

**COMMUNICATING CARE:  
HOW THE FILIPINO VALUE OF *PAKIKIPAGKAPWA*  
DETERMINES THE EMOTIONAL GEOGRAPHIES OF  
FILIPINO WOMEN MIGRANTS' JOURNEY**

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**Title:** Communicating Care: How the Filipino Value of *Pakikipagkapwa* determines the Emotional Geographies of Filipino Women Migrants' Journey

**Abstract:** This paper draws from a study wherein ageing Filipino women living in Valencia, Spain participated in March 2019. By this time, the women cited had already gained Spanish citizenship and retired after working for at least 25 years in Spain.

Their emotional narratives traced the separation from their families, when they left the Philippines to pursue more gainful employment as domestic workers for affluent families in Spain in the period between the mid-1970s to early 1980s. One of them was eventually reunited with her son, the other, built a family life in her adoptive country. They now call Spain "home".

**Keywords:** *ageing Filipino women; pakikipagkapwa; domestic work; emotional geographies; transnational families;*

It seems quaint now, discussions of dependence on analogue means of communication, in a time when the hot-button topic is the existential crisis posed by Artificial Intelligence to humanity.

However, there has been a resurgence of interest in the more mechanical and even manual not-so-distant past as anathema to the speed of communication technology that has become commonplace today.

This paper draws from a study wherein ageing Filipino women living in Valencia, Spain participated in March 2019. By this time, the women cited had already gained Spanish citizenship and retired after working for at least 25 years in Spain.

Their emotional narratives traced the separation from their families, when they left the Philippines to pursue more gainful employment as domestic workers for affluent families in Spain in the period between the mid-1970s to early 1980s. One of them was eventually reunited with her son, the other, built a family life in her adoptive country. They now call Spain "home".

Throughout their migrant journey, they have maintained their transnational family motivated by *pakikipagkapwa*, through writing letters and recording cas-

sette tapes, and sending cash remittances that carry their emotions, particularly, their love.

There occurred a shift in their maintenance of relationships with families from transnational to translocal over the passage of time and determined largely by the level of *pakikipagkapwa*.

### ***Pakikipagkapwa*: Filipino core value**

*Pakikipagkapwa* is a core Filipino value and conviction that each person is an extension of oneself, an acknowledgment of a shared identity, and as such, treatment of the other appropriately (Pua & Enriquez, 2018). There are different levels of social interaction under *pakikipagkapwa*, ranging from *pakikitungo* (civility) all the way to *pakikiisa* (being one with). The latter is the ultimate level, describing a relationship with someone considered as *hindi ibang tao* i.e., one of us (Pua & Enriquez, 2018). This range also determines whether Filipino migrants look are oriented toward the Philippines or more in their own vicinity for those that they regard as close, no matter the actual physical proximity.

Philippine society is highly communitarian. The family is the basic unit of society, but the definition of family extends to relations beyond those determined by consanguinity and affinity, to friends that are considered *hindi ibang tao*.

This value has persisted over generations. According to the 2019 World Values Survey, among Filipinos, 98.2% consider family and 92.8% consider work is very important in their lives. In addition, 83.6% trust their family completely, 59.3% say one of their main goals in life is to make their parents proud. In terms of the important things that children should learn at home, 61.8% say it is hard work and 53.8% say independence (Haerperfer et al, 2022).

The Philippines is among the top ten largest migrant-sending nations in the world (International Organization for Migration, 2022). The labor exportation policy began in the 1970s as a strategy to increase employment for Filipinos and economic opportunities for the Philippine government. The number of Filipinos taking jobs abroad has steadily climbed over the years. According to a 2022 study, 7% of Filipino households have at least one overseas Filipino worker (or OFW, as they have come to be called), 75% of whom send money back to the Philippines in the form of remittances (Mangaluz, 2023). In 2022, their personal cash remittances alone accounted for USD 36.14 billion (Rivas, 2023; Philippine Statistics Authority, 2022).

### **Emotional narratives of Filipino migrants**

At the time this study was conducted, there were approximately 33,851 Filipinos living in Spain: 298 of whom lived in the city of Valencia, about 70 percent of whom were female (Ministerio de Inclusion, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, 2020). But anecdotal data from a member of the Filipino community estimates that 1,000 Filipinos live in Valencia.

This research begins and ends by tracing the trajectory of emotions. Emotions are more than merely embodied experiences, according to McKay (2007), migrant self-identity is revealed through emotions. The migration process itself mobilizes many emotions as embodied subjects change physical locations. As Christou (2011) found in her study of Greek-Danes: „through their narratives, migrants express and communicate their emotional experiences in constructing a sense of self and belonging in the ancestral homeland and abroad“ (p. 256), so it was with Filipinas who participated in this study.

Trying to recover from a disconcerting move, Filipinos look for something familiar by finding the Filipino community. By doing so, they feel some sense of belonging in a foreign place (Montayre et al., 2017). I met members of the Filipino community at the Catholic church that hosted their Sunday Masses, and interviewed six Filipino women for the study. Due to space constraints, only two stories will be discussed here.

