

## **Salam: Of Dislocation, Marginality and Flexibility**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reconstructs the life stories of residents of Salam Compound. The compound serves as entry point for many Muslim migrants who leave the southern Philippines. Salam is both a refuge and a halfway point. A sense of dislocation permeates the stories. Dislocation begins with the movement away from a homeland that is familiar and defining of identity. The dislocation is, in a sense, an escape, a desperate project to avoid armed conflict in the southern Philippines or a desperate enterprise in search of work. Salam is a halfway point for transients prospecting for overseas work, the staging area for a global labor exodus. The sense of dislocation is not unlike locating oneself in the margins, portrayed in the residents' negotiated identities and spaces, constantly challenged, implicitly regulated. Dislocation is also depicted as flexibility, portrayed by the residents making do and their everyday creative resistance and struggle in new locations in the city. Gathered through ethnographic method, the stories offer a glimpse into the lives of the residents of the compound, how they negotiate around social constructions of identities — resisting and accommodating internal and external forces that impinge on their lives, revealing a rich and poignant tapestry of family relations, community ironies and an ever-impinging world beyond its walls.

Keywords: *negotiated identities; overseas women workers; Salam Compound; dislocation*

### **Note:**

The names of those interviewed have been changed.

Symbolic processes fashion and maintain the new political identities. They are used as a means of degradation, to create categories of people defined as dangerous or expendable and therefore suitable subjects for expulsion or the coercion that leads to flight.

Elizabeth Colson  
*Displacement*, 2004

This paper attempted to catch a glimpse of the lives of the residents of Salam Compound in Quezon City. Their stories reveal notions of dislocation. The sense of dislocation begins with the movement away from a homeland, which is both familiar and a source of identity, to a new place. The dislocation is also in a sense an escape, a desperate project to avoid armed conflict or a desperate enterprise to search for work. It is dislocation that is not unlike locating oneself in the margins, where one is frequently challenged, maligned, if not regulated. In another sense it is dislocation that is flexibility, flexibility in adjusting and adapting to a different location acting in a model of “complex interconnected cultural space, one full of crisscrossing flows and intersecting systems of meanings” (Inda & Rosaldo, 2002, pp. 1-34). The residents recreate places and reinterpret and embellish meanings in their everyday lives, constantly negotiating identities and navigating spaces, resisting and accommodating in their new location in the city.

Practitioners of ethnography have posited that the method, as well as the way of writing, allows for the capturing of meanings and insights into how people make sense of their world. By focusing on a particular community, a descriptive account of a particular culture and of their meaning-making emerge and thus, a glimpse and understanding of a particular context (Ellen, 1984; Garson, 2008). The same is attempted for this study, to intuit into how the residents of Salam make sense of the world around them and how they locate themselves in the crisscrossing flux of movements.

The study takes caution in Clifford's (1986) consideration of ethnographic accounts as allegorical, that “transcendent meanings [...] are the conditions of its meaningfulness.” As an allegory of cultural description it does not only “...represents, or symbolizes, that” but rather forwards that “this is a – morally charged – story about that” (Clifford, 1986, pp. 99-100). As part of the reflexivity in the conduct of ethnography, I caution that the politics of the cultural translator is implicated in the writing and in the reading of the text. The stories are not neutral. They are allegories, if not testaments, of marginality and of struggles. Hearing and writing the stories as a Christian from Mindanao, acutely conscious of how much of the cultural and religious sameness and the differences may

be reflected in the reporting, wary of the stereotypes that social conditioning can possibly betray, I take stock that the “recognition of allegory requires that as readers and writers of ethnographies, we struggle to confront and take responsibility for our systematic construction of others and ourselves through others” (Clifford, 1986, p.117).

Data were collected for a period of six months in 2005 and updated from 2010 to 2011. The photos were taken in 2011. The data-gathering benefited from the orientation provided by community leaders, snowballing into individuals and families sharing their stories. Many of the interviews stemmed from chance conversations. Informants would refer others. Perhaps a shared pining for home helped facilitate the conversations. What stories they shared offered a glimpse into their lives, revealing a rich and poignant tapestry of family relations, community ironies, and an ever-impinging world beyond the walls.

### **Orienteering: Finding Bearings**

It is perhaps with caustic humor that some urban poor communities in Metro Manila are named after places that conjure images of bliss and comfort. There is a Paradise Village, a Happy Village, and a Village of New Hope. Most of them begin as abandoned lots or abandoned dumpsites, spaces of hazard that counter the bliss and comfort their names purport. Salam shares the same affinity in its naming. Salam takes its name from the Arabic word *salaam* meaning peace. The name conjures a place of safety and tranquility. In some ways, Salam has provided safety for many of its residents. For the casual outsider, Salam conjures a place of danger. It is illicit and subversive, the representation of the underbelly of the urban landscape. It brings to mind notions of southern conflicts and violence. Salam as no man’s land.

Regarded as an Islamic center in the metro, Salam covers 4.9 hectares of one of the metro’s thriving cities. By the early 2000s, it was home to almost 10,000 people (Watanabe, 2008). Islam comprises the third largest population by religion in the *barangay*, the majority of whom live within the compound. The majority of *barangay* residents are Catholics. The compound of Iglesia ni Kristo dominates the geographical landscape with its headquarters, church, and educational facilities visible from most vantage points in the *barangay*. Along the main road which is dotted with gates into private and exclusive residential subdivisions, one finds the entrance into Salam. An archway identifies and proclaims its welcome to all those who enter, the constant frenzy of jeeps and tricycles, and the babel of people nearby.

Salam is a dense place, crammed with houses built tightly beside and stacked on top of each other, crisscrossing pathways serving as its arteries. Its main road, Libya Street, paved during a previous national election, is the widest. Along Libya Street are a variety of business establishments – cell phone shops, *ukay-ukay*, DVD and CD rental shops, food stalls, hardware, an amahan pawnshop, and *sari-sari* stores. Advertising posters of cell phone carriers give the street an air of entrepreneurial festivity. Children are everywhere, running and playing; groups of teenagers loiter around. It gives the impression that the compound is doing well. It has the feel of a small town market street. At the center of the compound is the Salam mosque, an airy structure with white tiled floors and walls, still half-finished after many years (Fig. 1). Across the mosque is a small wet market. Libya Street is bustling with activity.

