

## Manila, Tel Aviv and back

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Living room decoration in the home of a Filipino family, whose grown up daughter left to work in Israel

In recent years, consumption and possessions have been recognised as important themes in migration studies. The short history of migration between the Philippines and Israel has indeed produced a rich material culture of its own, with fascinating stories yet to be told. Since Israel started to recruit Filipina care workers in large numbers in 1995, numerous objects have travelled back and forth, while many were created along the way. Within this process, these objects have changed their meanings and transformed their functions. In both countries, they now mark the homes of those who travelled, as well as the homes of their loved ones, employers, and neighbours. In Manila and Tel Aviv, the respective cultural centres, they have entered the public space, sometimes visible only for those, who themselves have travelled.

Rather than providing a complete account or thorough investigation, this essay highlights some stories and material objects of migration from the Philippines to Israel and back, as well as the social space between them.

### **Altars**

Given the fact that most airlines provide only about twenty to thirty kilogramm of baggage allowance on flights between Manila and Tel Aviv, there's not much one can carry either way. However, Filipinos travelling in between Tel Aviv and Manila typically have their suitcases filled not with objects destined for their own use, but with commodities to be sold, things to be consumed with relatives or friends at the place they travel to, as well as gifts to deliver. Lots of gifts. Even if

they have never been to Israel before, they are likely to have former neighbours, classmates, or relatives who left ahead of them and who will now wait for their arrival, as well as for the arrival of the Filipino food, much cheaper sandals or whitening creams they ordered to be brought along from the Philippines.

This is why one has to really set priorities in choosing what to take to Israel from among one's own objects. So what, apart from some clothes (many of them gifts, too...) and pictures of loved ones in the Philippines could be more important than objects, which will protect and bless you on this journey to a far away land?

Catholic Altar in the shared flat of Filipinos in Tel Aviv, Israel

Being predominantly Catholic, most Filipina migrants on their way to work as carers in Israel carry along little devotional objects, that is prayer books, icons, or figures from the shrines they visited before leaving. Most importantly perhaps items from the shrine of Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage in Antipolo, which for so long has protected the colonial galleon trade between the Philippines and Mexico and nowadays blesses the many Filipinos, who visit it before setting off for work abroad. Sometimes also brought along is an icon of Saint Lorenzo Ruiz, the first and only Filipino Catholic Saint, who until recently was rather unheard of in Israel's few Catholic Churches, but now even has fiestas being celebrated in his honour. These objects are put onto altars, which Catholic Filipino newcomers to Israel set up as soon as they manage to have a place of their own - typically a bed space in a shared flat with other Filipino care workers to be used on their one day off work. As they stay on, these altars increasingly bear witness to their devotees' religious journeys and spiritual endeavours, not only in the Philippines, but in Israel as well.

Back in the Philippines, house altars too are being transformed in the process of migration: they come to include Virgin Mary icons from Nazareth, bottled water from the Jordan River, as well as rosaries, crosses, figures and candles from the 'Holy Land'.

A large Santo Niño figure and devotional objects from Israel set up on the home altar of a Catholic migrant to Israel in the Philippines

**Balikbayan boxes**

Perhaps the most prototypical object of Filipino migration is the balikbayan box. Created in the early 1970s by the Philippine dictator Marcos, the term balikbayan (Filipino, literally 'homecomers') was intended to strengthen ties between the Philippines and its diaspora by stimulating the economic support and financial investment of overseas Filipinos in their economically weak 'motherland'. Filipino migrants all over the world were (and still are) encouraged to send gift boxes free of duty up to a value of \$1,000 to the Philippines. In Israel, balikbayan boxes can be found in practically every shared (weekend) apartment of Filipinos, often half packed, since things may be collected over long periods of time.

Gina's balikbayan box seen on the picture, contains packages of salt, sugar, pasta, corned beef, Israeli instant coffee and tea, as well as six video cassettes, four on 'The Holy Land of the Bible' and two on the life of Mother Teresa. As in other balikbayan boxes, a great deal of space is taken up by hand-me-down clothing Gina received from her employer's extended family. In her case these include baby clothes, even though there are no small children in her family in the Philippines. In addition, she sends a TV set to her father, bought second hand for US\$65 in Tel Aviv.

