

A SIMPLIFIED MAP OF THE FRENCH-PHILIPPINES: a bird's eye-worm's eye-view

by Maya Meyewski

An estimated 50 000 Filipinas and Filipinos work as migrant domestic workers in France. 30 000 are in Paris, the rest in the southern part of the Hexagon, including Monaco. Only 6000 are officially registered and documented.

If you take a good look at the Philippine community in Paris, through the years, you will see the shaping up of a *duplicata* of the country of origin. You find the same characteristics, the same problems (indiscipline, corruption and all...) and the same reasons for hope (faith, spirituality, caring attitude, the value of the family...).

You do understand that when we say migrant Filipinos and Filipinas in France, we are talking about migrant domestic workers, the majority (around 80%) of whom are women.

The map of the Philippines is drawn and delineated by all sorts of regional organizations: LUZVIMIN, VISAMIN, Ilocandia, Caviteño, Batangas, Hiligaynon, Pampango, Mindanao... and by religious leanings: majority Christians of all tendencies (Catholic – El Shadaïi, Couples for Christ, Mabuting Pastol, Marianne movements...; Protestant sects - Iglesia ni Kristo, Born again Christians, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses...), minority of Muslims and Indigenous peoples.

Take a look at the larger Philippine society in France and you recognize a familiar economic hierarchy: an infinitely small number of "*mayaman*" (either rich families from the Philippines with secondary residences in France or Filipinas married to rich French or other non-Filipinos, usually businessmen), a small "middle-class" (small entrepreneurs or Filipinas married to middle-class non-Filipinos) and a large majority of "*mahirap*" (domestic workers) which is still multiplying with new arrivals and second generation migrants, including the recently counted 20 births per week registered at the embassy.

The only difference is that unemployment is rarely a problem in this French-Philippines, where misery is manifest only among those who are dependent and handicapped due to physical ailment, drugs, alcoholism, etc.

Let us concentrate on the large population of these highly educated "*mahirap*", the migrant domestic workers.

Despite all the brouhaha about their being "*modern day heroes and heroines*", this population is obviously a source of embarrassment for the sophisticated Filipinos and Filipinas here and at home. In consequence, there is an uneasy coexistence between those who work as domestic workers and those who don't or don't have to (married to financially comfortable men).

The embarrassment of sophisticated society produces a "looking-glass" effect which is quite disastrous for these women's self-esteem. Despite the efforts at professionalizing domestic work in France, we still hear women talk about themselves in derogatory terms like *tsimay*, *maid*, *atsay*...

The general tendency is isolation. Isolation because the general majority is undocumented ("*Sans papiers*"), with feelings of being "illegal" and right-less in a France of laws. The recent tightening up of policies regarding migrants is manifest in the growing number of (from 1 to 5) deportations per month.

They tend to live in fear of the police and what they consider "unsafe" persons (which can include their own compatriots). They are scared of the French in general, not speaking the language properly, not knowing the culture which is so un-Filipino (and the fact that the French appear more rude than tender). They tend to be wary of those who, in their opinion, are not in the same category of undocumented workers.

Other factors contribute to their isolation: psychological reasons like depression, with varying degrees of severity (some are on anti-depressants), fear of “temptations”(women fearing men, especially non-Filipinos), feeling of shame (battered women, lesbian relationships...), problems linked with occult practises (mostly “*kulam*” and “*gayuma* ”)...

Social divisions (whether real or imaginary) create uneasiness among migrant workers. The first obvious resentment comes from the fact that there are those who are documented (“*may papel*”) and those who are undocumented (“*walang papel*”). “*Porque may papel, nagyayabang na!*” This is followed by the division between those married to “*Puti*” (especially “*Pranses*”) and those who aren’t.

There are other factors considered significant, as indications of “progress” and therefore as source of social division in the community: having one’s own studio or apartment instead of a service-room, owning a car, having a house of your own in France...

Somehow, members of this migrant community are beholden to persons with the allure of “*Taga-embassy*”, which does not necessarily mean being part of the Philippine Embassy staff. This includes UNESCO workers, academes and expat-workers who sometimes intermingle with them in certain activities (like Independence day celebrations) and are usually conducted to the front seats next to the Ambassador and the Parish Priest (So Filipino, isn’t it?)

