

The Filipino Seafarer: A Life Between Sacrifice and Shopping¹

Gunnar M. Lamvik

ABSTRACT: The central theme in this article is a highlighting of the way in which the life of the Filipino seafarer continues to be interwoven with that of his family. The seafarers are portrayed as products *of* and *for* their families, both in the sense that the family appears as the major motive for leaving and that close kin often play an intrinsic role as facilitators for the actual departure. Also the extensive and complex financial contribution of the seafarer towards his family, together with certain extraordinary knowledge obtained through his occupation find their place in the outline of the Filipino seafarer as a family-based enterprise.

The article also contains a brief theoretical outline of the labour migration phenomenon, besides a discussion of the coping aspect in a seafaring profession. Life at sea is portrayed as a highly repetitive and deprived universe, which demands the use of certain coping strategies in order to make daily life appear meaningful for the seamen. Crucial in the seafarers' struggle for significance lie metaphor and the gift.

KEYWORDS: gift, labour migration, maritime industry, metaphor, Philippines, seafarers

Introduction

To be at sea is an act of love.² To be a Filipino overseas seafarer, is about a deep compassion or concern for the family members back home in the Philippines. The seafarers are products *of* and *for* their families. In this article I introduce the concept and portray the seafarer as a family-based enterprise. In the sense that the family appear as the major motive for leaving – to improve the financial situation of the family is *the* most typical migratory motive – and close kin often play an intrinsic role as facilitators for the actual departure. In addition the extensive and complex financial contribution of the seafarer towards his family, together with certain extraordinary knowledge obtained through his occupation, contributes to my argu-

ment of the Filipino seafarer as a family-based enterprise.

When the financial remittances from the employed seafarers eventually reach the native soil of the Philippines, the strong family orientation is once again very apparent. Besides a comprehensive distribution of gifts among family, it is common among seamen to be engaged in different investments where the objective, among other things, is to improve the standard of living of the family. It is especially in the fields of education, housing and small-scale business projects that these expenditures take place. Despite the fact that these investments are comprehensive and highly important in order to understand the strong relationship between the seaman and his family, this article will first and foremost focus upon the strong

gift-giving tradition among overseas Filipino seafarers.

Labour Migration

Human beings have always migrated. And the inducement factors for such a movement will historically vary from country to country, from region to region, from family to family and even from individual to individual. The migration phenomenon can thus be treated in many different ways, and every angle can be said to reveal some of its components or aspects. One particular common approach over the years has been to emphasize the linkages between development and migration. Will development lead to more or less migration? And who takes the actual decision to migrate; what is the decision-making unit?

These huge topics and questions have been recurrent in the migration debate over the years. In the 1950s and 1960s there was an overwhelmingly positive view of the relationship between migration and development (according to, among others, Castles 2008: 4) in the sense that migration will eventually lead to equilibrium between the economies in the sending and receiving countries, so the stream of people will decline. This perspective focuses upon a micro level in the migration process, where important concepts are individuality, cost-benefit calculations and equilibrium. This can also be referred to as neo-classical theory, which 'emphasized the individual decision to migrate, based on rational comparison of relative costs and benefits of remaining at home or moving' (Castles 2008: 4).

In contrast to this positive micro perspective, we find a more pessimistic macro perspective. This so-called historical-institutional approach has ideological roots in Marxist political economy (Castles 2008) and important keywords are: structural conditions, demography, unemployment rates, systems of produc-

tion and international politics and legislation. A well-known approach within this perspective is to look for factors which coerce personnel into circulation in the international labour market. Migration is not, seen from this angle, based on voluntarism, but is rather treated as a question of coercive necessity.

We have so far seen two rather different ways of approaching the issue of migration. One that emphasizes the external, coercive forces surrounding the migrants, and another one which underlines the possibilities for the individual migrants to make calculations inside of this framework. The third and last perspective I would like to bring forward in this discussion is based on a combination of the two discussed above. The bridge is built by an analytical entity which is considered to be standing between the micro and macro levels. I am here referring to the household.