### Gina's balikbayan box, Tel Aviv, Israel

The foodstuffs frequently sent from Israel in other boxes comprise food that, in the Philippines, is commonly associated with the Middle East, like dates or 'Arab' sweets, as well as food that migrants have become used to in Israel, but which are uncommon in the Philippines, for example mixed pickles. As in Gina's case, balikbayan boxes contain objects that migrants are expected to send (the corned beef; even though these might be more expensive in Israel than in the Philippines), gifts in the more classical sense, and things that help family members have a picture of life in Israel. And, of course, there are the many 'Holy Land' souvenirs: seven-armed chandeliers, 'Holy Land' calendars, place-sets, rosaries, Christian DVDs and video tapes... Each balikbayan box allows deep insights into and understandings of the varying degrees of social status, prosperity, misery, insecurities and tastes of both the senders and the recipients. Some migrants explained that the content of their boxes provided substantial support for their families, who were otherwise unable to buy clothes or 'extravagant' food like dates or sweets. One Filipina interviewee, Marian, whose extended family lived in a Manilan slum-like neighbourhood in nearly complete dependency on money remittances sent by family members from overseas, jokingly remarked that, due to her balikbayan boxes, which she filled with her affluent employers' second-hand clothes, 'they still can't afford a warm meal three times a day, but at least they wear Prada and Gucci'.

Origami paper swan in an Israeli living room in Kibbutz Ein Gedi, Israel

**Origami Paper Swans**

If there is one single object, which in Israel signifies the immigration of Filipina women for the care of the elderly, it is an origami paper swan. Origami paper swans have conquered Israel in all sizes, shapes and colours: They adorn book shelves in the living rooms of children of elderly cared for by Filipina migrants, as well as desks of Ministry of Interior officials, who decide about Filipinos' permits of residence and employment; they are used to collect the tip on counters of Tel Aviv's many bars and coffee houses, and, displayed in shop-windows, signal that Filipino customers are welcome. Crafted out of the pages of old magazines, the swans are fabricated by Filipina care workers during their often tedious working hours with the elderly in private homes.

It is important to note that in the Philippines, I have never seen an origami paper swan. In Israel, they were introduced by those Filipinas, who worked in Taiwan and Korea before coming to the 'Holy Land,' Filipino friends told me. They learned to do origami in these countries and introduced it here in Israel, they said. Initially given away as small gift in appreciation for favours, Israeli residents, citizens and migrants alike, have deeply fallen in love with these paper birds.

Accordingly, more and more carers have learnt to craft them, and nowadays, on Sundays, Filipinos' only day off work, in front of the Tel Aviv central bus station, you can even buy them.

Paper swans and other objects for sale in front of the Tel Aviv central bus station]

### Things Israeli in the Philippines

As a country where about ten percent of the population live and work abroad and practically every family is affected by migration, objects that are an outcome of migration are highly visible in the Philippines: houses built from overseas remittances, cars acquired through contract work abroad or motor bikes and buses financed by those, who left. The houses of migrants to Israel may have the star of David on their gates or sport large open kitchens, as they have become fashionable in the new building in Israel, where the Filipina carer worked. Buses financed by these migrants may bear names like 'The Holy Land', 'Jerusalem', 'Manila Tel Aviv' or even, seen once in Baguio, 'Kibbutz Shiller', named after a communal settlement in central Israel, which employs several Filipina carers.

## Material World

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A washing machine imported from Israel, used as a commode in the home of a return migrant in the Philippines  
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Then, there are the many small, less spectacular objects of migration in returnees' homes. There are home appliances one has become used to working with in the Israeli households one was employed in. There are the many 'Holy Land' posters and pictures of celebrations and gatherings with co-Filipina workers in diaspora. There are washing machines imported from Israel, for example, which have not even been unpacked, because the local water and electricity supply turned out to be insufficient for their use. In the house of Romelyn, located in a picturesque valley in the Philippines Mountain Province, I spotted bed sheets from the Israeli Tel HaShomer hospital turned into curtains. While the Hebrew inscription 'Medical Centre Tel HaShomer' in between ornamental flowers was unreadable for Romelyn as well as for most of her visitors, the bed sheets were revealed to serve as both souvenir and trophy.

Romelyn in her home in the Philippines Mountain Province two years after her return from Israel] Curious about their story, I asked Romelyn about it. After almost five years in Israel, she told me, the elderly woman she had been employed to take care of, was referred to the Tel HaShomer hospital near Tel Aviv. Romelyn accompanied her and stayed beside her bed during what turned out to be her employers' last two weeks. Out of feelings of responsibility and compassion, Romelyn continued to be with her, washed her, fed her, sleeping on a chair beside her bed, in spite of the rudeness of the Israeli nurses, who repeatedly told her to leave. After her employer died, and Romelyn was forced to return to the Philippines within days due to the expiration of her work permit and in spite of her own grief, the bed sheets her employer had rested on were the last thing within Romelyn's reach to remain of her. But, so she tells me with a smirk upon my visit two years after she returned from Israel, she too took them to revenge the nurses' nastiness.

The objects in returnees' homes therefore tell stories not only of the success, but of the nostalgia, the happiness and suffering, and very typically the ambivalences and paradoxes of migration.

see the AHRC Footsteps Project,

<http://www.keele.ac.uk/research/lpj/SOCPOR/AHRC/index.htm>