It is interesting to note the existence or absence of Philippine values in the French-Philippines.

Colonial mentality is quite intact in this community, the way it is in the Philippines. Marriage with a “Whiteman” (“*Puti*”) is considered lucky (“*buenas!*”) and becomes a hidden ambition of many Filipinas, though often in contradiction with their deeper preference for Filipinos (I remember a wedding in London where the bride who was marrying an Englishman sighed out loud: “*Ay, papaano... mas gusto ko sana, Pilipino. Pero wala, eh!*”). This is parallel to the ambivalence in migration itself, the preference for the easy warmth and security of the Philippines while choosing the Western adventure and the attraction of money with all its advantages for family and self.

This is not to say that marriage with a “Whiteman” is necessarily a negative experience. There are probably as many Filipinas who are authentically happy in their marriage with “Whitemen” as there are unhappy ones. A lot of Filipinas complain of their male compatriots’ machismo; the Frenchmen, true to their Latin culture, are also known machos, but perhaps less spoiled and more useful home companions than their Philippine counterparts. “*Kaya lang, hindi nila naiintindihan ang kultura natin, lalo na ‘yong pagpapadala ng pera sa pamilya!*”

We can see the danger of a new colonization in migration (in the sense that Filipinas can feel obliged to reject their own identity as an inferior one, to take on an alien dominant culture). Domestic workers with lowered self-esteem look up to their rich employers (with varying degrees of intelligence and culture). Many waver in their Philippine identity. “*Bakit naman pinapakita pa yong mga Igorot sa TV at nakakahiya! Hiyang hiya na ako sa amo ko!*” It takes a lot of convincing before they can accept the possibility that they may be more educated and more intelligent than their rich employers.

With the recent policy of “*Intégration*”, there is an added danger of new colonization, since many Philippine workers interpret this as having to give up their culture of origin, to enter the French community. During a community meeting, a “leader” suggested that, in the light of “*Intégration*”, ... “*perhaps we should stop wearing our National costume at the Philippine Independence Day celebration...*”

Many women who marry Frenchmen feel that they owe their husbands an infinite debt of gratitude (*utang na loob*), not only serve them with customary care and devotion; they tend to orient their thinking in line with the husband’s, mostly to maintain peace in the household..., sometimes because they haven’t developed their own opinions. A Filipina married to an extreme rightist Frenchman is very unhappy but would never leave him because of *utang na loob*. “*Dahil sa kanya, ako ay nagkapapel.*” (How many are held hostage by this kind of reasoning?) Then, with the years, you start hearing her say: “*Tama din naman yong sinasabi niya! Ang mga foreigners kasi...*”

Linked with isolation and low self-esteem is the limited social and cultural life of migrant domestic workers. Many Filipinas are attracted to non-Filipinos with even lower self-esteem. Some find

satisfaction and their own idea of happiness in caring for (physically or psychologically) handicapped Frenchmen. “*Nakakaawa kasi!*” Since wife-batterers are usually men of low self-esteem, a few Filipinas become caring but battered wives or girlfriends.

Just like home, there is a double standard of comportment among migrant workers: one with the French, another with *Kababayan*. At work, Filipinas and Filipinos are exemplary in discipline and cleanliness. But in Philippine gatherings (programmes, parties, sports tournaments), they can be chaotic and messy, to the extent of getting banned from public gyms and cultural centers, temporarily or permanently.

Utang na loob, which women feel very strongly with their French husbands and employers, is a value that seems to suffer in the community itself, in the light of the new materialism in migration. Women are often heard complaining: “*Ako pa ang tumutulong, ako pa ang nagiging masama! Walang utang na loob!*”

Utang na loob is often sacrificed at the altar of pecuniary interest and the need for security.

At work, Filipinas are highly lauded and solicited because of their intelligence, their mastery of English, their honesty, cleanliness and competence. They are entrusted the care of heirs and heiresses to elite families. The rich in the 16th arrondissement who tend to be absentee parents appreciate the presence and assistance of Filipinas. Some of these latter practically rear these children to adolescence, like second mothers, a practice which also provokes emotional trauma in the hearts of Filipinas who get attached to their “wards” and inevitably lose them.

