Religion and its Role in the Filipino Educators' Migratory Experience

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Abstract

In Thailand, Filipino teachers have become the largest group of foreign teachers. However, in addition to the influence of the usual factors that play out in their mobility, the migratory experience of the Filipino teachers demonstrates that religion plays an essential role in their eventual participation in international migration. By examining the instrumental approach to development via religion, Filipino teachers utilize instrumental and transnational practices to provide themselves with avenues to achieve their goals and enrich their migratory lives. Simultaneously, in helping shape the Filipino teachers' migration routes and experiences, religion benefits from this relationship by exercising their regulatory functions through the Filipino teachers' affiliation with their churches. This study ultimately contributes to the discussion of religion's shifting image and practices that eventually become part of the normativity within a migrant's transnational space.

Keywords

Filipino educators; instrumental religion; missiology; teaching profession; Thailand

Introduction

As the number of Filipino migrants who work in the teaching profession in Thailand increases, examining and better understanding the factors that propel their movement to the Kingdom have become more pertinent, if only to make more sense of the emerging mobility of Filipino migrants in the region. Filipino migrants are considered the largest group of skilled workers migrating into the English language education sector in Thailand, as indicated in Perez-Amurao and Sunanta's study (2020), second to those coming from the United Kingdom and the United States of America. In the Thailand Migration Report 2019, the Philippines ranks third among foreigners holding work permits for professional and skilled occupations for 2014-2017 (Harkins, 2019). However, it is important to note that this report includes professionals and skilled workers from other industries, not necessarily from the teaching sector alone. Many Filipino migrants teach either English or other courses that require the use of the English language. Nevertheless, since 2003, despite the lack of a bilateral agreement to facilitate labor supply between the Philippines and Thailand, Filipinos remain the fastest-growing migrant labor group in Thailand (Sciortino & Punpuing, 2009).

Migrant work among the Filipinos is nothing new. As one of the leading labor suppliers in the global labor circuit, the Philippines' participation in international migration has generally been discussed in existing literature bodies mainly driven by the usual push-pull factors. Bodies of research centered on intra-regional migration "from the Philippines to Thailand has been increasing but has not yet received close academic attention" (Perez-Amurao & Sunanta, 2020, p. 118), much less a study that connects the Filipinos' migration to Thailand and religion. This study highlights the following contributions: a discussion on the intra-regional migration from the Philippines to Thailand; the increasing role religion, as a non-economic factor, plays in the Filipinos' intra-regional movement; and, vice versa, the benefits such a non-economic factor as religion reaps from said relationship and that of transnational engagements. By examining the Filipino teachers' religious affiliation both in their country of origin and host country, their migratory experience speaks of how religion plays out in the transnational space and how it leads the Filipino teachers to their eventual participation in international migration. The Filipino teachers' religious affiliation also provides a glimpse at their religious identities and practices, allowing a clearer understanding of how ecclesial influences offer the Filipino teachers avenues to achieve their goals and enrich their migratory lives.

This article further demonstrates that even while still in their country of origin and upon reaching their country of destination, the Filipino teachers' mobility within the region is facilitated with the help of their religious organization. Even back home in the Philippines, the propensity of the Filipinos to work abroad is already spurred by their religion and its teachings. The Church teaches its believers that one's faith is meant to lead them to sacrifice for others, especially for the sake of one's family (Ileto, 1979; Guevarra, 2010; Rafael, 1988), in imitation of Jesus Christ's sufferings. Religious teachings have eventually become regulatory, making sure that family members' actions address familial needs. For many Filipinos, migrant work has become a form of sacrifice in response to family necessities. To these Filipinos, "a deeply rooted and pervasive culture of migration has made moving abroad common, acceptable—even desirable—as an option or strategy for a better life" (Asis, 2017, para. 1).

On the other hand, religion's influence on the migrant lives of Filipino teachers does not stop while they are in their country of origin. A closer look at global religion explains how the Filipino teachers forge international connections, particularly in their transnational lives in a host-country setting because religion in itself operates on a "global societal system" (Beyer, 2001; Levitt, 2003, p. 848). As such, this study emphasizes understanding Filipino migrants in Thailand as transmigrants who forge "transnational social field" (Schiller, 2018, p. 201; Schiller, Basch, & Blanc, 1995) and live transnational lives between Thailand and the Philippines. Since religion operates in vast and far-reaching geographic spaces, and milieus that span beyond borders, its followers such as the Filipino teachers are able to participate in its activities, extending their memberships and enriching their practices transnationally (Beyer, 2001; Constable, 2007; Fresnoza–Flot, 2010; Peterson, Vasquez & Williams, 2001; Vasquez & Gomez, 2003; Vasquez & Marquardt, 2003).

In adopting the instrumental approach to faith or religion to analyze the Filipino teachers' migratory experience, I discuss the two-pronged influence of religion and its attendant practices as these manners shape the Filipino teachers' propensity for migrant work both in the country-of-origin setting and in the host country context. I share Guevarra's (2010), Ileto's (1979), and Rafael's (1988) views that homeland religion cultivates in the Filipinos a strong propensity for migrant work as such type of employment involves a certain degree of sacrifice in support of loved ones' needs; what I call the discourse of endurance. Thus, other than the typical push-pull factors that serve as the driving force in the Filipino teachers' overseas work, religion also catalyzes their decision to take up work abroad. I share views of Peterson, Vasquez, and Williams (2001) as well as Beyer (2001), Constable (2007), Fresnoza–Flot (2010), Vasquez and Gomez (2003), and Vasquez and Marquardt (2003) in arguing that religion's influence on migration is not limited to a migrant worker's nourishment of their spiritual life. Beyond the church's dispensation of ecclesial benediction, the church also shares with its members material items, knowledge, services, and networks that help its followers find work and sustain their migrant lives. This act demonstrates that members of the Filipino teaching community in Thailand do not necessarily go through a single migration path leading to their migrant work. While many teachers are hired either as walk-in applicants or as referrals through their personal or professional networks, others can secure teaching jobs via their religious memberships or affiliation. This situation reflects how religion can be highly influential, propelling migrant workers to confront and adapt to their migrant work setting conditions.