In the 1980s and 1990s new perspectives entered the debate. Many of these approaches made it possible to have a more holistic understanding of the migration process. One of these was referred to as the new economies of labour migration (NELM). The NELM approach came, according to Massey et al. (1993: 436), as a 'critical response to, and improvement of, neo-classical migration theory'. The NELM perspective criticizes the neo-classical models for being too individualistic and rigid, but represented also an alternative to the so-called historical-institutional approach. The NELM perspective emphasized that the migration process should be seen in a wider social context. In short, what the NELM perspective achieved was to view migration as a family strategy and concern, and that the family or the household should be treated as the decision-making unit. Or, as de Haas (2008: 35) phrased it, 'revitalized thinking on migration in and from the developing world by placing the behavior of individual migrants in a wider societal context and by considering not the individual, but the family or the household as the

most appropriate decision-making unit'. The vast importance of family and household in the migration process brings me back to the Filipino version of this movement. The Filipino seafarer's strong financial, emotional and cultural position in his family, is a perfect illustration of how important it is to include the family or household unit into consideration in the migration endeavour.

The Recruitment Process

To choose an overseas maritime career in the Philippines involves a whole lot of manoeuvring, especially when it comes to how the potential migrant is able to forge a relationship with the overseas labour market.³ To become a migrant is not just dependent on a willingness to go: equally important are factors such as the personal relationships one is able to establish or plead, directly or indirectly, inside the manning offices in Manila.

In order for potential migrant families to be able to hand over personnel to the international labour market, they need to get in touch with those who provide such employment. In other words, the families or the migrants themselves need assistance from someone who can help them to articulate their own wish and ability actually to land an overseas contract. The answer to this problem is the broker. The chances of succeeding without establishing contact with such a gatekeeper is small. The potential migrants cannot, for example, just go to the agents in Manila on their own and expect to have good odds of acquiring a job abroad, even though such efforts in some cases do lead to an overseas contract. The trend is that those who want to go need to pursue their application through people or institutions which convey their wish to the overseas labour market.

To fully understand the need of a broker, it is important to bear in mind the enormous gap which exists between the metropolis Manila, the seat of the political and financial elite in

the country, and the rest of the 76 provinces which constitute the Philippines. Manila is in many ways a world of its own, seen in relation to the rest of the archipelago. At least this is the impression one is left with after some time in the Philippines. For instance, a typical way to categorize the country is to contrast sharply the capital on the one side and the rest of the country on the other. For example, if you are looking for a person, and you wonder if he is located in Manila, the answer may easily be: 'No, he is out in the provinces.'

So, despite the fact that the educational level is relatively high in the Philippines, we cannot get away from the impression that a majority of the population in the country live very provincial or local lives, far from the international, metropolis Manila. It is not just a matter of distance in the geographical sense of the word, between for instance the financial district of Metro-Manila, Makati and the rice fields of Panay or the sugar plantations in Negros. It is rather a question of seemingly different worlds or universes.

In general we may say that a broker is someone who is able to combine or convey appreciated information or experience from two separated sectors of a society or, more precisely, he is in a position to utilize the comparative advantage which is implicitly present in these two different domains of society. In the case of Philippine labour migration we have, according to Goss and Lindquist (1995), three different types of gatekeepers: the local patron, the private recruiter and the returned migrant. This article will concentrate its discussion around the latter of these mediators, namely the returned migrant.

From the moment a young Filipino man envisions himself as a future overseas seaman and a provider for his beloved ones back home, family members will be of vast importance to him. He will most certainly have to rely on financial support from people around him when facing the expenses at the maritime college. Likewise, when he eventually reaches the level

of applying for an actual overseas contract at one of the many maritime recruitment agencies in Manila, the family will once again play a crucial role. They could, for example, assist him with the necessary knowledge of how to perform in the actual process of applying, and it is often maintained that if the applicant has a relative within the agency, the chances for a successful outcome of the application will be radically improved.

The family members who function as gatekeepers or so-called backers in the recruitment process, are foremost the experienced seafarers. The returned migrant knows, for example, which offices one should visit in order to receive all kinds of clearances for a job abroad, who to address in these offices and of course where these institutions are located in the urban jungle of Manila. But the most important element in the experience possessed by the returned migrant may be connected to the personal relationships they have been able to establish inside the manning agencies in the capital. The contract worker will, after some years and due to their personal contacts, be in a position to recommend applications addressed to these private recruiters. Often these applications come from a son, nephew or a cousin of the seafarer. It is this recommendation practice, besides the more technical know-how mentioned above, that turns the returned migrant into a broker in the recruitment process.