There is an illusion of power - holding the keys to an illustrious home - and belonging (to a family). “*Sinisilbihan ko naman sila ng maigi. Hindi ko na kinukwenta ang oras... Mabait kasi!*” Once more, *utang na loob*, coupled with *hiya*. “*Kaya lang, parang umaabuso rin!*” But, the craving for affection and feeling of security is still very strong.

What are the chances of these women getting out of isolation? A positive effect of the new policy of “*Intégration*” is the frenzy for French lessons. Suddenly, everyone wants to speak and read in the host language, not so much to facilitate communication with the French but more to add to their chances of obtaining papers or to assure the renewal of their permit to stay and work in France. But, as a side-effect, they open their senses to everything French. One student declared her joy at being “*able to buy French magazines*” and to understand, at last! what used to be meaningless sounds. Logically, this should motivate them to open up to the French culture and actively participate in society.

Besides the regional and religious entities in this French-Philippines, there are minor “tribes”, as they sometimes call themselves, that cannot be ignored. One of them is the gay minority, male and female. The latter group is less open to scrutiny and avoid exposure to media. But Filipino homosexuals are more open and imposing, proud to be part of the bigger French “tribe” of which the Paris Mayor himself is an open adherent.

There are the artists- painters, sculptors - who are part of this migrant domestic worker community, some graduates of Philippine art schools or naturally talented persons inspired by the artistic ambience in Paris. They are beginning to organize and exhibit their works in special venues, now and then as invited guests of community associations, to provide aesthetics to celebrations. Singers and musicians perform all over Paris. Some domestic workers supplement their earnings by singing in restaurants.

In case you’re itching to know if there are cases of prostitution among our women in this French-Philippines, the answer is happily: “No!”. While prostitution is a French institution which has been glorified in the Arts, Filipinas in France are not known to participate in the flesh market.

Some Filipinas arrive in France from the Middle East and refer to themselves as *takas*, having escaped from their employers, mostly for reasons of inhuman working conditions. They merit special attention, for a great majority feel that they are stigmatized instead of being supported by the Philippine Embassy. They often run away without their passports which are automatically confiscated upon arrival in the Middle East and feel unjustly penalized by the difficulty (and the high cost) of procuring a new passport. Many are penniless when they run away, are usually in a state of over fatigue from overwork, lack of sleep or trauma from abuse by their Middle-East employers. Filipinas in Paris have a kind of “antenna” to spot these victims in hotels, sidewalks, parks and gardens and help them escape (or “*takas*”), take care of their immediate survival and

find jobs for them. But, due to the strain of migration, many of these first friendships deteriorate and few develop lasting relationships.

As far as the economy is concerned, the French-Philippines reflects the rich underground economy of the mother country. On the surface we see Filipino and Filipina entrepreneurs engaged in running: a Philippine store, a forwarding agency (“*door-to-door*”), a travel agency, a service-firm for renovating, repainting apartments, taking care of installations

But the underground is replete with a multitude of cooks, hair-stylists, beauticians, dress-makers, masseuses, crafts vendors, money transferers, manghuhula, manggagamot, mangkukulam..., name it, we have it. You just need to know who knows who.

Some community members engage in wider fields of action which cuts across regional barriers. They are more social-service oriented, acting alone or in groups like trade unions (ex. *CFDT*), associations like “*Babaylan*”, which specializes in disseminating pertinent information for Filipinas as migrants, workers and women, “*Asosyong Sangguniang Pilipino*” which addresses labour issues, as well as European networks like “*RESPECT*”...

Deviance and criminality is not very rampant but exists in the French-Philippines, mostly in the male population involved in illegal trafficking of persons, murder, drug dealing, drug use, wife-battering, rape and child abuse, plus cases of lesser offence. But, French prisons have also housed some Filipinas. I met one who was in jail for illegal trafficking and claims that, in the same prison, she met Filipinas who were caught at the airport, in transit from Latin America, transporting drugs for the Philippines.

All sorts of problems linked with pecuniary interests plague the community: over-indebtedness, swindling and all forms of victimization of *kababayan*. Undocumented workers have less access to banks and are easy prey to thieves and robbers. French regulations do not stipulate a permit to stay as condition for opening a bank account. But, most banking institutions remain closed to undocumented migrants and refuse or discourage them.

