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Reimagining Collective Identities in Migration: A Biblical Perspective on Cultural Memories

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Scripture reports many instances of individual and collective migrations which we are not unfamiliar from our present day experiences. Abraham and his clan uproots themselves from Ur of the Chaldeans with what looks like the prospect of a better life in Canaan. Jacob and his twelve sons transfers to Egypt where there is food during a long drawn famine. Moses flees to Midian from Egypt to avoid Pharaoh's ire. The Israelites are led from Egypt to Canaan because this is where they are promised land of their own by God. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus flee to Egypt because Herod threatens the life of Jesus. It seems clear that patterns of migration then and now are driven by the same economic and political factors. The narratives or stories of present-day migrants bear witness to the constancy of the patterns established and narrated even in the Bible.

This paper will tentatively explore the rich contribution of religious cultural memories¹ to the collective identities² of migrants who are far from their native countries. It will be done by looking at these cultural memories through the Exodus narrative which shares a commonality with migrant experiences of today. As a Filipino, my knowledge extends largely to Filipino migrant experiences. I had personal contact with them in Rome where I lived for 8 years and was a chaplain to one of the 45 or so Filipino Catholic communities in that city. In those years, I also had glimpses into the activities of other Catholic communities from Madagascar and Mexico. They, just like the Filipinos, brought with them their religious practices and evolved their identities on these cultural memories.

The Exodus experience of Filipinos in the last fifty years, to some extent, finds its root in the “failure of the “developmental authoritarianism” model of state-building under Marcos”³ and protracted thereafter with the failure of succeeding governments to create enough opportunities for employment within the country⁴. From a different perspective, this exodus can be viewed in terms of how the Filipino Catholic identity or the Filipino religiosity is significantly reflected. The analysis of Caroline Hau of Rey Ventura’s *Underground in Japan* (1992) which narrates his experience as an illegal worker in Japan seeks to understand the complex situation of migrants. What calls our attention is that this narrative written from a secular perspective unknowingly highlights the importance of religion in the lives of the migrants. Evidences of religious practices of the migrants is quite apparent in three quotes that we have lifted from Hau’s analysis:

¹ “Cultural memory,...., focuses on fixed points in the past, but again it is unable to preserve the past as it was. This tends to be condensed into symbolic figures to which memory attaches itself - for example, tales of the patriarchs, the Exodus, wandering in the desert, conquest of the Promised Land, exile - and that are celebrated in festivals and are used to explain current situations.”: J. ASSMANN, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, p. 37.

² Collective identity we define here as the socio-cultural markers of belonging. “The collective or ‘we’ identity is the image that a group has of itself and with which its members associate themselves.”: J. ASSMANN, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, p. 114.

³ C.S. HAU, *On the Subject of Nation*, 229.

⁴ Hau supports this statement saying, “what was initially viewed as a “temporary’ solution to the Marcos government’s inability to work out economic, political, and social solutions to the crisis it encountered in the late seventies and early eighties would eventually become the cornerstone policie, by the Estrada, and Arroyo years, of the Philippine state.” (C.S. HAU, *On the Subject of Nation*, 231.)

The “fruits” of illegal labor are displayed *on Sundays in church*⁵, when Filipinos bedeck themselves with “gold chains, bracelets, rings, leather jackets, signature clothes both real and fake”.⁶

They *congregate in church* and the nearby McDonald’s on Sunday mornings, and write letter to their families in the afternoons.⁷

The so-called Filipino community in Japan *is marked by* the same cleavages of class, gender, ethnicity, *religion*, and language dividing Philippine society.⁸

These quotations in an indirect way give proof of how deeply the religious component is imbedded in the psyche of these migrants. Much so, it manifests itself in their lives even in the most disparate contexts as the three statements quoted above makes the reader realize. In many migrants, their religious affiliations become some form of safe haven when they feel alienated in a foreign place. This also gives us an opening in terms of how the biblical Exodus narrative can be read to give a meaningful encouragement to migrants who find themselves in very difficult and many times inhospitable circumstances abroad. The progressive strengthening of the role of God in the lives of the Israelites as they left Egypt, wandered in the desert, and finally occupied the promised land reveals how it has become a pillar of their collective identity. It is the migrant’s religiosity that often sustains them as a group wherever they find themselves. There are many examples of how migrants make adaptations of religious practices from back home in their local settings. The Mexicans in Rome would gather together to celebrate their *Dia de los muertos*⁹ and recreate in their place of gathering the “altars for the dead” since they cannot go to the cemetery where their dead are buried. Filipinos continue to celebrate *Simbang Gabi*¹⁰ in the days preceding Christmas day regardless of where they are.

One of the distinctive marks of Filipino migrants¹¹ in various places around the world is the setting up of vibrant communities of worshipping Filipino Catholics. This has made an impact in the faith life of those localities where Filipino Catholics are present. In a recent trip to Vancouver, Canada, I happened to visit a suburb two hours away where the Filipino community there have built a chapel in the parish

⁵ The highlighting and italization of some parts of the text are ours to highlight our point.

⁶ C.S. HAU, *On the Subject of Nation*, 248.

⁷ C.S. HAU, *On the Subject of Nation*, 249-250.

⁸ C.S. HAU, *On the Subject of Nation*, 252.

⁹ Commemoration of the Dead on November 2 of each year.

¹⁰ Traditional novena Masses from December 16 to 24 usually celebrated early in the morning or anticipated in evening Masses.