Aletha<sup>1</sup>, 76, first arrived in Spain in 1977 and earned 8,000 pesetas a month. Leia, 74, came to Spain in 1980. At that time, she earned 11,000 pesetas a month.

Both women sent all of their salary to their families back home. They would exchange the Spanish currency for US dollars then send them through the bank to their relatives in rural parts of the Philippines. A single parent, Leia was primarily motivated to earn enough to support her months-old son, who she left under the care of her mother. However, from this budget, Leia was also able to help her parents and 10 older siblings.

Aletha sent money to her mother, who divided it to cover family expenses, including the education of her four younger siblings. After all, Aletha was motivated to find a job to earn more to support her parents and siblings.

Both women, putting family first, were motivated by *pakikipagkapwa*.

### **Maintaining transnational families**

After arriving in Spain, they maintained their bonds with their family by sending letters and voice-recorded cassette tapes. Aletha would exchange correspondence with her parents every two weeks--waiting for their letter in response to her previous letter to arrive before writing another, responding to any queries. For special occasions like Christmas and birthdays, they exchanged greeting cards.

Leia became acquainted with her growing son through tapes with recordings of his voice, and he, with hers. They would record stream-of-consciousness narrations and, in similar fashion as letters, send them in response to the other's tape.

As Baldassar et al (2007) point out, communication between the migrant and the family left behind contribute to transnational caregiving.

Madianou and Miller (2011) ascertained that letters and tapes sent between Filipino parents and the children that they left behind bear materiality and a personal touch that helped maintain transnational families. In voice tapes, they added, there was also a quality of approaching co-presence, since the disembodied voice recorded and able to be played back, was temporal to the recipient of the tapes.

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<sup>1</sup>Names have been changed.

Garabile *et alii* (2016) crafted a model of resilience for transnational families that reflect a similar process of maintaining transnational families through communication tools, in this case, letters and voice tapes, through which they try to maintain their familial roles despite physical distance.

Without words, cash remittances also carried their love and care, what Katigbak calls „emotional remittances“ (2015). Through the provision for material needs, the migrants feel that they are fulfilling their familial obligations with their domestic work.

As time passed, the Filipino women established bonds with fellow Filipinos, bound by common interests and beliefs, as well as experiences. In the time they spent together and emotions that drew them closer, they found a sense of belonging and a home away from home.

In the case of Leia, she had established co-presence during the few times she visited the Philippines and spent time with her family during those short summer months. After her mother had passed away, however, and she was finally reunited with her son in Spain when he turned 17, she admits that they suffered tension in the relationship, having for the first time lived under the same roof over an extended amount of time. “It was as if we did not know each other at all.” In the period also since she had left the Philippines, she had developed an intimate relationship with a fellow Filipino who also worked in Valencia. In addition, she had grown closer to other relatives who lived in the same neighborhood.

Aletha visited her parents every few years until her parents both passed away. By that time, she had already given birth to her daughter in Spain. This signaled a shift in her focus and orientation. By that time, two of her siblings had graduated from nursing school. She had fulfilled what she perceived as her family obligation. “My daughter is the only person who was entirely my own and I was determined to do everything to take care of her even if I was to do it alone in Valencia.” It turned out that she did not need to do it all on her own, because friends she had made helped her raise her daughter so she could manage working and caring for her child.

Emotional geographies extend not only transnationally (from the Philippines to Spain), but also translocally (within Spain and Europe). They forge and develop these bonds based on the temporal, whether in small groups or within the larger Filipino community.

Baldassar (2007, 294) notes that „transnational relations are rarely maintained at a constant level across the family life-cycle and there is always the potential for migrants to become permanent exiles from both their homeland and their homeland family“.

### **Shifting care**

Indeed, both women, at the time of the study, no longer think of going back to the Philippines except for the occasional visit. “My parents have passed away and my siblings have families of their own. My life is focused on taking care of my grandchildren now,” is how Aletha characterizes her life. “This is where I will die.”

By establishing emotional relationships with people in the host country, the migrants feel at-home and reconfigure their self-identity relative to this new home, and feel a sense of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). With the passage of time, family members in the Philippines pass away or become distant, and old bonds fray and weaken, but emotions surrounding people in Spain strengthen relationships as they buoy each other's emotions and sense of self, so they feel at-home in their new home.

In transnational caregiving, (Baldassar et alii, 2007), communication through different channels as well as emotional remittances, and visits to attain co-presence, are important factors.

The migrant journey is determined by the level of *pakikipagkapwa*, in reference to people (and therefore, places where those people are) to whom they are bound by being *hindi ibang tao*. During the early stages of migration, their emotional geographies trace back to the homeland, but with the passage of time, as they negotiate self-identity and build social networks in the host society, their emotional geographies shift from transnational to translocal.

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