**Figure 1. The Mosque. Waiting for completion.**  
**Photo by Lawrence Dizon Sumulong. Used with permission.**



The houses along Libya Street are mostly made of concrete. A number of them are still unfinished, construction bars protrude from the sides of the structures, waiting for a wall or a roof to be put up. It seems that at some point the owners may have run out of money or may have altogether left Salam. Transience, it turns out, is one of Salam's rhythms. As one goes deeper into the compound, the concrete houses give way to wooden ones in disrepair; the main road branches out into tighter alleyways where there is very little by way of infrastructure. Salam's exclusion becomes apparent as one reaches its margins. At the very edge of the compound are walls and barbed wire fence. Salam is fenced-in, or fenced-out, depending on whose point of view is taken (Figures 2 and 3).

**Figure 2.** View of the wall surrounding one side of the community.  
Photo by Lawrence Dizon Sumulong. Used with permission.



**Figure 3.** Visitors look through a barbed wire fence that separates the compound from its neighboring school.  
Photo by Lawrence Dizon Sumulong. Used with permission.



According to Low (1996), as cities thrive and expand with the influx of migration, fortresses are built *around* and *within* cities. The metaphor of a divided city begins to emerge, one that is characterized initially by the geographic divide of uptown and downtown and later to the economic and social divide of the upscale and the ghetto. The divide has been characterized with the tensions and conflicts of stereotypes of social groups and the ordering in some ways of activities of those who live in the cities and participate in its urban cultures (McDhough, 1993). The divide becomes more apparent as “large mixed commercial and residential development projects reinforce the segregation of the divided city, further cutting off communities by visual boundaries, growing

distances, and ultimately, walls” (Low, 1996, pp. 383-409). The walls that divide become codes of fear, tangible symbols, “producing [a] literal landscape of fear” (Lowe, 1997, p. 53). The walls of Salam may be made of thin cement blocks but they seem fortress-like, evoking fear and wariness from those outside. The walls may be the residents’ attempt at keeping themselves in, or the outside’s attempt at keeping them out.

### **Salam: A Peaceable Land**

Salam was founded on fertile land, not unlike the places where many of its residents and transients come from. Similarly, and characteristic of marginal spaces in the city, the compound was disputed land and was a subject of conflict.

Generoso de la Cruz Abdul was born of a Muslim father and a *balik-Islam*<sup>1</sup> mother. Abdul is the only Muslim elected into the community council. A Tausog from Cotabato, he has lived in Manila for almost two decades. He remembers Salam in the 1970s as *talabiban*, a breezy grassy land dotted with mango trees. It was then a mixed community of Christians and Muslims. Salam is the biggest Muslim community in Metro Manila – “*mas malaki pa sa Taguig*” (‘even bigger than Taguig’), he contends. He recalls that it was the Libyan government that donated the land.<sup>2</sup> During the 1970s Muslims were dispersed all over Metro Manila as *squatters*; the plan for the donation was to set up a community for Muslim peoples, with hospital, a *madrassa* and a dormitory. The main street is called Libya Street, he explained, in gratitude for the Libyan government’s donation.

Jorge Dahon, a barangay official, recalls the beginnings of Salam as one of “organic” occupation. There were people who found themselves in Manila, as refugees, seeking “greener pastures,” and needed a place to live. They found an empty lot and began constructing their houses:

*Bigla na lang may kumunidad na. Daban-daban, nagkatao d’yan sa Salam. Una, mga pami-pamilya lang hanggang sa lumago. Dati, halo-halo ang mga tao naman d’yan, may mga Katoliko; mas marami pa nga dati. Tapos may mga Muslim din. Wala namang gulo sa pagsasama dati. (All of a sudden, there was a community. People started coming. First came families, then their kin. Until it flourished...There was a mix of peoples. You had Catholics living in the compound; there were more of them before. And of course, the Muslims. There were no conflicts between the two back then.)*

At some point, he said, either Maummar Gaddafi or a rich Libyan billionaire bought and donated Salam to the community. He recalls the land

dispute that followed after, how the “Iglesia ni Kristo contested the Muslim community’s title.” The Iglesia claimed the land through valid purchase and demanded that the residents leave. When the residents refused, he recounts, the demolition of houses ensued. There was violence, many were hurt and a few died, “*Takot ako na baka magka-jihad. Baka umapaw ang dugo. Magulo at delikado ang mga panahong iyon. Takot kaming sumiklab lalo ang gulo.*” (‘I was afraid there might be jihad. Blood might flow. Those were dangerous times. We were afraid the conflict would escalate.’)

Abdul remembers a Friday in September referring to it as “*araw ng demolisyon*” (‘Day of the demolition’): “*Sumiklab Iglesia versus Muslim. Magulo! Mainit ang mga tao noon. Heto na ang mga sisira ng mga bahay namin. Mawawalan na kami ng matitirhan. Syempre, labat humahanda nang makipaglaban. Isipin n’yo, saan na naman lilipat ang mga tao kung aalis.*” (‘The conflict between Iglesia members and Muslims broke out. There was chaos, people were on the edge. We expected Iglesia members to come and destroy our houses. Everyone was ready to fight. Think about it, where would people go if they leave.’)