Gay Paree is très sexy! But, in the French-Philippines, most Filipinas are “sex-less”. Married women (with husbands in the Philippines), avowed or un-avowed virgins... This remains one of the unexpressed strains on the very human nerves of our super-heroines. Due to isolation, fear of men and unequivocal devotion to family, the practise of sexual abstinence is very high in the Philippine community. To “protect” themselves, women frequent religious rites and encounters, keep to themselves (among women) or simply stay at home after work, intensifying isolation and solitude. Now and then, one hears of a heterosexual woman shacking up with a “tomboy”. Filipinas with their wavering sexuality do not seem to consider this a deviance. “I am not lesbian,” somebody told me, “but the men here are not good for me. My partner is caring and tender. I prefer her... .” A married woman living with a lesbian says: “It’s not like being with a man. I don’t feel unfaithful to my husband!”

Nevertheless, prolonged separation usually coupled with the Filipino husband’s infidelity has pushed some married Filipinas into the arms of Parisians of different ethnic origins (French, Sri-Lankan, Pakistani...).

Body and heart are neglected values, among migrant domestic workers. They keep chasing jobs and money, tend to neglect their bodies... as to the heart, it’s not to be taken seriously, not yet.

This is the phenomenon of postponed health and happiness. “*Saka na!*”

Normally, only registered workers have access to Social security. But, many undocumented migrants benefit from what is called “*Aide médicale d’Etat*” (State medical aid) which provides the same health services to low income groups, even migrants, with or without papers. But there are persistent rumours about its instability.

Those who do not benefit from this “aid” simply pay great sums of money to private clinics, doctors, dentists... Most suffer from chronic fatigue, many are nervous and depressed, suffer from skin irritations due to chemical products regularly handled in the job. More and more cases of cancer, more and more deaths are reported in the community.

The “*Saka na*” attitude applies to Happiness. Try to ask a Filipina if she’s happy in France and you will encounter the eternal problem of researchers in the Philippines. For, deep in the heart of every Filipina is an intimate chamber that guards the secret of her happiness and unhappiness. Not everyone has the right to a visit and certainly not always. So, the answer to your question will always depend on your relationship of trust with the person.

I distributed questionnaires to remitters in a bank; the replies were mostly positive.

“**OO**, dahil sa nakakapagtrabaho ako at nakakapagpadala ako ng sapat na pera para sa aking pamilya.”

“**Yes**. I have a good paying work and kind employer and they pay for all my medical bills.”

“**OO**, dahil sa dito ako nakakasurvive ng ikabubuhay para sa aking mga pamilya, at kahit papano nakakaipon paunti-unti. Mahirap man ang trabaho ay no choice. OK lang, masaya na rin ako.”

“**OO**, dahil sa pagpunta ko sa France nagkaroon ako ng pagkakataon na makatulong sa pangangailangan financially ng aking pamilya. Nagkaroon din ako ng chance na ma meet and mga ibat-ibang klase ng tao and learn some things from them.”

Happiness for these women are other persons’ happiness, that of their loved ones.

But, those with whom I have a trusting relationship had other answers.

“**No**, definitely no. Nganong anhi man ta mopuyo nga kalami man gyud sa ato! Dinhi puro stress! Kapoy, pastilang kapoya!”

Yes and No.

No, dahil sa dito, malungkot. Ang buhay ko ay trabaho, bahay, trabaho, bahay. Hindi katulad sa atin. May pamilya... at saka, akoy nag-aalala. Ang anak na gusto kong mailagay sa mabuti ay napapapunta sa masama!

Ngunit, maligaya din naman ako dito. Ewan ko lang kung bakit!”

“**Yes and No**, is my answer.

I am happy in France or Paris particularly-because it is where I have learned to be totally independent in all aspects of my life and I become mature.

“No, because I cannot practice true sense of freedom because I am undocumented. So I have to be conscious of all my actions and have to be thinking of going to safe places and dealing with safe people all the time.

Another difficulty I have encountered here is looking for a place to live in. It makes me unhappy knowing the fact that apartment or studio here is very expensive and is not easy to find one. Having a comfortable place to stay in is really hard.”