Life at Sea

The life at sea can be named a state of exception. To be a professional seafarer might involve membership of an alternative society or reality. In other words, a ship is, in short, an extreme and an abnormal place to be: it is almost impossible to find a corresponding society elsewhere. A ship is therefore in its character an exceptional or an unparalleled place, and the experience the seafarers obtain after

the actual performance of the contract periods on board might be unique.

When I refer to a ship's abnormal qualities I first and foremost relate this to the following components: it is floating and constantly in motion; it is populated by relatively few people – mostly men – who are replaced from time to time; there is highly limited space on board and the division of labour and the social organization is rigid and hierarchical. All these elements considered one at a time are, of course, not enough to reveal a merchantman's exceptional character: small and hierarchical working organizations, for instance, are rather common throughout the world. The potential for unparalleled experiences will, however, occur when these attributes are taken together. In other words, it is the combination of these factors which might nourish or generate certain unique experiences.

At the core of Filipino maritime labour migration lies an impressive ability and willingness to endure hardship (*pagsisikap* in Tagalog) or make sacrifices for the sake of the family. I will maintain that this is by far the most fundamental and meaningful inducement factor for choosing a maritime overseas career in the Philippines. This statement implicitly denotes that everyday life at sea comes with a price and that the family is part of the solution in handling life on board.

When repetitiveness and routine of the daily life on board is strongly felt, it is easy to understand that the struggle for meaning and the task of handling boredom is often included in the seafarer's own understanding of their time on board. Some statements may illustrate the deprived character of the life on board.

'I basically see myself as a prisoner on board', said a retired chief engineer to me once. He was not alone, though, in making use of terms and metaphors which linked life on board to what takes place in a prison. Some of the seafarers I interviewed claimed that it was common to name the working contract 'a sentence', and joke about it in these terms, asking

people on other vessels how many months of their judgment on board they have left. In another instance one told me about the letter he wrote to his girlfriend, in which he wondered what he had done to deserve this sentence; he could not remember violating the law, but he was out there serving a ten-month '*senténsiyá*' (Tagalog).

An able-bodied seaman I interviewed, also agreed with linking the society on board to a prison-like arena since:

You live only in a small place. You meet every day the same people. You see every day the same places. You see the land, you see the sea, and you see the clouds, the stars, and the moon. Every morning when you wake up, you go to the kitchen, take a cup of coffee, talk about the same things – about work. And then after that, 08.00 start working, 10.00 coffee, 12.00 lunch, 13.00 start working again, 15.00 coffee, 17.00 dinner. Then after 18.00 [you might have some] overtime, if not you go to the recreation place, listen to some music, watch TV ...

Another seafarer I met expressed similar sentiments. This man referred to the ship as a 'mobile prison', and explained what he meant by saying 'you go out, and you know that you have to come back again'. A third seaman I interviewed phrased his experience this way: '[Yes, it is a prison on board] because you have nothing to do, only to work, work and work'. He continued, after giving me an elaborate description of a typical day on board similar to the one above, by saying '[on board we have] no Sundays, only Mondays'.

It also became apparent to me during the fieldwork in Iloilo (city and province) and on board, that the seafarers themselves see the 'ship society' as a deprived and secluded universe: a place which might leave you with a sense of being kept separated from real life. For instance, some of the seafarers I met emphasized that they had instructed their wives not to give them any negative news from home since they were unable to respond anyway. A third mate I interviewed told me that: 'it

would be nicer if they could write us good news only. Something which could make us [feel] comfortable on board [...] It is very hard for us [to receive bad news on board] since we have this ten months contracts'.