Haji Masud, wizened and elderly, is one of the *bapas*<sup>3</sup> of the compound. His historical marker for the establishment of Salam is the declaration of Martial Law in the country: “*Magulo sa Mindanao noon. Parating may giyera. Tumatakas ang mga tao papunta dito. Dito sa Manila, pareho din pala dahil martial law.*” (‘There was chaos in Mindanao. There was war going on all the time. People wanted to flee here. Here in Manila, it was the same because of the Martial Law.’) Watanabe (2007) contends that one of the reasons for the declaration of Martial Law in 1972 was to curtail the uprisings of Muslim insurgents in Mindanao. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was established as a separatist movement towards a Bangsamoro Republic. The State commenced offensive military incursions in Mindanao to curtail the movement. The constant bombardment and conflict in communities forced many of the non-combatant residents to flee and become refugees elsewhere (Watanabe, 2008, p.74). Many of them would flee to Manila. Haji Masud recounts:

*Magulo’yung panahon sa bansa. Pati din sa mga Muslim at sa Islamic Directory [Directorate] dito. Nagkawatak-watak kami, may mga away. May mga kapatid nating Muslim, inuna ang mga sarili at ibinenta ang lupa. Doon nagkagulo. Para bang nawala sa puso nila ang kapatiran, at pera ang inuna. Naging squatter kami sa sariling lugar bigla. Ito na at pinapaalis kami. Maraming beses ang demolition. Nuwebe (9) na beses ang maalala ko. Mabirap mawalan ng tirahan. Nakakatakot mawalan ulit ng mauwian kaya galit ang marami. (It was a troubled time for the country and so it was for many Muslims and the Islamic Directory*

[Directorate] here...we were asunder and had internal conflicts. Our Muslim brothers sold the land [Salam] and that's when the trouble started. It seemed they forgot we were brothers, and thought of themselves first. Suddenly, we were squatters here. They were forcing us out. There were several demolitions – nine times, I remember. Everyone was afraid they wouldn't have a home to go back to again, so everybody was enraged.)

The Iglesia had just set up their headquarters in the neighboring area and had wanted to expand their property. The Iglesia, Haji Masud said, had wanted to buy the land but the community refused to sell. He alleges it was the “no-good Pugak Altapresion” who, through some device, sold Salam. One million pesos was supposed to have been given as a down payment and another one million pesos was used to “clear out” the people from the land. He remembers the police and the heavy equipment vehicles during the demolitions. He feared that the brewing conflict between the Iglesia and the compound residents would escalate. Many of the residents were prepared to fight until the end.<sup>4</sup> By the grace of Allah, he says the conflict did not escalate.

His memory is that of the Libyan government vindicating their case in the Supreme Court:<sup>5</sup> “*Dinaan sa proseso, hindi sa pamamagitan ng dabas. At mabuti naman, naayos din. Mahirap ‘yun, magulo. Mas maraming masisira, mamamatay. Gusto lang naman namin, matitirhan. Iyong peaceful din. Iyong alam mong may matutuluyan ka.*” (‘It was by way of due process and not through violence. Had we turned to violence, it would’ve led to more destruction, more deaths. All we wanted was a place to live – somewhere peaceful that you can go home to.’) He constantly thanks Allah that the worse did not come to pass: “*Pareho lang naman ang Iglesia at Muslim, naniniwala sa mabuti.*” (‘After all, both Iglesias and Muslims believe in the good.’) The Iglesia expanded where they could, he said. Beyond the western wall of Salam is the New Era College, the primary education facility of the Iglesia ni Kristo.

According to Bapa Haji Masud, Salam is now run by the Salam Most al-Madrassa Advisory Council. He explains that the council is composed of the elders of the community. The council is similarly set up as “how things are done back home.” To adapt to the changing times, the Council has since registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission. He says he doesn’t quite understand what it means to be “incorporated” but praises Allah just the same. He said he has seen a lot in his lifetime, living in Manila for more than two decades now — 17 years of it in Salam, and previously in Quiapo. In Quiapo, he experienced demolitions too. Demolitions seem to be part of living in Manila, or perhaps of being Muslim in Manila, he mused.

After the dispute over Salam, the main mosque was erected as a symbol of peace. It was named *Salam* and the compound was named after it. Like many of the houses in Salam, however, the mosque remains unfinished (Watanabe, 2007). When news of the death of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi reached Salam, there were those who, remembering his generosity, marched in mourning along Libya Street.

Abdul believes it is always good to welcome everyone who wishes to visit Salam. It is an opportunity, he said, to introduce the community, to introduce himself to “*non-Muslims...Para makita ninyo*” (“So you can see”). He assures that it is safe in Salam, but cautions alertness:

*Gaya din sa ibang lugar, ok naman. Syempre, kaunting ingat. Alam n’yo naman kung sino ang kakausapin. Ingat lang sa mga warshock, mga nabombahan ang bahay sa Mindanao. May mga dala-dala pa ang mga iyan...Sana may matutunan kayo sa Salam at buwag kayong madadala. Ok naman ang mga tao dito. Parang tayo-tayo lang din.* (It’s the same as in other places, it’s ok here. Of course, one has to be careful. You need to be careful around those who suffered shock from the war – whose homes were bombed in Mindanao. They still carry the memories. I hope you learn something in Salam. The people are okay – same as everyone else, just like any of us.)

### **Southern Dreaming: Haunting Songs**

Abdul says his story is common in Salam: “*Labat nandito para greener pasture.*” (“Everybody comes here hoping to find greener pasture.”) It has been one struggle after another since he arrived in Manila. He’s had many jobs in the years that he’s been in the city. He was a laborer, a helper, a construction worker, a foreman, a stuntman, a waiter, until he finally saved enough to become a contractor. He then entered politics. “*Gagawin mo labat para mabubay.*” (“You do what you can to survive.”) In Manila, he said, one just has to be willing to do anything.

The Abas brothers, Tausogs from Zamboanga, tell a similar story. The family was starting to do well in Mindanao. A relative who had gone to work overseas helped them to purchase passenger jeepneys. Their circumstances became difficult when their route became dangerous and too risky for the brothers to ply. Their passenger route coursed through armed conflict areas between the military and rebel forces. They had to sell their jeeps one by one. One brother had gone ahead to Manila on the invitation of a cousin who worked as a policeman. The two brothers followed next. All three became

security guards. What they earned and saved for the next five years became their initial capital for Salam's biggest fish stalls. Life is better in Salam, the brothers say. They don't see themselves going back to Mindanao; they don't see any reason to. Salama, their mother, when asked if Salam is home for her, shakes her head and repeats over and over, "*Julo*."<sup>6</sup>

Many of the early Salam residents thought of themselves as refugees in the city. "*Kasabay ng awit ng nanay ang putok ng baril* ('Along with our mothers' lullabies were the shots of guns')," remembers Abdul. If you are not in the army, the soldiers think you are a rebel; and if you are not a rebel, the rebels think you are with the army. In Cotabato, he was always in the middle of the crossfire, always in fear that one side would finally get him. Abdul left Cotabato and arrived in Manila as Martial Law began. Bapa Haji Masud remembers that "*Sa Mindanao, kung sino ang may baril siya ang pakikikinggan. Kaya magulo sa Mindanao labat may baril...Ang hirap sa Mindanao, may gulo parati. Hindi ka makapaghanapbuhay. Masisira ang tinda. Delikado ang buhay mo...Marami na ang namatay.*" ('In Mindanao, people listen to whoever holds the gun. Everybody has a gun in Mindanao that's why it's chaotic. Livelihood is damaged. Lives are always in peril...Many have died.')