No, “I am not happy here because I am alone, away from my loved ones.”

No, “ I can't say I'm happy here. No yata because there's really no clear policy about the country's migrant workers; kahit may papel ka, parang walang assurance na ma re renew yon. Also, most Parisians are very rude. They are trying na ma adapt natin ang culture nila but how could I, We are not brought up like that although I'm willing to learn their language. And then there's the usual problem about intriga and tsismis among our kababayan. Minsan parang lumiliit ang mundo kasi pinipilit mong umiwas sa masama, sa ano mang gulo and in the process, nasa "shell" ka na pala. Sometimes that's what pains me more. »

With time, perspectives in this French-Philippines are evolving. In the beginning, persons are too deep into earning, to pay their debts, to send money home, to prove themselves to their families, willing to accept poor living and working conditions... they seem unable to think outside of this work, work context.

With the years, they begin to think differently. They are less uncomfortable with the French culture, begin to speak some French, begin to open up to the new environment; While continuing to work very hard, chasing the Euro, they begin to include themselves as beneficiaries of their earnings, no matter how small. Some begin to question the value of sending **all** their money home, begin to resent the constant and increasing demands of their beneficiaries, begin to think of themselves and their future....

But, the “*Saka na*” attitude still persists.

Who are responsible for these 50,000 migrant workers? Who do they run to in case of extreme need?

The Philippine Embassy in France, more accessible to Parisian Filipinas than to those in the South, has its hands full **and** not only with diplomacy **or** migrant questions. We **sometimes** hear of “*visiting*” Philippine officials **who** take up a good part of **the** time and energy **that** should be devoted to migrant workers.

There is an uneasy co-existence between the Community and this representative of the Philippine government in France with its reduced capacity to service their “*modern day heroes and heroines*”.

Until recently, the Embassy had resisted opening up to the Philippine community, to deal exclusively with working out bilateral agreements. It is true that this new responsibility sort of dents the elegance of Diplomacy; domestic workers complain of cold reception or outright hostility in Philippine Consulates. Migrant workers reproach Embassy officials their lack of compassion, their tendency to penalize Filipinas in difficulty, instead of lessening their suffering. On their part, Embassy employees reproach Filipinas their lack of transparency, lack of clarity in giving information, **their impatience and tendency to allow rumours to influence decisions**.

In fact, the Embassy in Paris is badly equipped to deal with community problems. **In the recent years, we have observed a generation of diplomats who seem to empathize with OFWs. They seem more available for the community, more willing to face the migration question. But, despite present efforts at organizing positive community activities, there is a real lack of competent personnel to address the various dimensions of migrant worker needs: neither social worker, psychologist nor labour attaché, to name a few. In short, the Philippine government is not giving enough support to its sole representative in France, the very body it has mandated to service “modern day heroes and heroines”.**

French NGOs and trade unions are the usual recourse in cases of legal problems, of unfair labour practise, immigration questions...

For the rest, Filipinas invent their own variety of tension-management, with hopes of healing. Many keep themselves busy in church, to maintain faith and links with the Divine (“*si Lord*”). They become active in associations, to forget themselves, while **they** regularly, daily if possible, link up with the Philippines, to monitor **child** and family. One or two consult the traditional manghuhula, manggagamot, hilot... Most of all, they adhere to : “Laughter is the best medicine” and “The more the merrier” (*Sama-sama tayo para mas masaya!*”) where, **quite often in occasions to dress up in typically Filipina neat elegance**, they find a semblance of family joy and warmth, to allow them to survive, just to survive, until that happy day when the “*saka na*” will become their true “*ngayon na!*”...
“*Kailan pa kaya?!*”

About Maya:

Maria Thelma Noval-Jezewski left the Philippines in 1971, after studies in St. Theresa’s College (Cebu), Asian Social Institute (Manila) and a short stint as City sociologist of Cebu City. She stayed in England up to 1975, when she finally chose to settle in Paris, married Polish writer, Christophe Jezewski, mothered Adam and Mayumi, and became active in the Paris Philippine community, mostly as part of her involvement in the association Babaylan, *Femmes philippines en France(Philippine women in France)*. She’s still around.