininity in their host country in order to enhance their marketability in a globalized field of consumption. These postures imply not just the OFW's possession of a specific skillset, but of a cultivated, domesticated and disciplined will that is deemed a desirable attribute by potential employers. It is these disciplines of corporeal self-regulation that manifest what Guevarra (2010) calls the OFWs "added-export-value," underscoring the Filipino worker's advantage in the competitive global political economy.

From the perspective of labor brokerage, OFWs are heroic not simply because they acquire certain of skills of the trade. It is actually somewhat the opposite. The training regimes, in inculcating modes of humility and self-surveillance, effectively encourage a downplaying of the worker's agency, or at least a tempered exertion of aptitude and skill. These programs produce a unique form of labor power in which workers are 'coached' to internalize the idea that a 'good' employee is one who is deferential and humble, not just in being able to follow orders, but in "not acting better [than their supervisors.]" (Guevarra 2010, 146). In this sense, the capacity for self-effacing humility is thought of as a learned, coachable form of bodily circumscription, attenuated specifically to the demands of the potential employer, regardless of one's natural instincts or intuitions. Brokers of labor,

according to Guevarra, "teach workers to discipline themselves to comply and accept what is supposed to be this "natural" situation, of being maltreated by their employers." (2010, 148).

The crafting of subjectivities in labor brokerage is a process not unlike what find in monastic institutions which, as Asad has observed, involve the repression of bodily comportments in order to cultivate "the conditions within which obedient wills are created" (Asad 1987, 159). More than just an internalization of 'techniques of the body' (Mauss 1935), labor brokerage encourages the inculcation of "disciplined gestures" which are an ensemble of embodied dispositions that are fostered through a regime of constant surveillance and self-regulation (Asad 1987, 170). Labor brokerage situates the willful and self-regulated adoption of effacement against a backdrop of the OFWs moral duty of transnational providership — of being a good husband/wife, and a good parent to the loved ones they leave behind. The overall effect of this conditioning is that the OFW is trained to withstand (in silence) even the most difficult of demands and circumstances, or be flexible enough to adapt to and accept any situation called for in the pursuit of their jobs without having to be monitored by external authority. This is, as Hau points out, an ethics of self-discipline that "inscribed the individual resolutely within the sociopolitical arena and worked to inform and circumscribe his or her thinking and action" (Hau 2004, 150).

My contribution here is to argue that although workers training regimes inculcate modes of self-regulating corporeal discipline, its effectiveness is to an extent contingent upon aptitudes that result from embodied *ritual agency,*. This argument is premised upon on a conception of ritual that does not emphasize its role as a vehicle for the delivery of symbolic systems of meaning in the sense conceptualized by Geertz (1973), or its function of cultivating effervescent collective identity as put forth by Durkheim (1912). By 'ritual agency' I refer to the process in which OFWs have looked to their ritual acts as a distinct arena of corporeal and sentimental self-fashioning, both before and during the pursuit of overseas employment. As we shall see, ritual is a way of crafting modern selfhoods and a source of courage, strength, perseverance and fortitude for OFWs as they confront the challenges of the often difficult and at times oppressive conditions of overseas employment.

SELF-MORTIFICATION AND EMPATHIC SELFHOODS

We return at this juncture to the experience of those like Sencho Roman, who have engaged in Passion rituals of self-mortification in province of Pampanga, located in the central region of Luzon Island in the Philippines. These rituals, which include the performance of self-flagellation and nailing by a wide range of Roman Catholic devotees (both men and women), commemorate the foundational soteriological message of Christian salvation. How are the embodied subjectivities crafted in Passion rituals – that is, their ritual agencies -- relevant in OFW strategies to confront the vicissitudes of transnational labor? To the extent that the rituals channel those virtues of humility and self-effacement that, as I have shown, are resonant in the disciplinary regimes of labor brokerage, would self-mortifiers be particularly responsive to the brand of hero-martyrdom endorsed in the economy of sacrifice?