In 2000, as the separatist movement in Mindanao escalated,<sup>7</sup> then President Estrada declared his mandate of "All-out War." The escalation of fighting resulted in 50,000 displaced people and the destruction of homes and farmlands all over the region (Watanabe, 2008, p. 75). As a result, more people left Mindanao.

Abdul recounts that for the longest time he did not return to Cotabato. He feels shame in not being there, shame in turning his back from the southern Philippines: "*Nahiya ako sa pagtalikod ko sa amin. Matagal din hindi ko ginampanan ang pagka-Muslim ba. Pero naniniwala pa rin ako sa Dios syempre. Mahalaga 'yan sa buhay. Kaya ngayon, bumabawi tayo sa Allah.*" ('I felt ashamed for leaving our home. I was not a Muslim for a long time. But I still believe – that's important in life. So, now I try to make it up to Allah.')

Danny, a Maguindanaoan from Cotabato, has been in Salam since the early 1990s. Twice married with five children, he has been unemployed for some time. He scrapes a living by selling vegetables left over from the market rush, displayed on a table in front of his house. He usually watches over his children while his wife is at work. His sale is usually a pittance, but he considers himself fortunate than most to have a roof over his head:

*Tabimik naman dito. Wala masyadong nakikialam...Eto, bantay muna ng mga anak. Medyo wala tayong trabaho ngayon. Mahirap talaga ang panahon.*

*Mahirap din makabanap ng trabaho. Lalo na 'pag Muslim ka. Nalalaman din kasi nila na Muslim ka e...May mga kakilala nga ako, college graduate naman pero kabit sikyo, hirap makatrabaho. Hirap na rin ang panahon...pero buti na rin dito. (We live in fair quiet here. Not many interfere with us. I take care of the kids as I am unemployed. It's difficult to get a job as a Muslim; they'd know if you are one. I know Muslims who are college graduates yet couldn't get a job. Times are difficult...but it is good here.)*

One of the reasons cited for the rapid shift of population from rural to urban areas is that most of the opportunities for economic growth have been in urban areas (Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2004, p.7). Studies on Muslim migration have pointed to poverty and insecurity as the reasons for the movement of peoples. Many of the communities in Mindanao, overwhelmed by military offensives, remain in disarray and without basic services (Kadil, 1986; Watanabe, 2007).

For many of Salam's residents it is a haven of peace, an escape from former hometowns mired in violence and death.

### **Northern Marginality: Flexing Constructions of Identity**

In relocating to Salam many of its residents have become part of the urban labor force. The men of Salam find work as laborers, drivers, and helpers. Many become security guards or bodyguards. "*Ang akala kasi, 'pag Muslim, matapang, war-freak. Kaya madalas, sikyo kami* ('People think that Muslims are brave and war freaks. That's why we often get hired as guards')," explained Jay, the youngest of the Hajid brothers. It may be one of the contradictions of Salam that men who find legitimate work do so as security guards and policemen, keepers of peace, as persons in authority, while those who could not, it is said in hushed tones, work for the underground, in the trade of illegal drugs. In this circumstance, the men inadvertently perpetuate the notion of the "Muslim war freak" to find work, consciously or unconsciously complicit in perpetuating a disadvantage and a risk. The national saga for peace is at the same time the discourse of terrorism where characters and peoples are profiled and labeled their parts in the news.

Every now and then there would be a reminder of Salam's facet as the underbelly of the metropolis; there would be whispers of its shadow economy. In between conspiratorial "*Atin-atin lang ito ha...*" ('Just between us...') "*Humag ka maglalakad dito sa Salam ng gabi. Ang kaya ko nga lang, maglakad dito, dyan sa malaking kalsada...Naku, delikado dito* ('Do not walk around Salam at night. I

only do on the main street...It is dangerous around here’),” one is quickly reassured with, “...*pero normal lang man ‘yan*” (‘but that’s just normal’).

Raissah relates how only a week earlier, there was a drug bust where one alleged suspect was killed. It is at night when things happen, she says. “*Yung mga tambay, hanggang madaling aram, nagtitinda ‘yan...may mga naka de-service na pumapasok dito na bumibili. Madalas may raid dito, mga NBI.*” (‘They sell until the early hours of the morning... they come in their cars to buy. Police raids happen often, by the NBI’), adds Raissah. She says the leaders and elders of the community reprimand those who are caught drinking alcohol (forbidden in Islam) and try to stop the gang fights. The drugs are harder to control. She adds:

*Di ko nga rin alam kung sinu-sino dito ang dealers, madami talaga! Mahibawan na lang ‘pag naa na’y raid. May mga matatanda, may mga bata din, may mga babae pa nga! Di mo talaga alam kung sino ang okay o hindi. Pasagdan na lang kay mabadloke dari. Sa amo-a pala-away man ko, awayon nako na sila, pero dari hilom lang. (I don’t know who the dealers are. There are many! People find out when there’s a raid. They could be old people, kids, there are even women. We just let it be because it scares us. Back home I’m quarrelsome. I would quarrel with these people, but here [in Salam] I’m quiet.)*

Community members explain that police raids come in two forms: as drug-busts or as a “show of force” of the government’s anti-terrorism campaign. Every time there are bombings in Mindanao, police raids would usually happen in Salam and other Muslim communities in Metro Manila. Police scour the communities for terrorists. Residents would be accused of harboring criminals. They lament that when the raids reach the news it only aggravates the already mired reputation of Salam.