The instrumental approach to faith or religion in this study's use of the transnationalism framework allows a perspective to analyze the Filipino teachers' migratory experience that views migrants as active agents who connect the homeland and country of destination through their everyday activities. Migration into the educational sector in Thailand is a choice that Filipino migrants in this study make to improve their life chances. This choice has become more feasible and attractive to Filipinos regarding the following developments: there is an increasing demand for English language education in Thailand; the commoditization of education in the English language in the Kingdom has become more apparent and practiced; and, there are now emerging migrant networks that are accessible both in the Philippines and in Thailand.

Methodology

This study made use of ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews. The in-depth interviews, however, were a result of initial focus group discussions (FGD), whose preliminary objective was to look at the Thailand-based Filipino educators' migratory experience. The study eventually relied on aforesaid data-gathering methods to collect rich accounts of how religion plays a crucial role in Filipino teaching professionals' lives in the country.

Having taught in Thailand for almost fifteen years, I have personally witnessed, and am able to relate to the issues discussed by the respondents in this study. As a participant-observer, I have had first-hand experience of being a Filipino teaching professional in Thailand. Thus, I was able to identify with the concerns my participants raised in the course of our discussions.

I initially worked with a total of 50 participants, carrying out participant observation and focus group discussions (FGD) with 25 Filipino teachers in the first group, and interviews with the additional 25 Filipino teachers. The interview results of those with relevant data have been shared in this study. This study is the corollary of an earlier, more extensive study between the first quarter of 2015 and the last quarter of 2017. I held the first FGD on a Sunday afternoon in the residence of one of my participants. The second FGD took place during lunchtime in the school were my relevant participants worked by arrangement with one of the FGD participants, who subsequently, coordinated with his Filipino teacher-colleagues. I held meetings with the teacher-interviewees in various locations and through various modes that were convenient for the respondents. The respondents agreed to do face-to-face interviews, with three who had to be interviewed via Skype due to their geographical location. The FGDs and interviews were conducted using both English and conversational Tagalog to allow the informants more liberty to articulate their thoughts easily.

After gathering preliminary data about the respondents, I further conducted the second round of separate follow-up in-depth interviews with six respondents from the same group of 50 participants, whose migratory experience directly linked to what subsequently emerged as the focus of this study; that is, the intersectionality of the respondents' religion with their migratory experience. The initial identification of respondents was based on my network. To prevent sample selection bias, I chose not to know the names of those with whom my contacts initially communicated. I only learned more about the respondents when we met in person. I also used the following selection criteria: they are Thailand-based educators employed by institutions that use English either as the only or one of the means of communication; following the condition earlier stated, they have worked or have been working for at least one year; and, they are working in either private or public educational institutions. Upon the respondents' recommendation within the aforementioned circle, I was introduced to others who also agreed to be interviewed.

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Conceptual framework and review of related literature

The Filipino teachers' migratory experience in relation to religion

By adopting the instrumental approach to faith or religion in analyzing the Filipino teachers' migratory experience, this study considers religion as being an active part of their lives, not just when Filipinos start embarking on overseas work. The role of religion is seen to begin much earlier than imagined. In fact, religion's role in amplifying every Filipino's propensity for migrant work is well-entrenched as the Spanish influence is in the Philippine culture (Guevarra, 2010; Ileto, 1979; Rafael, 1988). Scholars posit that with the Spanish colonization of the Philippines for 333 years, the ideological frame of hardship and submission has become well-rooted in almost every Filipino's psyche.

San Juan (2000) shared a related claim. He maintains that because the Filipinos' international dispersal is from "family or kinship webs in villages, towns, or provincial regions first" and that the Filipinos' mobility is due mainly to perceived economic growth and the desire to help the family ease such financial difficulty, "the origin to which one returns [is] heavily attributed to family and kinship" (p. 236).

Rudolph (1997), as cited in Vasquez & Marquardt (2003), mentioned that a historical look at religion and globalization shows how religious groups have been seen as "among the oldest of transnationals…[carrying] word and praxis across vast spaces before those places became nation-states or even states" (p. 2).

Vasquez and Marquardt (2003) also noted that religion is seen as "the result of desperate defensive, often private, responses to inevitable structural processes of modernization and secularization" (p. 4). This viewpoint is because religion is mostly understood as ineluctably tangled with socio-historical undertakings closely linked to, and at times resulting from, people's spatial and embodied engagements.

Guevarra (2010) argued that this ideological frame could be claimed to have served as the underlying reason through which the Spanish colonizers culturally dominated and influenced the Filipinos.

> *"The narratives of suffering, sacrifice, and martyrdom became prominent themes with the introduction of Jesus Christ and his symbolic representation of redemption. Within Philippine society to this day, his suffering and sacrifice are popularized, retold, and collectively celebrated as narratives of Pasyon; his crucifixion is reenacted during the Lent season." (Guevarra, 2010, p. 24).*

Guevarra further argues that the Filipinos' conversion to Catholicism did not only mean surrendering to the Spanish rule, but also symbolized their having embraced and advanced the Spaniards' religious standards and values that have deeply penetrated the Filipino daily life. This incursion has been observed to manifest in the Philippines' cultural practices, and the Filipinos' ways of living even to the present.

> *In a fundamental way, it conditioned Filipinos' eventual submission to the Philippine state. These ideals have become especially evident in the ideological framework of the country's overseas employment program and pivotal in the way the state manages labor migration and characterizes Filipino workers' choices to work overseas as "sacrifices" or acts that serve the interests of both their families and the country, and that the state attempts to reward symbolically and materially (p. 24).*

Besides viewing religion as pivotal in understanding how it impacts many Filipinos' propensity to take up overseas work, it is vital to note religion's role within a migrant worker's social space. This indicates another role religion plays in migrant workers' lives, particularly in facilitating possible employment opportunities to those in need.

Fresnoza-Flot's (2010) study cited that among the Filipino women in France, churches not only offer worship services but also serve as an "employment agency," among other things, referring to Lefebvre's use of the concept of social space arguing how it is "constituted by networked social relationships and is not located in a definite geographic area" (p. 346). Similar to how Fresnoza-Flot applied said concept in her study, Lefebvre's (1991) definition of social space is relevant to how the Filipino teachers in this study use their own churches' social space where they make full use of "the networks and pathways [to] facilitate the exchange of material things and information" (p. 77). In this regard, Fresnoza-Flot (2010) further posited that for Lefebvre's tenet to be applicable to the migrant church context, "one should not treat them in isolation but rather focus on their complex links with the other components of a given society" (p. 346).

