BALIK-ISLAM IN THE PHILIPPINES:
REVERSION, SYMBOLIC NEGOTIATION,
AND BECOMING
THE OTHER

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
OF RELIGION

by
Marybeth T. Acac
August 2020

Examinining Committee Members:

Dr. Zain Abdullah, Advisory Chair, Department of Religion
Dr. Terry Rey, Department of Religion
Dr. Sydney White, Department of Religion
Dr. Vivienne Angeles, External Member, LaSalle University
ABSTRACT

Although the majority of Filipinos are Christian, recent developments reflect an upsurge in conversion to Islam, particularly in the northern Philippines. This dissertation examines one of the fastest growing religious phenomena in Southeast Asia, Balik-Islam, which means “reverts to Islam,” or the process of “returning to Islam.” The Balik-Islam movement has become popular since the 1970s, and its religious narratives on Muslim reversion challenge and complicate what we already know generally about conversion to new religions, including the impact of the external “non-religious” factors associated with it. This dissertation shows how a discourse of “reversion” among Balik-Islam members reveals complex realities about the appeal of Islam to Filipinos. While other scholars have used paradigms concerning “othering” and underlying “symbolic” forces to understanding the reasons why conflict and crisis might appear in conversion narratives, this characterization also tends to reify religion and position Christianity and Islam as polar opposites operating within a hostile environment. My approach is to understand how Balik-Islam members negotiate their transition to Islam by virtue of social and cultural settings that are both fluid and multifaceted. By critically assessing their “reversion” narratives, this dissertation reveals how their transition to Islam reflects a “symbolic negotiation,” or an act of reimagining the process of religious conversion itself, substituting it for a discourse of reversion that reflects a diverse set of spiritual and social needs.
For my parents.

*Maraming salamat sa pagmamahal ninyo sa akin
at sa walang sawa ninyong pagsuporta at pasensya.

*Ito po para sa inyo.*
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“Life happens to you while doing a PhD,” my advisor would remind me whenever I felt disheartened, overwhelmed, or fatigued during the course of my doctoral studies. With heartfelt encouragement and candor, he explained: “The journey of the doctorate isn’t outside your life. It’s deeply a part of it, including the ups and downs.” His words capture precisely what this dissertation means to me. It represents a considerable part of my life—essentially the vehicle through which I journeyed to become the person I am today.

To my doctoral advisor, Dr. Zain Abdullah—thank you for allowing me to embrace the ups and downs of life and transform these experiences into a critical and, I hope, positive contribution to the scholarly study of religion. Your mentorship, understanding, and optimism has impacted my life far beyond this PhD program.

To my dissertation committee: Dr. Terry Rey, Dr. Sydney White, and Dr. Vivienne Angeles—I am indebted to your kindness and am honored to have had the opportunity to work with you these many years. Terry, your insights on Bourdieu and our discussions on religious conversion inspired the notion of “symbolic negotiation”, as presented in this thesis. Sydney, your expertise on the religious dimensions of labor and migration provided me with invaluably fresh perspective. Vivienne, your pioneering work on Islam in the Philippines laid the necessary groundwork for my research to come into fruition. I thank each of you for your patience, feedback, and continued support.

To the members of the Balik-Islam community who graciously welcomed me into your lives—into your homes and offices, and into some of your deepest, most profound thoughts about the human condition and life hereafter, I am eternally grateful for your cooperation, trust, and goodwill.
To family and friends who directly and indirectly supported my efforts to complete my research, fieldwork, and writing, please know I could not have done any of this without you. It is your love and support that enabled me to accomplish what oftentimes felt like the impossible. Special thanks goes to the Villegas family, who adopted me as their own during my time in the Philippines. Tita Liza, Tito Joey, Jygz, Iya, and Vonti—your capacity for love and sacrifice embody the best of Filipino culture.

To the Oliver family—your steadfast support and understanding gave me the strength I needed to make it to the finish line. Krystle Corpuz and Erin Guinn-Villareal—when I asked for a helping hand, you offered to carry me forward. To my sisters, Ate Bevan and Marielle—when I needed a listening ear, you paused your world to attend to mine. To my mom and dad—you placed me on your shoulders so I could reach the stars.

To my partner and best friend, Ryan—you inspired me to persevere and renewed my will to succeed. To my son, Kobe—you breathed new life into my universe and gave me a higher purpose than I believed possible. I love you more than I can comprehend.

To Filipinos around the world—especially those working overseas, far from the comforts of home—I hope this dissertation does justice to your service and sacrifice. And to Carmen Cordoviz—your story continues to motivate me to use my privilege as a platform for voices that might otherwise go unheard. May you rest in peace.
CHAPTER

1. THE ISLAM OF RETURNING AND REVERTING ........................................1
   Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1
   How I Got Here ....................................................................................................... 6
   Research Questions and Scope ............................................................................ 10
   Chapter Outline ................................................................................................. 17

2. TOPOGRAPHY OF REVERSION IN THE PHILIPPINES ............................ 23
   Introduction .......................................................................................................... 23
   Reproducing the Muslim Other: Spanish Reconquista in Asia .......................... 28
   Enforcing Division through Integration: American Occupation and Politics of
   Filipinization ....................................................................................................... 33
   Navigating between Moro and Christian: Filipino Born-Again Muslims .......... 46
   Reverting to a Globalized Islam: Deterritorialized and Translocal Muslims ...... 50
3. APPROACHING REVERSION THROUGH “SYMBOLIC NEGOTIATION”........58

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 58
Reexamining the Stage Approach ........................................................................ 61
Symbolic Universe ............................................................................................. 67
Symbolic Battle ................................................................................................... 72
Theory of Practice ............................................................................................... 76
  Habitus ............................................................................................................... 77
  Field .................................................................................................................. 78
  Capital ............................................................................................................... 78
The Three Ds of Symbolic Negotiation ............................................................. 86
  Diaspora ......................................................................................................... 90
  Discord .......................................................................................................... 91
  Da‘wah .......................................................................................................... 91
Case study #1: Ibrahim ..........................................................................................92
Case Study #2: Omar ............................................................................................94
Case #3: Maryam ..................................................................................................96
Scope and Limitations of Symbolic Negotiation .............................................100

4. DIASPORA: THE PHILIPPINE LABOR MARKET ........................................102

ISCAG ................................................................................................................. 102
Introduction ........................................................................................................ 112
Field: The Labor Brokerage .............................................................................117
Habitus: “Bagong Bayani” (Modern-day Heroes) ...........................................127
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capital: “Flexible Non-Citizenship”</th>
<th>137</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. DISCORD: DISRUPTION AND DISORIENTATION OVERSEAS</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryam</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field: Trials and Tribulations</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rambo’s “crisis”</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iyadurai’s “disenchantment” and “crunch”</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wohlrab-Sahr’s “Symbolic Battle”</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitus: Suffering and Sacrifice</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital: Faith and Hope</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. DA‘WAH: AN INVITATION TO PAG-ASA (HOPE)</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibrahim</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field: Answering the Call</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitus: “Utang na loob” (Indebtedness)</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital: Pakikisama (Togetherness/Cooperation)</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatives</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pag-asa (Hope)</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. CONCLUSIONS: PROSPECTS FOR SYMBOLIC NEGOTIATION</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omar</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BIBLIOGRAPHY .......................................................................................................................... 223

APPENDICES

A. BALIK-ISLAM DATA .............................................................................................................. 239

B. APPROVED INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) PROTOCOL:
DETAILED RESEARCH DESIGN, INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, AND
SURVEY ........................................................................................................................................... 240
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Factors of Symbolic Negotiation</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Comparison of Stage Approach Models with Symbol Negotiation</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2016 Survey on Overseas Filipinos, Summary of Findings</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Deployed Land-based Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) by Top 10 Destinations.</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Deployed Land-based Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) by Top 10 Destinations.</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Top 5 Destinations for Filipino Citizens Living and/or Working Overseas.</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Demographic population data from ISCAG sampling</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**LIST OF FIGURES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sultanates and Muslim Settlements, 1565.</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Map of the Philippines displaying Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Relationship and Geographic Origin of Christians, Born Muslims, and Born-Again Muslims in the Philippines.</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Origins of Symbolic Negotiation.</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Lewis Rambo’s Systemic Model of Conversion</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Joshua Iyadurai’s Seven-Step Model of Transformative Religious Experiences</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Sociological Paradigms and their Corresponding Levels of Analysis</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Configuration of Fundamental Concepts in Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice.</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Analysis of Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice Toward Theorizing Balik-Islam.</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Relationship between Three Ds (Fields), Habitus, Capital, and Symbolic Negotiation (SN) within a Symbolic Universe.</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. The Structure of the Field of Diaspora within a Symbolic Universe.</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. The Structure of the Field of Discord within a Symbolic Universe.</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. The Structure of the Field of Da’wah within a Symbolic Universe.</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF PHOTOS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photo</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ISCAG school building and basketball courts.</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ISCAG administrative offices and apartment residences.</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mosque construction and medical clinic.</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Islamic Studies Call and Guidance (ISCAG) signage.</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1:

THE ISLAM OF RETURNING AND REVERTING

Introduction

Religions respond to matters of life and death, this world and the hereafter. They give human beings the meaning we so desire; they provide answers to our everyday questions and concerns. Perhaps this is the reason Peter Berger’s early claims of imminent world secularization might be called into question. In many countries—particularly in the urban centers of “Western” nations—institutional religion appears to be on the decline, while other countries are experiencing a rapid growth in certain forms of religion and an increased popularity in other respects. Most notably, Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, Mormonism, and Islam are witnessing a rise of new members in record numbers. However, this should not be surprising. These religious traditions all share a

---

1 In *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), Peter L. Berger proposed that modernization would usher in an inevitable decline of religion. As a proponent of secularization theory, he wrote that “secularization has posited an altogether novel situation for modern man. Probably for the first time in history, the religious legitimations of the world have lost their plausibility not only for a few intellectuals and other marginal individuals but for broad masses of entire societies” (p. 124). In a later edited volume, Berger became highly critical of secularization theory and admitted that his prior assumptions were false. He acknowledges that the world, in spite of modernity, appears to be more religious than ever—with the exception of Western Europe and Western academic circles. See *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 1-18.


key ingredient: they actively engage in various forms of proselytization. For these and
many other fast growing religions, to serve God is to share the word of God. While
proselytization is only one factor of religious growth, it is an important one. In a
globalized world enhanced by ever-advancing technologies, the rapid dissemination of
knowledge and information has become discernably mundane. What emerges from all
these connections, intersections, and technological associations is a world overflowing
with religious practitioners negotiating the symbolism of their sacred traditions. This is
neither a historical nor a modern marvel; this is, one might argue, instead, our present
human condition. Yet at this time in our history, we have the technologies, education, and
resources to recognize the proliferation of this kind of symbolism, how it develops, how
it operates, who influences it and who are influenced by these decisions.

This dissertation seeks to understand the rise of religious appeal in a modern
world, focusing attention on a growing population of new Muslims in the Philippines.
Though my population sample focuses on a particular group, it is profoundly rich with
theoretical possibilities. And I consider it a prime example of how symbolic negotiation
works in this setting. I would argue, therefore, that these results have implications for
how we understand the various ways in which religion works and how Muslims are
engaged in navigating multiple Islamic meanings in today’s world.

The aim of this research is to piece together an array of possible factors that
impact religious conversion in a modern milieu. Specifically, I focus on recent
 conversions to Islam in the Philippines. Although the vast majority of Filipinos identify

---

are the world’s fastest-growing religious group,” April 23, 2015, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-
as Christian, recent developments reflect an upsurge in conversion to Islam, particularly in the northern Philippines. This dissertation, therefore, examines one of the fastest growing religious phenomena in the Philippines beginning in the 1970s, which is a movement popularly known as Balik-Islam. It is one that Filipino anthropologist Luis Lacar argues is “both intriguing and paradoxical” mainly because of historical tensions between Christians and Muslims in the Philippine archipelago. Those who associate themselves with the Balik-Islam movement legitimize or base their claims on the early establishment of Islamic sultanates throughout the Philippines, which occurred prior to the arrival of Spanish Catholicism in the 16th century. Most of the movement’s founders are former Christian Filipinos who worked as contractors in Middle Eastern and Gulf countries and who first encountered Islam while abroad.

“Balik-Islam” generally can be translated as the "reverts to Islam" or the process of "returning to Islam”, and it denotes a heavily symbolic process of reverting back to Islam rather than converting to a new religion. The concept of reversion is not unique to Filipino Muslims, as it is frequently used as an “Islamic” term to describe religious conversion to Islam, more generally. This research, meanwhile, explores the complex processes involved in a discourse of reversion in the Philippines and seeks to grasp why and how Islam appeals to a growing number of Christians. Rather than focusing on the psychology of these reverters, which I believe is less productive because I am interested in

---

6 For the purpose of consistency, I use the term “revert” to refer exclusively to the Balik-Islam community who are the at the heart of this study; I use the term “convert” in an inclusive and general sense, meaning any person who experiences religious change or embarks on religious transformation.
the articulation of both macro- and micro-level factors and influences, I approach the narratives of Balik-Islam members in an interdisciplinary manner. This allows me to analyze their conversions within the context of both their personal biographies and larger geographies, when and where these accounts overlap, and what these intersections reveal about their varying degrees of religious transformation. By broadening the scope of possibilities and variables that influence religious conversions, this dissertation proceeds to examine several factors that complicate our commonsense notions of conversion. My approach includes an investigation of the following: (1) The historical legacy of Islam in the Philippines; (2) The colonial and post-colonial grievances from Spanish and American rule; (3) The present-day state-sponsored exportation of labor; and (4) The current transnational networks of Filipino migrants in diaspora. I argue that these research considerations should be considered as ways to more accurately depict the complex and multifaceted underpinnings of religious conversion or “reversion” to Islam in the modern Philippines. Moreover, situating member narratives about conversion within this broader context helps to explain the growing popularity of Islam in the region.

To date, there are only a handful of studies on the Balik-Islam phenomenon. Luis Lacar was among the first to provide an ethnographic survey of initial converts in the Southern region of Mindanao during the 1980s and 1990s. Lacar’s study is significant because he identifies a crucial distinction between native Muslims (Moros) and new Muslims (Balik-Islam). The next major ethnographic study dates from 2005, by Vivienne Angeles, in which she examines the conversion narratives of Balik-Islam women in the

---

northern Philippines. This study provides significant insights into our understanding of gender dynamics among Filipino Muslims and their link to gender disparity in transnational labor export. Another relatively recent policy-based study conducted by David Borer, Sean Everton, and Moises Nayve focuses narrowly on the Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement, a militant branch within the greater Balik-Islam populace, and they employ social movement theory to argue that Balik-Islam on the whole exemplifies a rising threat to Philippine national security. This dissertation builds upon these and other works on Balik-Islam, including the religious conversion literature in the Philippines, and more generally, it explores the perspective of symbolic negotiation as a way of thinking about this material and my findings. As for my methodological approach, the bulk of my work involves

---


fieldwork in the Philippines and, more precisely, archival and textual research, participant observation, interviews, and surveys.

How I Got Here

The subject of reversion in the Philippines is in itself a fascinating topic, especially given that the Philippines continues to be one of the most religious countries in the world.\(^\text{11}\) I came to this topic by way of a somewhat circuitous path. I first declared an undergraduate major in religious studies as an alternative to international affairs—another way of understanding how people around the world think and behave in accordance with their belief systems. In retrospect, I find the more genuine reason for my study of religion was my ignorance of what it entailed. The more I pursued religion, the more captivated I became by what it could reveal about the human condition.

My parents are Filipino immigrants from the northern Philippines—my mother from Metro Manila and my father from the nearby province of Laguna. My mother is a lifelong devout Roman Catholic. My father was raised in the Aglipayan Church, a branch of Catholicism independent of the Vatican. But he now self-identifies as non-religious. Despite his lack of religious faith, he supported my mother’s request that we, as a family, attend church (Mass) every Sunday. At first, I found it somewhat odd that my mother’s reasoning seemed to ignore faith or religious duty; rather, she repeatedly explained that

\(^{11}\) For example, in a recent international survey conducted by NORC, “the country with the strongest belief is the Philippines, where 94 percent of those surveyed said they always had believed in God”. See Tom W. Smith, “Beliefs about God across Time and Countries,” \textit{National Opinion Research Center (NORC)}, University of Chicago, April 18, 2012, \url{http://www.norc.org/NewsEventsPublications/PressReleases/Pages/international-perspectives-on-theism.aspx}.\n
“a family that prays together, stays together”. And that was essentially our view of what family meant and the role religion ought to play in it.

Moreover, I’ve had my share of bouts of religious disbelief, doubt, and dissent since my adolescent years. But it was my mother’s tenacity, strength, and wisdom that made me increasingly curious about her faith. When I grew older, she confessed to me that she once left the Church and stopped believing in God altogether. It was during her adolescence, when her father died of liver failure, that she remembered how she could no longer believe in the promising stories and teachings of the Church. Her grief was consumed by anger and resentment. Her faith was crushed by death and misfortune. It took years for her to begin to cope with her new reality. Ironically, she admitted that it was indeed a renewed faith in God and habitual prayer to saintly souls that ultimately calmed her nerves and consoled her. I observed her practically every evening reading her novena (prayer booklet) to Mother Mary and the Child Jesus (Santo Niño), before she went to bed. Regardless of this seemingly pious routine, her “religiosity” consistently struck me as less spiritual and more pragmatic or instrumental. She would never admit to using religion as a coping mechanism or to being a rational actor in all of this. Still, her struggles (and my own) to negotiate the meanings of religious faith and tradition against the backdrop of the quotidian life have piqued my interest in how religious people grapple with it all. Understanding the intentions of people of faith has been the most difficult aspect of this study. In order to explore theoretical understandings of religious conversion, I struggle with positioning myself as an interpreter, a researcher who purportedly could know and demonstrate what motivates converts and why they respond the way they do. I sometimes question whether there is truly a formulaic way of deducing
such actions and intentions. Still, my informal conversations, observations, and unstructured interviews with these converts in the Philippines (and around the globe) are in many ways utterly revealing. Similar to my recollections of my mother’s attempts at being religious, I have become increasingly aware that being religious is much more than explaining what is outwardly visible and apparent. I see industrious, resilient, and passionate men and women determined not only to survive the hardships and sorrows of life, but most poignantly, they struggle to negotiate religious meanings in ways that give them hope and help them make sense of the world. In many respects, my endeavor to understand this behavior has been a lifelong pursuit.

Though this early experience with my mother influenced me, my paternal grandmother played an inadvertent role in my decision to study Islam. During my first visit to the Philippines in 2002, my 85-year-old grandmother forbade me from traveling to Mindanao, the southernmost region of the Philippine archipelago. Speaking in Tagalog, she expressed her distrust of Muslims and her belief that they were all terrorists. What struck me most was not her diatribe against Islam and Muslims, but my lack of knowledge on the subject. I didn’t even know there were Muslims in the Philippines. This sparked in me a hunger to learn more.

This intense desire eventually led me to study abroad in Morocco for a semester, to a summer homestay in Palestine, Arabic study in Egypt, fieldwork in Indonesia, and a few other brief travels to Muslim majority countries. I quickly came face to face with what I once deemed as strange, unfamiliar, different, and dangerous or “Other.”12 As I

12 By “Other”, I refer to Edward Said’s notion of “othering” via his critique of Orientalism. Though the term, in general, refers to what is different or alien to one’s self or identity, Said specifically acknowledges the “Orient” as an “Othered” construct of the West. He claims that Orientalism is
become more aware, however, my views of religion broadened. But this only produced more questions about how people lead religious lives and how they situate these sensibilities in the world. For example, I was once married to a Muslim man I met in Cairo. He was born to a Catholic Filipina mother and a Muslim Egyptian father. Because he self-identified as a Muslim and I did not, I was compelled to consider how religious boundaries are maintained, particularly within contemporary settings. Though I am religiously agnostic, I have been intellectually inspired and intrigued by those who center themselves upon a sacred grid. Their stories are captivating, and I am inspired by their perseverance, resilience, and courage to change, adapt, and transform their lives. In various and perhaps odd ways, this study reflects the many years I have endeavored to understand what constitutes the “religious” and what makes up the people who create these sacred worlds. This dissertation, therefore, is partly an intellectual reconciliation of my past to grasp this notion of the Other, why people engage in discourses against it, and why others try to unravel it. Christianity and Islam cannot be reduced to a single

________________________________________

essentially “a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire” in Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage, 1994 (1979)), 202-203. Moreover, my experience of the “Muslim Other” aligns with Said’s idea of a “latent Orientalism” which he describes as almost an unconscious sort of bias against the “Other” as a result of Western learning. Though Said’s thesis has been widely criticized for its polarizing tone and substance, [see for example: Bernard Lewis, “The Question of Orientalism”, *Islam and the West* (London: Oxford Press, 1993); Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies* (London: Allen Lane, 2006); Martin S. Kramer, “Said’s Splash,” *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America.* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001)] I find Said’s concept of Orientalism quite relevant in current discourse on “Islamophobia” in the “West”. As this dissertation will demonstrate, the Philippines is quite “Western” in its views on race and religion due to its long legacy of (Christian) European and American colonialism. Therefore, I argue it is fitting to presume that in many aspects, Christian Filipinos think more like “Westerners” than they do as “Southeast Asians”. It should be noted that the Philippines is the largest Christian-majority nation in all of Asia Pacific.

monolith and conversion cannot be simplified as a mere shift from one religion to another. Yet, this is often the case.