Abdul never forgets that he is Muslim. He has a Muslim name and lives in Salam. Both facts, he said, have cost him many opportunities. “*Hindi makapasok sa trabaho dahil sa ‘Abdul.’ Alam n’yo naman, medyo takot ang mga tao sa Muslim.*” (‘I couldn’t get a job because of my name, ‘Abdul’. You know people are afraid of Muslims.’)

Wadud, a Tausog father of two, started college but was unable to finish his Criminology degree. He now makes a living as a tricycle driver and a part-time *barangay tanod*. When he tries to find work outside the compound, he devises a tactic, “*Si Ali, nagiging Alex para makapagtrabaho.*” (‘Ali becomes ‘Alex’ just so I could get a job.’)

“*Jay ay Jamal talaga. Nabirapan din kasi ang iba sabihin ang pangalan ko.*” (“Jay’ is really ‘Jamal.’ It’s hard for others to say my real name.”) Jay goes through lengths to explain how he has to “de-Muslimize” his name as his way to “urbanize,” to accommodate and be accommodated in the city. In the city, one must have an urbanite’s name; what in Christian parlance would be equivalent to “Pedrito” from the barrio becoming “Pete” in the city. Among Muslims, names introduce the fundamentals of their personhood. Names do not only identify them but also define them as persons belonging to a culture with a set of social subpractices and to a particular religion with defined beliefs. Names in the case of Jamal, Ali and Abdul are assertions of identity and also markers for subordination. When Jamal becomes Jay, Jamal subjects himself to the norms and standards beyond the walls of Salam.<sup>8</sup>

The practice of name-changing is not without historical context. Colonial (Spanish and American) personifications of Muslims persist in contemporary Filipino language; terms such as *amok* and *juramentado* are words derived from early Moro acts of resistance, loosely translated to mean someone who goes berserk, or is warlike, or a war freak (Tarling, 1992). Such notions were used to instill fear of the Moro and to rationalize often violent practices to subdue the “dangerous Moro warrior who runs amok.”<sup>9</sup>

The struggle in the northern urban city presents a two-fold stigma for Salam residents — that of being poor and the implications of being Muslim. A resident of Salam is constantly made aware of his or her status in the city. The patterns of spatial and identity regulations make them conscious of this. According to Bapa Haji Masud, “*Mga Muslim ay terrorists daw. Pero terrorism is bad sa Islam, ayaw ni Allah ito. Wala ‘yan sa Quor’an. Pero ‘yan palagi ang nasa news...Kaya buti din na nag-aaral tayo.*” (“People say Muslims are terrorists. But terrorism is bad in Islam; Allah is against this. That is not in the Quor’an. But that’s always what’s [projected] in the news...So, it’s good that we study.”) Jamal surmises, “*Kaya din ok dito sa Salam kasi pare-pareho kaming Muslim sa loob.*” (“That’s why it’s okay here in Salam, because we’re all Muslims here.”)

Stereotypes, constructions of identities, both burden and label those who live within Salam. Salam residents, specifically male Muslim urban poor, are constantly reappropriating and renegotiating their identities. Adopted as mechanisms of accommodation, the stereotypes of being “war freak” and “terrorists” are reappropriated as favorable traits of bravery and courage — highly desirable in security work — allowing them entry into the formal labor sector as security guards, body guards, stuntmen and, in a few instances, as policemen. Christianized name equivalents become the mechanism to acquire

work, to fit in and be deemed credible in a non-Muslim world. The tactic is at the same time forced acquiescence to a regulation that portrays how identity has become ever more “relational and determined” and politically constructed (Escobar, 2007; Laclau, 2000). The practice reflects the relationship of the subordinate and the dominant, suggesting that more than the flexibility of identity-making, it is oppression through the determination of acceptable identity (Escobar, 2007, p.252). The city forces the residents to employ tactics for fitting-in, to flex and employ mechanisms of accommodation and resistance.

For the women, Salam presents a space for flexibility. Most of them find work as sales girls, maids, and store attendants in the city. Many of the women in Salam are entrepreneurial, the majority are in the informal sector selling *kakanin* (rice cakes). A few run their own businesses of sari-sari stores and *ukay* (secondhand) shops. Most of them go about their everyday lives without veils<sup>10</sup>. The Omar women from Cotabato, a household of nine middle-aged cousins, widowed aunts, divorced sisters, and young nieces, echo Abdul’s challenge of the city: “*Dito sa Manila, kumayod ka lang, may kikitain ka na. Lalo kung magbenta ng kakanin. [Doon] Sa amin, nakadepende kami sa asawa. Wala masyadong pagkakakitaan. Mahirap.*” (‘Here in Manila, if you just work you will earn...Especially if you sell food. Back home we were just dependent on our husbands. And there was little means to earn anything. It was difficult.’) Like the Omar women, Farida, a Maguindanaoan from Zamboanga, found herself in Manila. She said, “*Wala nang trabaho sa Mindanao. Kailangan naming maghanap ng trabaho. Na-lay-off asawa dahil natalo na ‘yung politikong boss nya.*” (‘There are no more jobs left in Mindanao. We had to leave to find work. My husband was laid off when the politico he was working for lost.’)

The Omar cousins are in their working clothes preparing their *kakamins*, clad in jeans and blouses, lipstick on, and with their hair let loose. They laugh at the idea of a religious patrol around Salam, saying: “*Ay wala na ‘yan dito. Sa Cotabato meron kaya ingat doon, baka kalubuin ka. Pero dito, okey lang. Modern na dito e. At mainit kung nakabelo?*” (‘People don’t mind around here. In Cotabato you have to be careful or they shave your hair. But here it’s okay. It’s modern. Besides, it’s hot under a veil!’) There is a sense of resistance, a kind of glee in Sorayda’s back talk against what she perceives as a patriarchal and constricting religious tradition. Noticeably, the younger residents wear typical streets clothes. Among the young, religious or ethnic backgrounds are not distinct. Identity, it seems, has become unfixed in the urban setting. Bapa Haji Masud regards this as problematic. As a Muslim community, everyone is encouraged to pray five times a day. This is the way in Mindanao, he insists, but the city has changed the ways of the young people in Salam. “*Kristiyano o Muslim, iba na talaga mga bata,*

*wild na maski saan,*” (“Christians or Muslims, the youth are really different these days. Kids everywhere are wild.”) he says. He remarks that this may be the ways of the modern times but it is not the right path; Allah is greatly displeased.