Before I go on with this discussion, let me emphasize that at the bottom of this issue lies metaphor. To draw comparisons between a social universe on board a ship and a prison environment cannot be anything else than a metaphoric manoeuvre. This is due to the simple fact that a ship in the merchant marine is not a prison, and a seaman is after all not a prisoner. These organizations differ sharply, for instance when it comes to questions of what constitutes the basis and the overall goal for their activity – profitable transportation versus punishment and isolation – and in the way individuals become part of these organizations. For example, it is a common belief that the decision of becoming a seafarer is deeply rooted in some sort of individual voluntary decision, while whether a person is imprisoned or not is located on a macro or conventional level and therefore something which is way beyond a strong influence from the single individual. Or to put it in an even more obvious or banal way: to become a seaman is something people usually want and therefore strive for in contrast to a life behind bars, which is, perhaps with a few exceptions, a situation people do a lot to avoid.

The link between the ship and the jail is also unveiled by the seafarers when they apply the prison metaphor to indicate how it can be on board. It is in this case important to bear in mind the following: a metaphor is not an arbitrary entity since it cannot be viewed or understood isolated from the way people make use of it. In other words, the fact that people apply concepts and expressions 'which allow us to understand one domain of experience in terms of another' – to quote a possible definition of a metaphor developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 117) – should indicate that there is an actual connection between the fields which are

combined. This is not necessarily an objective or 'real' similarity; however, the connection might primarily be based on how people look upon or experience certain issues.

For interest's sake, let me also mention that life at sea can be good to think with for people located at the opposite side of the metaphor, namely in prison. At least this was the case in the work of Jimmy Boyle, a long-term prisoner who published his diaries in 1985. In one of his many reports, addressed to his girlfriend, he pessimistically described life behind bars thus: 'I'm so at sea in this place that I'm trying not to be drawn into it' (Boyle 1985: 238).

It should also be underlined that even though a metaphor is not an arbitrary entity, this does not mean that it is a one-dimensional and a tangible part of our vocabulary and hence of our way of conceptualizing our stock of experience and communicating with our fellow beings. To highlight, downplay and hide particular properties of the so-called domains of experience, which is the source or the basis for the metaphor, will always be part of the process of metaphorization (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 149). In other words, through a recurrent use of a certain metaphor, its potential as a signifier is revealed and narrowed, since a limited content or a bounded direction is ascribed to the metaphor. Or to put it in a slogan-like manner: a metaphor contains potential for some signifying abilities, not all and not one.⁴

That some of the Filipino seafarers struggled with a feeling of being kept apart from their 'actual' reality during their time on board, became rather obvious when I asked them to describe what life at sea was like. One of the most significant statements I heard during my fieldwork came when a young and successful chief engineer was asked to conceptualize the everyday life of a seaman. He replied that to be able to endure being a seafarer it was necessary 'to produce something out of nothing'. A chief mate, on the other hand, described life at sea in the following words: '[being at sea is] just a state of mind'.

Some did fail, though: those who did not manage to produce this something out of nothing. I remember a story told by one of my neighbours in Iloilo City, who was a chief mate. The story was about one of his subordinates, an able-bodied seaman, who suddenly one day started to drink and throw bottles around inside his cabin. The chief mate went to the man and told him: 'Do not bring your problems on board. [...] Do not give ourselves a problem. [...] If you have problems with your wife, do not bring it here. This [place] is different, we are here to work, we are here to earn money. [...] Before we left our house we had problems [as well]'. He continued saying 'That is why we are here – we need money. That is a big problem.'

At the centre of the Filipino seafarers' strategy or struggle for significance during their periods on board, once again lies the family. I maintain that the Filipino seafarers, at a more fundamental level, never actually leave their families. They constantly see themselves as delegates from their kin back home, and during their contract period on board, they put a lot of effort into upholding this orientation. Besides an explicit communication with the family through media such as letters and cellular phones, the seamen are able to bridge the geographical gap between themselves and their beloved ones in the Philippines, through an extensive engagement in the purchasing of gifts or so-called *pasalubongs*.

Gifts from the 'Outside'

We are, in general terms, given an idea of what the practice of gift-giving is all about in the following statement: 'Labour migrants are, in a sense, incomplete persons, who must re-establish a bond of substance with persons left behind' (Werbner 1990: 203). In short, the seafarers' distribution of gifts must thus be seen in relation to his position within the family. His position as a husband, son, father, nephew,

cousin, godfather, patron and godchild, will influence how he distributes the content of his *balikbayan*-boxes (litterely it means: repatriate box). In addition friends and neighbours will also often be favoured with a gift.