Research Questions and Scope

The fundamental question at the heart of this dissertation is: why are a growing number of Christian Filipinos converting to Islam? Given that Christians and Muslims in the Philippines have endured a rather confrontational history—for over three centuries colonial Spain aimed to pit Christianized Filipinos in the northern islands against the minority Muslims (Moros) in the south—and, furthermore, why are many Christian Filipinos in the northern provinces of the Philippines actively embracing Islam? To address these matters, I raise two more pointed questions: what reasons do converts themselves attribute to their conversions? And what social factors or outside—secular or material—forces contribute to their conversion? My methodology for locating answers thus requires a thorough analysis of both the conversion narratives and several socio-economic factors directly associated with these narratives.

---

14 The Spanish used the term Moro for any inhabitants professing Islam, “after the Islamized people of ancient Mauretania—the Maurus or Moros who manned the Arab armies which conquered and ruled Spain for centuries.” Quote from Peter Gowing, Mandate in Moroland: The American Government of Muslim Filipinos 1899-1920 (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publishers, 1983), xi. There is extensive literature on Muslims or “Moros” in the Mindanao province, their encounters with colonial Spain, and subsequent relations with Christianized Filipinos. One of the earliest and most circulated historiographies is Cesar Adib Majul’s Muslims in the Philippines (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1973). He notes that Spanish King Philip II (reigned 1556-1598), for whom the Philippines is dedicated, sought to enslave Moros and force Catholicism upon all other native inhabitants of the islands. After years of Moro rebellions and wars, the Catholic Filipinos of the north and the Muslim Moros of the south were essentially divided by religious, cultural, and socio-economic interests. This division, according to Majul, helped foment the rise of separatist and militant Muslim movements in recent decades. Also see Samuel Tan, The Muslim South and Beyond (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2010); Cesar Adib Majul, The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines. 3rd ed. (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1985); Peter Gowing. Muslim Filipinos: Heritage and Horizon. (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1979).
The scholarly debate on conversion is long and ongoing. Scholars grapple with its very nature and have difficulty agreeing on a definition that adequately describes the range and scope of the process and its constituent parts. Defining religious conversion is problematic because “religion” itself is substantially dynamic. What constitutes a religion? How does a religion differ from an ideology, worldview, or philosophy? Does a religion require belief in a deity or other-worldly beings? How are religious borders of exclusivity created and maintained? I have found that religious conversion signifies a momentous change in one’s personal identity—one sizeable enough to entail a new name or label. The first academic studies dedicated to understanding religious conversion date to the early 20th century, yet nearly all dealt narrowly with conversion to Christianity. These Christian-centric analyses often centered on the paradigmatic Christian conversion figure, Saul, who changed his name to Paul after encountering the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Other classic works on conversion are rich in theory but are criticized for their scant empirical fieldwork. Others may provide substantial data but then precariously draw universal conclusions from narrow case studies. It is only in the last

---

15 Rambo and Farhadian provide an excellent overview of the history of conversion studies in the introduction to The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion (New York: Oxford, 2014), 4-9. Notably, the most influential early works on conversion, they claim, are William James’ Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) and Arthur Darby Nock’s Conversion (1933). Though they still remain influential, they are both limited by their Protestant predisposition and narrow emphasis on the psychological process of conversion.

16 Illustrative of this model can be viewed in Lewis Rambo’s Understanding Religious Conversion: A Study in Human Nature (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993). Here, Rambo introduces his “integrative model”, a highly theoretical approach to conversion that consists of seven stages: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences.

17 A good example is John Lofland and Rodney Stark’s “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,” American Sociological Review 30 (1965): 862-875. Stark and Lofland investigate conversion experiences in the Unification Church, popularly known as the “Moonies”. The study is a monumental development in the conversion studies because it introduces and applies the theory of network analysis as way to understand religious conversion. However, as I discuss later, the drawback of this sort of approach is the assumption that network theory can apply to all cases of conversion.
two decades or so that we see strident attempts to approach religious conversion with more balance and sophistication. Scholars have also recently begun to explore cases involving conversion to non-Christian religions. This is significant because researchers are recognizing that diversities of (and within) traditions, geographies, and cultures matter. That is to say, a single explanation or a culture-specific paradigm cannot apply to the vast variety of religious experiences that lead to conversion. For this reason, this study strives to identify particular factors that impact the conversion of the Balik-Islam members in the Philippines.

In this regard, the work of Ines Jindra on conversion theory has been useful for informing my thinking about religious reversion among the Balik-Islam. Her monograph provides an exhaustive account of the current theories and debates in the field of conversion studies. She divides the various approaches for understanding religious conversion into two broad categories and then systematizes them under the rubrics of network theory and social constructivism. Network theorists argue that people tend to convert to a different or new religion when they are influenced by network of family and/or friends. The act of conversion, therefore, is largely based on rational choice. The convert gains social capital in a religious economy or “marketplace” by acquiring

18 See for example David Smilde, *Reason to Believe: Cultural Agency in Latin American Evangelicalism*, (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2007) and Daniel Winchester, “Embodying the Faith: Religious Practice and the Making of a Muslim Moral Habitus,” *Social Forces* 86, no. 4 (2008): 1753-1780. In her article, “A Cultural Sociology of Religion: New Directions,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 38 (2012): 247-265, Penny Edgell praises these studies for their balanced use of theory and empirical research. She notes how they concentrate on the intersections of “lived religion and institutional analysis” which “helps us to get past the idea that the analyst must choose between understanding religion as operating on the surface (as tools that people use to solve problems or position themselves strategically) or as being deeply formative of preconscious or automatic habits and dispositions,” p. 255.

religious capital through conversion. The other approach, Jindra contends, is social constructivism. This theory stipulates that one’s agency is not as significant as the social environment in which one is reared and raised. It is a more deterministic view of conversion that takes into account the social structures that impact conversion. Jindra concludes that both approaches to religious conversion are valid and are not in any real sense mutually exclusive. She interviews and surveys dozens of converts from a variety of religious traditions and finds that both theories are informative. Jindra engages in “biographical sociology”, an approach that intricately combines the fundamentals of network theory and social constructivism. By considering the premise of this model, I explore the conversion/reversion narratives I collected and analyzed them for not only the life choices or rational decisions each convert makes, but I also consider the larger social conditions that impact their conversionary experience.20

Because there are far more studies on Christian conversion than there are for Islam, crafting an approach to studying conversion to Islam has been potentially challenging. The literature on Muslim conversion is sparse and scattered among different subfields. Most studies focus on either historical cases of conversion, gender dynamics among converts in the “West”, or the European context in general.21 Furthermore, those

20 Jindra states that one of her main goals in A New Model of Religious Conversion (2014) is to “highlight the power of biographical sociology and introduce it to (American) cultural sociology,” quote from page 22. In sum, biographical sociology requires an interdisciplinary scope, essentially combining methods from anthropology and sociology and seriously considering both macro and micro levels of analysis. Jindra’s application of biographical sociology utilizes two methods: narrative interviews and grounded theory.

studies that do employ techniques that gather personal narratives tend to ignore the external factors that may influence conversion, something that the present dissertation attempts to avoid.

I also find the work of Monika Wohlrab-Sahr particularly useful for making sense of the conversion narratives I gathered during my fieldwork. She focuses on Muslim converts in Germany and the United States and is one of few scholars who explores the process of conversion from Christianity to Islam in a more balanced way. By using both narrative interviews and “grounded” theory, Wohlrab-Sahr theorizes the process as “reoccurring allusion” and “religious symbolism,” revealing more about the values and meanings involved in conversions. She contends that conversion from Christianity to


22 In the way that Kathy Charmaz defines grounded theory methods as “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves,” Wohlrab-Sahr relies on inductive methods aimed at developing a theory rather than having a preconceived theory at the outset of her research. In other words, she allows the empirical data collected from narratives and life stories speak to her, rather than vice versa. See Kathy Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory. 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014) p. 1.
Islam reflects a “symbolic battle.” She also argues that this type of conversion could be classified as a “symbolic transformation of crisis.” Therefore, she finds that the fundamental purpose of conversion is to solve an existing problem. Wohlrab-Sahr further explains that in particular cases where Christians embrace Islam, converts adopt the religion of the “Other” often to redress a problem or some inadequacy in their Christian life. Their conversion accounts are thus expressed in terms of change in their religious identities as some sort of conflict resolution. Still, I would argue that her attempt to define Christian to Muslim conversion as a “battle” or “transformation” appears much too limiting. A battle can assume a hostile relationship between two homogenous religions, Christianity and Islam; a transformation suggests that conversion must be a completed action. I think Lewis Rambo can be helpful in this regard; he maintains that conversion is an ongoing process, perhaps in many cases never reaching total completion in a convert’s lifetime. To account for these limitations, I classify the conversion/reversion among the Balik-Islam as representing “symbolic negotiation”. Just as Wohlrab-Sahr has recognized some aspect of conflict resolution in the conversion

---


25 The idea that religion can be used to solve particular problems is not new. Wohlrab-Sahr, however, highlights the importance of symbolism in how religions function. In his popular book, God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World (New York: HarperOne, 2010), Stephen Prothero raises a similar idea in his “four-part approach” to religion. He illustrates the diversity of world religions by recognizing each has its own set of problems and solutions that are resolved by certain techniques which are guided by exemplars in each tradition (p. 14). Wohlrab-Sahr complicates this neat and methodical approach by examining what occurs when religious symbols shift and acquire new meanings. She might argue that the problems and solutions within converts’ worldviews are thus expressed in messy and complex “symbolic battles” and “transformations”.

experience, my fieldwork has revealed that Muslim revert s in the Philippines also seek to resolve certain problems, crises, or inadequacies in their lives through the process of conversion to Islam. However, in contrast, I suggest that they engage in “symbolic negotiation” with the “Other” religion as a means of resolving these concerns.

I propose that in order to broaden Wohlrab-Sahr’s paradigm of symbolic battle and transformation, more attention must be given to external, socio-economic issues that shape the current interpretations, practices, and forms of these religious traditions. In other words, I agree with Wohlrab-Sahr’s argument that Christian converts to Islam deal heavily with symbolic battle, conflict, and tension; however, based on my survey of the field, Christian converts to Islam in the northern Philippines also experience symbolic exchange, modification, and reform, a process that is not necessarily confrontational, battle-like, or even transformative. Therefore, this dissertation explores how the act of reverting or “returning to Islam” among Balik-Islam Filipinos signifies a paradigmatic “symbolic negotiation,” which speaks to their unique experiences of conversion, their appeal to religion in the modern world, and the role Islam plays in the Philippines, a majority-Christian nation.

Additionally, this symbolic negotiation occurs on two levels: as individual consciousness and as collective consciousness. My conceptualization of symbolic negotiation in the case of Balik-Islam pivots on three factors: (1) migration, (2) disorientation, and (3) proselytization. By migration, I mean any form of human geographic passage or dislocation, domestic or transnational. Disorientation denotes any instance of conflict or uncertainty that occurs during migration. Proselytization includes all modes of solicitation, coerced or inadvertent. In this dissertation, I attempt to provide
a systematic account of each factor in order to show how symbolic negotiation operates among reverts and within their communities. Specific to the Balik-Islam and the Philippine context, migration outsources a massive labor diaspora, disorientation often transpires in the form of discord while one lives overseas, and proselytization is the practice of da’wah meaning “call or invitation” according to Islam. (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Conversion as SYMBOLIC NEGOTIATION</th>
<th>Global factors</th>
<th>Factors specific to Filipino Muslim reverts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Migration</td>
<td>Diaspora</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disorientation</td>
<td>Discord</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proselytization</td>
<td>Da’wah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Factors of Symbolic Negotiation. Source: Author.

By centering my discussion on these factors of symbolic negotiation, I aim to illustrate the ways in which religious conversion in the modern world is a highly multifaceted process. This study of Filipino Muslim reverts is not meant to provide a universal formula for understanding religious conversion. Rather, I attempt to understand the role “reversion” plays in the conversion and maintenance of what it means to be a Filipino Muslim in the Balik-Islam movement.

Chapter Outline

The next chapter explores the multifaceted contours that shape Balik-Islam identity by concentrating on the notion of “reversion” and how it reveals a gradually shifting perception of the Muslim “Other” in the Philippines. What is most puzzling about the Balik-Islam in the Philippines is that despite an extended history of pedagogical, political,
and economic hegemony under the Spanish and the Americans—both imparting their
own biases against the Muslim “Other”—Balik-Islam returns to Islam, rebranding its
image to fellow Philippine citizens as the ideal precolonial “original” religion of both
Filipinos and humankind at large. To illuminate this point, what follows is an overview of
the history of Muslim-Christian relations in the Philippine archipelago that underscores
the external forces that reproduced the European concept of a Muslim Other and
imported it to Southeast Asia. I argue that it is critical to grasp the impact of colonial
influence on the Philippines in order to begin to understand the complexity behind the
process of “reversion” among the Balik-Islam.

Chapter Three outlines my methodology for understanding conversion to Islam by
specifying the details of my theoretical approach, or what I characterize as “symbolic
negotiation”. This paradigm is the heart of this dissertation, in that it provides a blueprint
for new ways of thinking about religious conversion. By building on and integrating
several theoretical paradigms from different academic fields, I show how symbolic
negotiation is both interdisciplinary and multi-level in its capacity for qualitative analysis.
Specifically, I explore how symbolic negotiation can be viewed as combination of Peter
Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s “symbolic universe” (1967), Monika Wohlrab-Sahr’s
“symbolic battle” (2006), and Pierre Bourdieu’s “theory of practice” (1971). I then
examine the primary components of a symbolic negotiation model, which are: (1) the
symbolic universe, (2) fields of social activity, and individualized forms (3) habitus and
(4) capital. Next, I describe the specific types of fields that, when merged, create a space
in which symbolic negotiation in the form of religious conversion emerges. The point of
visualizing such a complex model is to contextualize the three factors of symbolic
negotiation, as noted above: diaspora (migration), discord (disorientation), and daʿwah (proselytization)—or the “three Ds” for short. In effect, this chapter provides a theoretical foundation for how I analyze data collected from my fieldwork in the Philippines in the summer of 2015. These data include survey responses from over 100 Balik-Islam respondents and narrative accounts drawn from one-on-one interviews with selected participants.

Chapter Four focuses on the first of the three Ds: migration in the form of diaspora. I discuss how migration has a direct impact on the process by which Balik-Islam members “become” Muslim. Moreover, I argue that migration is largely the primary factor that contributes to conversion among the Balik-Islam. In the case of Balik-Islam, migration takes the form of the modern Philippine diaspora, or the billion-dollar enterprise, aptly described by scholars as “The Philippine Labor Brokerage”. Exploring the role this enterprise plays in conversion is essential for grasping external factors of influence. And the huge number of Filipino migrants living and working in majority-Muslim nations is a crucial factor for understanding the rise of Filipino Muslim reverts. This chapter aims to delve deeper into the politics of such an economic system that

27 Aside from Vivienne Angeles’ articles on Balik-Islam, there are no other studies to date that examine the impact of migration on Muslim reverts in the Philippines. There are, however, several outstanding studies that reflect on the spirituality of Filipinos in diaspora. These include Gemma Tulud Cruz, “Between Identity and Security: Theological Implications of Migration in the Context of Globalization.” *Theological Studies* 69, no. 2 (2008): 357-375, and Claudia Liebelt, “On Gendered Journeys, Spiritual Transformations and Ethical Formations in Diaspora: Filipina Care Workers in Israel.” *Feminist View* 97 (2011): 74-91.


encourages overseas work, work that more often than not requires endurance, adaptation, and sacrifice.

While the labor diaspora is a key factor in understanding the globalizing environment in which “symbolic negotiation” takes place, Chapter Five considers how although the labor export benefits the Philippine state, especially in terms of a rising GDP and its impact on countless communities, the idea that migrants experience destabilization is also central to this dissertation. This chapter examines the second of the three Ds, “discord”, which I take to denote a kind of crisis or destabilization. For me, discord better captures the tone of my subjects’ narratives. Although several of the reverts with whom I spoke recalled experiences of crisis, the majority did not. Instead, there were stories of disorientation and disruption in their “old” way of living. My sampling includes both men and women who hold various roles within the Balik-Islam community, and I argue that these reverts engage in “symbolic negotiation” as they strive to resolve the discord.

Though many Balik-Islam reverts experience various sorts of discord, particularly stemming from the labor diaspora, there is another crucial factor to consider when assessing the rise of Muslim reverts in the Philippines: da‘wah. Da‘wah, the last of the three Ds, is a global and Islamic practice of inviting others to learn about Islam. In Arabic, it can mean “a call” or “an invitation”, and in many instances, it is characterized as “mission activity” or an Islamic form of proselytization.29 In Chapter Six, I explore da‘wah in the Philippines, particularly with regard to its transnational reality. I trace the

routes and roots of *da‘wah* among the Balik-Islam. Vivienne Angeles writes about the transnational linkages between the Philippines and the greater Middle East. She recounts how the Moro separatist movements in Mindanao coincided with the start of mass labor export to oil-rich countries in Gulf and Middle East. The political and later, Islamic movements among Moros (born-Muslims) garnered worldwide attention which encouraged not only working but also studying abroad. *Da‘wah* among the Balik-Islam is therefore a culmination of numerous historical, political, social, and economic processes.

In this chapter, I focus on two broad types of *da‘wah*: active and passive. As it applies to the Balik-Islam, active *da‘wah* encompasses how the Balik-Islam engage non-Muslim communities. By passive *da‘wah*, I am referring largely to Ismail al-Faruqi’s notion of *da‘wah* as manifested in a virtuous lifestyle. Finally, the last section of the chapter will examine *da‘wah* in the reversion narratives of my interviewees. They all have unique stories about how they came to embrace Islam. As I recount their narratives, I expound on how “symbolic negotiation” occurs in their decision-making process. The constant negotiation between Christianity and Islam is a gradual and perhaps never-ending process for these reverts. My ultimate argument, however, is that by framing my analysis within the context of symbolic negotiation, it appears that reverts perform *da‘wah* not just as a call to Islam, but also as a call to *pag-asa* or ‘hope,’ in the Tagalog language.