The city restricts but at the same time allows a space for breathing. Women find a semblance of freedom and the youth thrive in their unfixed identities, even as the elders bemoan that tradition has become a casualty of the changing times. For the women, their new location marks a transition in their traditional gender roles for better or for worse. Those who were considered to be in traditionally dependent roles have transitioned to become active economic providers for the family, implicating not only political but also economic persuasions in the reconfiguration social dynamics.

The general misappreciation of Salam, related usually with that of its residents’ perceived participation in the conflicts in Mindanao and as an informal settlement in the city,<sup>11</sup> engender stereotypical constructions of identity that become the premise for Salam’s unsavory reputation. Salam is known as a no-man’s land where drug dealing is an everyday fact and where terrorists hide out. When Salam is featured in the news, it is usually for police raids, insinuations of clan feuds, or a news alert bannered “Abu Sayyaf member nabbed in drug bust.”<sup>12</sup> Salam is dislocated in the city, seemingly out of place and out of synch within the cosmopolitanism of the modern urban landscape. At the same time, Salam plays an integral role in the meta-narrative of the urban epic as the villain, the sinister representation of the city, its residents handed out predetermined roles. Jamal, Ali, and Abdul become the characters that symbolize the idea of the Moro warrior running amok.

Those who now live in the city continue to negotiate themes of struggle in the southern Philippines, contested ethnic and cultural boundaries and identities.

### **Sojourns to the Middle of the East: Saudi Dreaming**

Danny gave indication that Salam was not just another urban settlement, that it had another specialized function – Salam has become a deployment stage for overseas domestic help:

*Di ko na gaano kilala mga tao kabit na matagal na kami dito. Paiba-iba na ang mga tao dito. Dating-alis. Karamihan dito sa Salam, galing talaga ng probinsya. At pumupunta dito sa Manila, nagbahanap ng trabaho. Marami dito, naghibintay lang matawag para sa abroad. Gusto ng marami makaalis. Mag-abroad.* (We’ve been here a long time, but I don’t

know many of the people here now. People come and go these days. Many come here from the provinces. They come to Manila to find work. Most of them want to leave, to go abroad.)

*Kadalasan ngayon, mga babae. Aalis ang mga 'yan para magpa-DH sa Saudi, Yemen, sa Middle East. Ang babata pa nga nila. Aalis ang mga 'yan.....Marami dito, titira lang sandali. Tapos 'pag natanggap na sa trabaho, alis agad...* (Most of them are female. They will leave to become DH [domestic helpers] in Saudi, Yemen, in the Middle East. They are very young. They will leave. Many of them will stay here for a while but once find employment they leave...)

Danny explained that many women who come to the city come to Salam to stay with relatives or with recruiters. He explains that some of the taller houses are actually dormitories. Recruiters own most of the larger houses in Salam. A good portion of Salam's population is composed of transient, hopeful overseas workers, mostly young women recruited from the provinces to work for Middle Eastern households.

In the 1980s, a large number of overseas contract workers (OCWs) – 85% of the total OCWs – were destined for the Middle East (Orbeta & Obrigo, 2009). The deployment continues in Salam. It continues amidst the government's mixed statements on overseas employment for Filipinos, hailing them as modern heroes on one hand (Rupert & Solomon, 2006, p. 88), and calling for more employment options locally to reduce the number of overseas workers by way of parlaying calls for protection for abused workers abroad on the other hand (DOLE, 2010).

Ate Farah is an Iranon who has been living in Salam for the past three years. Finding no work in Pagadian, she and her husband set out for Manila. She complains about the “no vacancy” policy for Muslims, “...*sabihin nila, no vacancy daw pero meron naman. Wala din naman ginagawa ang gobyerno dito.*” (“They would tell you that there is no vacancy when there actually is. The government isn't doing anything about this.”) Her husband was in public service for 20 years working as a staff member for local politicians. He was always a “casual” employee who was never given a formal appointment. When the budget cuts came, he was let go. Her niece is married to a Salam resident. It was through this network that the couple reached Salam. Ate Farah now works as a recruiter. Her network comprises contacts and referrals from back home. She conducts her business in the house of her nephew. She said his stature in the community affords her protection.

All of Ate Farah's recruits are women and are prospecting as domestic helpers in the Middle East. She explains that it is usually difficult for women from the province to apply for other "better" work. The placement fee of approximately P50,000.00 is so much more than what most of the women could afford. It takes about a month to place someone for Saudi and Dubai, and about five to six months for Qatar (Fig. 4). If the applicant is a Christian, she has to pay for her own medical exam. If the applicant is Muslim, the medical exam fee is waived. She is proud to have around 20 recruits in her "stable." The women are mostly relatives and friends from the province, she explains. Some of them have been waiting in Salam for more than a year. While waiting, most of the women are housed in crowded dormitories. They number 50 to 100 at a time. Many of the girls who come to Salam are able to leave for abroad. Some are forced to go back to the province. She said that in some extreme situations, when the recruit's savings start dwindling, unmarried girls opt to get married to "escape" from their difficult recruiters. Whenever they can, the women learn Arabic prayers or *salah*. They were told that most employers take well to someone who knows how to pray.