‘Shopping can ease the boredom’ was an explanation that was given by a seaman I met on one of my many visits on board. He wanted to explain to me why the seafarers are so involved in purchasing gifts during their contract periods. What he had in mind was not solely the act itself, although I am sure that to roam around in a foreign shopping mall after weeks at sea, could be a refreshing time for the men. While boredom denotes the deprived and dull universe on board, the shopping can denote the mnemonic qualities of the gifts that are bought. That is, the gifts that are hand-carried on board are capable of and act as remedies to generate a clear memory of those back home, people who in the near future will receive these things as presents. Shopping is therefore a type of active remembering of the receivers by the seaman at work and, equally important, for the seaman to be remembered by the family while he is away. Let me elaborate on and clarify what I mean by this.

The seaman has, over the years, bought and distributed most certainly a wide range of gifts to members of his nearest family, as well as to other relatives and neighbours and friends. Typical things he carries home can be: shoes (for instance trainers of well-known American brands), T-shirts (for example with motives from cities visited by the seaman), food (such as coffee and chocolate), cigarettes (‘for neighbours and friends’) and whisky (my impression is that Black Label is the most common choice in this case).

These gifts share at least one certain quality, namely their foreign origin. Moreover, in addition to their status as imported goods, there will also be other meanings stored in or ascribed to the item which may link the gift to its donor. In other words, the gifts will be equipped with a significance that may tell a

personal as well as an exotic tale long after the object has left the seaman’s hands. In sum, this will create a situation in which the gifts can be seen as reminders of the marginal seafarer (marginal in the social sense and not structurally or economically). The act ensures that he will be represented in the family and the local community, even during the time he is absent. With the help of a gift he will achieve a sort of conspicuous absence back home.

I maintain that this situation may ease the sense of emptiness, absence and loneliness which the seamen often experience during their time on board. It allows their everyday life on the ship to be draped in a meaningful veil, since they traverse the geographical gap and isolation by leaving and systematically distributing physical proofs of their bare existence and successful efforts at sea among significant members of their land-based network. The family back home will, through these foreign artefacts, receive not only a reminder of the seaman as a person, but also of which project he is involved in, every year’s toil and struggle on board, a hardship and sacrifice which after all takes place in their name.

The seaman’s gifts can be looked upon as some of the most concrete things he has left after 10 months at sea. In the vacuum he experiences during his contract period, the *pasalubongs* represent by far the most tangible proofs of his effort on board. Phrased in a slightly different manner, since the seaman has 10 months a year that he cannot explain and cannot account for, the gift will represent important cornerstones or reminders for their memory. Just as the souvenir sheds some light on the individual tourist, and generates a need for his or her narrative to be told, the gift may point at certain episodes from his contract period and he will ensure that these are mentioned or included in the process of giving it away.

In other words, what the seaman gives away are glimpses of his recent, though monotonous, past. Just as the souvenir gains its strength

from 'events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative' (Stewart 1993: 135), the gift should be treated as physical results of an endeavour in a highly routinized, deprived and therefore blurred universe.

Alfred Gell's (1986) notion of exotic items as per the definition of pieces of art is relevant in the discussion around the gift. Although the *pasalubongs* cannot be viewed as actual pieces of art, the presents brought home from the sea do share certain elements with a typical work of art. The gift is for instance similar to art when it comes to the role it performs in negating and transcending the so-called real world – in this context, the everyday reality of the Philippines. It is bought and brought home from the 'glamorous' outside, and instead of the local peso, it is paid for in U.S. dollars. Moreover, according to many Filipinos, the imported goods are characterized by a different 'flavour', a different taste and a better quality and are therefore preferred over local products. A perfect gift is seen as a contrast to what the receiver's own world is capable of offering. A gift from a seaman is a taste of what it can be like out there, compared to the well-known, taken-for-granted Philippines.