Filipino teachers in Thailand as transmigrants

This study adopts the transnational framework, coupled with the instrumental approach to faith or religion, in analyzing the Filipino teachers' migratory experience. Schiller, Basch, and Blanc (1995) talked about transmigrants as those "whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state' (p.48). They maintained that transmigrants could not be considered as sojourners who stay in one place temporarily mainly because they put down roots in one place, integrating themselves in their receiving countries' economic, political, and day-to-day circumstances. Nevertheless, these transmigrants also have commitments in their own countries of origin, keeping linkages, carrying out proceedings, and asserting a certain degree of impact on said places' goings-on. Schiller et al. (1995) contended that transnational migration is a process through which transnationals "forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations… [underscoring] the ongoing and continuing ways in which current-day immigrants construct and reconstitute their simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society" (p.48).

Transnational activities, Portes (1999) maintained, refer to regularly occurring conditions spanning state boundaries marked by the actors' genuine allegiance to fulfilling them. Performed by authoritative actors such as those from the national government and multinational companies and "more modest individuals, such as immigrants and their home country kin and relations" (Portes, 1999, p. 464), transnational activities are further identified.

Distinguished as *transnationalism from above* and *transnationalism from below*, respectively, Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt's (1999) mapping of transnational activities include not only the normative approach to migration that is purely economic, but also those that have political, cultural, and religious dimensions.

> *The ready availability of air transport, long-distance telephone, facsimile communication, and electronic mail provides the technological basis for the emergence of transnationalism on a mass scale. While these technical innovations have enabled governments and major corporations to accelerate the process of transnationalism from above, their potential has not been lost on ordinary people who have availed themselves of the same facilities to implement their own brand of long-distance enterprises (p. 223).*

Levitt and Nyberg–Sørensen (2004) talked about transnationalism as one that started in the early 1990s. They hold that early scholars on said theory, presented migrants as those who have left or come back, saw it as one that involves and advances the nation-state's interest. Applying the view of Schiller et al. (1995), Levitt and Nyberg–Sørensen (2004) maintained that the wrong notion about transnationalism, taking it from the point of view of just either an emigrant or an immigrant, should be corrected. Levitt and Nyberg–Sørensen held that migrants' lives and experiences should be viewed instead as those that are connected, thereby allowing people to see the different layers of migrants' connections and engagements involving two or more worlds, that is, their country of origin and their country of settlement.

Vertovec (2009) defined *transnationalism* as a "social transformation spanning borders" (p.4). In the same article, Vertovec posited that transformation, "a common theme in the study of globalization" (p.22), can be distinguished from *change* that only occurs in a single milieu or spectrum. "Stated more strongly, change that occurs only at the micro-level of people or only at the macro-level of collectivities, rather than at both levels, is likely to be a momentary fad than an enduring transformation" (Rosenau, 1997, as cited in Vertovec, 2009, p.22). In looking at modern research on transformations that occur in societies, Hannerz (1996, as noted in Vertovec, 2009) demonstrated that those that take shape in the transnational context influence societies at national, local, and personal levels. Vertovec commended Held et al.'s (1999) *Global Transformations* for advocating the "transformationalist" approach to changes that heightened interconnectedness via globalization has brought about. Vertovec (2009) posed a warning, though, on what cannot be considered *transformative* within the migrant transnationalism context. While an intensified myriad of cross–border activities can be observed as key players in the transnational field—such as increased number of networks, the immense volume of remote movements, and communication in faster speed—Vertovec cautioned that they do not exactly or always result in universal or enduring societal changes that impact structures, and therefore, cannot be considered transformations. Vertovec (2009) admonished that

> *Transnationalism describes a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations, and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common–however virtual–arena of activity (p. 3).*

Findings and discussion

Mobility from the Philippines to Thailand: Push-pull factors

One significant point that explains Filipino educators' increasing presence in Thai classrooms relates to what attracts them to do migrant work in the country. This issue is crucial because it provides one to have a better and more informed insight into the nature of Filipino migration in the Southeast Asia (SEA) region, particularly Thailand, amidst the overseas Filipino workers' (OFWs) heavy migratory flow to top destinations such as the Middle East, Italy, Hong Kong, and Singapore, among others (Carlos, 2002; Orbeta & Abrigo, 2011).

Informants of this study revealed several reasons why Thailand is slowly gaining popularity among Filipino migrant workers. The leading explanation the informants provided, which they claim is true to them and even among the majority of their Filipino peers, is their desire to help their families financially.

> *You see… you need to work hard for the family. Well, I'm always motivated when it comes to family. I guess all Filipinos think that way. We all work hard for the family. If you're single, things would have been ok even if you've got none. But if you're a family person… everything… even down to smallest things… you'd be motivated (Jessie, 16 August 2015).*

Jeck, who first came to Thailand in her mid-twenties, shared the same reason, citing this cause as one of her main motivations for deciding to do overseas work.

> *It was worth it. I was sending money to my family… and now we're building a house. Let's say that now I'm earning thirty thousand baht [THB]. Ten thousand baht [THB] of that goes to my family monthly, and then the rest is for me (Jeck, 7 August 2018).*

Although single, just like Isabel, Nica, and other informants, Jeck decided to leave her homeland to earn more money to support herself and her parents and siblings back home. The informants' consistent rhetoric about taking up overseas work for their family echoes views that Guevarra (2010), Ileto (1979), and Rafael (1988) expressed. For the informants, being away from the family is a form of sacrifice, but needs to be done.

Another reason is the profitability that the Filipino teachers enjoy due to Thailand's much lower cost of living than that of the Philippines. Among those interviewed, the majority agreed to this point. Many cited that while the salary they received in their current employment was similar to if not the same as the salary they used to receive back home, the lower cost of living in Thailand made their work in the country worthwhile.

> *Here in Thailand, there are a lot of buy one–take one promos. You always have items sold at 50% off. Because you see… in the Philippines, the cost of infant formula is very expensive. It really matters a lot. Whatever you save from buying formula milk here…you can still use it to buy other stuff. Food is cheap here… fruit, milk…. It seems*

> *like you can always afford to buy them even if you don't have much money. Oh my god, Ate [older sister in Filipino]… when my husband was still working abroad, money ran out fast. If you're living inside a village… the tricycle fare alone was expensive. That's already a big thing for us. Let's say you want to buy shrimp, your 90 pesos [PHP] would only be enough for ¼ kilo of it. Even galunggong [a kind of fish considered one of the cheapest in Philippine wet markets] is expensive…. (Leah, August 28 2015).*

Leah, whose entire family now lives with her in Thailand, shared her experience, recalling how she tried to manage when they were still living in the Philippines.