Ate Farah shares her growing concern that a number of the applicants are under-age: "*Ang ginagawa ng hindi mabuting recruiter, dino-doktor 'yung birth certificate. Mas madali 'to gawin sa probinsya. Madali lang kausapin ang mga tao.*" ('What some unscrupulous recruiters do is to 'doctor' birth certificates. The 'doctoring' is best done in the province, where it is easier to talk to the officials.') The young recruits are made to put on make-up to make them look more mature. Her youngest recruit, her own niece, is 16 years old. She says, "*Pag mas bata dyan, hindi na din maganda.*" ('Any younger than that is no longer good.') When her niece applied for a visa she was denied. "*Nagmukha siguro s'yang mas bata sa edad na sinabi n'yang twenty-one,*" ('She must've have looked younger than her declared age of twenty-one.') says Ate Farah. Her niece plans to wait for one or two more years before reapplying. Perhaps, Ate Farah said, at 18, she will look 21. In the meantime, her niece will go back home to the province to help her family. It is a sacrifice that a woman makes for the sake of her family, she explains; the children for their parents, and the mothers for their children. A study on the implications of migration on family structures in Southeast Asia (Devashayam, 2008) found that both gender and marital status of the worker significantly impact family life, especially for mothers, who are "the focal point of social relationships in the family." (p. 5)

**Figure 4. While waiting to be called abroad, a young recruit plays with her paper cut-out doll.**

**Photo by Lawrence Dizon Sumulong. Used with permission.**



Arab households prefer to have Muslim help so recruiters would usually go to Mindanao. The agency gets the equivalent of two months' salary of a recruit. As a recruiter, Ate Farah gets a commission from her "suki" agency worth one-month salary of each recruit. At times, the girls themselves send her extra money, her "tip," as their way of thanking her. As a recruiter, she said, it is very important to check with the agency to see how your recruit is doing:

*Depende ito sa asikaso ng agency. May pinapabayaan na lang ang mga DH doon. Ako, kakilala ko kasi halos ang mga pamilya nila kaya sa akin nangungumusta. Marami din naabuso, nari-rape, nabubugbog. Kailangan talaga, bantay at ingat. (It depends on how agencies look after their recruits. There are those who leave the DH on their own abroad. I know most of the women's families. They ask about them through me. There are many who get abused, raped, and beaten up. Vigilance and caution are really necessary.)*

The Omar women are Middle East veterans. Aissa has been to Abu Dhabi four times and Aida was leaving in a month's time for her fifth contract. It isn't rare, Aissa said, that even after experiencing abuse abroad women still go back. She goes, she said, not because she is fearless but because she has no choice.

Ate Farah went to Saudi in the late 1980s, and then went to Kuwait and Riyadh for two years in each place. Her résumé includes being part of the contingent of Filipino workers who escaped during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Her employers wanted her to stay with them but believing her life would be in danger, she decided to leave for the nearest Filipino embassy. It took the contingent weeks to cross the desert. She recounts days of extreme cold, heat, and dehydration during the desert crossing until she was able to come back to the Philippines. Unfazed, she went back to the Middle East for one more contract. She said that being a domestic helper is not a bad job, but cautions that one must beg Allah for good masters. One must also get used to the humiliating conditions of the work: “*Parati kang nasisigawan. Mabilig sumigaw ang mga Arabo. Pero ganun na lang talaga siguro sila. Kaya tiis na lang.*” (‘You always get shouted at. Arabs tend to shout a lot. Perhaps that’s how they are. You just have to endure.’) She has been lucky, she said; hers is not the usual story. She has heard of many domestic workers in the Middle East, some of them she knew personally, who were abused and raped. She looks at recruiting as her way of paying back her good fortune, and does her best to look after the girls.

Ate Farah reflects on the movement of women from local communities in Mindanao; how, she said, as a result there have been changing social configurations back home: “*Wala nang dalaga sa probinsya... labat na nasa abroad o gustong mag-abroad. Yung mga babae iniinwan na lang nila ang mga anak sa asawang lalaki.*” (‘There are no longer young women left in the provinces. They’re either abroad or want to go abroad. The women leave their kids to their husbands.’) There are only mostly old people, husbands and children. The girls whose families could no longer afford to send them to school are sent to Manila to apply for work abroad: “*Ang iba, ayaw na rin mag-aral. Bakit pa, wala naman trabaho din dito. Kaya abroad na lang.*” (‘Others don’t want to study anymore. Why bother when there are no jobs. They might as well go abroad.’)

The Philippines is among the major sources of labor in Southeast Asia. There are claims that it is now far more viable for Filipinos to secure employment abroad than locally (Go, 2002). Most of the women migrant workers find employment abroad in what are characterized as low- end or dangerous, difficult and dirty jobs, mostly doing domestic work (Devashayam, 2008; Huguet, 2003).

In the early days of Salam, it was the destination. The early migrants to Salam were mostly families who want to take refuge from the crossfire in Mindanao. Nowadays, Salam is a stopover in transit. No longer the destination but the deployment center. The prospect of being able to work abroad resulted in the surge of women to Salam. As a result, Salam has expanded its functions; not only does it support the “local” urban formal and informal labor sector but is now also the hub for a specialized work force on a global scale. Ever more so, Salam is now characterized by transience (Fig. 5).

**Figure 5. Waiting in Salam. A young woman sitting on top one of the unfinished houses in Salam.**

**Photo by Lawrence Dizon Sumulong. Used with permission.**



The flux of women going abroad has created a change in the social order in the family. Families in the south are being reconfigured. Women are becoming breadwinners and men caretakers in what was a dominantly and prevalently patriarchal configuration. It has also instigated the cultivation of women's labor for domestic help, skills and advice being passed on from mothers to daughters, from aunts to nieces, from grandmothers to granddaughters. Traditional and religious instructions have given way to instructions for workplace viability. The women are the emergent characters, poignant symbols, to the pragmatics of survival. It is ironic, reflected Ronald, a community organizer for overseas migrant workers, that only the police raids would reach the news and hardly ever the plight of Salam's women overseas workers.

### **Locating, Flexing in the Margins**

In Salam there is an anxious atmosphere of survival. One senses this in the undercurrents of the hushed talks about the illegal drug trade, the harried walks of the vendors, and the ardent and anxious waiting of the recruits to be called abroad. Everyone is waiting to be located.