¹¹ The Commission on Filipinos Overseas reports that there are about 10.2 million Filipinos overseas. This huge number includes 4.8 million permanent, 4.2 million temporary, and 1.2 million irregular migrants. (From Office of the President of the Philippines: Commission on Filipinos Overseas [Accessed: 13 Oct. 2020] www.cfo.gov.ph/ph/statistics-2/).

grounds dedicated to the Sto. Nino, the Child Jesus, to whom many Filipinos have a deep devotion.

While these actions may simply be dismissed as the migrants trying to transplant their religious practices from back home to wherever they find themselves now, it also reinforces their sense of a collective identity even if they have been uprooted from their home countries. Jan Assmann has a very interesting insight on this phenomenon when he comments on the fact that God establishes his covenantal relationship with the Israelites in Sinai while they were wandering in ‘no-man’s-land’. He thus points out that:

The covenant preceded the acquisition of a homeland, and that was the crucial point. The bond was extraterritorial, that is, independent of any territory, which meant that it remained universally valid no matter where in the world the Jews might find themselves.¹²

In a parallel manner, when migrants bring their religious practices wherever they find themselves, they are expressing the validity of those ways of relating with their God that transcends territorial boundaries. Further, the establishment of the covenant in Sinai was necessary to solidify the collective identity of the people. After years of being immersed in Egyptian society, the Israelites will struggle with this identity. They will constantly complain about having been brought to the desert. They will exclaim their longing for the ‘fleshpots’ of Egypt (Ex 16:3). The longing is not only for food because at a certain point, they will fashion a golden calf to represent the god they wished to worship (Ex 32). Doesn’t this golden calf resemble the Egyptian goddess Hathor? Conversely, when you look at migrants and their holding on to their religious practices, it is also a struggle to maintain their collective identity. While the covenant in Sinai, reestablishes the collective identity of the people as the chosen nation of the God of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, migrants experience the reassurance and comfort in their religious cultural memories, softening the harsh realities of their alienation and giving a new meaning to their collective identity. For the Israelites who have lived in Egypt for many decades, there may have been a forgetfulness of their own religious traditions thus the necessity of reiteration through the formula “God of the fathers, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” of their connectedness to their one and only God. Migrants likewise are constantly besieged with the temptation to be assimilated in the local culture. It is the celebration of cultural memories that transcend

¹² J. ASSMANN, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, p. 180.

geographic boundaries which will allow them to retain their sense of belonging to their cultures of origin.

The political and economic realities that drive migrants away from their home countries define the shape of their migratory behavior. Are they temporary, short term migrants or are they permanent, long term migrants? When Moses fled Egypt, the premise was that he would not be able to return for a long time or at least until the Pharaoh who threatened his life was still alive. Thus, he settles in Midian and builds a new life for himself with a family and takes on a pastoral lifestyle. It is only the event of the burning bush which will rekindle his connections to his past life. God who speaks to him evokes the cultural memory by introducing himself as “the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” This is an important event because Moses, who recognizes his otherness among the Midianites by naming his son Gershom—meaning “I am a stranger in a foreign land” (Ex 2:22), begins the process of reacquiring his identity. In the same manner, the Israelites wander in the desert also in the process of reacquiring their collective identity by slowly shedding off vestiges of Egyptian influences before they face God on Mount Sinai and respond to his invitation to be their sole God by indicating they will do all he asks of them (Ex 19:8). With God at the center of their collective identity, they move forward towards their long term settlement in the promised land. The Israelites affirm the worship of one and only one God as a distinctive mark of their core identity and it shapes their cultural memories from here on as they establish various rituals, monuments, and norms shaping this identity. “The Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt was the foundational act that provided the basis for the identity not only of the people, but also of God himself.”¹³

Migrants of today, find ways of affirming their collective identities as they settle in their host countries. Those who settle for the long term bring with them their distinctive cultural memories expressed in language, arts, food, and religion. Filipino migrants have a particular way of integrating these cultural aspects around their religious practices. Sunday liturgies are big events that bring them together. As expressed in the three sentences we started with from Ventura’s narrative, there is an indirect way by which God, as a central figure, allows these migrants to manifest their collectiveness. Analyzing these three statements, one realizes that depth by which the migrants assimilate in the local culture and ways of doing things. It also reflects how certain elements such as religious adherence, gender, or ethnicity remains a dividing factor for these Filipino migrants.

¹³ J. ASSMANN, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, p. 180.

What then of their collective identity? This is where the biblical narrative of the Exodus and its rereading becomes helpful for the modern day migrant. While the narrative seems to point to a very exclusive sense of election by the God of the Israelites as his chosen people, one has to give room to the Christian appropriation of the Hebrew scripture and its incorporation into the Christian scripture to expand this notion of chosen-ness. Thus, we suggest that Assmann's initial intuition of the covenant as extraterritorial, before the acquisition of the homeland, and therefore valid wherever Jews find themselves can also be applied to all peoples, especially migrants. A collective identity that goes beyond the boundary of gender, ethnicity or religion coalesces with the figure of God as its defining element. The challenge of reimagining collective identities in migration lies in a two pronged approach of strengthening one's cultural memories as well as opening oneself towards building new memories that will contribute but not diminish that same collective identity. As the Israelites will move from the desert towards settling the Promised Land, they will realize that this land is not empty. They will have to confront how they will interact and relate to the inhabitants of the land. The one important element that will define this interaction and relationship is their adherence to the one God. It will take a long process before they can establish this collective identity among themselves. People today who migrate bring with them their particular religious identity. It is perhaps, for many of them, the one constant in their lives that they can rely on. It is on this that they are able to build a new identity in a new place.