> *Life here is a lot easier…plus, if you compare the cost of living here and in the Philippines, you'd enjoy staying here. Although the salary seems a bit higher in the Philippines, but because the cost of living here is much lower, you get to enjoy life here more. Also, you know, we need to send money back home (Joy, 16 August 2015).*

Just like Leah, Joy was not alone in her sentiments. Almost all of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) members I encountered, single or married, echoed the same belief. However, I observed that their responses citing the economic advantage of being a migrant worker in Thailand always had to do with their either *want* (e.g., personal commitment) or *need* (e.g., familial responsibility) to send remittances back home for their loved ones to help defray family expenses. It is not difficult to see that the informants viewed their migrant work not only as a means to alleviate their monetary situations, but also to financially augment distant family members' living conditions (See also Constable, 2007).

It is essential to discuss the role taxes play in migrant workers' take-home pay and gross earnings, and savings at the end of each month. Comparatively speaking, the Filipino teachers' taxes in Thailand are less stringent than those shouldered by their counterparts in the Philippines. The two types of taxes that the Filipino teachers find consequential, especially when imposed in the Philippine context, are the income tax (e.g., tax on a person's income, emoluments, profits arising from property, the practice of a profession, the conduct of a trade or business, or on the pertinent items of gross income) and the value-added tax (VAT) (e.g., general consumption tax equivalent to 12% of the sales price of an item or service).

In both the Philippines and Thailand, income taxes are levied according to salary brackets. The difference is that income taxes in the Philippines are higher than those imposed in Thailand, that is, if ever one is taxed at all in the Thai setting. Whereas annual personal earnings from THB0 to THB150,000 (US$0 to US$4,784) (Foreign Exchange Rates, 2020) are exempted in Thailand (Personal income tax, n.d.), personal monthly income within the lowest category from PHP0 to PHP10,000 (US$0 to US$210) (Foreign Exchange Rates, 2020) in the Philippines is immediately taxed at 5% (The Philippines, n.d.). For example, if a Filipino teacher in Thailand who is earning a monthly entry rate of THB17,000 (US$542) (Foreign Exchange Rates, 2020) is taxed, his deduction would only be 5%. If the same earning is taxed in the Philippines, following the Philippine salary brackets, such an earning would be taxed at 10%. My informants cited that although said tax gap may seem minimal, it is, in fact, already considerable enough to ultimately make an economic difference when budgeting for consumer items.

In reality, however, my informants confirmed that many did not get taxed on their personal income even if their monthly earnings were technically taxable based on the salary brackets. While they could not offer any verifiable explanation for such an "exemption," many speculated that it could be because doing so would, in return, require their employers to enroll them into the Thai Social Security Fund, a portion of which needed to be borne by the employers. However, from what I observed, this issue seemed to be of no concern to a good number of the respondents, as they valued the actual earnings they got at the end of each month more than the promise of some benefits to being enjoyed in the distant future.

Other than the issue of income taxes, another point regarding push-pull factors that the Filipino teachers found significant is the advantage that the Thai VAT has over the Philippine VAT. Value-added taxes (VATs) are defined under the Philippine law as "a form of sales tax… on consumption levied on the sale, barter, exchange or lease of goods or properties and services in the Philippines, and on the importation of goods into the Philippines" (Value added tax–a, n.d.). In the Thai context, "VAT has been implemented in Thailand since 1992, replacing Business Tax (BT). VAT is an indirect tax imposed on the value-added of each stage of production and distribution" (Value added tax–b, n.d.). The Philippine VAT rate is currently 12% on the sale of goods, services, and use or sale of properties, whereas the current Thai VAT rate is only 7% to 10%, with some exemptions (Value added tax–a, n.d.; Value added tax–b, n.d.). This tax requirement explains why this study's informants often cited Thailand's low cost of living as one of the primary factors motivating them to work in the country despite the small, or sometimes almost zero–differential wage gap they received in the two countries. For Filipino teachers like Leah, Joy, and Nica, Thailand's lower cost of living was a decisive pull factor, creating influence over them and advancing their mobility into Thailand. Contrary to what Verwiebe et al. (2010) said about wage gaps and how European migrant workers viewed them, wage gaps in the Thai working context among the Filipino teachers play little or no significance in their decision to work in the Kingdom. This standpoint is mainly because the wage gap between the teachers' salaries received in the Philippines and in Thailand was, in fact, negligible.

Another pull factor commonly cited by my informants had to do with workload differences in the Philippines and Thailand.

> *I must admit there is greater satisfaction when teaching in the Philippines, but the workload here is a lot lighter than the teaching workload in the Philippines. I, for example, have to teach for only 12 hours. In the Philippines, I had to teach for 40 hours per week. So, I can say that work here is a lot easier, lighter... And because I spend fewer work hours here, I'm not exhausted, and I also can afford to take on extra jobs. In the university where I teach, I only have to handle a maximum of 12 units… of course, it means that I also have to do research, but I don't find it difficult to do. You see, in the Philippines, even if you have a part-time job, like what I usually do… since I need to use the Internet for my writing, the pace is slow…Internet in the Philippines is too slow… it affected my part-time writing job. All these I consider when comparing my job back home and my work here now (Nica, 14 August 2018).*

Nica's sentiment about reaping more satisfaction from teaching in the Philippines did not go unnoticed by other informants. However, with many of them, the advantage of leaving work

back home in favor of a better financial situation in Thailand due to the reasons cited above was more substantial than personal satisfaction from one's professional career.

Being one of the most considerable labor-sending countries globally, the Philippines has made the Filipinos no stranger to other destinations. The ten leading destinations for OFWs are primarily economically advanced countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Italy, and the United Kingdom, and the like. These destinations do not merely welcome temporary migrant workers; they also provide Filipinos a chance to move permanently. This raises one relevant question about why many Filipinos choose to work in Thailand instead, which does not offer the same opportunities as the abovementioned destinations. Yza's experience provides one answer.