To conclude, I recapitulate my arguments for employing the notion of “symbolic negotiation” as a means for grasping a greater sense of the reversion process among

---


Filipino Muslim reverts. By showing how the “factors” of diaspora, discord, and *da’wah* are all present in varying degrees, I demonstrate how Filipino Muslims negotiate the space between their former Christian “selves” and their current identities as Muslims through symbolic exchanges. The reversion narrative shared by the Balik-Islam community, which is based on the historical presence of Islam in the Philippines prior to the coming of Spanish Catholicism and American Protestantism, has become a powerful and inspiring trope for new Filipino Muslims and those contemplating conversion. I end this study acknowledging the limits of my research and analysis. Finally, the concept of “symbolic negotiation” is meant to further complicate the field of conversion studies; it is not intended to be in any way definitive. Rather, I posit it as a middle-range approach towards understanding the process of reversion and for rethinking previous assumptions about religious conversion.
CHAPTER 2:
TOPOGRAPHY OF REVERSION IN THE PHILIPPINES

Introduction

Since the arrival of Spanish armadas in the mid-16th century, native Muslim communities in the Philippine archipelago have struggled against colonial forces. Muslim settlements had been established throughout the islands as early as the 14th century, as an extended network of a flourishing Islamicate in the Southeast Asia Malay region. Although Spanish armies yearned to fully conquer and convert the Muslim natives to Catholicism, after a series of wars, they were only able to suppress Muslim expansion by pushing them southward into the province of Mindanao. For over three centuries of Spanish rule, yielding to the aggressive policies of Hispanicization and Christianization in the northern provinces, the marginalized Muslim south kept closer ties with their kin in Malaysia and Indonesia. Furthering the divide between the north and south, Spain christened the northern colony as a namesake to their king, Philip II, and in contrast, branded their southern foes “Moros” after the Iberian Moors, the Muslims they had expelled from southern Spain during the Inquisition. It was during this time that the Filipinos of the north and Moros of the south began constructing distinct religious, political, social, and ethnic identities.

33 The Spanish used the term Moro for inhabitants professing Islam, “after the Islamized people of ancient Mauretania—the Maurus or Moros who manned the Arab armies which conquered and ruled Spain for centuries.” (Gowing, Mandate in Moroland, xi).
When Spain lost its foreign territories to the United States at the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Moros of the southern Philippines were suspicious of the occupation of a new colonial power. Guided by the policy of “benevolent assimilation”, the American administration sought to pacify the bloody revolts against its colonization. A major element of American policy was the integration of the entire archipelago. Through a mix of ignorance, negligence, and self-interest, the United States began its first imperial venture by perpetuating an ethnic and religious conflict that has continued until the present day.

By the time the United States officially granted the Philippines full political independence on July 4, 1946, the Moro province of Mindanao was overwhelmed and occupied by Christian Filipinos. Droves of Filipino migrants from the north settled in the Moro territories after a series of American land reform laws which disproportionately favored Christians over Muslims. Not only were Moros culturally alienated, but perhaps most significantly, they were persistently politically and economically marginalized. However, dynamics began to change when key Moro leaders were granted government scholarships to study at universities in the capital, Manila. In the 1960s and 1970s, student leaders such as Nur Misuari demanded an end to the discrimination of Moro people. Embracing the term “Moro” as a symbol of their cultural heritage, Misuari formed the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the first of many Muslim separatist movements that would soon follow.

From the 1970s onward, the Philippines has dealt with both violent and non-violent means to resolve what politicians have labeled the “Muslim problem”. Unforeseen in Misuari’s initial ambitions for Muslim autonomy of Mindanao were
external variables and consequences of globalization: the rise of communism, rapid increase in Philippine labor exportation, and the expansive reach of transnational Muslim movements. The Muslim problem of the Philippines became an international problem, a chance for the global *Ummah* to demonstrate solidarity with their fellow Muslim brothers and sisters. With moral and economic support from world leaders like Ghaddafi in Libya and other emerging Muslim movements like the *Jamaat Tablighi* in Pakistan, Misuari’s nationalistic objectives fragmented into varying factions and organizations that uphold various notions of Muslim identity and a Muslim state.

It is from this dynamic intersection of local and global grievances that the Balik-Islam movement emerged. Though there have been numerous attempts for peaceful reconciliation, most notably, the creation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), a majority of Moro separatist movements have been, in some way or form, involved in militant and terrorist activities throughout the Philippines. Some, such as the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement, have qualified links to al-Qaeda. These para-military organizations make it difficult, if not impossible for other Muslim groups to engage in meaningful peace agreements with confidence and trust. The Philippine government remains highly suspicious of Moro organizations and social movements, and this is the heart of the “Muslim problem” in the Philippines today. More specifically, mistrust and apprehension, though on occasions warranted, are core obstacles to both Muslim-Christian relations and Muslim integration in the Philippine Republic.

---

In light of this, the general problem this dissertation addresses is the unique nature of the Balik-Islam movement, its role in contemporary Philippine society, and the challenges it encounters as a *Muslim* movement. Most Balik-Islam groups identify themselves as Filipino-Christian revert to Islam and recognize that they do not share the same cultural heritage and colonial history as ethnic Muslims, i.e. Moros. Many of the founding members of Balik-Islam groups are former overseas contract workers in the Middle East and Gulf region and have a different concept altogether from their Moro counterparts about what it means to be Muslim and what it means to make a choice to return to Islam. It should be noted, however, that Balik-Islam and Moro are not entirely mutually exclusive; there are overlaps and crossings that need further research and investigation. But that aside, the roots and causes of the Balik-Islam movement are considerably different from the roots of Moro dissent.

Due to its distinct and largely unfamiliar history, Balik-Islam’s reception in contemporary Philippine society remains questionable. The government demonstrates its suspicion of the Balik-Islam by forcefully shutting down any activity they deem as a threat to national security. But how popular society perceives the movement is unclear. Many Balik-Islam groups are located in Luzon, the northernmost province that houses the nation’s capital Manila, a booming cosmopolitan city. The region is not the same as it was in the 1970s; it is increasingly capitalistic and pluralistic, which is largely an outcome of state-sponsored labor exportation. Because of these labor policies, the contemporary Philippines is a patchwork quilt of returnees from overseas work, who carry with them foreign cultural experiences, foreign languages, and oftentimes, foreign ideas and world views. Perhaps this new pluralism is a principal reason why the Balik-
Islam have been highly successful in recruiting new converts. All this considered, the Balik-Islam are neither Moro nor Christian, and thus do not share the same socio-cultural identifications as the other two main established religions in the Philippines. Though they do not belong in the category of Moro, the Balik-Islam movement is a Muslim movement and is thus under intense suspicion from the government and national security agencies. Though most all are former Christians, their decision to convert/revert to Islam and renounce Christianity indicates that they no longer belong to the majority religion. Rather, the Balik-Islam are a marginalized minority religious movement that has created its own sense of belonging.

This chapter explores the multifaceted contours that shape the Balik-Islam identity by concentrating on the notion of “reversion” and how it reveals a gradually shifting perception of the Muslim “Other” in the Philippines. What is most puzzling about the Balik-Islam in the Philippines is that despite an extended history of cultural, pedagogical, political, and economic hegemony under Spanish and American imperialism—both having imparted their own biases against the Muslim “Other”—Balik-Islam members return to Islam, rebranding its image to fellow Philippine citizens as the ideal precolonial “original” religion of both Filipinos and humankind at large. To illuminate this point, what follows is an overview of the history of Muslim-Christian relations in the Philippine archipelago that underscores the external forces that reproduced the European concept of a Muslim Other and brought it over to Southeast Asia. I argue that it is critical to grasp the impact of colonial influence on the Philippines in order to begin to understand the complexity behind the process of “reversion” among the Balik-Islam.
Reproducing the Muslim Other: Spanish Reconquista in Asia

Before a series of colonial powers established control of the Philippine islands—the Spanish (1565-1898), Americans (1898-1946), and Japanese (1941-1945)—native inhabitants on the over 7,000 islands of the archipelago practiced and followed various religions. Historical sources on pre-Spanish natives are limited to Spanish accounts that essentially classify the indigenous people as either *indios*, the pagans who eventually converted to Christianity, or *moros*, those who professed Islam as their faith.

Unconverted pagans who were typically mountain dwellers or those out of reach of the Spanish conquest were known as *infieles*, or infidels. The name “Filipino” originally was reserved for Spaniards born in the Philippine islands to distinguish from those born in the Iberian Peninsula.\(^\text{35}\) However, toward the end of the Spanish occupation, as more *indios* converted to Christianity, being Filipino became tantamount to being Christian. As the most prominent scholar in Philippine Muslims studies, Cesar Adib Majul, notes the missionary efforts of Spain essentially “extended the Crusades of medieval Europe” to Malay lands.\(^\text{36}\)

While Islam arrived in the Philippine islands as early as the 14\(^\text{th}\) century through maritime trade, religious practices of indigenous inhabitants—generally classified as animism—can be traced back centuries prior. Historians find that most pre-Christian and pre-Muslim Filipinos held a strong belief in *Bathala*, a supreme, all-powerful being and creator who dwells in the sky. Bathala’s spiritual essence is made manifest through invisible, smaller beings called *anitos* (sometimes referred to as *nonos* or *anitus*) who live


\(^{36}\) Ibid.
on the earth among humans. According to local legends, Bathala created *anitos* to oversee human activity, including fishing, farming, health, military, and childcare. Pre-colonial Filipinos also practiced ancestor worship, by which deceased ancestors became *anitos* and were imbued with supernatural powers. *Anitos* could be good or bad spirits, and Filipinos engaged in invocations, offerings, rituals and used amulets and charms to ensure their livelihood and avoid misfortune. Like many Philippine religion scholars, Alan Delatovo finds that when the first Filipinos converted to Christianity, they identified their *anitos* with the images of Catholic saints.\(^{37}\) Kathy Nadeau adds that Spain’s missionary campaigns among *indios* were overwhelmingly successful partly because indigenous Filipinos articulated the language of Christianity as a means of expressing their own values, ideals, and hopes for liberation from their colonial oppressors. In effect, Nadeau contends that native Filipinos appropriated their own version of folk Catholicism, one based on an animistic belief system, which contested, subverted, and eventually transformed Spanish rule.\(^{38}\)


Although Spain was largely successful in conquering natives in the northern islands of the archipelago, they were unable to overcome the Muslim communities firmly established in the southernmost islands. Because of the Philippines’ geographic location, wedged in between China and the Indonesian archipelago, it was a natural transit location for maritime merchants in what is now considered Southeast Asia. As early as the 10th century, Muslim traders traveled as far east as Borneo and would travel through the Philippine islands on their routes north toward China. According to genealogical accounts known as tarsilas and travel accounts known as akhbār, there are legends of Muslims settling in Sulu and Buayan at the end of the 14th century (see Figure 1). By 1450, the Sultanates in Buayan, Sulu, and Maguindinao began to formalize their authority in the region. Later, in the early 16th century, European powers began to arrive in the Malay region. The fall of Malacca, a regional epicenter for Islamic thought, signaled the beginning of a new world order. After the Portuguese ousted Malaccan royalty in 1511, the Sultanate of Brunei emerged as the leading commercial and naval power, expanding its influence further north toward Mindoro and as far as Maynilad—what is today known as Manila, the Philippine capital city that today is home to over 13 million people.

By 1565, the Spanish arrived, and having learned from earlier exploratory expeditions to the region, Spanish conquistador Miguel López de Legazpi and his men were prepared to conquer and establish the Philippines as a colony of Spain. However, since the fateful mission of Magellan in 1521, Islam had become an integral political, social, and economic force in the region. From 1565 onward, a series of battles known as the Moro Wars effectively divided the Philippine islands along religious allegiances. Christianized natives, indios, were soon pitted against Muslim moros in both armed and
psychological warfare. Eventually the advanced military capabilities of the Spanish drove Muslim settlements to be contained within Sulu and the southernmost province of Mindanao.

For Spanish conquistadors, encountering Muslims in the Philippine islands was unexpected and alarming. By 1571, when Spain officially established its colonial administration in the Philippines, Spain was already preoccupied with a centuries-old religious and territorial war with Muslims in the southern region of the Iberian peninsula, more popularly known as al-Andalus. Al-Andalus represented the western-most remnant of the medieval Ummayad Islamic dynasty, whose domain at the height of its power spanned from Damascus to northern Africa to the Atlantic and Mediterranean shores of southern Spain. Beginning in the 11th century when Muslims ruled al-Andalus, Christian Iberians began to refer to them as “Moros”, after the Roman name for Mauretania, “Maurus”.\(^{39}\) In the 13th century, internal conflicts caused the Muslim caliphate to lose some of its grip on the Andalusian territory and the Catholic Church began to consolidate its power, not only stifling the expansion of Muslim territory, but by 1609, also eradicating the Muslim empire from the European continent through brutal efforts collectively known as the *Reconquista*—the reconquest of Christian lands from Muslim hegemony.

As Islam’s influence on the Iberian Peninsula declined, the Moros in al-Andalus were both estranged and vilified. The expulsion of Muslims from Iberia constituted a Christian reclamation of disputed territory. Through efforts related to *Reconquista*, Muslims, regardless of their origin, were perceived as “Maurus Africanus”—Moros. The

\(^{39}\) Moros is rendered as “Moors” in English and other European languages.
gradual political, cultural, and economic alienation of Moros in Iberia reproduced the concept of Muslims as the perpetual “Other”, a concept that involves deep-seeded biases against religious beliefs as well as ethnic and biological traits. Isaac Donoso notes that when the Spanish stumbled upon Muslims in Asian, the ongoing territorial war in Iberia was extended to the Philippines. Donoso argues that the Othering of Moros in the Philippines was not necessarily due to religious differences, but, rather, it was a continuation of a long-lasting geopolitical rivalry. Briefly put, the transmission of this Spanish bias against Muslims from Iberia to Asia signaled the transformation of *Maurus Africanus* to *Maurus Asiae*—thus did the legacy of the North African Moros traveled across the ocean and produced a new Asian Moro.

Spanish colonizers made strident efforts to showcase disdain for their Moro adversaries. Scholars have examined how colonial Spain reinforced the image of a Muslim Other through various forms of cultural media. For example, Donoso writes how Spain exported medieval dramas called *Moros y Cristianos* from the Iberian peninsula to Mexico and the Philippines. The trope *Moros y Cristianos* was a cultural device and ideological tool that generated an ideological division between Christians and Muslims. Each shared a standard theatrical plot that juxtaposed good versus evil, as the “bida” or hero always defeats the “contrabida”, the villain. Because of the anachronistic nature of these dramas—in that they were often set earlier in foreign and

---


“exotic lands” such as Africa, Arabia, or Turkey—*Moros y Cristianos* could be repurposed as general theater in popular culture. However, when the dramas were introduced to colonial Philippines, they became popularly known as either *Moro-Moro* or *Komedyas*. Spanish Jesuits staged the first production in 1637 to reenact a Spanish victory over Muslim leadership in Mindanao.\(^43\) While the plotlines of future *Moro-Moros* and *Komedyas* vary, the overarching theme has remained the same—the triumph of Christianity over other religions (notably Islam and animistic traditions). Vivienne Angeles notes that *Moro-Moros/Komedyas* in the Philippines exhibited two popular themes: the defeat and eventual conversion of Moros to Christianity in the Philippines or the fall of Granada and expulsion of Moors from Spain in 1492. Today, the *bida/contrabida* dichotomy remains a signature storyline in Spanish/Mexican *telenovelas* and Filipino *teleseryes* (equivalent to American soap operas). *Moro-Moros/Komedyas* are also preserved as central events at annual *fiestas* (town celebrations for patron saints) throughout the Philippine islands. In effect, *Moros y Cristianos* was a highly effective means of imposing Christianity throughout colonial Spain, maintaining the dominance of Christianity even after colonialism, and sustaining the cultural norm of a Muslim Other.

Enforcing Division through Integration: American Occupation and Politics of Filipinization

While the majority of the Philippines underwent broad Hispanization of its political, cultural, and religious domains under centuries’ worth of Spanish rule, Moros in the southern islands experienced continued Islamization of the public and private sectors of...

---

\(^{43}\) Angeles, "Moros in the media and beyond: representations of Philippine Muslims," 35.
its society, independent of Spain. This separation pushed Moros to establish deeper ties with its Muslim Malay counterparts in nearby Indonesia and Malaysia than with its northern Christian Filipino neighbor. It was not until 1898, when the United States deposed Spain of its power at the end of the Spanish-American War, that the prospect of uniting the archipelago under one government gradually become a new reality.

When the American government seized control of the islands, it exercised great caution in trying to avoid the unscrupulous histories of European imperialism and “assumed the Philippine Islands with the utmost reluctance and with a sense of responsibility to the people of these islands that was profound and sincere.”\textsuperscript{44} By choosing not to grant the Philippines immediate independence, however, the United States embarked on its first foreign occupation and long-distance colonial relationship. In accordance with this newfound responsibilities, after the signing of the Treaty of Paris on December 21, 1898, President McKinley gave the following instruction to his War Secretary:\textsuperscript{45}

\begin{quote}
It should be the earnest and paramount aim of the military administration to win the confidence, respect, and affection of the inhabitants of the Philippines by ensuring them in every possible way that full measure of individual rights and liberties, which is the heritage of free peoples, and by proving to them that the mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation...under the free flag of the United States. \textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

Despite Filipino guerilla resistance against United States occupying forces, which lead to the outbreak of the Philippine-American War and lasted from 1899 to 1902, the Americans pushed forward with their policy of “benevolent assimilation” under


\textsuperscript{45} The treaty that officially ended the Spanish-American War.

\textsuperscript{46} Taft, The Duty of Americans in the Philippine, 4.
McKinley’s hackneyed motto, “A Philippines for the Filipinos,” and declared that all policies, prior to approval, must take into consideration the welfare of the people. Although the details of American colonialism in the Philippines remain disputable—particularly on discussions that implicate the United States as less than benevolent in its methods of occupation—there is mounting evidence that American leadership was neither ignorant of the divide between the northern and southern islands nor blameless in their robust efforts to integrate the archipelago under the banner of Filipinization. In order to fully grasp the complexity of what it means to be Balik-Islam in the Philippine context, familiarization with the history of Moro-Filipino relations is integral to the greater picture of reversion and symbolic negotiation. This section of the chapter, therefore, focuses on illustrating on how American colonialism further propagated the marginalization and othering of Muslims in the Philippines.

In 1899, just after landing on the southern island of Sulu, Major General Otis of the U.S. Army Forces reported that:

All Moros…profess the Mohammedan religion, introduced in the fourteenth century, and the sacredness of the person of the Sultan is therefore a tenet of faith…. The United States must accept these people as they are, and endeavor to ameliorate their condition by degrees, and the best means to insure success appears to be through the cultivation of friendly sentiments and the introduction of trade and commerce upon approved business methods. To undertake forcible radical action for the amelioration of conditions or to so interfere with their domestic relations as to arouse their suspicions and distrust would be attended with unfortunate consequences.47

Otis was aware of the cultural distinction between Moros and the northern Filipinos. He also appeared to respect their distinct forms of government and wished to carry out his duty of “benevolent assimilation” through a genuinely altruistic manner in order to avoid

---

further bloodshed and rebellion. In another similar account, James A. LeRoy, assigned as a secretary to the staff of the first United States Philippine Commission in 1899, shared his observations regarding the Moros stating that

by the word “Filipinos” we mean the Christianized inhabitants of the archipelago, who constitute nine-tenths of its total population, excluding the pagan and more or less savage tribes of the hills and forests and the Mohammedan Malays of the southern part of the archipelago, commonly called “Moros”. 48

LeRoy published many of his observations during his travels in the Philippines from 1890 to 1901 and focused on significant social and political problems. In his writings, he is sympathetic to the misuse and misunderstanding of the Moro-Filipino distinction and notes

an amazingly great amount of confusion has arisen from the failure to preserve clearly this fundamental distinction. The fact that it is considered vital by the Filipinos themselves, that they themselves feel entirely separate…is in itself sufficient reason for preserving the distinction. 49

Adhering to Otis and LeRoy’s advice, the United States Congress passed a “Philippine Bill” on July 7, 1902 which recognized “the distinction between Muslims, Christians and Pagan Filipinos” and stipulated that there be different forms of government for each. 50

Although the recognition of both Moros and Filipinos continued, in many instances Moros were perceived inferior to their Christian Filipino counterparts. By 1903, American preference for Christian Filipinos began to surface. In a report by the first Civil Governor of the Philippines, William H. Taft, 51 he wrote that the Filipinos are a Christian people. And they have been so for three hundred years. It will not be said that I have been partial to the Spanish Friars and the Spanish sovereignty here, but I am anxious to admit in the fullest manner the debt which these people and the world owes to

49 LeRoy and Earl, The Philippines Circa 1900, 3.
50 Rajinder Singh Chauhan, Muslims in South East Asia, (Delhi, India: Kanishka Publishing House, 1991), 80.
51 William H. Taft later served as the 27th President of the United States from 1909-1913.
Spain and her friars for Christianizing 7,000,000 of Malays and giving them, speaking broadly, Christian and modern ideals.\textsuperscript{52}

Taft aided in pursuing a civilizing mission that aimed to modernize the Moros, as evinced by his statement that the Filipino Christian were “centuries in advance of the Mohammedan.”\textsuperscript{53} In another set of instructions, sent to the second Philippine Commission in 1902, are guidelines on how to deal with Muslims and other non-Christians:

In dealing with uncivilized tribes of these Islands, the Commission should adopt the same course followed by Congress in the case of north American tribal Indians, to maintain their tribal organization and government surrounded by a civilization to which they are unable or unwilling to conform. Such tribal governments should be, however, subjected to wise and firm regulation and without undue interference. Constant active efforts should be made to prevent barbarious practices and they should be introduced to civilized customs.\textsuperscript{54}

Within the first few years of the American occupation, Muslim regions in Mindanao were controlled by U.S. forces through a series of sociopolitical and economic policies, as well as a brutal military campaign modeled after efforts at home to manage Native American tribes.\textsuperscript{55} At first, the United States imposed a policy similar to that of Spain, allowing the

\textsuperscript{52} Taft, \textit{The Duty of Americans in the Philippine}, 13.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{54} Chauhan, \textit{Muslims in South East Asia}, 79.
Moros to maintain their own form of government. But the Americans knew they had a significant advantage over colonial Spain; they were able to accomplish what Spain had failed to do—subdue and control Moro lands. The southern islands, which were once impenetrable, were now available and amenable to American political and economic control.