The practice of self-mortification during Holy Week is not an isolated ritual performed only by a few 'radical' or 'extremist' individuals. In Pampanga, it would be a conservative estimate to say that hundreds of Catholic penitents publicly self-flagellate on Good Friday, while many others engage in a reenactment of the Passion story culminating in the actual nailing of between 10 to 20 devotees.[6] Spanish Roman Catholic missionaries had first introduced these rituals in the sixteenth century as part of a suite of missionary strategies. Converts throughout the Philippines were encouraged to seek penance and atonement through friar-supervised exercises of pain infliction collectively known as 'disciplina.' (Barker 1986;; Bräunlein 2009; Zialcita 1986). In the over four centuries since its introduction, these rituals of *disciplina* have since been officially discouraged by Filipino clergy, who have instead preached the primacy of the scriptures and of the sacraments. But in Pampanga, self-mortification rituals continue to be practiced by a fairly wide cross section of Roman Catholics outside of, or in addition to formal liturgical modes of piety (Bautista 2010; Cannell 1999; Lahiri 2005).

As we saw with the case of Sencho, rituals such as self-flagellation are physical expressions of *empathy* directed at Christ for his own self-sacrifice, and towards another suffering subject, typically a relative, on whose behalf the ritual is performed. In this regard, the rituals are less about the personal imitation of Christ, the purification of the soul or the expiation of sin, than about the cultivation of a relationship of reciprocal supplication, in which ritual protagonists vow to inflict pain upon themselves to solicit, or give thanks to God's favorable intervention.

Unlike the martyr's irrevocable ultimate sacrifice of his life, the "suffering" that is channeled in self-mortification is oriented toward the creation of a multi-subjective empathy – one that initiates a affective connection between the flagellant, the suffering Jesus Christ, a third party (in most cases, a sick relative) and God the father. To self-mortify, therefore, is not an isolated act in which the flagellant seeks to achieve the full consummation of the Passion episode – that is, Christ's death. Rather, it is tantamount to a re-negotiation of the soteriological promise of Christian salvation, in which a flagellant does not pay the unredeemable price of life, but offers enough of his own empathic body-in-pain as a way to appeal for God to alleviate another's predicament. In the course of this act, modes of humility and self-effacement constitute the sensibilities in which a ritual protagonist is able to act upon (as opposed to merely praying for) God's divine intercession in his life and that of his family.

Sencho is among the many self-mortifiers I have encountered in Pampanga who has channeled these ritual agencies towards their experience as overseas laborers.[7] As a region, central Luzon has the second highest number of OFWs, at 14.1 per cent according to a survey conducted by the Philippine National Statistics Office in 2012 (Ericta 2012). Pampanga, where most of the rituals are performed, is ranked third in the list of highest OFWs deployments by province, surpassed only by Manila and Quezon City (Pavia 2012). Many of Sencho's friends, as well as relatives have gone through the same process of thinking about their overseas deployment in a way at is resonant with their ritual agencies.

[6] There are no official statistics that account for the number of self-mortifiers. In the mid to late 1990s, Barker had observed that in the province of Pampanga "tens of thousands of Filipino men scourged themselves during Holy Week in a dramatic spectacle of public blood-letting." (Barker 1998, 8). In the nearby province of Bulacan, meanwhile, Braunlein observed that "Hundreds of flagellants and other penitents can be seen in [the town of] Kapitangan, especially on Good Friday" (Braunlein 2009, 898). Bautista (2011) also points to the sheer prevalence of self-mortifiers in the province during Holy Week.

[7] The case studies in this paper are based on in-depth ethnographic research conducted from 2010 onwards in the province of Pampanga. The names of those mentioned have been changed.

The labor brokerwho facilitated Sencho's employment had put him through a great deal of bureaucratic and physical procedures before he could even depart. In the pre-departure training he was asked to familiarize himself with several thick manuals on various kinds of machinery that they may encounter. This technical aspect, however, was not what made the training meaningful for him. Most of the seminars, he recalls, served to remind them that there were strict policies against misbehavior. "Even though our employers would push us to the limit or even be unfair… they said that I shouldn't be too macho, too aggressive… and picking fights would not only be stupid, it would be useless because that's not our country, we're just employees."[8]

Sencho's experience of being asked to curb his 'manly drives' is not an isolated case of an unscrupulous or abusive placement agent. The pre-departure training emphasized the physical suppression of instinct in favor of a self-enforced submissiveness and deference to hierarchy. Indeed it required "playing down your manly arrogance (*kayabangan*)", that even in the face of emasculation workers ought to just "bow your head, take it in, and just think about your family". The training he received was not so much an accumulation of new skills but a reiteration of modes of corporeal repression, which was what was needed endure what he already knew from OFW relatives and friends was a harsh and tumultuous working environment. Failure to embody this discipline meant that one was simply "not cut-out for 'making it' overseas."