> *My husband and I once tried our luck moving to Canada. We thought it's a nice place to raise our family. It's a first-world country that offers a lot of other opportunities a young couple like us would have wanted. But you see, moving there also requires a big investment on our part. After we completed one set of documents, for example, came another one, another one, and another one. Each time we would have to file a document, we needed to pay. The immigration process was just expensive. On top of the document processing fees, we were also told to prepare a big amount of show money… you know… we needed to have big savings in the bank to show to the immigration officials that we would not be dependents on the Canadian government when we get there. In the end, we gave up. The entire process asked us to put up such a big capital for something whose gains we were yet to know… (Yza, 8 September 2015).*

Yza's account demonstrated one thing that directly connects to a pull factor for Filipino teachers in Thailand. It also substantiates Nica's narrative on the same issue, a sentiment that reflects a commonly heard story among OFWs back in the Philippines who end up selling their properties to allow them to afford the capital needed to migrate.

> *We were told to apply to Canada before, but, my…. the processing fee is too high for us, whereas here, it's simple. Just fly here, perhaps bring with you US$1,000 to get you started… it's small. It's not difficult to raise that fund. But if you go to the US or Canada, you need to raise a big amount. Then you'll end up selling your properties just to afford the fees (Nica, 14 August 2018).*

When asked about the thought of working in other destinations, Claudine responded similarly to Nica and Yza.

> *Deciding on where to go involves many factors based on the requirements by specific destinations…the cost of moving… I know somebody who took a long time and a big amount of money to be able to move to Australia. I'm also thinking of moving to New Zealand, which is very different, say, compared to Thailand. A friend encouraged me to come to teach in NZ since there are places there that need teachers. However, there are tons of checks and balances that require processing that is just too expensive, unlike here. I'm working on my documents so I can send them to an NZ qualifications agency, and that itself is worth eighty thousand baht [THB]. And that is just for assessment. I spoke to a friend the other day. She's a nurse by*

> *profession, but she and her husband are teaching English for nurses here. Now, as a family, they've been working on moving to Canada, but it's too expensive. They're also studying French in case they move there. They're waiting, but, really, their money all goes to all those documents and fees that are just too expensive (Jeck, 7 August 2018).*

All three accounts above demonstrate another factor that drives Filipino teachers to migrate to Thailand, and not necessarily so to other more economically advanced countries. People's experiences illustrate that migration destinations are also correlated to selectivity in terms of the financial capital migrants either have or are willing to raise to be able to move.

Apart from the lower cost of living in Thailand, other micro-level push and pull factors cited by this study's informants were the following: low crime rate, closer proximity to family compared to other usual destinations, cheaper cost of airline tickets when going home, laid-back day-to-day work activities, and lax employment requirements.

Other than the micro-level push and pull factors, the macro-level reasons are also considered part of the driving force that makes Thailand an attractive work destination among the Filipino teachers. For one, having achieved a balance between emigration and migration, the Kingdom has successfully transitioned to becoming a labor-importing country (Paitoonpong et al., 2012). Not only is it importing low-skilled labor force from its neighboring countries like Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, but it has also already been importing a considerable population of its teaching workforce from other English-speaking countries from both Asia and the West. Without a doubt, Prime Minister Prayut's announcement during his 2015 state visit to the Philippines, stating plans to hire 4,000 Filipino teachers to teach in Thailand, did not escape the Filipino public (Thailand needs, 31 August 2015). Given Thailand's increased demand for foreign teachers in both the private and public schools, the Filipino teachers' surge into the country was expected.

During Benigno Aquino III's presidency from June 2010 to June 2016, the Philippines saw an economic growth that allowed it to pull ahead of Thailand (Chandran & Chen, 30 January 2015). Thailand, on the other hand, considered to be Southeast Asia's second-largest economy (Economy, 2016), had managed to maintain a relatively more robust economy during the previous years (Philippines vs. Thailand, n.d.), during which its status as an emerging destination for the Filipino teachers within the region was recognized. This macro-level factor is generally closely tied to the Philippine government's inability to provide an adequate volume of employment for Filipino workers. In fact, despite the many claims during the past few years that the Aquino administration had successfully separated the country from the "sick man of Asia" stigma, reports showed that the economic growth the previous administration asserted had not trickled down to the Filipino people's personal- and household-level needs (See also Philippines and Thailand compared, n.d.). Even in Rodrigo Duterte's current administration that has expressed the same goal of bringing back Filipino overseas workers home, said objective has not yet been met. "However, while the goal of bringing OFWs home one day has been expressed by all presidents, it has largely been unrealistic" (Asis, 12 July 2017, para. 40.)

Unpacking the Filipino educators' identity

Besides seeing the Filipino teachers form part of the everyday sight in many Thai classrooms, very little has been acknowledged about these teachers in formal academic discourse. This section sheds more light on several questions about the Filipino teachers who were contacted, but not limited, to the following: Who are the Filipino educators? What is their background? Are they teachers by profession? What is the migratory route they take? How do they deal with Thailand's migration requirements? Is Thailand one of their leading work destinations?

In an attempt to shed more light on who the Filipino educators are, I share below some of my informants' brief profiles, demonstrating their basic demographic features and their corresponding narratives. Their stories provide a window on many different issues specific to their migrant worker experience, such as why they decided to work in Thailand, how they engaged in the teaching profession, and their everyday encounters, and so forth.

Table 1: A summary of the basic demographic features of selected interviewees

Name/ Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Educational Background	Year Level Taught	# Years in Thailand
1. Jessie	Female	30	Married (1 child)	BSEd	Kindergarten *(Anuban)*	7
2. Joy	Female	32	Separated (1 child)	BS Business Ed	Kindergarten *(Anuban)*	4
3. Peter	Male	32	Married (No child)	AB Social Science	High School *(Mattayom)*	8
4. Leah	Female	33	Married (2 children)	BEE Ed	Elementary *(Prathom)*	10
5. Mario	Male	35	Married (1 child)	M.Ed TESL	Elementary *(Prathom)*	11
6. Andrew	Male	35	Single	MA Educational Management	University *(Mahawittayalai)*	13
7. Jeck	Female	35	Single	BEEd	Elementary *(Prathom)*	6
8. Juan	Male	40	Married (2 children)	AB Religious Studies	Elementary *(Prathom)*	12
9. Lena	Female	42	Married (1 child)	BS Computer Science	Elementary *(Prathom)*	2
10. Nica	Female	42	Married (3 children)	MA Women's Studies	University *(Mahawittayalai)*	6
11. Harry	Male	42	Single	BEEd	High School *(Mattayom)*	16
12. Yza	Female	44	Married (3 children)	MA ELLT	Elementary *(Prathom)*	10