A major point of contention throughout the Mindanao province has always been land. Moros occupied some of the most fertile land in the southern region.\(^56\) During Spanish rule, the southern islands were not covered by the Spanish ‘encomienda’ system, one based on a feudal-like land arrangement imposed in Luzon and in the Visayas.\(^57\) But with the arrival of the American colonial government and the signing on the Treaty of Paris in 1898, ownership of all lands in the Philippine archipelago became sovereign possession of the United States. To expedite the unification of the archipelago, the US Philippine Commission quickly passed several legislation concerning land ownership. These laws were also enforced in the Islamized areas of Mindanao. The enactment of these laws eventually granted Christian Filipinos easy access to land and power in the Muslim ancestral territories.

In 1902, the Land Registration Act (No. 496) introduced the Torrens System\(^58\) which called for the systematic registration of land.\(^59\) This system essentially overlooked


\(^{58}\) A system for recording land titles under which a court may direct the issuance of a certificate of title upon application by the landowner. The system is named after Sir Robert R. Torrens (West's Encyclopedia of American Law, 2nd ed., 2008).

the historical customary law (adat) among the Moros which is based on the notion that there can be no absolute ownership of land. Moros believed that “land and all of creation belong to God, and human beings are only trustees or stewards of God's creation.”

Since pre-colonial times, Moros practiced this principle of adat was and land was maintained based on usufructuary rights, with the sultan (datu) exercising supreme stewardship of the land under his domain. Because of this arrangement, many of the Moro natives refused or did not find it necessary to register the lands they were cultivating. Following the Land Registration Act of 1902, the Public Land Act of 1903 required that those lands unregistered in the previous year would automatically become public land. These lands were then sold to Filipinos, Americans, and foreign nationals. In addition, this law introduced the ‘homestead system’ which granted lots of 24 hectares to Filipino citizens who “sought to establish, cultivate, and maintain farms in frontier areas.” The United States implemented the homestead system to “resettle the excess populations from the more crowded areas of the country;” i.e., the northern provinces of Luzon and the Visayas. These two policies, however, were ultimately detrimental to native Moro inhabitants. Many Moros did not take the opportunity to register for legal entitlement to their land. Nor did they apply for new public lands offered by the American government since it was considered a foreign and uncustomary practice. Instead, Christian Filipinos from the northern islands began migrating south to take advantage of the government-sponsored program. From 1903 onward, there was a

---

60 Cagoco-Guiam, "Retrospect and Prospects: Toward a Peaceful Mindanao".
61 Legal rights of using and enjoying the fruits or profits of something belonging to another.
62 Hayami, Quisumbing, Adriano, Toward an Alternative Land Reform Paradigm: A Philippine Perspective, 42-43.
considerable shift in demographics throughout the Mindanao province. According to census data, in 1903, Moros made up 76% of the population. By 1918, they made up only half. Today, estimates show that Moros make up roughly 20% of the population in Mindanao. Moreover, before American colonization, Moros technically “owned” a majority of land in Mindanao. By 1990, they possessed less than 17%—most of which are remote and infertile mountainous areas, and over 80% of the Moro population was reported to be landless tenants.64

In 1906, Major General Leonard Wood, the appointed governor of the Moro province (1903-1906) and former military governor of Cuba (1899-1902) grew skeptical of the official mission slogan “The Philippines for Filipinos.” He shared the sentiments of Taft and considered the Christian Filipinos far more advanced than the Moros. Believing he could both contribute to the economy and set an example to the native Moros, he asserted that ‘what is needed here is an influx of such people as built up the West. The natives would be stimulated by their example and educated by their work and the possibilities of these Islands would soon be apparent.’65 Woods’ initial plan entailed bringing an influx of American agricultural specialists to settle in the Philippines and teach natives how to develop the land. Due to the costs of transportation and logistical constraints, the Americans invested in training Filipino Christians from the north. In 1913, the American government began to establish a number of agricultural colonies encouraging farmers from Luzon and the Visayas to migrate south by providing ‘free transportation, financial assistance, town sites and surveyed properties.’66 From 1913 to

64 Chauhan, 107.
65 Peter Gowing, Mandate in Moroland, 126.
66 Ibid., 88.
1917, seven agricultural colonies were opened in Mindanao where the Christian Filipino settlers lived among the native Muslim farmers.67

Early efforts of resettlement served the political purpose of alleviating agricultural tension in the north, especially for landless farmers in congested regions. It offered Filipinos government-subsidized land and helped to quell peasant unrest. But much of the government’s efforts were unsuccessful at the outset. For various reasons, many prospective migrants were deterred and dissuaded to migrate to Mindanao, mostly due to the prevalence of malaria, lack of development or amenities, and tension between Christian and Moro people. In response, the government established a more comprehensive program prompting the founding of the National Land Settlement Administration (NLSA) in 1939. Due to the onset of the war, it ceased to resume until 1950 when it sponsored the migration of 8,300 families into the previously established settlements. Succeeding years yielded numerous additions of Christian settlers. Between 1948 and 1960, two million Christian Filipinos reportedly moved to Mindanao under the auspices of government-run programs, and by 1963, the National Resettlement and Rehabilitation Administration (NARRA) supplanted the NLSA and managed over 25,000 migrant families residing in 695,500 hectares of land.68

The rise of a migrant population, even in its early years generated a vibrant economy, as General Wood had anticipated. As early as 1919, American corporations entered the scene and began to monopolize the agro-business in the southern Philippines. B.F. Goodrich launched a rubber plantation in 1919, followed by Goodyear in 1929 and

67 Pikit, Silik, Paidu, Pulangi, Pagalungam, Glan and Talitay (Gowing, Mandate in Moroland, 88).
68 Chauhan, 108.
Firestone in 1957. Del Monte established its pineapple plantation in 1926, succeeded by Dole in 1963, and both have since enjoyed monumental annual returns on their investments in Mindanao. These corporations represent just a fraction of foreign land consumption that further aggravated the land conflict in Mindanao. With time, more employment opportunities, and possibilities for a better life, Christian Filipinos flocked southward, enthralled by a myth popularized by American media that Mindanao was a new frontier and “the land of promise.”

With Christian Filipinos comprising the majority population in Mindanao in 1916, the rights of the minority Moro population were overlooked. In 1916, Congress enacted the Jones Law, also known as the Philippine Autonomy Act which announced the United States’ intention to “withdraw their sovereignty over the Philippine Islands as soon as a stable government can be established therein.” According to Peter Gowing, the Jones Act essentially “accelerat[ed] the Filipinization of the civil administration” throughout the Mindanao province. American imperialists relied on aid from those most educated, of high local esteem and preferably those with whom Americans could best relate to—that is, the Christian Filipinos. Christian Filipinos were thus trained and conferred greater roles in the new American-led administration throughout the fledgling Republic. Jaime Infante put it succinctly, observing that “the economic oligarchy became the political

69 Ibid., 109.
70 Mastura, Muslim Filipino Experience, 78.
72 The United States did not officially grant the Philippines its independence until July 4, 1946, notably after the country was devastated by Japanese rule during World War II; Peter Gowing, Muslim Filipinos: Heritage and Horizon, (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1979), 166.
oligarchy.” 73 From 1916 to 1946, American forces gradually moved toward indirect rule by implementing the “Filipinization” of politics, economy, education, healthcare, and military throughout the entire archipelago. 74 By enacting the Jones Law, the United States effectively established a hierarchy of power, placing Christian Filipinos above what they deemed as “uncivilized” Moros. 75

For Moro leadership, the Jones Law was a striking betrayal. During the early years of military occupation, U.S. and Moro authorities forged an agreeable relationship with the signing of the Bates Agreement in 1899. 76 The agreement stipulated that the Moros would recognize American sovereignty and agree to adhere to anti-piracy laws, among other things. In return, the United States offered its patronage, respect for the authority of Moro chiefs and sultanate, and protection from foreign invasion. 77 With the Spanish gone, the Moros knew they were vulnerable. They accepted the rule of the United States since they detested the thought of being handed over to a Filipino government. For this reason, the Jones Law was particularly unfavorable. After the enactment of the Jones Law, a group of Moro datu signed a petition against the law stating

When the Americans came here…the American officers, who were the legitimate representatives of the United States government, made promises to us and gave us and gave us assurance that the American people would always protect us and not amalgamate us with the Christian Filipino people. 78

74 Mastura, 87.
75 Chauhan, 79.
76 The Bates Agreement was signed by Brig. General John C. Bates of the U.S. Army and Sultan Jamal-ul-Kiram II of Sulu.
77 Gowing, Muslim Filipinos: Heritage and Horizon, 34.
Moros demonstrated trust not only by signing an agreement of truce but also by relinquishing their right to arms to the American forces. The petition continues:

As time went on, our American benefactors serving the government were being gradually replaced by Christian Filipinos which we consider a breach of the promise of those who disarmed us.\textsuperscript{79}

Not only did it appear that the Americans betrayed their trust, but by bestowing authority in the hands of Christian Filipinos, they further intensified the centuries-old animosity between Christian Filipinos and Moros. Moros resented the parceling out of lands they had occupied for centuries to foreign settlers and Christian Filipinos.\textsuperscript{80} In 1916, Datu Piang of the Mindanao province protested the land resettlement efforts declaring

\begin{quote}
The Moro has witnessed many of the choiced parts of his country parcelled out to (Christian) Filipinos. He has seen the shrines once his ancestors gathered in solemn worship now converted into pig-wallows or drinking shops—two abominations to the Moslem. He has been pushed out from his better villages and towns and these sites given over largely to (Christian) Filipinos.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

The encroachment of Filipinos and Americans on Moro lands not only signified political and economic infringement, but many Moros saw the chain of events as an allied campaign against their Islamic way of life. As settlements and civil municipals expanded under the Jones Law, Filipinos began to control the jurisdiction of nearly every social, political, and legal aspect of communities in Mindanao. Moro leadership viewed the Filipino as an Americanized-Christian, whom they considered “a coward, a cheat, a bully and a land-grabber, who, if he could, would destroy Islam.”\textsuperscript{82} Rightly so, Jeffrey Milligan designates the subsequent post-American era as “internal colonialism,” where Filipinos govern Moros and effectively inherit the continuing “Moro problem” faced by their

\textsuperscript{80} Gowing, \textit{Muslim Filipinos: Heritage and Horizon}, 37.
\textsuperscript{81} Mastura, 84.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 42.
colonial predecessors.\textsuperscript{83} Both Milligan and Angeles add that Christian Filipinos ultimately perpetuated the negative stereotypes and biases against Moros that were produced through centuries of colonial discourses.

The binaries of good versus evil, and ‘us’ versus ‘them’, reproduced in \textit{Moros y Cristianos} and \textit{Moro-Moro/Komedya} dramas not only continued through popular culture, but just as influential was the pedagogical diffusion of such dualism. Beginning in the American colonial period, school textbooks and books on Philippine history were what Milligan describes as “agents of cultural and ideological hegemony.”\textsuperscript{84} For example, he points to a study that analyzes 38 history textbooks disseminated in the 1980s and early 1990s. Half made no mention of Muslims in the Philippines, and those that did included only several paragraphs at most, which were largely disparaging toward Moros.\textsuperscript{85} Milligan adds that as of the early 2000s, even after Moros in the Philippines had gained political and economic traction, govern-issued textbooks remained inadequate in representing the histories and cultures of the thirteen different ethnolinguistic Moro tribes.\textsuperscript{86} Interestingly, Milligan concludes that “the curriculum, even where it includes material on Muslim Filipinos, engages in the intellectual construction of the Muslim

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 479.
\item Peter Gowing provides a chart of the recorded groups from 1975 in \textit{Muslim Filipinos: Heritage and Horizon}, 1979, 2. The groups include: Badjao, Ilanun, Jama Mapun, Kalagan, Kolibugan, Maguindanao, Maranao, Molbog, Palawani, Samal, Sangil, Tausug, and Yakan.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Other by reinforcing popular biases and dividing the world in ways that justify and perpetuate the marginalization of Filipino Muslims.”

Navigating between Moro and Christian: Filipino Born-Again Muslims

Largely due to the United States’s policy to unify the Philippine archipelago, incorporating Muslim regions separated by over 300 years of history, the tension between Muslim and Christian communities increased over time due to a number of political, economic, and social policies that further subjugated the Moro people. As the unification process continued by way of land redistribution and settlements, Moros felt increasingly threatened. Hostility between Moros and the Christianized Filipino government heightened in March 1968 when at least 28 Moro army recruits were killed in the infamous “Jabidah massacre” on the island of Corregidor. Moro activist and leader, Amina Rasul-Bernardo, argues that “the exposed massacre provided a focal point for Muslim secessionists” while other scholars note how “Jabidah made all sections of Muslims—secular and religious, modern and backward alike—concerned about their future.” Soon after Jabidah, for a number of alleged reasons, including formation of a

---


88 According to Cesar Majul, “the real purpose of Jabidah was never made public, and even today speculation and controversy surround this secret plan” (See: Cesar Adib Majul. The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines. 3rd ed, (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1985), 41). Majul believes that the Philippine Army clandestinely recruited a Moro sect of soldiers to train in guerilla warfare, but 28 recruits were found massacred soon after.


Muslim secession movement, President Marcos declared martial law on September 21, 1972. In response to these, among other hostile events, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) emerged under the leadership of Nur Misuari, who, at the time was an instructor of political science at the University of the Philippines. In 1974, Misuari made public the ‘Manifesto of the Moro National Liberation Front: Establishment of the Bangsa Moro Republik’. Seeking to rectify the injustice incurred upon the Moro people, the manifesto opens by stating:

We, the five million oppressed Bangsa Moro people, wishing to free ourselves from the terror, oppression and tyranny of Filipino colonialism which has caused us untold suffering and miseries by criminally usurping our land, by threatening Islam through wholesale destruction and desecration of its places of worship and its Holy Book, and murdering our innocent brothers, sisters and folks in a genocidal campaign of terrifying magnitude.

In effect, Misuari and the MNLF reawakened a centuries-old desire for independence—first from Spain, then the United States, and this time from the Philippine government, which Moros believe to be a direct product of colonial powers. While it goes beyond the scope of this dissertation to delve further into the complex history of Moros in the Philippines, what is imperative for the reader to grasp are the underlying sources of the grievances Moros share as they continue to seek autonomy from Filipino sovereignty and reparation for their lands seized in the Mindanao province. In recent decades, scholars have observed a rebranding of the Moro identity. Angeles discusses how the separatist struggles of both the MNLF and off-shoot organization the MILF (Moro Islamic

---


Liberation Front) served as conduits of change. Since the 1970s, Moros gradually embraced their designation as “Moro”, a once derisive label introduced by the Spanish, and used their “otherness” as justification for autonomy from the Philippine Republic.

How Moros relate to the newer communities of Muslims, the Balik-Islam reverts, is central to this study. The Moro identity was forged by centuries of struggles, occasional triumphs, and perhaps most importantly, the formation of ethnic solidarities that grew stronger and more resilient with each setback. Since Balik-Islam reverts have no historical or ethnic ties to the Bangsamoro (Moro Nation or Moroland), they are categorically a different class of Muslims. Since they never experienced the same forms of marginalization and Othering by colonial oppressors, as had Moro ancestors, there are Moros who remain suspicious of Balik-Islam intentions and view reverts as disingenuous or insincere, especially since most all are former Christians. Despite some antagonism, most Moros simply wish to ensure their experiences are not undermined by the possible conflation of Balik-Islam and Moro, as they are often grouped collectively as Muslim Filipinos. Moro leader, Amina Rasul-Bernardo, for example, was quoted as acknowledging in succinct terms, “we are Moros, the converts are Muslims.”93 In this case, Rasul-Bernardo is not necessarily disparaging the Balik-Islam, but rather, she emphatically highlights the distinction between the two communities.

In a similar vein, the Balik-Islam reverts I met in the Philippines were highly conscious of the Moro-revert/convert distinction. When asked about the difference between the two types of Filipino Muslims, most Balik-Islam were quick to reply that

93 Angeles, "Moros in the media and beyond: representations of Philippine Muslims," 51. As a former student of Nur Misuari herself, and through her years of research on Muslims in the Philippines, Angeles concludes that “to be a Balik-Islam is definitely not synonymous with being a Moro,” Ibid.
there is essentially no difference; they are all Muslim brothers and sisters. However, during my experiences, this standard response of comradery was almost always qualified by a momentary, sometimes seemingly unconscious divulgence of the tension between the two groups. Though they all see themselves as part of the ummah, a global community of believers, Balik-Islam members refer to Moros distinctly as the “Born-Muslims”. While some Balik-Islam respondents view Born-Muslims as more fortunate for being born into the faith, the vast majority of Balik-Islam I spoke with strongly believe that reverts are the more genuine Muslims because they deliberately chose Islam as their faith. The act of choice is critical to how Balik-Islam members assess their relationship with Born-Muslims. As will be exemplified later in this study, many Balik-Islam reversion experiences mirror the conversion narratives of Filipino “Born-Again” followers. In my previous encounters with Filipinos who left Catholicism for Pentecostal and Evangelical sects, the ways in which they regard themselves as “born again” in their Christian faith is strikingly similar to how the Balik-Islam describe their reversion to Islam. For this reason, I find that Balik-Islam can be distinguished as the “Born-Again Muslims” of the Philippines. When asked their opinion of Born Muslims, several Balik-Islam shared their slight contempt for Born Muslims, describing them, for example, as “lazy to practice their religion” and “ignorant of the true faith”. In general, it became clear to me that many Balik-Islam saw Born Muslims as taking Islam for granted while Moros, in large part, question the authenticity of Born-again Muslims.

In part, due to the stark differences in how Balik-Islam and Moros construct their identities and thus perceive themselves in relation to one another, their notion of “reversion” varies greatly. Moros—or Born-Muslims—tend to view the act of returning
to Islam through a colonial framework, whereas Balik-Islam—Born-Again Muslims—are more inclined to understand their reversion within a universal context. Of the over 100 Balik-Islam members I polled, 76% characterized Islam primarily as the original religion of all humankind, while 9.3% principally recognized Islam as the pre-colonial religion of the Philippines. While these two responses are by no means mutually exclusive, what is telling is that the vast majority of Balik-Islam in this study understand their religion as one that transcends nationalistic boundaries. Balik-Islam preachers do certainly mention Islam’s pre-colonial presence in the country as a hook to draw in potential reverts, but this information becomes ancillary to their core message.\(^{94}\) This data reflects an important departure from previous studies that portray Balik-Islam as returning to the same pre-colonial Islam touted by Moro nationalists. Rather, the Balik-Islam are returning to an archetypal Islam unbound from territorial disputes, unhindered by ethnic markers, and exempt from historical grievances.

