

## BOOK REVIEW

**Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr. (2009). *Maalwang Buhay: Family, overseas migration, and cultures of relatedness in Barangay Paraiso*. [With John Estanley Z. Penalosa, Tania Belen T. Liwanag, Resto S. Cruz I, and Jimmy M. Melendrez]. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press. 450 pages.**

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The experience of overseas migration has transformed Philippine society and most specially the Filipino family. This book investigates the social costs of migration in Barangay Paraiso, a community in the province of Batangas with an ever increasing number of migrant workers. Various relational entanglements found within both the family as well as the community, in the midst of a globalizing world, are illustrated in *Maalwang Buhay*. The book exposes how families have in a way disintegrated and how relationships within the family are negotiated and re-negotiated. It also shows how various individual efforts are made to preserve the relationships within the family and how a particular community invests in supporting its members, thus transforming it into a big “family.”

The book begins by introducing the village and its social history, wherein the reader gets a feel of the local conditions that are at work within the community such as poverty, intermarriage among early settlers of the place, and internal migration; as well as participation in local socio-economic activities (primarily farming and livestock raising). These activities are not seen to provide enough in terms of economic well-being. This leads to social mobility which is at first internal (meaning movement from Paraiso to Manila) and later on gives way to international migration. A section of the book further discusses the community's migration history by analyzing demographic data. The book is divided into 16 chapters relating to various forms of relationships created and re-created in the course of diaspora experiences. One focus is on the changing marriage customs and traditions brought about by migration patterns in the community. One chapter presents a specific case of a wedding between a migrant worker and his fiancée based in Barangay Paraiso, examining even relationships that are at work after the marriage ceremonies such as: those between parents and children,

and among siblings. Echoing many similar studies, migration has changed the marriage patterns in Barangay Paraiso. One observation is the postponement of marriage to a later age. Meanwhile, familial relationships between husbands and wives, and parents and children are portrayed to be threatened by migration. Husbands and wives are faced with the breakdown of marriages, and parents and children contend with indifference toward each other. Responding to these problems becomes an important role played by the extended family members as mediators and/or as a support group to the transnational family.

The meaningful role of “the house,” which becomes central to those who start a new life together, is also examined in this book. The house is a symbol of personal autonomy and a structure as well, which most of the time is considered as a migrant’s investment. The idea of personal autonomy arises from the tradition where married couples separate from their original families and create their own. Houses, as physical structures, are also seen as status symbols in the community. Sometimes too big for the migrant’s family, the houses are often left under the care of the relatives who are left back home.

With globalization, technology (particularly the use of mobile phones) plays a significant role in dealing with the communication needs of migrants and their families. Some parts of the book examine how these gadgets have replaced the old communication systems of snail mail and land line telephones. Mobile phones are presented as having become indispensable to both the migrant worker and the family member/s who are left behind.

The children are considered to be the most affected when one or both parents leave for overseas work, and several chapters of the book are focused on children. These sections discuss various notions of childhood among the community members, the child-parent (or kin caregiver) relationship in various ages of the child, and care-giving challenges. There are different transnational householding approaches: care is given to children of migrant workers either by the parents themselves and or relatives, and the book shows that this is an emotionally laden issue. As with other studies on children of migrations (Añonuevo & Añonuevo, 2002; Parreñas, 2005) there is an observed estranged relationship between the absent parent/s and the child no matter how the former try to bridge whatever gap has arisen. On the other hand, care-givers face the dilemma of drawing the boundaries as to their responsibility over the child, especially on issues of instilling discipline.

Education is considered important by the community and children are encouraged to pursue their studies. Migrants’ children are seen to be more privileged since their parents can afford to send them to better schools (private

schools) and they are able to pursue tertiary education. Because of this, education has become an indicator of “social distinction and stratification.” However, schools are not only seen as a place for learning but as part of a larger “care giving network” as well. Teachers and counsellors are envisioned to play a role in “caring” for migrants’ children. Those who share similar experiences with children of migrant workers are seen as sympathetic and responsive to the needs of these children.

Relationships in the context of internal and international migration are sometimes maintained and forgotten by members of the community. One reason for losing communication with some of their relatives, considering distant geographical locations, is the absence of mobile communication. On the other hand, it is but interesting that relationships with those who are overseas are fostered. The last chapter provides a conclusion on overseas migration and cultures of relatedness.

Many of the findings of the study support the results of previously conducted studies on migration. Though there is already a lot of literature investigating migration experiences, this book should be considered an important contribution to the study of communities in diaspora. As suggested in the title, the book has tackled issues on family, overseas migration, and the culture of relatedness in a community in Batangas. It is interesting that the migration phenomenon was investigated around kinship ties among the members of the community. The author has portrayed the importance of these ties in the preservation of the transnational families, an issue which is usually taken for granted. *Maalwang Buhay* is able to present the interrelatedness of these concepts through the experiences of the community members.

The author put into context how a particular community has experienced continuous migration over a span of almost three decades. Both the quantitative and qualitative methods of research used in the investigation of the overseas migration phenomenon in the said community have contributed to a rich illustration of its diaspora experience. The quantitative data provide a general picture of what transpires in Barangay Paraiso. On the other hand, the qualitative data make a concrete case of a migrant’s experiences. Data from both research methods complemented each other and have given a clearer picture of the socio-cultural terrain of the community under investigation. The extensive documentation conducted by the researchers has provided a complex picture of the interactions that transpire within the community at focus. The reflections and views of the participants of the study did not only give them faces but emotions as well, thus giving the study a human side. Having said this, Aguilar’s

book has allowed the reader to enter the different worlds within the community and gain a sense of how these are being shaped and re-shaped.

It would have been interesting, however, if the study could have been supplemented by a section dedicated to problematizing the concept of *maalwang buhay* ('the good life'), which is the title of the book. Who can be considered to be having such a life? Can *maalwang buhay* be achieved locally or only through overseas migration? Are the relational costs worth it?

The reviewer, as a scholar who is interested in studying communities in diaspora, considers the book to be recommended reading. One can draw inspiration in conducting a similar study of another community from the book's methods of research. Another admirable part of the book is the inclusion of sections on sharing of findings to the members of Barangay Paraiso, as well as identifying practical applications of the study. Getting feedback from those who are subject of the study validates the findings, thus giving more credibility to the results. Indeed, the study is not only to be consumed by academicians but also by policy makers.

## REFERENCES

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