13. Maria	Female	46	Single	BEEd	High School *(Mattayom)*	2
14. Ptr. Eman	Male	52	Married (5 children)	Ph.D. Missiology	High School *(Mattayom)*	13
15. Ptr. Ron	Male	53	Married (1 child)	AB Theology	High School *(Mattayom)*	6

Note: *Obtained via the participant information sheet given during the in-depth interviews*

Table 1 above reveals significant information concerning the informants' basic demographic profiles, and the implications of said features on the narratives the informants shared. Although they do not necessarily represent the entire Filipino teaching population in the Kingdom, data about these Filipino teachers provide pivotal material central to knowing and understanding what it means to be a Filipino teacher in a host country like Thailand.

A look at the gender composition of my selected interviewees in Table 1 shows that eight (53%) were female, and seven (47%) were male. The data revealed that the percentage of Filipino female teachers holding Thai 5–year teaching licenses and 2–year provisional permits from 2008–2014 were 55.20%, whereas 44.80% of the male teachers held such licenses or permits.

It was also learned that in terms of age, seven (47%) of the teachers were in their early to mid-30s, and another six (40%) were in their early to mid-40s. The remaining two (13%) were male teachers who were both in their early 50s at the time of the interview. Of the 15 selected interviewees, ten (67%) were family persons, one (7%) was separated, and four (26%) were single. Among the ten teachers considered family persons, only one did not have any children, whereas the rest had children who were living with them in the host country.

In terms of educational background, nine (60%) held education or education-related degrees, while the other six (40%) finished non-education degrees. At the time of the interview, five had graduate-level degrees. Two (13.5%) teachers taught at the kindergarten level, *anuban* in Thai, six (40%) taught at the elementary level, *prathom* in Thai, five (33%) at the high school level, *mattayom* in Thai, and the remaining two (13.5%) taught in the university level. However, the experience they shared was about their previous teaching time in Thailand's primary education sector. All those who were teaching at the kindergarten level were female teachers, and the majority of those teaching at the high school level were male teachers. The rest, mostly female, were teaching at the elementary level.

Except for the three (20%) interviewees who had only been in Thailand for two and four years, respectively, the remaining 80% had been living in Thailand for over half a decade, and some more. At the time of the interview, the longest period of time in the Kingdom among my informants involved one (7%) interviewee who had stayed in Thailand for 16 years, followed by two others (13.5%) who had been in the country for 13 years. The average number of years the 15 selected informants had stayed in the country was 8.8 years, whereas the newest ones (three interviewees) had only been in the country for two years at the time of the interview.

Instrumental approach to faith or religion and transnationalism

Narratives cited in this study both directly and indirectly point to the act of benevolence that Catholicism instills in every Filipino back home. Church sermons regularly cite different forms of hardship that one must endure for the sake of one's family and loved ones, a notion that has come to regulate people's thoughts and behavior towards familial needs. In this study, various informants repeatedly connected their migrant work to their need or desire to help their families and loved ones, expressed materially through the cash remittances they regularly sent back home or through other means that their migrant work had allowed them. Their cash remittances were used not only to help defray their families' day–to–day expenses but also to pay for other expenditures, such as a family member's education. Articulating the discourse of endurance, a good number of the informants of this study cited their migrant work as a form of sacrifice that they needed to do "for the family."

Through a combination of ethnographic observations, interviews, and socialization with other Filipino teachers, the author found that members of the Filipino teaching community in Thailand do not necessarily go through a solitary migration path leading to their employment. While a considerable number of teachers are hired either as walk-in applicants or as referrals through their personal and professional networks, others are able to secure teaching jobs via their religious memberships or affiliation. For instance, religious groups that hold a strong foothold in the Philippines and have partner organizations and churches in Thailand, such as *Iglesia ni Cristo,* Seventh Day Adventist, and *Dating Daan*, among others, help in facilitating their members' employment application, or, at the very least, help provide relevant networks or support systems.

Constable (2007) mentioned how migrant workers use instrumental religion to advance their agenda and help them cope with challenging situations. In said situations, religion is used instrumentally to allow the Filipino overseas workers to take an approach in dealing with a migrant labor-related issue.

As pointed out by Peterson, Vasquez, and Williams (2001), "… religion is changing but not disappearing" (p.1). Their argument also posited how people have turned to religion for help. Leah, a devout member of a Philippine-based church that has a chapter, *lokál* in Filipino, in Thailand, and whose membership totals 5,545 congregations and missions ("About," n.d., para.3), attested to this fact.

> *We help through teachers' referrals. For example, if my school has vacancy, I will automatically ask my jobless family members and church mates, especially those who have newly arrived in Thailand. Of course, our work will always be for our family. Everything that we study in our church has a Biblical basis, whether it [act of helping] is for our family members or friends. And one of the commandments of God is to help out those who are in need. So even if our church leaders do not expressly tell us to do it… since that is what we are exposed to during our Bible lessons in the church, then we take the initiative. What we do here is replicated in any country where you find our church because our activities are centralized (Leah, personal communication, 7 June 2016).*

The above narrative demonstrates how Peterson, Vasquez, and Williams (2001) saw religion through which it "has also provided additional resources that help people manage severe crises … in the family [financial] stability, in neighborhood well-being, and in national civic life. In this context, churches have become critical resource centers. Churches function as flexible networks of mutual aid, where poor people not only receive charity, but pool their resources and draw from institutional supports. These range from physical space to job referrals…" (p.1).

The church and its expanding auxiliary role in migration

Fresnoza-Flot's (2010) treatment of Lefebvre's concept can be further understood by examining Mario's church-related experience. At the time of the interview, Mario had had a decade-long stay in the country already, giving him enough exposure to concerns a church-going foreigner like him may experience. Mario was a 35-year old Filipino teacher who had been actively involved, along with his wife and child, in church activities, among other social and civic engagements. Every Sunday, they would all go to a Catholic church, located somewhere in Khon Kaen, a northeastern province of Thailand, to assist with church activities. Mario shared that although the Catholic church they went to primarily served as a spiritual refuge for them, it also played roles that went beyond the religious realm, exceeding the ecclesiastical intention of the church itself.