Reverting to a Globalized Islam: Deterritorialized and Translocal Muslims

The Balik-Islam’s propensity to highlight their connection to the global Islamic \textit{ummah} is not a unique phenomenon. The concept of \textit{ummah}—a universal community of believers—is fundamental to Muslims worldwide. Yet, in the historical and geopolitical context of the Philippines, it is a relatively new outlook. For centuries, Moros were

\(^{94}\) One primary assumption I had before going into the field was that Christians Filipinos became Balik-Islam upon discovering the truth about Islam being a pre-colonial religion in the Philippines. To my surprise, for most Balik-Islam I spoke with, learning about the pre-colonial status of Islam was a secondary or even tertiary reason for becoming Muslim. This early realization in my fieldwork drove me to dig deeper into other possible root causes of reversion. The result of this gradual and extensive exercise is manifest in the model of symbolic negotiation, the heart of this dissertation and a theory expounded in further detail in the next chapter.
forced to define their religion in an inward manner, particularly as a foil to their Christian neighbors. In contrast, Balik-Islam define their religion by looking outward, seeking authenticity abroad and in a global context. Olivier Roy’s recent works deliberate on the global Islamic resurgence and are helpful to understanding how the Balik-Islam might fit into current global religious trends.\(^\text{95}\)

Roy argues that the spread of Islam around the world and especially its “passage to the West” marks a phenomenon he terms “deterritorialization”.\(^\text{96}\) Roy believes that this occurs when religion is delinked from culture and no longer has a relationship with a territory or given society. It means that religion has to define itself solely by religious terms. It also implies a loss of traditional religious authority embedded in society. Focusing on Muslims who migrate to the West (namely Europe and North America), Roy claims that in order for deterritorialized Muslims to maintain a Muslim identity, they must actively seek out new forms of social authority and reconstruct their identities, all while living in the midst of Western values and cultures. Deterritorialized Muslims, therefore undergo a process of “deculturation” before adopting their new religious identities.\(^\text{97}\) Roy emphasizes that because most historically Islamic cultures, or Muslim-majority populations, view religion as encompassing all aspects of individual and social life—the private and public—it is particularly challenging for deterritorialized Muslims to fully integrate into Western or non-Islamic cultures. Roy reasons that the notion of a “Globalized Islam” emerges from the process of deterritorialization, because without


\(^\text{96}\) Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, 33; 38.

\(^\text{97}\) Ibid., 120.
Thus, for deterritorialized Muslims, creating an abstract worldwide community built around Islamic values, or an imagined ummah, becomes more important than creating a state, as was the goal of Islamists in previous generations.

Notably, one key outcome of deterritorialization, Roy asserts, is the rise of neofundamentalism. He finds that it often stems from rootless and deterritorialized Muslim youth, especially second or third generation citizens of Western countries. New forms of radicalism, militancy, or even violent extremism have resulted from Muslim youth being uprooted and unable to integrate in Western societies. They tend to go on quests for Islamic authenticity that begin with rejecting Western culture and values. These deterritorialized Muslims, Roy claims, wish to establish an authentic and uniform ummah, a Muslim community built around Islamic values, that transcend any particular society, culture, or territory.

Although Roy’s concept of deterritorialization remains a popular trope for explaining the concept of a Global Ummah, Peter Mandaville’s study on “translocality” somewhat parallels Roy’s observations on Muslim migrants to Western countries, but his conclusion, I argue, are more nuanced, constructive, and optimistic. Mandaville stresses the importance of considering Islam as a lived experience. He employs Talal Asad’s theory that religions are discursive traditions that are embedded in historical power-knowledge relations. Thus, Mandaville defines translocality as new forms of

---

98 Roy sees this as a “crisis of authority”, Ibid, 33.
99 Ibid., 2.
100 See Peter G. Mandaville, Transnational Muslim politics: Reimagining the Umma (New York: Routledge, 2001).
politics emerging from the Muslim world’s experience of globalization. By focusing on how Muslims themselves experience diaspora and transnationalism, Mandaville attempts to shed the binaries of Islam and the West and draw attention to the rapidly changing and porous boundaries in international relations. He argues that through the “process of displacing Islam from a particular national context and reconstituting it as a ‘travelled’ object in diaspora, Muslims develop an increased capacity to recognize, account for, and debate the difference within their religion”. Translocality, he adds, provides “deterritorialized” Muslims with the intellectual environment in which to develop “counter-hegemonic discourses” which could help them negotiate their identities as minority communities living among “Western” cultures.

Both Roy and Mandaville’s approaches to understanding a Globalized Islam involve the movement of Muslims from majority-Muslim countries to Western states where they become the minority. Roy’s discussion on deterritorialization sets the stage for his longer analysis of neofundamentalists—and he is sure to note that they represent a very small minority of migrant Muslims. Mandaville, on the other hand, examines translocal spaces where he sees migrant Muslims gaining new knowledges as they live among different cultures—in contrast to losing territory and culture. The two approaches illustrate the complexity of locating and defining a “Globalized Islam”. Roy emphasizes how displacement can foment the desire for uniformity of Islam through the creation of an imagined ummah. Yet this paradigm can be problematic in that it projects a Globalized Islam as void of culture and without historical roots or genealogy. Roy’s

---

103 Ibid., 179.
argument essentially assumes that Islam can be homogenized, which harkens back to Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington’s and their assumptions that Islamic civilizations are monolithic. Mandaville, on the contrary, underscores the diversity in discursive formations and transformations that take place among Muslims in diaspora. He points to the increase in critical thinking among Muslim in the West, which is due to a number of factors including increased exposure to Western education systems, increased literacy, hybridization of cultural values, etc. Leif Manger also writes about Muslim diversity in similar respects to Mandaville. Manger employs the term “identity spaces” to denote the process of continually changing Muslim identities in local contexts. Given these different paradigms of Globalized Islam, what is clear is that despite ongoing globalization, modernization, and secularization processes, there remains a wide spectrum of interpretations of what it means to be a Muslim minority. Roy is not mistaken in his analysis; even Mandaville acknowledges the trajectory of neofundamentalism, its desires for uniformity, and how it may signal an ominous course of action (e.g. terrorism). However, Mandaville, along with Manger, and others who seek to understand the intricacies of an emerging Globalized Islam may be more constructive and revealing in their approaches.

Recalling that Balik-Islam means the “returnees to Islam” or a “return to Islam”, these “reverts” in the Philippines have a very keen sense of space and time. The Balik-Islam movement began in the late 1970s and coincided with the oil boom in the Gulf and President’s Marcos martial law and subsequent export-oriented industrialization policies.

---

This was the start of a Philippine labor diaspora that continues today, with migrants’ remittances totaling 10% of the country’s GDP (gross domestic product). The founding members of contemporary Balik-Islam communities were once overseas labor migrants (known as OFWs, Overseas Filipino Workers) in Muslim-majority countries, mainly in the oil-rich Gulf states. Most all of them were nominal or practicing Christians who embraced Islam through *da'wah* efforts abroad. But rather than converting to a new religion, they maintain a sense of reverting or returning to Islam, which they believe is the original and therefore “authentic” religion of all humankind. Philippine scholar, Luis Lacar, and notably the first to publish a study on Balik-Islam, stressed that such conversions to Islam would have been considered “anathema” to Filipino Christians given the historical hostile and suspicious climate between Moros and Christians.\(^{106}\) This is precisely what makes the Balik-Islam a puzzling phenomenon.

While the remainder of this dissertation closely examines how and why Filipino Christians embrace Islam through a study on symbolic negotiation, Roy’s paradigm of deterritorialization coupled with Mandaville’s idea of translocality provide a useful starting point to understanding what reversion might mean to the Balik-Islam. What the Balik-Islam have essentially created is a reconstructed Muslim identity based on various political, economic, socio-cultural, and historical factors. Most reverts have experienced migration to another culture where they become the minority and are left to negotiate their Filipino, Southeast Asian, Christian identities with a new and foreign religion and culture. For a variety of reasons, when they do decide to embrace Islam and return home to the Philippines, they return as part of a marginalized minority population, belonging to

neither the Christian majority nor the “Born” Muslims in Mindanao. Thus, in one sense, they become deterritorialized Muslims who identify themselves foremost as Muslims. Living among Christians in the northern Philippines, they can no longer fully partake in embedded customs such as eating pork, drinking alcohol, or celebrating Christmas. They must then engage in deculturation in order to preserve their Muslimness. As Roy notes, by rejecting Western culture, deterritorialized Muslims reconstruct an Islamic culture which can invariably result in the idea of an imagined ummah.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 3. Relationship and Geographic Origin of Christians, Born Muslims, and Born-Again Muslims in the Philippines. Source: Author.*

Based on my analysis of the Balik-Islam movement, the diagram above illustrates the relationship between Christians, Moros, and the Balik-Islam and how they identify with the notion of territory. Today, religious groups in the Philippines are no longer constrained to specific geographic regions. The figure represents the historical territorial origins of each religious community in order to denote the lack of territory associated with the Balik-Islam. In this respect, they fit within Roy’s concept of deterritorialized Muslims. However, according to my research, very few Balik-Islam would fit Roy’s
description of a neofundamentalist. But by utilizing Mandaville’s notion of translocality and examining the translocal spaces where Balik-Islam reverts negotiate their identities with their surroundings, we find discourses of critical thinking and reflection on what it means to be a Balik-Islam Muslim in the Philippines. In these translocal spheres is where community leaders teach about the forgotten history of Islam in the Philippines. In these translocal spaces is where Balik-Islam members engage with their non-Muslim communities, providing them with education, medical services, and food. In these translocal spaces is where deterritorialized Muslims negotiate their values, meanings, and principles in order to become the “Other” while remaining authentically Filipino.

107 Neofundamentalism as it relates to Balik-Islam is addressed in the concluding chapter.
CHAPTER 3:

APPROACHING REVERSION THROUGH “SYMBOLIC NEGOTIATION”

Introduction

The concepts of translocality and deterritorialization (discussed in chapter two) allow us to envision the spaces—both the physical and abstract—where the Balik-Islam are able to negotiate their identities as Muslim reverts. Yet these conceptual models only scratch the surface of answering the question of why there are a growing number of Christian Filipinos converting to Islam. These carved out spaces point to general categories that identify and distinguish new Muslims (namely from militant or extremist sects) and provide us a more tangible sense of the lay of the land—the topography—where conversion occurs. However, what this dissertation aims to map out are the webs of networks that make up the liminal and fluid spaces where new religious identities are formed.

This chapter is dedicated to the theoretical framework I apply to understand the religious conversions among the Balik-Islam. Hereafter, I use the terms reversion and conversion interchangeably since both signify a process of religious change that is captured by the concept of symbolic negotiation. The instances where there is a distinction between the two occurs in the reversion/conversion narratives of Balik-Islam interviewees that are introduced in subsequent chapters. The primary distinction between reversion and conversion involves how a Balik-Islam member interprets their own process of becoming Muslim and whether or not they understand it to be a return to Islam, that is, a move backward in the symbolic sphere, or a move forward to a new
religion. For the purpose of this chapter, this distinction is extraneous as my goal is to situate the symbolic negotiation model within conversion scholarship.

Scholars of conversion studies have grappled with how to best capture the elusive phenomenon of religious conversion, how to articulate its complexities and nuances to a general audience, and how to distinguish conversion without marginalizing or disparaging converts as irrational or acquiescent. The literature on religious conversion predominantly broadly focuses on what are popularly described as “stages” of conversion. These theories are essentially descriptive accounts of how religious converts gradually transition from one religion to another. Rather than view conversion as a series of sequential steps or stages, I propose a holistic approach that takes into account all possible factors that might contribute to one’s conversion experience.

The heart of this dissertation is introducing “symbolic negotiation” as an approach that more precisely and constructively depicts religious conversion. Symbolic negotiation is the process in which numerous external and internal factors converge to produce an ideal environment for potential converts to reassess and reevaluate the values and truths that hold together their plausible reality. Symbolic negotiation is not unique to religious conversion. I argue that symbolic negotiation occurs in all instances where life-altering changes occur and disrupt one’s sense of certainty. Symbolic negotiation is present in nearly all forms of human activity whether or not we recognize it. By framing religious conversion as an ordinary and ubiquitous human practice—that is, through the lens of symbolic negotiation—this dissertation seeks to normalize conversion by underscoring the situational factors that impact conversion rather than place credence on characteristics that make converts themselves distinct from non-converts.
The concept of symbolic negotiation is derived from various theoretical models across multiple disciplines. This chapter begins by discussing how symbolic negotiation builds on and combines particular conceptual models in the fields of religious studies, anthropology, and sociology. Specifically, I understand symbolic negotiation as an amalgamation of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s “symbolic universe” (1967), Monika Wohlrab-Sahr’s “symbolic battle” (2006), and Pierre Bourdieu’s “theory of practice” (1971) (see figure 4). I then examine the primary components of a symbolic negotiation model, which are: (1) the symbolic universe, (2) fields of social activity, and individualized forms (3) habitus and (4) capital. From here, I describe the specific types of fields that, when in convergence, produce a space in which symbolic negotiation in the form of religious conversion emerges (see figure 10). In general, symbolic negotiation involves the confluence of social fields of (1) migration, (2) disorientation, and (3) proselytization. Moreover, based on data I collected on the Balik-Islam community, the fields specific to symbolic negotiation among reverts to Islam are: diaspora (migration), discord (disorientation), and da‘wah (proselytization). I refer to these fields as “The Three Ds.” To conclude, I acknowledge both the benefits and limitations of my scope and methodology. In effect, this chapter lays out the theoretical
foundation for the remainder of the dissertation, as subsequent chapters are each dedicated expounding on the three Ds of symbolic negotiation in greater detail.

Reexamining the Stage Approach

The stage approach to religious conversion gained popular traction with Lofland and Stark’s 1965 study on the Unification Church of Reverend Moon, or more notably the “Moonies”. In what they termed a “World-Saver” model of conversion, Stark and Lofland outlined a process of conversion based on their interactions with the “small millenarian religious cult.” 108 From their findings, they concluded that, in general:

For conversion a person must experience, within a religious problem-solving perspective, enduring, acutely-felt tensions that lead him to define himself as a religious seeker; he must encounter the cult at a turning point in his life; within the cult an affective bond must be formed (or pre-exist) and any extra-cult attachments, neutralized; and there he must be exposed to intensive interaction if he is to become a “deployable agent” 109

With these requirements in place, they formulated a conversion sequence consisting of seven stages: (1) tension, (2) problem-solving perspective, (3) seekership, (4) turning point, (5) cult affective bonds, (6) extra-cult affective bonds, and (7) intensive interaction.

After their study gained considerable attention, Lofland revisited their approach in 1977 and explained that the World-Saver model was not intended to be applied as a quantitative model, as critics had understood, but rather as “an analytic description of a sequence of experiences.” 110 Regardless of Lofland’s effort to clarify their intents, many

109 Ibid.
critics found their stages model inadequate, too static and individualistic, and too specific to be applied elsewhere.\footnote{See Henri Gooren, “Reassessing conventional approaches to conversion: Toward a new synthesis.” Journal for the scientific study of religion 46, no. 3 (2007): 338.}

Similar to Lofland and Stark’s stage approach, Lewis Rambo’s 1993 study sought to refine decades of conversion research and proffered what he characterizes as a “holistic” and “integrative” model.\footnote{Lewis Rambo, Understanding Religious Conversion: A Study in Human Nature (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).} Rambo’s seven-stage model remains a common reference point for scholars of conversion studies, as his work laid the groundwork for more interdisciplinary ways of conceptualizing conversion as a process. Rambo’s “integrative model” consists of seven stages: (1) context, (2) crisis, (3) quest, (4) encounter, (5) interaction, (6) commitment, and (7) consequences (see figure 5). Departing from Lofland and Stark’s sequential model, Rambo attempts to depict the stages of conversion as a systemic web where the stages are interactive, multidimensional, and not necessarily successive. In figure 5, Rambo places “context” at the center of the matrix to signify that it is “the total environment in which conversion transpires”\footnote{Rambo, Understanding Religious Conversion, 20.} As I allude to later in this study, Rambo’s idea of context parallels my use of Bourdieu’s concept of “field”.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure5.png}
\caption{Lewis Rambo’s Systemic Model of Conversion Source: Rambo, 1993, p. 18.}
\end{figure}
Moreover, Rambo’s adaptation of the stage model aims to be holistic insofar as it incorporates four key components: cultural, social, personal, and religious systems.\textsuperscript{114} By taking seriously a convert’s religious experience as a significant component of understanding conversion, Rambo advocates for more phenomenological studies on conversion. While this is a positive trajectory for conversion studies on the whole, Rambo notes that this model is only a beginning framework and not to be accepted as comprehensive or complete. The intrinsic flexibility and abstract qualities of Rambo’s approach makes it readily applicable to most all conversion experiences. My work on symbolic negotiation essentially reconfigures Rambo’s integrative matrix in order to go beyond the surface of descriptive stages and instead delve into the phenomenological aspects of conversion. I do strongly agree, however, with Rambo’s general definition of conversion, which, for the purpose of situating symbolic negotiation, I adopt hereafter: “conversion is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations.”\textsuperscript{115}

Further building on the stage approach, Joshua Iyadurai’s 2011 work focuses on conversion as a transformative experience through a study of converts to Christianity from various religious traditions.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure6.png}
\caption{Joshua Iyadurai’s Seven-Step Model of Transformative Religious Experiences. Source: Iyadurai, 2011, p.515.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 5.
in India. Specifically responding to Rambo’s appeal to explore interdisciplinary and phenomenological approaches to religious conversion, Iyadurai designed a step model that involves psychological, sociological, and religious studies. He defines phenomenology as a study that “takes the experience of a person as it appears…and looks for the meaning of an experience while committed to ‘thick descriptions’ as it appears.”

Following suit with seven steps, Iyadurai’s “model of transformative religious experiences” includes: (1) exposure, (2) disenchantment, (3) crunch, (4) pursuit and test, (5) hostilities, (6) participation, and (7) maturation. He contends that Rambo’s model, along with other predecessors, may acknowledge the role of religious experience and practice in conversion, but they do not effectively incorporate these elements. To account for both, Iyadurai designates a place for the “social psychological dimension” along the x-axis and religious practice in the y-axis. The x-axis includes agents from a religious community who facilitate one’s conversion through proselytization.

In my view, the literature on conversion has conditioned scholars in the field to envision conversion as a linear process that consists of defining stages or steps. Though each model improves upon the previous theories, conceptually, the stage approach remains limited by its structure and configuration. While the heuristic tools of stages or steps are undoubtedly useful for packaging conversion in a clear and digestible form, its formulaic drive for certainty proves to be disingenuous to the highly complex nature of religious conversion. In other words, each of the approaches discussed above aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of religious conversion, yet the linear trajectory

117 Ibid., 505.
118 Ibid., 515.
inherent in these process-oriented models ostensibly restrict the possibilities of non-linear conversion experiences. The theorists themselves admit these flaws by cushioning their arguments with the use of added clarification and caveats. For example, in his characterization of a stage approach, Rambo fully acknowledges the paradoxical nature of defining conversion as process that may or may not be linear:

A stage approach is appropriate in that conversion is a process of change over time, generally exhibiting a sequence of processes, although there is sometimes a spiraling effect—a going back and forth between stages. A stage may be seen as a particular element or period during that process of change. Each stage has a cluster of themes, patterns, and process that characterize it.\(^{119}\)

By recognizing how the conversion process may sometimes exhibit “a spiraling effect—a going back and forth between stages,” Rambo concedes that there are outliers to a sequential stage approach and thus chooses to illustrate his integrative model as a matrix of connected stages. Iyadurai, building on Rambo’s seven-stage model, also acknowledges the connectivity between and among steps which he denotes in figure 6 with dotted lines, creating a grid-like effect. While the stages and steps in these models are shown to be connected, the paradigm of a stage or step presumes there are parameters that define each stage/step, and that for people to experience a genuine religious conversion, they must undergo these seven distinct phases in some measurable capacity.