It may seem that Sencho's case highlights the effectiveness of discursive pronouncements of the Church and of the state. There was, however, an added dimension to his OFW experience, which has been generally underemphasized in the academic literature. Sencho identified the practice of religious ritual as that which imbued OFWs like him with a particular kind of inner fortitude (*lakas ng loob*) to confront the challenges of work. "The training itself was okay," says Sencho, "but it's a good thing that I've been doing flagellation for years — you learn to have confidence and strength of inner fortitude. You know, in a way, being an OFW is just like flagellation", he said, "you have to be disciplined and committed to finish it to the end, even though it hurts. In the end, God will answer your suffering by benefiting your family."

Sencho was channeling the idiom of self-mortification in depicting transnational labor as a *transaction* where the recompense for great acts of suffering was a divinely endowed material benefit. While labor brokerage involves the disciplining of bodies for the purposes of maximizing its economic capacity, in Sencho's case, it was thinking about transnational labor as an extension of flagellation that enabled him to confront the harsh demands of the economy of sacrifice. It would be inaccurate to assume, from Sencho's account, that export quality martyrdom constituted a curbing, if not complete loss of agency. The inner fortitude that enabled him to persevere was not derived from embodying docility and subservience,, but rather from channeling the experience of ritual performance — in this case, of pain infliction — in order to supplant and compliment the demands of labor brokerage.

These themes of inner fortitude (*lakas ng loob*) and restraining your many arrogance (*kayabangan*) resonate with the experience of another self-flagellant and OFW, 28 year-old laborer Miguel, who was accepted, along with several other men, in a large car dealership in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Miguel had often conflicted with his employer and some of the Saudi workers. "They were arrogant," he said, "and didn't appreciate how I could do things in a creative way (*diskarte*). They

[8] An emphasis on the notion one's pride (kayabangan) is discussed in the research of de Guzman (1993) who observed among technicians in Saudi Arabia that "Here you really must eat your pride" (de Guzman 1993: 24); and among female domestic workers who mention that one must be "willing to swallow their pride" (Palma-Beltran 1991: 50).

couldn't really teach me anything either."[9] This made his job extremely pressure-laden, as he was constantly high-strung and confrontational. But he persevered and concentrated on his work. "I needed to show my family that I was a man… that I could withstand the hard times, that I was strong enough to sacrifice." It was not just training that offered him the means for engaging in the challenges of transnational labor, but the actual, physical practice of ritual itself. "[My Saudi employers] didn't know it," he says, "but I'd done flagellation for years. Can they do that? My buddies know it, and that gives me confidence (*lakas ng loob*) to bear the hardship of the job."

He never mentioned his flagellation to his Saudi colleagues because during his pre-deployment training he was told to curb his arrogance (*kayabangan*). But nevertheless, his having performed the rituals of self-flagellation was for him a source of silent reassurance, not because of what it meant for the practice of faith, but because it showed, at least to his companions, that he was capable of a feat that reasserted his manhood. In that sense, his ritual agency not only demonstrated his prowess as a translational subject, but re-established for him what McKay (2011) has called 'hegemonic masculine privilege' by emboldening the spiritual fortitude to endure the emasculation of the OFW hierarchy.