Other than serving as a place of worship, his church indirectly performed other roles that can be said to be in keeping with Lefebvre's (1991) tenet; that is, his church allowed said ecclesial community to be a source of "material things and information" (p.77) that, at times, may not exactly carry a pure ecclesial relevance. Mario said that his church maintained a Facebook group through which churchgoers would receive information and messages. Facilitated by the same Facebook group, members of the same church did not just interact; they exchanged messages and information on matters concerning their faith practice. They also learned about other socio-secular matters, such as teaching job opportunities through social media platforms. Furthermore, Mario spoke about how his church had inadvertently become a host of various events, socially linking people on varying occasions.

> *In the Catholic church that we go to, there is this school right next to it... This school is being run by the same parish… and that if the school needs some teachers, the priests that run the school simply inform the parish priest in our church. Then this parish priest informs the churchgoers through our Facebook group about teaching job openings. Whoever needs work… our Facebook group has members of mixed nationalities…so yes… people not only get information about church stuff and job opportunities. They also obtain information about employment opportunities, indirectly, through the church (Mario, personal communication, 14 September 2017).*

During the early part of her migrant work in the country, Nica first learned about a Catholic church in Phitsanulok in the northern part of Thailand. Like Mario, she spoke as well of how the ecclesial community eventually became a site for interactions and other forms of social exchanges among the Filipino teachers, who eventually took part in transforming this place they often frequented. One marked spatial configuration of the religious site and attached faith-based activity the Filipino teachers made was when the church accommodated their schedules resulting in a church service, *misa* in Filipino, held mainly for the said migrant group.

> *The situation there in Phitsanulok is that the Filipino teachers, because many of them have to do tutorials, they would be available to go to church at seven in the evening. So, yes, they sort of influence decisions regarding the time of the mass. Their schedules were accommodated. They have a big population of Filipino teachers there. At that time, there were about 30 teachers. There were also others who were not teaching, but they were close. So the church became an extension of the family…. For example, "Andrew," he's been there for a long time already. It's like… church time is also the time when the Filipinos see each other. Many of them were relatives as well (Nica, 16 September 2017).*

In Fresnoza-Flot's (2010) study, some of her informants stayed clear of church activities to avoid gossip. Similarly, Nica decided against being a regular churchgoer of that particular Catholic church, despite her seeming familiarity with it and the people who went there, for this reason:

> *In that Catholic church, you see… many were Filipinos. We purposely did not go there because there were many gossipers (Nica, personal communication, 16 September 2017).*

As such, although Nica expressed her thoughts about the importance of going to church, if only for spiritual nourishment, she, together with her husband, demonstrated their understanding of how their participation, or non-participation, within the church context would play a role in the structuration of the migrant community of which they were a part.

Leah's, Mario's, and Nica's experiences all thus fulfill Fresnoza-Flot's (2010) take on Lefebvre's idea that church activities should not be taken in isolation because they connect to other "components in a given society" (p.346). This highlights another aspect of Filipino teachers' life as migrant workers. Other than economic reasons as the primary catalyst for their work abroad, they, too, are community members whose pre-occupations are not limited within their workplaces' confines.

> *For example, right after typhoon Yolanda hit the Philippines in 2013, we held a fundraising activity. The church participated by donating some items coursed through the Filipino community. The Filipino community here in [name of the province] is composed of three big groups…one Catholics, the other born-again, and then the third, those who don't go to church at all. In the Catholic church that we are members of, we have this Feast of St. Gerard. We invite all Filipinos to join the feast…not just to go to church but also to join us during lunchtime… it's like a fiesta. There are food booths… the church holds a mass in English for the non-Thais. It does help foster relationships within the community. In fact, it was through such activities that the Association of Filipinos in Thailand (AFT) in [name of the province] all started. That's how AFT in this province was born. No… it's not necessarily church-related activities that we hold all the time. Through AFT, we have widened our activities to those that are not exclusive to one religion alone…. For example,... the Catholic group had a holy rosary cenacle attended by people of the same faith. When I became the president, I suggested an inter-faith Bible sharing… It went ok. We do it bi-monthly. Different people facilitate each meeting. Especially the sisters…the nuns…they go to the fiesta, but since then, they've been going as*

> *well to other non-secular activities like teacher trainings (Mario, 14 September 2017).*

Yoo (2000) cited how narratives such as the abovementioned demonstrate how churches can influence migrant workers' activities as they fulfill an additional role in facilitating social networks and furnishing the migrant workers with relevant business information and work opportunities.

In the Filipino teachers' case, this experience involved the expanding auxiliary role of religion, as they not only found it as a host of church activities that people traditionally held. Rather, in the case of the Filipino teachers in Thailand, religion had gone through transformations that, despite retaining its typical supportive role, are now inclusive of changing normativities. Church functions in the country−of−origin primarily revolve around religious activities meant to nurture and sustain the church parishioners' spiritual needs and other parish-based community outreach programs. Whereas, church functions in the receiving−country context such as those that the informants of this study had experienced are unique to a church that caters to migrant workers' needs. In this case, religion becomes closely intertwined with migration as it is viewed to open new possibilities that result in being embodied in the migrant workers' host-country milieu.

Transnational religion and its regulatory functions

As Leah expressed, her religious organization, which had established a physical church in Bangkok, does more than help its members in terms of spiritual needs. While the Bible sessions that they regularly attended helped them in their faith-based formations, Leah maintained that their ecclesiastical activities had created far-reaching effects among themselves and others, most especially those who shared the same faith regardless of locality. In effect, it can be claimed that membership alone helps one to advance their material conditions as the church acts as a crucial facilitating agent through which the members can negotiate "the changing challenges posed by economic pressures well beyond state control" (Peterson, Vasquez, & Williams, 2001, p.10). Given the same condition, the testimony provided by Leah helps depict religion as the origin of "collective representations' foundational categories that order our perceptions, structure our actions upon the world, and cement social relations" (Durkheim, 1995, as cited in Vasquez and Marquardt, 2003, p. 5).