As scholars continue to apply some form of the stage approach to specific and nuanced case studies around the globe, the conversation surrounding the effectiveness of using stages remains largely unresolved. Annie Roald, for example, adopted the stage approach in her work on Muslim converts in Europe and focuses on post-conversion

stages. Roald points to four stages unique to the conversion process experienced by new Muslims in relation to the born-Muslim community. She identifies zealotry, disappointment, acceptance, and secularization as the stages that occur after converts accept Islam as their new religion. Although she endorses the stage approach as a useful means of , Roald admits that “not all converts go through these stages, and not all go through them in the same order.” Moreover, she emphasizes that the stages in the process are not static. Her conclusion indicates that these stages are less linear and processual than they appear, and are rather more fluid and dynamic modes of character development. By acknowledging that these “stages” are in fact not necessarily stages at all, Roald’s approach to new Muslim converts exposes a significant flaw that persists in contemporary conversion studies and begs the question of how can scholars more aptly describe the conversion experience in a meaningful and perhaps more precise way that mirrors reality rather than applies a theoretical model that essentially catalogs the perceived behaviors and experiences associated with conversion.

What I propose is thinking about conversion as a fluid interaction of multiple and various factors that eventually impact a person’s decision to convert and remain a convert thereafter. Rather than fixate on distinct stages of experience, the notion of symbolic negotiation takes into consideration the inherent overlap, intersections, and connections between and among numerous experiences and circumstances that make up a convert’s experiences. Furthermore, the stage approach to conversion tends to remain descriptive, responding to questions of ‘what’ converts are doing or ‘how’ they convert. Although I

---

121 Ibid., 348.
do not dispute the validity of stage approaches such as Rambo, Iyadurai or Roald’s, I argue that these discussions are lacking consideration of ‘why’ conversion occurs on a macro level. The model of symbolic negotiation perhaps most closely relates to Rambo’s systemic matrix of conversion shown in figure 5 above, in that it accommodates the notion of conversion as a non-linear process. Symbolic negotiation, however, stems from an entirely different theoretical underpinning. Table 2 below summarizes the stage approaches discussed above and provides a high-level comparison with the elements of a symbolic negotiation model to be examined in detail within this dissertation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>social psychological</td>
<td>holistic</td>
<td>phenomenological</td>
<td>“social phenomenological”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. TENSION</td>
<td>1. CONTEXT</td>
<td>1. EXPOSURE</td>
<td>FIELD (HABITUS + CAPITAL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. PROBLEM-SOLVING PERSPECTIVE</td>
<td>2. CRISIS</td>
<td>2. DISENCHANTMENT</td>
<td>DISCORD / DISORIENTATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. SEEKERSHIP</td>
<td>3. QUEST</td>
<td>3. CRUNCH</td>
<td>DIASPORA / MIGRATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. TURNING POINT</td>
<td>4. ENCOUNTER</td>
<td>4. PURSUIT AND TEST</td>
<td>DA’WAH / PROSELYTIZATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. CULT AFFECTIVE BONDS</td>
<td>5. INTERACTION</td>
<td>5. HOSTILITIES</td>
<td>SYMBOLOGICAL NEGOTIATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. EXTRA-CULT AFFECTIVE BONDS</td>
<td>6. COMMITMENT</td>
<td>6. PARTICIPATION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. INTENSIVE INTERACTION</td>
<td>7. CONSEQUENCES</td>
<td>7. MATURATION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Comparison of Stage Approach Models with Symbol Negotiation. Source: Author.

Symbolic Universe

The concept of symbolic negotiation is derived from several distinct social theories, that when compared and analyzed against data collected through participant observation and fieldwork, yields a novel means of approaching conversion, and ultimately paves a way for articulating what “reversion” might mean for the Balik-Islam as well. In this way, symbolic negotiation follows both an inductive and deductive path to understanding.
conversion. Moreover, this approach may be considered by social theorists as a form of grounded theory, which according to Kathy Charmaz involves “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves.”122 I want to be clear that the stage approaches to religious conversion are both valid and valuable for conceptualizing how conversion operates as a cumulative process of multiple factors and experiences. However, the purpose of applying the model of symbolic negotiation is to situate religious conversion as a more natural and ordinary experience of human activity rather than view conversion as a distinct set of stages that is somehow unique to “religious” people.

In order to position religious conversion in a more general and universal setting, symbolic negotiation occurs within the context of a symbolic universe. While the stage approaches are helpful for identifying specific traits and patterns among converts, these models are inadequate in capturing the full range of the landscape in which a conversion experience occurs. Therefore, symbolic negotiation draws upon the concept of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s “symbolic universe.”123 This study uses the following definition of a symbolic universe as a baseline for theoretical comparison and for situating symbolic negotiation within a robust and all-encompassing conceptual configuration:

The symbolic universe is conceived of as the matrix of all socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings; the entire historic society and the entire biography of the individual are seen as events taking place within this universe. What is particularly important, the marginal situations of the life of the individual (marginal, that is, in not being included in the reality of everyday existence in society) are also encompassed by the symbolic universe.124

---

124 Ibid., 114.
What Berger and Luckmann imply in their theoretical framework is that all human beings essentially operate within a matrix of understanding and interpretation that determines our perception of reality and allows us to construct and live out our individualized narratives in a meaningful way. According to Berger and Luckmann, symbolic universes provide individuals a sense of institutionalized order in an otherwise chaotic world. The following is a brief summation of the logic supporting the theory of a symbolic universe:

1. Human beings possess an inherent desire for order and meaning; without order and meaning, there is chaos.

2. We establish order and meaning and through the process of legitimation. Legitimation allows us to explain and justify our beliefs and actions with a sense of certainty and purpose.

3. Through the process of legitimation, order and meaning are developed and actualized into plausibility structures. Subjective plausibility occurs when the totality of order at an individual level makes sense within the institutional order of society.

4. Plausibility structures are the building blocks of a symbolic universe. The symbolic level refers to realities beyond our everyday experiences. A symbolic universe is formed at the highest level of legitimation. It functions as an all-inclusive matrix of understanding.

5. Symbolic universes are maintained as long as the plausibility structures therein continue to seamlessly integrate order and meaning into every aspect of one’s existence. In other words, as long as these structures remain plausible, the symbolic universe provides total sense of order and meaning, keeping chaos at bay.125

Albeit a rudimentary outline of Berger and Luckmann’s theory, this summary identifies the key elements of a symbolic universe that are relevant to symbolic negotiation: legitimation and plausibility structures. I use the symbolic universe framework to demonstrate how religions are some of the most robust forms of plausibility structures and can even be taken as a symbolic universe on its own accord. Symbolic universes are not strictly individual; they can and are shared by communities who subscribe to a

125 My summary of supporting evidence for symbolic universe, based on Berger and Luckmann, The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge, 110-120.
collective truth. Berger and Luckmann note that the symbolic universe orders history and “locates all collective events in a cohesive unity that includes past, present and future.” Moreover, they contend that because a symbolic universe orders the past, it, in turn, establishes shared memory for “all the individuals socialized within the collectivity.”

In the way that religions also provide historical order and meaning, they can be construed as symbolic universes upheld and legitimated by certain plausibility structures.

To illustrate this point, Eva Hamberg applies the concept of plausibility structures to her work on Muslim migrants in Sweden. She argues that a person’s plausibility structure can be disrupted by migration. If and when immigrants leave a community of people who share the same beliefs and values, then it may become more difficult for them to maintain their original or previous “symbolic universe” as they are no longer surrounded by supporting structures that initially made their beliefs and values plausible. Hamberg essentially characterizes religion as a plausible structure that can be weakened if one’s environment and circumstances change. I agree with her observations, to an extent. My concern is that this application can give the mistaken impression that religions are homogenous and fixed.

More compelling is Anne Sofie Roald’s understanding of plausible structures as being in a constant “state of flux”, meaning that they can change in accordance with one’s social context. Roald reasons that plausibility structures are permeable, often adjusting to fit one’s environment. For example, in her study on Scandinavian converts to

126 Ibid., 120.
Islam, she found that many new converts were introduced to the religion by other new Muslims, and therefore the more recent converts eventually adopted the new plausible structures in a more fluid manner, as opposed to experiencing disruption to the older structures that help establish their symbolic universe. Both Hamberg and Roald’s use of plausibility structures serve to illustrate how migrant converts to Islam deal with the uncertainties that accompany migration and how that might affect the plausibility of their beliefs and therefore impact their symbolic universe. However, I find that both disruption and adoption of new plausibility structures can occur simultaneously. It is, in fact, within this vague area of transition that symbolic negotiation occurs. Symbolic negotiation is the critical act of engagement that allows a convert to maintain their plausibility structures and permit their symbolic universe to remain intact.

For the purpose of this dissertation, the concept of a symbolic universe functions as the overarching framework in which symbolic negotiation takes place. The notion of plausibility structures and legitimation are central to the symbolic negotiation model, but they are expressed within the dynamics of Pierre Bourdieu’s fields, habitus, and capital. These conceptual tools, as I maintain throughout this study, are key to explaining the nuances beneath the surface of religious conversion. In the same vein, they provide a detailed account of how plausibility structures form and how they are sustained. Yet before diving deeper into why Bourdieu’s theory of practice is so central to understanding symbolic negotiation, I must first explain how Monika Wohlrab-Sahr’s use of “symbolic battle” bridges the gap between Berger and Luckmann’s symbolic universe and Bourdieu’s theory of practice, setting the stage for symbolic negotiation to come to the fore.
In her studies on Muslim converts in Germany and in the United States, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr concludes that the fundamental purpose of religious conversion is to solve an existing problem. Rather than outline general and categorical stages that a convert might experience, Wohlrab-Sahr hones in on the particular social factors that inform, shape, and impact why someone raised as a Christian might decide to become Muslim. By recognizing the significance of the symbolic sphere in which problem-solving may occur, she uncovers a spectrum of modes of conversion to Islam in the “West”, including: symbolic syncretism, symbolic battle, and symbolic transformation. Where syncretism is one extreme of the spectrum, which refers to the combination or merger of the “new” and “old” religious tenets to create a hybrid, a symbolic battle reflects the opposite end of the spectrum, signifying tension between the old and the new. Wohlrab-Sahr eventually synthesizes this spectrum to be part of an overall “symbolic transformation of crisis experience.” Symbolic transformation illustrates a highly functional interpretation of conversion that aims to resolve a particular problem. Wohlrab-Sahr categories these problems areas into three spheres: issues with sexual and gender relations, social mobility, and nationality and ethnicity. After conducting dozens of interviews with converts to Islam, she finds that “the specific dynamic of conversion results from biographical crisis experiences that cannot be solved with other, nonreligious means, but


130 Wohlrab-Sahr, 2006, 81.
through conversion can be articulated symbolically and ritually within a religious frame of reference”.

In the same way I discussed the contours of “becoming the Other” in chapter two, Wohlrab-Sahr contends that in the specific conversion cases where Christians embrace Islam, they are essentially adopting the religion of the “Other” to redress a problem or deficit in their lives as Christians. She analyzes conversion accounts as expressions of change in these converts’ religious identities with the goal of achieving conflict resolution. As the Philippine historical landscape illustrates the centuries-long tension between Christians and Muslim powers, even in the present day, these cultural and religious divides remain palpable in regions around the world. Wohlrab-Sahr acknowledges the unique history between these world religions and thus assesses the conversion from Christianity to Islam as a functional means of making sense of one’s own symbolic universe in the midst of social and personal turmoil. From her interviews with German and American converts to Islam, she found that “adopting Islam becomes a means of articulating problems of disintegration in one’s own social context and enables the symbolization of maximal distance within this context.”

In other words, by becoming the “Other”, converts to Islam are—knowingly or unknowingly—settling any unresolved discord in their former religion by achieving “maximal distance” from Christianity at the symbolic level.

I find Wohlrab-Sahr’s articulation of what occurs in the symbolic sphere during religious conversion exceptionally valuable for understanding why Christians might

131 Ibid.
convert to Islam, in particular, because this approach deviates from the conventional stages approach. Furthermore, I am aware that this sort of framework may imply certain Orientalist undertones by seemingly portraying these religious traditions as monolithic, static, and even combative entities; however, I would argue that recognizing the historical distinctions between the two religions allow us to confront how particular biases have been transmitted through generations and how they have been internalized as objective truths to produce the imagery of the “Other”. Although Wohlrab-Sahr’s symbolic paradigms are useful, they capture only pieces of a larger puzzle of the conversion process. In my paradigm of symbolic negotiation, I propose to build on and explore the applicability of these paradigms by linking them to the theoretical concepts of symbolic universe and theory of practice.

First, I take Wohlrab-Sahr’s spectrum of conversion—which encompasses symbolic syncretism, symbolic battle, and symbolic transformation of crisis—to represent the range of experiences that transpire during symbolic negotiation. As a result, symbolic negotiation, as it relates to Wohlrab-Sahr’s findings, becomes the aggregate of all possible conversions cases of Muslim converts. By broadening the theoretical scope from specific categories of conversions to an all-inclusive and general space of “symbolic negotiation,” it becomes possible to articulate multiple modes of conversion in a convert’s narrative, rather than limit the analysis to a single function or motive for conversion.

Second, I insert Wohlrab-Sahr’s symbolic paradigms into Berger and Luckmann’s framework of a symbolic universe, one that is shaped and sustained by plausibility structures. The notion of maintaining formidable and legitimated plausibility structures
coincides with the problem-solving component of Wohlrab-Sahr’s thesis. In order for converts to maintain the plausibility structures that define their new religious identity, they must undergo a certain extent of change, which involves a degree of conflict resolution with the former religious identity. This process, as Wohlrab-Sahr rightly asserts, can only be resolved at the symbolic level, which—to reiterate Berger and Luckmann’s definition—refers to realities beyond our everyday experiences. By comparing these two theoretical paradigms, we can more vividly and specifically articulate how and why plausibility structures are maintained. Before introducing Bourdieu’s theory of practice to this equation, below is a diagram that illustrates how each paradigm can actually evaluate the same phenomenon of conversion, but are doing so at different levels of analysis: macro, meso, and micro.

![Sociological Paradigms and their Corresponding Levels of Analysis. Source: Author.](image-url)
Theory of Practice

While the paradigm of symbolic universe involves a relative macro sphere of analysis and symbolic negotiation falls within a “meso” or middle level of analysis, Bourdieu’s theory of practice and the its conceptual components of field, habitus, and capital, assists in evaluating the micro level of analysis. While macro in this sense refers to a high-level and broad assessment of conversion in terms of symbolic change and meso largely involves the social groups and institutions that shape an individual’s experience, the micro level in this study focuses primarily on the individual’s biographical narrative, the underlying sociological structures that inform one’s conversion experience, and the degree to which individuals exercise agency during the process of symbolic negotiation. However, in order to capture how symbolic negotiation functions, I find that these levels of analysis must be evaluated concurrently in a relational approach. Within this comprehensive paradigm, I consider Bourdieu’s theory of practice the glue that binds the disparate levels of analysis and enables us to seamlessly traverse between them.

Pierre Bourdieu published very little on religion per se, but his theories on social behavior have made a significant impact on religious studies in recent years.\textsuperscript{133} While some scholars advocate Bourdieu’s works in the field of religion, critics claim that he reduces religious practice to products of structural and institutional determinants, which, as a result, disregards an individual’s autonomy, agency, and choice in religious behavior.\textsuperscript{134} However, recent studies on Bourdieu’s key concepts argue that his theory of

\textsuperscript{133} Terry Rey lists the nine articles in which Bourdieu discusses religion explicitly. See Rey, \textit{Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy}. London: Equinox Pub., 2007, 60.

practice is substantially more complex than structural determinism. These studies suggest that perhaps Bourdieu’s highly prominent concept of “habitus” is too often taken out of its relational context with other theoretical concepts such as “field” and “capital”. Habitus, field, and capital, are all integral to Bourdieu’s renowned “theory of practice,” albeit there are other ancillary concepts like symbolic violence and collusion. However, this study centers on the dynamics among habitus, field, and capital within the framework of a symbolic universe. To begin, I turn to Terry Rey’s summary of these concepts for guidance and clarity:

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice may, for introductory purposes, be boiled down to a handful of its most fundamental concepts. The first is practice, or what people do in society. Invariably, practice takes place in any number of the interrelated and sometimes overlapping fields that together constitute society. So much of what people do, furthermore, amounts to self-interested pursuits of forms of capital, whether material or symbolic, relative to the fields in which their practice unfolds. And the ways in which people perceive of and pursue capital are chiefly generated by their habitus, which is that part of their personhood that filters their perceptions, molds their taste, and casts their inclinations and dispositions.

Habitus

Despite its name, Bourdieu’s notion of habitus does not exclusively refer to an individual’s habits or acquired disposition. Rey aptly describes habitus as “the seat of one’s dispositions and the filter of all that one perceives” or “the matrix of perception”. Habitus is an idea that connects the social to the individual, the objective to the subjective, the outer to the inner experience. In Bourdieu’s words, habitus is “the social embodied”, meaning that our dispositions, tendencies, and inclinations are acquired, oftentimes through invisible or unperceived relationships, and are made manifest in our

136 Rey, Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy, 39.
137 Ibid. 46-47.
actions and choices.\(^{138}\) Habitus therefore cannot stand alone; it must be assessed in relation to one’s environment, circumstances and experiences.

**Field**

The general term Bourdieu uses to describe the environments in which our habitus exists is “field” (champs in French). In sum, he contends that “the field structures the habitus” all while the “habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world”.\(^{139}\) The idea of a competitive game is a useful metaphor for trying to understand the relationship between field and habitus. Bourdieu maintains that habitus is similar to developing a strategy or having “a feel for the game.”\(^{140}\) In effect, this “practical sense” or “feel” for the playing field is transpires gradually with time and experience. Individuals gain cognizance of specific rules, players and their positions contribute to the construction of strategies that aspire to sustain and improve one’s position in the field. For example, knowing specific rules, players, and their positions, can facilitate an individuals’ strategy to improve their position in the field, and perhaps, win the game.

**Capital**

Furthermore, as Patricia Thomson explains, what is at stake in the field is “the accumulation of capitals” which is “both the process in, and the product of a field.”\(^{141}\)

---


139 Another helpful articulation of habitus as relational is by means of a “structured structure”: “The habitus is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization.” See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984, 170.


Capital, field and habitus are an inseparable trio in Bourdieu’s theory of practice.

Thomson summarizes Bourdieu’s four major forms of capital as “economic (money and assets); cultural (e.g. forms of knowledge; taste, aesthetic and cultural preferences; language, narrative and voice); social (e.g. affiliations and networks; family, religious and cultural heritage) and symbolic (things which stand for all of the other forms of capital can be ‘exchanged’ in other fields, e.g. credentials).”

Using the game metaphor once more, it is important to note that there is no even or level playing field, since the processes involved in capital accumulation, formation of field and habitus are constantly in flux. There is no causal or dominant of the three. This non-linear configuration of Bourdieu’s theory of practice is too often misunderstood as a determined process of socialization rather than what is truly is: a relational arrangement of generative principles that produce human volition, or at least the manifestation of choice. Figure 8 below illustrates my analysis of the theory of practice in which an individual’s habitus and capital shape the social field, while the field simultaneously sets the parameters and influences how habitus and capital operate within.

The central purpose of inserting the theory of practice into the symbolic negotiation paradigm is to bridge the conceptual gap between the roles of structural determinism and agency that occurs during a religious conversion. The question of whether converts convert because they are either predetermined by their social

\[\text{FIELD} \xrightarrow{\text{HABITUS} + \text{CAPITAL}} \text{Theory of Practice}\]

*Figure 8. Configuration of Fundamental Concepts in Bourdieu's Theory of Practice. Source: Author.*
environments or are rational agents in a pluralistic religious marketplace is an ongoing debate within conversion studies that characterizes two distinct schools of thought. Yet, Karl Maton suggests that “Bourdieu intends habitus to transcend the structure/agency dichotomy.” It is precisely this aspect of habitus and the theory of practice that I consider to be a theoretical bridge between what is traditionally regarded as determined and what is perceived as choice in religious conversion.

To be clear, I understand Bourdieu’s theory of practice as complementary to the rational choice theory of religious conversion as outlined by theorists such as Stark, Finke, and Iannaccone. For example, according to Iannaccone, there are three fundamental assumptions that support a rational choice approach to conversion:

- Assumption 1: Individuals act rationally, weighing the costs and benefits of potential actions, and choosing those actions that maximize their net benefits.
- Assumption 2: The ultimate preferences (or “needs”) that individuals use to assess costs and benefits tend not to vary much from person to person or time to time.
- Assumption 3: Social outcomes constitute the equilibria that emerge from the aggregation and interaction of individual actions.