While both labor brokerage and ritual self-mortification emphasize Christian values of suffering, sacrifice and humility, they differ in a very important respect. In labor brokerage, corporeal techniques of self-effacement emphasize a curbing of agentive will as a specifically exportable form of currency in an economy of sacrifice. In this sense, what Asad describes as the feature of a monastic institution is more relevant for labor brokerage than it is for ritual self-mortification. Their pre-departure training emphasized a work ethic that is based not on a superior deployment of skills *per se* but on a regulation of the worker's will. That which is crafted in performance of Passion rituals, however, is not a loss of will, aptitude or agency, but an enhancement of it, which can then be extended towards the adoption of strategies of empowerment outside the domain of ritual. Indeed, for Miguel and Sencho, it was ritual, and not training, that was the primary idiom for forms of empowerment – of channeling a sense of control and agency amidst the hardships of the economy of sacrifice.

We find a different inflection on this process in the case of Ramon, who had started self-flagellating at the age of 18, years before he met and married Ditas, a 29 year-old medical technician. While Ramon was faced with little means of earning sufficient income, Ditas' administrative skills in the medical industry offered the prospect of higher earning potential overseas. Ditas was able to secure a job with the Ministry of Health in the Saudi Embassy, who hired her as a medical administrator in a hospital in Riyadh. "Our children are the only reason why we decided that it was I who should go, instead of my husband." says Ditas. Saying so was not so much a statement about moving location. It was, rather, an expression of awareness that her leaving was a reformulation of the traditional roles of financial providership. She was aware that she was leaving behind the responsibilities of a mother who was expected to nurture the home. This sentiment was echoed by Ramon, who felt disappointed about his relative inability to earn sufficient income. But in spite of this, he did not feel that his role of providership was completely eroded: "It pains me, as a father and as a man, that I can't earn enough for my family... But never mind, I will still contribute in my own way and help her. If God can look favorably on my *penitensya* [flagellation] then I will be able to help support my family. Having God's favor is better than money, right?"

[9] This resonates with the observations of Smart et. al (1986) who observed that the migratory experience actually resulted in forms of de-skilling. A sample survey conducted among workers in the Gulf region showed that as much as two thirds did not learn any new skills (Smart et al. 1986: 111; Aguilar 1999: 124)

It was under this premise that Ramon has continued his practice of flagellation in the years that Ditas had been away. Ramon feels that his own ritual suffering is a way to approximate the pain that his wife undergoes, and is an expression of empathy with her who is "martyr-like" in her embarking upon transnational labor. "Since I can't earn for our family, flagellation is my humble contribution…my sacrifice," he says.

For Ditas, Ramon's flagellation emboldens and inspires her to handle the vicissitudes of OFW dislocation. "If Ramon can handle the pain of crucifixion for me," she says, "then I can be okay in Saudi. It is a kind of family endurance of suffering and pain." She remains ever worried about the safety aspect of Ramon's participation in the ritual, given that he is the one who takes care of the children. Yet she has learned to take this in her stride, preferring to think of the positive impact of her husband's act of pain-infliction: "Since my departure overseas, he has become responsible.. I guess his flagellation shows that too, since he's doing it for us, right? … Now I trust him to spend the money I send home wisely for our kids medical treatment, and even for their future."

Whereas labor brokerage inculcates a form of passive heroism, going through rituals of self-mortification constitutes a different kind of proactive heroism for Ramon. This is not heroism where, as Holt and Thompson observe among Americans, " men-of-action embody the rugged individualism of the rebel while maintaining their allegiance to collective interests, as required of breadwinners." (Holt and Thompson 2004, 428; McKay 2011, 7). Rather, *his* heroism is premised on the suffering through self-inflicted pain as an expression of empathic solidarity, not just with Christ but with his wife's own suffering. More than just a fulfillment of religious obligation, Ramon's flagellation was an act of "humility and lowering of pride" in accepting his wife as the breadwinner of the family. The loss of his role of providership was addressed through an embodied ritual act which, while not directly contributing to his family's material circumstances, resonated with the same tropes of suffering and sacrifice that emboldened his wife's deployment as an OFW hero-martyr.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have examined how a transnational economy of sacrifice in the Philippines is rationalized through rhetorical pronouncements about the positive value of sacrifice, which is deliberately associated with the neoliberal ideal of deploying productive economic agents. In the Church and the state's discursive linkage of remittance capital to both immediate and transcendent soteriological reward, the economy of sacrifice is packaged as new space on which OFWs can channel all sorts of nationalistic and pious agencies. Weber has famously argued that economic decisions are made not just upon a calculative rationalism but upon a set of internalized values consistent with Protestant ethics. The empirical specificity of this for the Philippines lies in how Roman Catholic ideals of martyric virtue are operationalized in a transnational economic context, manifesting what Foucault has described as the modern "investment of the body, its valorization, and the distributive management of its forces" (1977, 138). I have shown that this is undergirded by (1) the heroic valorization of the victimized bodies of fallen OFWs, and (2) the identification of transnational labor as the terrain of a new spiritual frontier in the mission of Roman Catholic expansion.