The features of Salam – half-finished houses, half-paved alleyways, a mosque that waits for completion – all speak of pining. Dislocated from the south, Salam has become a tiny slice of Mindanao, a transplanted community trying to approximate remembered old places. The people holding on to old ways but mediating with the new. As it attempts to keep tradition, Salam cannot

help but be thrown into the new order of things. It has become not just a passive recipient of a globalizing world but has become one of its staging areas. With its participation, it has become accessory to the changing social configurations of its own locality, extending to the localities farther south. The conflicts and the crossfire only add to the perpetuation of Salam's participation in the global labor chain. Salam is a symptom, if not a case study, for the effects of conflict-situations, neoliberal policies, and issues of marginalization (San Juan, 2009). On the surface, the underground economic practices in Salam present a tactical empowerment for survival as it goes against what is legitimate in the purview of the State. But the tactics find their actors entrapped in a quagmire of greater loss, further subjectified. Banking on mystifying constructions of identity, the men become complicit in perpetuating their representations as feared and marginalized peoples. When residents speak in hushed tones of brave but violent drug actors eking out a living for their families, they unwittingly provide the state a legitimate stake for their regulation and for the others a rationale for fear. When recruiters speak of an underage girl's sublime sacrifice for her family, the script acquiesces to the rationalization of the girl's entrapment into a social and economic condition that binds her and her family to the impositions of a global labor market. The conditions that allow these circumstances to occur in Salam implicate a bigger system, one that legitimizes policies that promote and perpetuate marginality, one that supports disparities in the local-urban and global labor arenas. The dislocation of Salam in the city, seemingly out of place and out of synch in the urban landscape, is ultimately a symptom of oppression, a continuing project for marginality. When "underground" practices begin to be normalized such that they become the norm for survival, there must be something to be said of the structures that allow for these to exist and, in Salam's case, to even thrive. They foreground forms of violence that are becoming more insidious. It begins in the south with military incursions and continues to expand manifesting in labor and gender relations and identity constructions.

The stories from Salam forward not only allegories of cultural descriptions, but morally charged stories about marginality and subjectification (Clifford, 1986, pp. 99-100). Its location and its connection with cosmopolitan Manila are embattled in the impositions of meanings, identities, and labels. The city only offers negotiated opportunities. Salam is a paradox offering flexibility and perpetuating marginality. In this small settlement, marked by walls from the greater urban hub, the residents of Salam make sense of the world around them and locate themselves in the flux of movements by reinterpreting and embellishing their exclusion, reappropriating identities and reinventing themselves (Tsing, 1993). Between the friction of tradition and urbanization, Salam residents

are finding ways to appropriate labels of stereotypes to an advantage — name-changing, appropriating the city’s homogenization practices, while struggling to keep the faith. They flex against marginality, striving to go beyond the metaphors and the literal structure of Salam’s walls.

Salam thrives because its people hear its call to prayer. Salam is built on kin, on the trading of stories and knowledge, on shared practices, on the social capital and security offered by families and friends. Salam is an arena where the challenge of marginality is met with innovative flexibility. As is common in the margins, it is flexibility, however, that is always at a cost for the marginalized.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Balik-Islam* refers to a person who converts to Islam. Within the faith, a more accurate meaning for it is someone who *returns* to the real faith.

<sup>2</sup> Watanabe (2008) reports that the compound was established in 1971. Funded by the Libyan government, the Philippine Islamic Directorate was formed comprising different Muslim leaders tasked to purchase land upon which to establish a “true” Islamic center; a community of and for Muslims in Metro Manila, one that was not in reality a refugee camp provided for Muslims escaping conflict in Mindanao as was common at the time (p. 80).

<sup>3</sup> *Bapa* is a term of respect accorded to elder men. They are respected for their experience and lineage and very often hold leadership positions in communities.

<sup>4</sup> In Watanabe’s reconstruction, it was in 1988 when members of the Iglesia ni Kristo claimed ownership of Salam by way of purchase. What ensued was a land dispute that forced many residents of Salam to seek haven elsewhere. This period marked the founding of other *offshoot* Muslim communities in other parts of Metro Manila: Baseco, Ermita, and Parañaque (Corpuz, 2003; Watanabe, 2008). Those who remained in Salam resisted the encroachment. The local government intervened by sending enforcements to force the eviction of residents, resulting in violent clashes and casualties (Watanabe, 2008, p. 74).

<sup>5</sup> According to Watanabe (2008), the land conflict generated a call to other Muslims to help their fellows in the struggle of Salam. Solidarity by way of continued demonstrations and lobbying, and with the support of the Saudi Arabian World League that funded the cost of litigation, vindicated the residents’ claim in the Supreme Court. In 1997, the sale to Iglesia ni Kristo was declared null and void (p. 80).

<sup>6</sup> Salama was born and raised in Julo, Sulo. Wishing to be near her children, she came with them to Salam.

<sup>7</sup> It was during this period that the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) breakaway group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the then newly formed Abu Sayyaf Group added further complexity to the power struggle in Mindanao. Initially,

the Abu Sayyaf became known as one of several militant Islamist separatist groups carrying out bombing, kidnappings, and assassinations as part of their tactics. The group later acquired a reputation for being a criminal gang, committing larceny, drug dealing, extortion, and kidnapping (Banlaoi, 2006).

<sup>8</sup>Escobar cites post-structuralism, particularly Foucault, to call attention to the “production of subjects” — those under the subject of power become objectified through “discipline and normalization,” in “as much as practices of subjectification that the subject performs on him or herself” (Escobar, 2007, pp. 251-252).

<sup>9</sup>Other cultural subpractices such as the *rido* feed into the imagery of the war-like Muslims. *Rido* is a Maranao term referring to community and kinship feuding marked by retaliatory violence between conflicting families or communities. According to a study on *rido* (Torres, 2007), the causes “are contextually varied and may be further complicated by a society’s sense and concept of honor and shame...proliferation of firearms, lack of law enforcers and credible mediators in conflict-prone areas, and an inefficient justice system all contribute to *rido*.” Often, when conflicts occur between and among Muslims in urban areas and are reported, the reports insinuate the conflicts as *ridos* or as “clan feuds.”

<sup>10</sup>A few of the women wear *burkas* and some of the men wear *gamis*; both are traditional Muslim clothing. The majority of the residents, however, wear “city” clothes.

<sup>11</sup>Even as the community has legitimate title over the land, Salam is often perceived and categorized as an informal settlement. It may have legal title, but its “displacement” in the urban landscape continues to render it as illicit.

<sup>12</sup>Search results from online news that featured Salam for the years 2009 to 2011 were mostly crime news related to drug raids. See Padua (2009), Agence France-Presse (2010), Manila Bulletin (2011), and Ragasa-Jimena (2011).

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