From these assumptions, Iannaccone highlights the heart of rational choice theory: maximizing behavior. In other words, Iannaccone and other proponents of this paradigm concentrate primarily on the outcomes that are manifested in behavior. This is a key difference between rational choice theory and Bourdieu’s theory of practice, as Bourdieu largely focuses on the generative principles of behavior. Another difference is Assumption 2’s assertion that individual preferences and needs are invariable; in contrast, habitus, field, and capital are considerably variable due to their relational and dynamic

---

linkage. Lastly, Iannaccone’s need for equilibria in what he refers to as “religious market” differs from Bourdieu’s model, which highlights forces of struggle (e.g. game or competition) in the field rather than balance. Notwithstanding these distinctions, where I find that rational choice and the theory of practice intersect is not necessarily what occurs in the religious field or religious market, but rather how in relation to capital and maximizing behavior.

In Stark and Finke’s *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, they define religious capital as “the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture.”¹⁴⁵ In regards to conversion, they propose the following:

- **Proposition 33** – In making religious choices, people will attempt to conserve their religious capital. When faced with making religious choices, people will attempt to save as much of their religious capital as they can and to expend as little investment in their new capital as possible.
- **Proposition 37** – When people convert, they will tend to select an option that maximizes their conservation of religious capital.¹⁴⁶

These propositions point to significant overlap between rational choice and Bourdieu’s tri-fold theory of practice, in that the accumulation of capital shapes individual behavior in the social field. Since rational choice models rely heavily on outcomes of human volition, and rationality is distinguished largely by a demonstration of maximizing behavior, I insist that Bourdieu’s theory can help explain the generative principles that result in rational choices. By applying the theory of practice, it could be argued that the choices one makes could be understood as one’s “practical sense” which is developed over time spent in a particular social field. The processes involving contemplation,

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 123.
deliberation, and ultimately a decision-making are cultivated by how one’s habitus negotiates with shifting cultural, political, social and religious fields.

Given the potential theoretical overlap between theory of practice and rational choice theory, I find it important to at least explore Maton’s idea that Bourdieu “transcends” the ongoing dichotomy between the two philosophies. Rey posits that “it could be, therefore, that Bourdieu is almost entirely absent from the massive literature in the sociology of religion relative to ‘rational choice theory’ because rational choice theorists consider his model of the religious field something of the ‘old paradigm’…Or, perhaps Bourdieu’s explicit criticisms of rational choice theory make him ‘off-limits’ to proponents of the new paradigm.”147 Here Rey refers to “old” as models of structural determinism while “new” alludes to rational choice models that give precedence to an individual’s agency and rational mind. Still, Bourdieu is critical of rational choice theorists and reasons that:

Thus, against the scholastic illusion which tends to see every action as springing from an intentional aim, and against the socially most powerful theories of the day which, like neomarginalist economics, accept that philosophy of action without the slightest questioning, the theory of habitus has the primordial function of stressing that the principle of our actions is often more practical sense than rational calculation.”148

While I side with Bourdieu’s hypothesis, not everyone agrees with this assessment of his theory of practice. For instance, Saba Mahmood in Politics of Piety is highly critical of Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. Mahmood employs Aristotle, Foucault, and Butler to frame the performativity of Muslim women in Cairo. She emphasizes the pedagogical process by which these women cultivate their moral and ethical identities and highlights their agency involved. Mahmood understands Bourdieu to be antithetical to this idea, stating

“apart from the socioeconomic determinism that characterizes Bourdieu’s discussion of bodily dispositions, what I find problematic in this approach is its lack of attention to the pedagogical process by which habitus is learned.”

Mahmood attempts to resolve the lack of agency in Bourdieu’s structuralist formula by adopting the Aristotelian tradition of habitus which "is understood to be an acquired excellence at either a moral or practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person.”

Mahmood contends that the women of the da’wah movement in Cairo are essentially using the exteriority of the body—that is, practices such as veiling, prayer, fasting, etc.—as a means of moral training which would, in turn, create an interiority of moral virtue. Therefore, in opposition to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus as inculcation, Mahmood argues that the women are exerting “moral cultivation.” What Mahmood’s argument seems to lack is the inclusion and consideration of outside social, economic, political and historical elements that inform one’s level of piety. Instead, she misunderstands that Bourdieu’s habitus is the “social embodied,” meaning that all dispositions are socially constructed. Mahmood focuses squarely on the microcosm of individual piety and the agency therein, and thus fails to skillfully weave in the macro elements of one’s social field.

Another critic of Bourdieu’s theory of practice is Bryan Turner in Religion and Modern Society. In this overview sociological perspectives in a postmodern world, Turner is more focused on issues like globalization, multiculturalism, and revivalism as he assesses Bourdieu in an entire chapter devoted to his works. Turner concludes, “in my

150 Ibid., 138.
view his essays on religion actually serve to pinpoint a real problem in Bourdieu’s work, namely its failure to overcome the traditional dichotomies of sociological theory—action and structure, on the one hand, and materialism and idealism on the other.” Further putting down Bourdieu’s ideas as essentially useless, Turner ends his discussion stating that Bourdieu’s “notions of embodiment, habitus, practice, and field offer a fruitful way of thinking” but he “did not make a major contribution to the sociology of religion.”

On the contrary, Joshua Roose in Political Islam and Masculinity: Muslim Men in Australia uses the theory of practice as the overarching framework for his research. Defying critics, he uses habitus, capital, and field to demonstrate that

Young men displaying project identities and engaging in constructive political action through acts of cultural production are likely to possess significantly higher levels of capital (including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capitals) that bestow them with great levels of confidence and empowerment, enabling them to act within their fields and society than young Muslim men who display resistance identities that engage in acts of destructive political violence (terrorism).”

Roose’s findings indicate that Australian Muslims engage differently within society and social fields based on their habitus and capital accumulation—which includes family, religion, education, employment, Western influences, government, and media. By identifying particular aspects of individual behavior based on these “thinking tools” of practice, Roose suggests societies can be more informed in their engagement with Muslims.

Roose’s application of Bourdieu’s theory of practice allows me to consider how I might understand the conversions of Balk-Islam reverts in the Philippines. Using field, habitus, and capital as theoretical tools, and based on information I collected from a

152 Ibid., 123.
mixture of surveys and interviews from over 100 respondents, I found that specific to the Balik-Islam and the Philippine context, the most prominent social fields present among converts are: migration, which occurs in the form of the massive Philippine labor diaspora, the disorientation of migrants, which often transpires in the form of discord while one lives overseas, and proselytization, which is the practice of da‘wah, the propagation of Islam. Within these social fields, I found that before converts embrace Islam, they have collective habitus, meaning that (1) most all were once practicing Christians or Catholics and (2) most all grew up with the biases and preconceptions that Islam is a dangerous religion, as it has been portrayed through the Philippine islands since the arrival of Spanish colonization. In terms of capital, there are various economic, social, cultural, and symbolic gains that migrants—or more specifically, Filipino overseas workers—possess. Aside from obvious gains such as increased monetary assets and spending power in the Philippines, they gain credibility and elevated status as world travelers who are exposed to different cultures and lifestyles. Figure 9 summarizes how Bourdieu’s theory of practice can be applied to the Balik-Islam community.

Figure 9. Analysis of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice Toward Theorizing Balik-Islam. Source: Author.
Symbolic negotiation is a multifaceted paradigm for understanding religious conversion that combines three key theoretical concepts: symbolic universe, symbolic battle, and theory of practice. The symbolic negotiation model deviates from the traditional stages approach to understanding conversion and engages in a holistic matrix of human behavior that integrates micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis. To reiterate Rambo’s definition of conversion, symbolic negotiation also reflects “a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations.” However, what sets this model apart from other paradigms, such as Rambo’s integrative model (figure 5) is its capacity to go beyond descriptive accounts of the conversion process, and instead, identify the underlying generative forces that might make one inclined to transform their religious identity. To be clear, this model does not purport to yield conclusive answers to why people convert. That line of query is wholly subjective and, in my view, a pointless endeavor. This model does, however, provide a refined map that helps to isolate specific factors that might influence religious conversion.

Figure 10 below diagrams how I imagine the three components of the symbolic negotiation model interact. Within a person’s symbolic universe, there are numerous social fields in which they live, work, and make decisions on a daily basis. Social fields are not necessarily physical spaces; they can include any tangible or abstract domain where social interaction occurs. For example, as a female graduate student who works full-time as an analyst, my social fields include my university; the office where I work;
my commute to work; my role as a student, a daughter, a sister, someone’s significant other, a friend, etc. The possibilities are endless because we are inherently social beings. Contained in these social fields are my individualized habitus (H) and capital (C) that both shape are shaped by each specific field. My limited work experience and position as an entry-level analyst, for example, structure my social field of employment, and vice-versa, my field of employment structures my experience as an analyst. The social field is analogous to a game in which I develop and gain strategies for improving my position in the field through experience (e.g. seeking a promotion or raise).

In the model of symbolic negotiation, there are always multiple fields that frequently intersect and overlap. The impermeability of fields is delineated by dotted lines as boundaries. It is rare, if not impossible, for a social field to remain in complete isolation. The arrangement of the fields is in constant flux; however, together, when existing in unison with minimal tension or ambiguity, they function as plausibility structures by providing order and meaning in the actions one takes and the decisions one makes. Some social fields make more rational sense than others, primarily because they are socially accepted and internalized. Being both a mother and a wife, for example, can be viewed as reasonable fields to most because the institution of marriage and the biological capacity of childbearing are largely a universally accepted pairing. Whereas being both a mother and unmarried may be a more challenging arrangement of social fields because, albeit increasingly common, it is not an institutionalized norm for many cultures. When two or more disparate fields collide, overlap, or intersect, a certain degree of symbolic negotiation occurs in order for an individual to make value adjustments and recalibrate their understanding of their position amidst shifting social fields. Symbolic
negotiation captures this effort to preserve the legitimacy of the plausible structures that support one’s overarching symbolic universe. The process of symbolic negotiation may or may not require action, such as the decision to convert to another religion. Whether someone pursues a considerable change in course is contingent upon the severity of dissonance caused by shifting social fields. In figure 10, symbolic negotiation (S.N) is depicted in the largest space where three fields overlap to illustrate maximum impact of shifting fields. It is within this space that symbolic negotiation occurs. It is within this space that an individual must determine how best to realign these shifting fields in a way that makes logical sense. By logical sense, I mean the yearning for order, meaning, and certainty, to an extent—enough to stave off the uncertainty and fear that embodies chaos. Furthermore, the model of symbolic negotiation is far from universal. Even in cases where a group of people have identical social fields, their individual habitus and forms of capital will always be unique. This is precisely the case with religious conversions among the Balik-Islam.
Figure 10. Universal Configuration of Symbolic Universe, Plausibility Structures, Field, Habitus, Capital, and Symbolic Negotiation (SN). Source: Author.

Figure 11 hones in on the specific factors I identify as being present among all the Balik-Islam reverts I surveyed. By framing these factors—diaspora, discord, and *da‘wah*—as social fields in the theory of practice, it becomes more evident where symbolic negotiation—or religious conversion/reversion—arises. Collectively, I refer to these three fields/factors as the “Three Ds”. As the remainder of this dissertation expounds on each of these fields/factors in much greater detail, I conclude that to get closer to answering *why* these individuals are Balik-Islam, *why* they renounced Christianity, and *why* they embraced Islam, we must evaluate these social fields with
Diaspora

Migration is a significant factor that plays a central role in the reversion among the Balik-Islam. Based on conversion narratives and biographical information I collected from a wide range of Balik-Islam members, I found that symbolic negotiation among most reverts took place within a diasporic or migrant-oriented environment. In the case of the Balik-Islam, migration takes the form of the modern Philippine diaspora, or what
some scholars refer to as “The Philippine Labor Brokerage”.\(^{155}\) With millions of Filipino migrants living and working in majority-Muslim nations, diaspora is a crucial factor for understanding the rise in Filipino Muslim reverts.

**Discord**

While the labor diaspora is a key factor in understanding the globalizing environment in which “symbolic negotiation” takes place, it is also important to note how although the labor export benefits the Philippine state, especially in terms contributing to the GDP, it has cost countless communities, families, and individuals their greater well-being. In what Anna Guevarra describes as “cultivating an ethos of labor migration”, the Philippine government and its employment agencies “do not only recruit labor but also play an instrumental role in how Filipinos come to imagine what it means to work abroad. They aggressively instill the notion that the promise of the good life is outside the Philippines while downplaying the various social costs of this pursuit.”\(^ {156}\) Rodriguez adds that “in a society where people are forced to secure their livelihoods far from their families and country of birth, ideas of ‘home’ and ‘the nation’ are destabilized”.\(^ {157}\) The idea that migrants experience discord through destabilization is significant.

**Da’wah**

While many Balik-Islam reverts experience various degrees of discord, *da’wah* is the third factor to consider when assessing the rise of Muslim reverts in the Philippines.


\(^{156}\) Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, *Migrants for export: How the Philippine state brokers labor to the world* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).


previously noted, *da’wah* is a global and Islamic practice of inviting others to learn about Islam that can be summarized as “mission activity” or an Islamic form of proselytization.\(^\text{158}\) As it applies to the Balik-Islam, active *da’wah* encompasses how the Balik-Islam engage with non-Muslim communities. Each revert has a unique story about how they came to embrace Islam. As I recount their narratives, I try to show how “symbolic negotiation” occurs in their decision-making process. By framing my analysis within the context of symbolic negotiation, I can better understand how *da’wah* interacts with other social fields rather than view it as an isolated variable that results in conversion.

To better illustrate the model of symbolic negotiation as a viable theory for understanding religious conversion, the following is a skeletal overview of three case studies of Balik-Islam members with whom I spent the most time during my fieldwork and, in effect, significantly informed the construction of the symbolic negotiation model. These accounts, among others, will be fleshed out in greater detail in the chapters to follow.

*Case study #1: Ibrahim*

Ibrahim, age 67, began his narrative by acknowledging that he was well into his forties when he decided to “embrace” Islam. He entered the seminary in his teens, planning to be a Catholic priest. At age 17, his father died abruptly. In utter disbelief that God could allow his father to die when he was still a teenager, Ibrahim “lost faith in God”, left the seminary and moved from his hometown of Bacolod City in the central islands of the Visayas to Zamboanga, Mindanao to work as an auto parts salesman. It was there,

Ibrahim claimed, that he first encountered the culture of “born-Muslims”, or Moros. In short, he was “turned-off” by their religion and still remained a fervent defender of Christianity. Years later, he became an OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker) and moved to Saudi Arabia for a total of thirteen years—hence, the beginning of his “diaspora”. As the oldest child in the family, Ibrahim, like most all OFWs would send money, or remittances, back to his family in Bacolod. He later explained that he specifically allotted a certain amount of money to go toward building a house in which he planned to retire upon his return. This is where “discord” begins. Ibrahim returned to the Philippines in 1989 only to find that his entire life savings that he entrusted with his siblings was gone, depleted by other family expenses. Ibrahim admitted he was so enraged by the betrayal that he “wanted to kill” them, despite them being his closest family. No one was killed; however, in one very dramatic confrontation, he assaulted two of his siblings, bad enough that they required hospitalization. Ibrahim recalls this moment with intense regret visible in his eyes. Since he had no future in the Philippines, he returned to his employer in Saudi Arabia. At this point, Ibrahim had lived and worked in Saudi as a proud Christian, constantly rejecting invitations to learn more about Islam, or “da’wah”. This meant he typically kept quiet and to himself during work gatherings. It wasn’t until his return to Saudi that he began to consider what his “Sheikh” boss had to say about Islam. His employer never compelled Ibrahim to convert; it was the Sheikh’s compassion and charisma that attracted Ibrahim to open up his narrow, strictly Catholic views of God. One day the Sheikh noticed Ibrahim appeared exceptionally dejected. He requested to speak with him to inquire what was wrong. Ibrahim explained the situation with his family; he had not yet felt remorse for hurting his siblings. He still felt deceived and still
desired vengeance. In consolation, the Sheikh offered him an Islamic perspective. He explained that in Islam, all things you think you own, be it money, a house, or land, are all given to you by God/Allah. The Sheikh advised that perhaps Ibrahim’s anger is a result of misunderstanding God’s will. The Sheikh suggested that Ibrahim was, in actuality, doing the work of God; he was the vehicle through which money could be earned and sent to family to ensure their survival. Ibrahim’s problem, therefore, stemmed from his insistence that the money he earned was his own. He should, instead, expect nothing in return for simply doing God’s will. Ibrahim pondered deeply about the Sheikh’s words. Soon after their conversation, Ibrahim decided to embrace Islam and begin journey of conversion. Ibrahim remained in Saudi for another three years. While working, he took up studies in Arabic and Islamic theology. By the time he returned to the Philippines, he asked his family for forgiveness, and he too, found the compassion to forgive. However, his mother, a devout Catholic was in tears upon hearing the news of Ibrahim’s turn to Islam. The rest of his family remains concerned for his well-being. Ibrahim is the only Muslim in the family. His wife, 24 years his junior, was a convert to Islam before they met. They have one son, 18 years old this year.

Case Study #2: Omar

Omar, age 61, was raised in Ilo-Ilo, which is located in the central Philippine province of the Visayas. His mother was a Catholic catechism teacher for 32 years and he was an active member of the Knights of Columbus. He would have been considered middle-class. He moved to Manila and completed his Bachelors in Commerce. He then went on to start law school when he got an opportunity to work abroad in 1982. This point in his
life would be his entry into field of diaspora. He did administrative work for a bank in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia when his boss and coworkers invited him to learn about Islam. He was a faithful Catholic at the time but had no friends with which to socialize. Despite his inherent bias against Muslims at the time he decided to take the offer and spend time with his coworkers outside of work. What struck Omar most poignantly was being taught the historical legacy of Muslims in the Philippines by non-Filipinos. Omar described his first year abroad as quite challenging. He was exposed to new ideas that made him question his values, faith, and beliefs. It was a year of constant instability and loneliness. His fiancée and family were in the Philippines, and although his employer allowed him to visit fairly often, it was a time I characterize as discord.

After one year of working in Riyadh, Omar was convinced through da‘wah events and lectures that the teachings of tawhid or “oneness of god” in Islam, and even the teaching of Jesus as a prophet made more than his Christian doctrine. At the age of 30, he took Shahada, changed his name to Omar and embraced Islam. He returned to the Philippines permanently in 2007 bringing with him economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital, especially in the form of his Middle East networks of other Muslims. Since 1992, Omar was part of the founding of ISCAG, the Islamic Studies Call and Guidance—the largest Balik-Islam community in the northern Philippines—and he continues to garner recognition of Balik-Islam converts throughout the Philippines. Through his multitude of experiences, he was able to negotiate a new religious identity and carve out a space for new Muslims in the vast marketplace of religions in the Philippines.
Case #3: Maryam

Maryam, age 48, was born in Dumaguete, a city in the southern Visayas region. She stayed there up until her college years. She attended Silliman University and majored in communications. At age 18, she was encouraged to marry her college boyfriend after her parents found out about a “scandalous” incident when she failed to return home one evening. Afraid that family and more treacherously, neighbors might start talking about their only daughter, Maryam married her first husband, a fellow Catholic also from Dumaguete. After earning her bachelors degree, she separated from her husband and her aunt arranged for her to work in Zamboanga, Mindanao. She lived in Zamboanga for over twenty years and held numerous careers. Aside from her primary position as a journalist, she mentioned working for a news radio show and local government offices. Moreover, shortly after moving south, she completed her masters degree in Public Administration.

As a journalist in her early 30s, she met her future husband on a regional bus in Mindanao. They ended up “dating” for only three months before getting married. Maryam said that in retrospect, she didn’t marry him out of love; she married him out of guilt. Because they were intimate during their courtship, something that is frowned upon in Philippine culture and Islamic tradition, her soon-to-be-husband purportedly made her feel guilty that they were intimate out of wedlock. Maryam was a devout Catholic at the time, and perhaps her Catholic habitus assented to the man’s reasoning. They married in the year 2000, a nuptial legal in both civil and Shariah courts in Mindanao. She then embarked on her second marriage. This new husband was a “born Muslim” from Maguindanao province. His mother was half Filipina, half Lebanese. His father was half Filipino, half Egyptian. In order to marry, Maryam needed to convert, at least nominally,
to Islam. She said the *Shahadah* in a Shariah court, which served as a testament to her new faith in Islam. But she remained Catholic, meaning she attended weekly Sunday mass for over seven years into their marriage. Her Muslim husband wasn’t aware of her Sunday outings, but according to Maryam, “what he didn’t know didn’t seem to harm their relationship”.