In the case of Leah and her church mates, however, Durkheim's tenet is seen in the reciprocity between her church and its followers. Leah and all other church followers subscribed to the far-reaching influence their religion had on them, therefore as church members, it can be said that they have recognized a two-way relationship. That is, while the people benefit from their church membership in various ways, both material and intangible, their church, consequently, also gains increased devotion from its members.

The practice observed by members of *Iglesia ni Cristo* (INC), a Philippine-founded church that has managed to establish *lokál* or 'chapters' in other countries, including Thailand, serves as one example. As mentioned earlier, this is the same church where Leah, together with her nuclear and extended family members, were members. Leah, whose Thailand-based family members consisted of her husband, children, an older sister, brother-in-law, and nieces, all dutifully attended the *pagsamba* (church services), one service on a weekday and another one on Sunday.

Leah was not just a regular church attendee but also one who served as a *kalihim* (secretary) in their *lokál* situated in Bangkok. In her many years of being a member of this church, Leah attested to how her church had played a major role in its members' lives, individually, and the entire congregation's existence, collectively.

> *For us, once we learn that the person we are speaking to is also a church member, even if that person is a total stranger to us, then it becomes automatic that we seem to understand each other already… and that we have that instant feeling that we are one family. So the relationship that we have with other members is on a different level compared to our relationship with others who are not from our church (Leah, personal communication, 7 June 2016).*

Leah stated that the kind of relationship she was referring to meant that despite being strangers to one another, members of her church would spontaneously and unquestioningly accommodate each other's needs, including giving information on job opportunities or, whenever possible, recommending a fellow member to prospective employers, among other things.

Besides cultivating the culture of extending personal assistance from one member to other fellow church members, INC has also been observed for its power to regulate its members' viewpoints and behavior, long known as a church that has a powerful influence in its own members' decision-making over a belief or course of action in some areas it has predefined. It is no secret that INC also holds a strong political influence over its members, including their decision when voting for a political candidate during Philippine elections (Jimeno, 23 July 2015).

> *INC leadership was expected to announce its anointed candidates at their worship service on Wednesday night, May 4, along with the usual stern reminder to stick to these choices when they cast their vote on Monday, May 9 (INC endorses Duterte, Marcos, 5 May 2016, para.3).*

Various news reports on INC's endorsement during the latest Philippine national elections in 2016 state that, given the church's reputation for bloc voting, it supported Rodrigo Duterte and Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., who ran for presidential and vice-presidential seats, respectively (See INC endorses Duterte, Marcos, 5 May 2016; Nicolas, 5 May 2016; Ramirez, 6 May 2016). Through the *katiwalas*, also known as "those assigned to distribute sample ballots to Iglesia members," INC members were said to be notified about the church's sample ballot endorsing specific candidates (INC endorses Duterte, Marcos, 5 May 2016, para. 4). Migrant worker members of INC in Thailand were no exception. My ethnographic observations, taking note of INC members' expression of political views and online behavior, support what the reports stated.

As of late, Leah continued to post via her social media account her views about, at times in defense of, the candidates her church had earlier endorsed. Leah serves as one example of a Filipino migrant worker in the education sector who has embraced her religion's role as a source of communal rendition that holds authority over her ability to represent and understand information, construct her undertakings develop her relations within the society she resides.

One other example is Maria's experience in the school she was teaching at the interview time. Although not a member of the same church as her co-teachers, Maria saw the role a church plays in her Filipino colleagues' lives.

> *My co-teachers were members of the Seventh-day Adventist church. One thing I noticed among members of this church is that they help each other in many ways. For example, they offer accommodation to their fellow church members if needed… and then if they have a church mate who does not have work, they help the person look for a job… They'll back you up…fellow Adventists help each other. Sometimes I even joke with them…Hmmm ... I think I'd want to convert and join your church instead (laughs). But it seems that this kind of help…. they sort of extend it only to their church mates. You see, in the workplace, let's say they're colleagues… one church member will literally reserve a space for a fellow church member. They do help others, too, when other have problems…like myself, but the kind of help they give a non-church member is a lot "less" than what they'll give to somebody who goes to their church. They have a church here in the province where I work. That's where they gather to worship every Saturday. It is no wonder why there are many teachers here in this area who are from that church (Maria, personal communication, 23 September 2017).*

The Filipino informants' accounts above show Durkheim's argument (1995, as cited in Vasquez & Marquardt, 2003), how churches are able to regulate their member's views and behavior towards fellow members, and even others, facilitating the manner through which they enact their dealings. The various experiences cited above substantiate claims on how religion allows itself to be a source of communal evocation that has a bearing on how we systematize our faculty of understanding, how we deal with people and circumstances, and how we secure (or even loosen) relationships.

Conclusion

It is important to note that the shifts seen in the respondents' ways of living are intertwined with forces that are situated not strictly within the migratory teaching contexts but also within the religious locale. The abovementioned situations illustrate that in the greater sphere of things, Thailand's current teaching workforce is shaped not only by forces located within the interiority of said occupational category but also by external forces that were, in the respondents' case, religion and transnationalism. This overall finding ultimately demonstrates that other than the typically thought of factors propelling Filipino teachers' migration into Thailand, as discussed in some bodies of literature, the changing face of, and practices in religion, serves as one of the forces that alter migration routes and experiences. Ultimately, such shifting tendencies inevitably result in migrant workers' changing features, their religion and relevant activities, and the migrant and transnational space within which they move about.

The results of this study indicate several implications for consideration. First, this study maintains that an analysis of the Filipino migrant workers' participation in the Thai labor market and the host-country religious landscape helps policymakers and various stakeholders understand the

shifting migration patterns in both areas. It is hoped that by providing stakeholders with new information in addition to the usual push-pull factors, they may further analyze how other non-traditional drivers of migration sustain the Philippines' continued participation in the global labor market.

Second, by examining the Filipino teachers' practical use of religion in securing employment while still in the country of origin, and when in the host-country, this study proposes that policymakers make use of the data when generating employment-related reports and analysis. This data provides potential OFWs and other stakeholders essential information when navigating their migratory route.

Third, by exploring the role of religion in the Filipino teachers' work in Thailand, this study hopes that policymakers utilize this advanced research, further studying the impression of the Filipino identity and practices in the host country's religious landscape.

Lastly, examining the role religion, via churches, plays in the Filipino migrants' lives should allow academic and religious scholars, church leaders, and other stakeholders to better understand how religion has become intertwined with migration and labor market activities participation.

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