As I have demonstrated over the last pages, it is almost impossible not to draw a tangible line between the things that are given and the person who is actually giving them away. The profound significance of the wide range of gifts presented after completed contracts is thus connected to the origin of the item and to the position and experience of the single seaman. In general I would illustrate this relationship by stating that the gift comes from the outside, and speaks of an outside world – just as the seaman does himself. He distributes objects from the outside world as gifts, things that are simultaneously an objectification of and commentary on his life as an overseas seaman. Phrased differently, he donates artefacts which he knows people back in the Philippines appreciate. However, to emphasize imported

items is also one way to comment on his own past and experience on board: as having an outstanding position in the family and local community.

Conclusion

The seaman's place or position in a family-based network is what makes him able and willing to leave, and at the same time it is what enables him to cope (but not without a struggle) with the deprived and secluded universe on board.

It is first and foremost a strong focus on sacrifice, or to undergo hardship in someone's name, that motivates the departure to an overseas labour market. In addition, the obvious and strong financial element as an inducement factor should be comprehended as being deeply rooted in the Filipino family orientation, since it is a widespread notion that the income is for the benefits of, or meant for, the whole family. Insights and efforts from relatives are also crucial when it comes to the practical accomplishment of the labour migration. In order to get to know how to approach the manning agents, those who locally handle the foreign labour market, the seaman – at least in the beginning of his career – often needs to rely upon the resources of his relatives.

The seaman's ability to see the family unit as a coping strategy during the contract period is related to his ability to drape his daily life on board – despite its monotonous and anomalous character – in a meaningful veil. With a focus on the family, he is able to bridge the gap between himself and those back home, and at the same time manages to see his effort and isolation on board in a wider and more meaningful context. Besides frequent phone calls back home he will, through an involvement in gift-related shopping, be reminded of those who rely on his efforts, the very people who also represent the overall motive for why he chose this profession in the first place.

The gift should also be understood as a 'metasocial commentary' (Geertz 1973: 448) to the experience obtained by the seafarer in his maritime career. He brings home exotic artefacts from all over the world — and emphasize simultaneously, since he himself has been to the same places, his own extraordinary knowledge. In short, the gift is in this thesis, treated as a medium for and an exemplification of the contact between the seafarer on board ship and the family members at home. He conjures up the memory of those back home with the help of the mnemonic qualities of the gifts, and they see his imprint in the exotic gifts while he is away. He purchases physical bearers, which are capable of carrying the memory of the family at home, and ends up by presenting them as gifts, as pieces of himself to family members after terminating his contract.

To sum up, this article has been about how strong ideals and motives are kept alive in a deprived and monotonous universe with the support of certain mnemonic devices. It has been about how sacrifice is nourished through shopping.

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Notes

1. This article is based on my doctoral thesis. See Lamvik (2002).
2. The statement is actually a paraphrase of Miller's 'shopping is primarily an act of love' Miller (1998: 18).

3. It should be noted that the Philippines have a strong migration industry (Lamvik 2002), where seafarers only constitute a small part. 'In addition to the 8 million Filipinos diaspora, many of those who remain at home are thinking of migrating' (Asis 2006: 194).
4. I have elsewhere suggested seeing the signification process in general as something which does include *motivert flertydighet* or 'motivated arbitrariness' (Lamvik 1994: 109).

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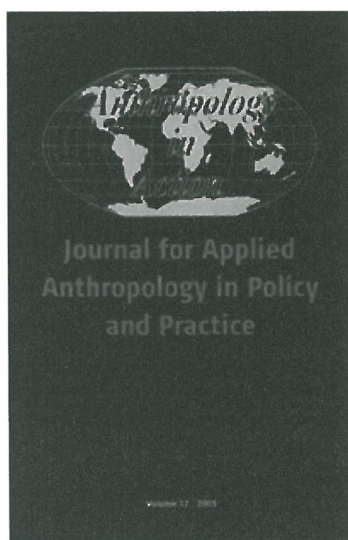
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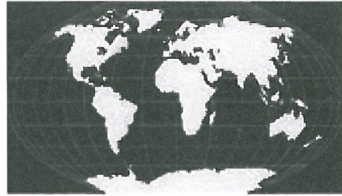
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