The economy of sacrifice is sustained not just through a conflation of patriotism and martyrdom but through actual corporeal regimes as well. Both the process of labor brokering and the rituals of self-mortification that I have described are similar in that they are disciplinary regimes that construe the body as both the object and vehicle for the cultivation of ethical and pious dispositions. OFW training programs seek to produce 'export-quality sufferers' whose tradable labor power is contingent upon their embodiment of Christian virtues of willing, servile obedience. In this way, the

infrastructure of the state's political economy resembles that of the medieval monastery described by Asad (1983) in its emphasis on self-effacement as the necessary condition towards exemplary virtue. This is ironic considering that it is the persistence of self-mortification in Pampanga that is typically thought of as an anachronistic remnant of a medieval Christian order which Filipinos, in their 'fundamentalism' and 'literalism,' have yet to shake off.

Rather than perpetuate this impression, I have shown that rituals of pain infliction in the Philippines are contexts for the formation of *modern* selfhoods. The economy of sacrifice is sustained by ritual agencies in which one's economic decisions are linked not to the ultimate price of death, but to a transaction of multi-subjective reciprocity. The ritual protagonists I have engaged with in Pampanga craft modes of empathy that engender a sense of confidence and perseverance in transnational domains, even while they are encouraged, by the state, the Church and its brokers, to accept as virtuous the potentially fatal consequences of their economic roles. To be a martyr is not the objective of the Passion rituals, whether in the form of flagellation or nailing, and neither is a heroic death the outcome pursued in OFW deployment. Suffering is endured, both in ritual and in transnational domains, with the expectation that it will bear a corresponding upliftment of their material and spiritual circumstances.

I am not alone in suggesting that transnational labor can be meaningfully understood by paying attention to ritual agency. For example, sociologist Filomeno Aguilar has argued, following Victor Turner (1967), that for Filipino OFWs, "international labor migration is an analogue of the ancient religious journey, a modern, secularized variant of the ritual pilgrimage" (1999, 102). He argues that the period of overseas placement is an ambiguous, suspended state of double liminality, whereby " [OFWs] are separated from society and, in their isolation, find themselves in a time of reflection." (Ibid. 101). For Aguilar, the transnational domain is a field of self-cultivation whereby OFW-pilgrims go thorough "a period of sacrifice, ascetic self-denial, and the abandonment of worldly comfort and pleasures" as they look forward to return to the homeland as an ontologically transformed and triumphant self (Ibid. 102). The hardship of the economic pilgrimage is bearable to the extent that workers anticipate the "the promise of a future reversal in status positions and a foreseeable exchange between the geographic sites of productive work and of consumption, separated yet linked within an uneven and disjunctive global capitalism." (Ibid. 120).

The ethnographic data I have presented here affirms Aguilar's notion that OFW labor is the site of subjective cultivation and transformation. In demonstrating the importance of corporeality, however, my contribution is to add some substance to the 'between and betwixt' space of transnational liminality. I have suggested that the values crafted in transnational domains is not merely actualized at the end of the journey, but during the embodied pursuit of overseas work as a mode of empathic suffering – the same modes of sentiment and affect that are emphasized in self-mortification rituals. And while it must be acknowledged that these sentiments would be more acutely felt by self-mortifying OFW men from Pampanga, the themes I have discussed have broader resonance in reiterating that the OFW's responsiveness to a political economy that monetizes their labor power cannot simply be reduced to a mere susceptibility to the state's rhetorical claims, nor can it be explained exclusively as a pursuit of economic rationalism.

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