In 2007, Maryam gave birth to their daughter, Mona. This was her third daughter; the first two are from her previous marriage. Maryam was 39 years old when she had Mona. At that time, she already achieved her career goals as a successful journalist and was at a point in her life when she could and would focus solely on being a good mother to Mona. In order to fulfill the role of a respectably Muslim mother, for the first time, Maryam began to seriously consider the merits of fully “becoming” the Muslim that she claimed when she first took the *Shahadah* years prior. Her husband left to work for a petrol company in Abu Dhabi later that year (diaspora). It was a profitable promotion he could not pass up. Maryam knew that the distance might jeopardize their marriage (discord). She knew many families were torn apart and dissolved because of overseas work. She was also aware that many Muslim Filipinos tended to take another wife, or three, while abroad, she said “to compensate for their loneliness”. Maryam recalls that the primary reason she officially turned toward and embraced Islam in 2007 was for the sake of young Mona, not for her (now ex-) husband. She needed to prove she could be a faithful Muslim mother, especially in the eyes of the court system. Though she and her husband were still on good terms at the time, Maryam wanted to take precaution in light of their new long-distance relationship.
Maryam mentioned that she converted to Islam initially out of practicality and convenience. From the moment she wed her Muslim husband to the moment they divorced, a span of nearly 15 years, her faith in Allah and understanding of “true” Islam grew exponentially with every experience, the joyful and the painful. When I asked about her religious life prior to conversion, she mentioned her Catholic upbringing in Dumaguete. Both of her parents were church-attending “strict” Catholics. They separated when she was in elementary school, but both passed away within a year after she obtained her bachelor’s degree. They never knew their daughter would become Muslim.

Maryam has only one brother, Eduardo, who remains an abiding Catholic. Her brother is a farmer in Dumaguete, tending to rice fields that they both inherited from their father. He isn’t university educated, though he attended vocational school for agriculture. Maryam said that is why “he’s not inclined to think too deeply about his faith” and is often critical of her conversion to Islam. They try not to talk about these issues whenever she visits. Maryam’s other close relatives are also aware of Maryam’s new faith, but many are not convinced she is serious about it anyhow, so they don’t mind the change.

Maryam described herself as independent and broad-minded – “malawak ng isip ko”. She was quite reflexive in her narrations and attributed her way of thinking to being educated. When I inquired more acutely about how she makes sense of her Catholic past and Muslim present, she illustrated her thoughts with an analogy of a bridge. She understood her life as a Catholic as one filled with devotion to God. Although she would consistently motion the prescribed rituals of mass and sacraments, those were secondary to her direct relationship to God. Rarely in her description would she mention Jesus of Christ; to her, the three in one persons of the Trinity were ultimately just “God” – why
the need to complicate the matter? – she would ask in a rhetorical sense. Though she stressed how her faith in God was significant, she did have a patron saint to whom she turned when she was troubled. Her saint was Saint Jude, she noted is the saint of “hopeless causes”. Naturally I inquired about her perception of saints as intermediaries and if that conflicted with her current Islamic convictions. She clarified that saints are just human role models, not gods. There is no problem calling upon saints for guidance – but not help, because help or “tulong” comes from God alone.

The metaphor of a “bridge” is how Maryam ultimately expressed her gradual process of conversion to Islam. It took a long time, she admitted, but after years of trials and tribulations, God or Allah, helped her find the religion – the way of life — that made the most sense to her, that filled the void that Catholicism failed to supply, that offered clear directives to practice on a daily basis so that she would not lose her way, and so that she might not ever again feel hopeless. She believes that there is not so much a difference between her Catholic self and her Muslim self. Both faiths are predicated on the belief, worship, and devotion to one God. According to Maryam, Islam just does a better, more direct way of making that point. A Muslim way of life better suits the person she is today. She appreciates the daily efforts she must make to abide by Islamic tenets; it gives her a constant reminder that Allah is always there, that she can always strive to be a better person, and that she is not alone. Maryam restated how grateful she is to be Balik-Islam, and that she made a conscious effort to find God/Allah and maintain that relationship. In the process of finding Allah, she needed to build a spiritual bridge between Catholic and Islamic teachings. God/Allah for her is constant. It is the religious teachings, rituals, symbols, and communities that are changing variables. It took Maryam over 40 years to
build this proverbial bridge, to cross over to a new way of living, to convert, to embrace Islam. But the bridge is not a one-way passage. It is clear that Maryam navigates back and forth, both directions, out of convenience and out of sincere piety. She undergoes “symbolic negotiation” with nearly every decision she makes. We sat together at Starbucks for hours one day, both with our dark brown shoulder length hair visible to the public, chatting, “tsismisan” – gossiping – like the dozens of other Filipinas in the café that afternoon. Yet, when Maryam descends from the jeepney, and walks through the gates of ISCAG, the Islamic Studies Call and Guidance, where she resides and participates in *da‘wah* events, she crosses a bridge into a different spiritual, cosmic, and symbolic reality. Her flowing hair will then be concealed by a colorful headscarf, a scarf as colorful as her life and spirit, a scarf that enables her to traverse the bridge of faiths and engage in symbolic negotiation.

Scope and Limitations of Symbolic Negotiation

By showing how the “Three Ds”—diaspora, discord, and *da‘wah*—are all present in reversions among the Balik-Islam to varying degrees, I demonstrate how Filipino Muslims negotiate the space between their former Christian “selves” and current identities as Muslims through symbolic exchanges that are linked to material concerns. Many revert are able to justify why embracing Islam and rejecting Christianity suits their individual circumstances and fulfills both their spiritual and social needs and desires. For example, they most often refer to their dissatisfaction with the Christian Trinity and explain how and why the relative simplicity found in Islam is more logical and more hopeful. Most all respondents would not have had the opportunity to learn of
Islam if it were not for encounters with Muslims overseas or with reverts who returned from abroad. The *da’wah* efforts of these returnees is pivotal since their primary hurdle is to dispel antagonistic stereotypes and myths regarding the Philippines’ “other” religion, Islam. The reversion narratives shared by members in Balik-Islam community, which are based on the historical presence of Islam in the Philippines prior to the coming of Spanish Catholicism and American Protestantism, has become a powerful and inspiring trope for new Filipino Muslims and those contemplating conversion.

Moreover, as these social fields, such as diaspora, discord, and *da’wah* change, habitus and capital adjust and often become normalized in the process – thus, producing a sense of new identity, sometimes without one’s knowledge. Vice versa, as habitus and capital change, they directly transform and shape changing social fields. This, I believe is the essence of Bourdieu’s theory of practice and this is the reason why his paradigm is central to understanding symbolic negotiation.

I end this chapter by noting the limits of my analysis. The concept of “symbolic negotiation” is intended to complicate the field of conversion studies and is not meant to be in any way definitive. The idea of symbolic negotiation combines the structural determinism and rational choice theory by evaluating the macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis simultaneously. It does not, nor is it my desire to, address the psychology of reverts in the Philippines or present a descriptive account of the stages in which converts follow during their conversion processes. I find that these approaches generally overlook the dynamism of global processes. Rather, symbolic negotiation can be used to allow scholars to consider religious conversion as a means of resolving modern-day problems through vigorous negotiation of symbols, meanings, and values.
CHAPTER 4:

DIASPORA: THE PHILIPPINE LABOR MARKET

ISCAG

Fieldwork is a strange kind of endeavor. It requires one to enter an unfamiliar community or culture with the intention to critically observe and analyze numerous coinciding processes that somehow, in some way, make a chosen site unique. At least unique enough to inspire a praiseworthy publication. In order to enter the field effectively, it seems that one must yield to the inevitable onslaught of vulnerability, yield to any degree of control. Though I proceeded with a vague idea of what may occur, for the most part, I entered into the “field” blindly, equipped with only general assumptions and preliminary data. But data doesn’t translate human experience. Thus, the rest of my senses remained in hyper-mode. I awaited, sought, and scouted for possible informants, potential leads, and noteworthy questions to ask. I envisioned every encounter, conversation, and even gaze as a prospective opportunity that might blossom into a network of ripened relationships. As if I was a predator ready to pounce on any opportune moment, I remained hyper-alert and hyper-sensitive. Yet I’d be foolish not to admit that this offensive play was an attempt to conceal my hyper-vulnerability and hyper-trepidation. I yearned for certainty; I yearned for answers. I feared uncertainty; I feared obscurity, or worse, unanswered questions on which my entire thesis depends. What if I missed an opportunity? What if I
ruined an opportunity? ‘What ifs’ paraded my thoughts and cast shadows of doubt as I dismounted from a jeepney and walked toward the main gate of my chosen field site.159

In the summer of 2015, I arranged to stay with extended family who graciously hosted me for the duration of my fieldwork. Conveniently, they lived in the same town of the largest Balik-Islam compound in the Philippines known as ISCAG, short for Islamic Studies Call and Guidance. After my third day in the country, my jet lag started to wear off and I began settling in to life in Dasmariñas, Cavite, a small city less than a two-hour drive south from Manila. The continuous rain from both typhoons Egay and Falcon proved to be a tremendous hassle, yet I knew it was time to face my gut-wrenching anxiety and call the ISCAG office to schedule my first interview. There were two numbers available to the public through a basic Google search. I nervously wrote down my intended phone dialogue in Tagalog, or at minimum Taglish (a popularly used hybrid of Tagalog and English). “Good afternoon, po.”160 I imagined. “Puwede po akong makipag-usap kay Brother Omar Penalber?” (Can I please speak with Brother Omar Penalber?). Even though the use of “brother” is traditionally used among Muslims, I didn’t really know how else to respectfully address the President/Chairman of ISCAG. I dialed the first number. Out of service. Darn. My nervousness swelled and I irrationally worried that my whole dissertation would flop. I calmed down and dialed the next number. It rang and a male voice answered, “Hello?” Both relieved and slightly panicked, I looked down at my prepared dialogue and asked for Omar Penalber. “Ako si Omar” (This is Omar) said the voice. I was surprised that he listed his personal number online.

---

159 A jeepney is perhaps the most popular form of public transportation throughout the Philippines. The original jeepneys began as converted US military jeeps left behind after World War II.

160 The word “po” in Tagalog denotes respect and reverence for elders and unfamiliar persons.
My prepared dialogue was meant for an office receptionist and involved arranging a meeting with Omar. I had to wing it. “Ako po ang estudante taga US. Nandito ako sa Dasma at gusto kong makipagusap sa inyo tungkol sa ISCAG.” (I’m a student from the U.S. I’m here in Dasmarinas to hopefully speak to you about ISCAG). Then I begin to switch into English after apologizing for my elementary grammar.

At first, Omar was quite welcoming, perhaps because he was under the impression that I was Muslim. Then came the inevitable question, “Sister, are you a Muslim?” “Hindi pa, po” (No, not yet) I stated, knowing that although it was a customary Filipino response and at the moment was the most diplomatic of words, it might have also been the most misleading of responses I could have given. “Oh, sorry, I did not realize you have not yet embraced Islam.” He then retracted his invitation to attend Eid prayer, thinking I would be uncomfortable. He then went on to give a broad explanation of the wide variety of services ISCAG offers and suggested that if I want to meet, after the Eid al-Fitr holiday would be best, noting that he would be out of town until then. I noticed a quick change of his tone upon hearing of my non-Muslim status. I recognized how I could be construed as suspect, but I felt needed to find a way in and gain his trust. I promptly asked if it would be permissible if I visit the compound before the Eid. His welcoming voice returned, and he cordially said I could visit anytime and that I should look to speak with Ibrahim.161

I made certain to sleep early the night before my visit to ensure I’d have plenty of energy to muster up the courage to finally enter the ISCAG compound after months of planning and preparation. Oddly enough, what consumed my thoughts that morning was

161 The participant requested that I use a pseudonym but gave me full consent to share the details of his story.
the question of what I was going to wear. I initially planned to wear a hijab while on the compound grounds, but ultimately refrained since I did not want members in the community to think I was Muslim on the first day. I reasoned that it might be disappointing for them to believe I’m Muslim at first only to feel deceived upon knowing that I’m a non-religious researcher with no intent to convert. I ended up wearing black ankle-length pants with a ¾ sleeve collared shirt. That’s an appropriate compromise, I thought to myself.

My goal for the day was to follow up with Omar’s suggestion to meet with Ibrahim. I recalled verbatim the directions my cousin gave me on how to commute to ISCAG on my own. At Gate #1 of my relatives’ housing subdivision, I crossed the street and hopped on the first jeepney marked “Salitran/Imus”. I paid 8 pesos (15 cents USD) and arrived at my stop about 20 minutes later. It wasn’t too hot that day, and I was feeling a bit cheap to pay 24 pesos for a taxi tricycle, so I opted to walk to ISCAG from there. Minutes later, I was sweating profusely trying to find anything resembling a sidewalk. After five minutes of brisk walking, I arrived at the front gate. Because it was Ramadan—the Islamic month of prayer and fasting—I didn’t expect to see many people at 9:30 in the morning. At the main gate stood a guard post. With my hair exposed and clothing relatively revealing, it was obvious I wasn’t Muslim. I greeted the male guard, who was dressed like a typical security officer at any local mall, and asked “Nasaan po si Ibrahim?” (Where can I find Ibrahim?). Seemingly happy to help a potential convert, he pointed toward an open lot comprising several basketball courts and instructed me to continue straight to the next gate. I could see it from where I was standing and proceeded to enter the compound. To my right were several vans plastered with the ISCAG school
logo. To my left I saw a public medical clinic I had read about online, more basketball courts, and just past these courts, there stood tall the iconic ISCAG school building I saw on ISCAG’s Facebook page and website.

Photo 1. ISCAG school building and basketball courts. Source: Author.
Photo 2. ISCAG administrative offices and apartment residences. Source: Author.

Photo 3. Mosque construction (center) and medical clinic (right). Source: Author.
I approached the guard at the next gate and introduced myself as needing to meet with Ibrahim, as if I had an appointment. The guard was quite hospitable and asked that I sign a visitors’ sign-in sheet. There were already several visitors that morning. It turns out the second gate protects not only the administrative building, but the numerous apartment complexes that hovered over me, providing shade on what was becoming yet another sweltering day. The double doors to the administrative building were wide open and there were a number of people, men and women, moving about swiftly, some carrying bags of food, others packaging the food. I recalled that ISCAG offers free Iftaar for anyone seeking to join that evening. Immediately to my left was a partially closed-off area with a desk labeled “ISCAG Da‘wah Information Women’s Section”. No one was at the desk that moment. However, to my right were two women assembling rations of dates for

\[\text{Iftaar during Ramadan is the meal that breaks one’s fast after sundown.}\]
the *Ifṭaar* meal. Straight ahead were several men standing in a semi-circle taking instructions from another shorter man regarding what to do with the food. I asked the women where I could find Ibrahim; they pointed to the man giving instructions. Once he was done speaking, I anxiously approached him and told him that Omar Penalber suggested that I meet with him. I wasn’t trying to deceive them in any way, but I knew for certain that they must have assumed that I was potential convert, seeking to take the *Shahadah*, as this is precisely the reason why many Filipinos visit ISCAG. 163 Ibrahim, though visibly busy, stopped what he was doing and invited me to speak with him in his office upstairs.

I followed Ibrahim up the stairs and into a noticeably cooler office space. Air conditioning in the Philippine summer heat and humidity is a much welcomed treat! I took a seat in what looked like a large professor’s office filled with books and paperwork. I felt instantly at ease. I convinced myself not to be nervous and to pretend I’m meeting with a professor during office hours. Again, as with my phone conversation with Omar, I began speaking in Tagalog, and that quickly shifted into Tag-lish, which eventually became English with a coerced Filipino accent. Ibrahim spoke in English most of the time, not because he felt bad for me and my broken Tagalog, but I could sense he was proud that his responsibilities as a da’wah leader include effectively communicating in English. Ibrahim was in his mid-60s standing no taller than 5’ 6”, close to my father’s height. His hair was almost all either grey or white, and his triangular beard bore the same shades of grey. On his nose sat thin-framed lenses that gave him an extra boost of professorial stature. Everything from his passion to his articulate rhetoric reminded me of

---

163 The *Shahadah* is a declaration of faith and the first Pillar of Islam. It expresses the belief that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.
the Malaysian politician, Anwar Ibrahim. Naturally, he began the conversation by asking the purpose of my visit. I went through a lengthy speech about how I’m a doctoral student from the United States collecting data for my dissertation on new Muslims in the Philippines. After my introductions, I received a rather confused response, “so are you a Muslim?” Of course I expected this question from the start. This time, I left no ambiguity in my response and stated that I am not. However, I proceeded to attempt to salvage my credibility and noted that I have many Muslim friends, have studied and lived in several Muslim countries, and even married a Muslim man. Ibrahim appeared more perplexed. I finished my case by trying to be as sincere and transparent about my intentions as possible. I expressed that even though I am not a Muslim, I make it my personal responsibility to challenge the numerous negative stereotypes about Muslims around the world. As a non-Muslim academic, I have the means to provide a different perspective for other non-Muslims to better understand what it means to be Muslim and especially what it means to embrace Islam. Though I can’t be absolutely certain, I believe Ibrahim not only understood, but agreed with my plea. I continued to be more specific about my plans at ISCAG, why I chose ISCAG, and how I hope to confront the misconceptions about ISCAG and the greater Balik-Islam movement in the Philippines.

After addressing my motives, that is, trying to understand how and why Filipinos have converted/reverted to Islam, Ibrahim voluntarily began to divulge his own conversion narrative. As I briefly explained in chapter three, Ibrahim’s conversion contained all the elements of symbolic negotiation: diaspora (migration), discord (disorientation), and da’wah (proselytization). In regards to diaspora, Ibrahim essentially experienced two pivotal incidents that involved migration and eventually impacted his
decision to embrace Islam later in his life. The first was when he left his hometown in the Visayas province to accept an offer to work in the southern province of Mindanao, where he first encountered Moros or “born-Muslims.” Second, after several years in Mindanao, in the mid-1970’s, Ibrahim decided to apply for work overseas in order to better support his family by sending remittances from his increased earnings. He lived and worked in Saudi Arabia for a total of 13 years but remained Catholic until his last three years abroad, in part, due to a family dispute. Isolated from family and friends back home in the Philippines, Ibrahim welcomed the *daʿwah* efforts from his employer, finding his logic and explanation of Islamic values to make perfect sense out of his personal situation. In other words, Ibrahim, through numerous disorienting experiences while living in a “diasporic field”, was able to identify in Islam a plausibility structure that helped to sustain his symbolic universe.

Over an hour had passed during this impromptu interview when several staffers entered the room for administrative requests. Then his office phone rang to notify him that school children were waiting for him downstairs to begin some sort of program. Ibrahim was the ISCAG compound’s operations manager office so I felt even more appreciative that he gave me his time on such a busy morning. He apologized for cutting our talk short, and made it clear that he finds me to be sincere in my research and will do all he can to support my dissertation project. He concluded by saying the next step will be to meet again soon with the President, Omar Penalber, when he returns to Dasmariñas. In short, the initial meeting went quite well, better than I expected. As I headed out the first gate, I heard from a distance, “Sister, so are you Muslim now?” I was walking briskly and was already far from the gentleman, so I gracefully evaded a response and continued
to exit the main gate. My mind was racing. What’s the most diplomatic way to answer such a question? I knew I needed to think of one quickly and think carefully about my approach. This is of course a da’wah organization; that’s precisely what takes place here, conversion. How can I sidestep the conversion question without giving a suspicious impression that I’m a journalist or government agent?

Introduction
Growing up as a Filipino-American, I had always assumed the dream of most Filipinos was to one day make it to the United States, and, if fortunate enough, have the financial means and proper documentation to stay. My family’s presence in America is owed to my paternal grandfather’s ingenuity and determination to have one of his children join the United States military while recruitment efforts at local bases in the Philippines was still underway in the 1970s. Through his fabled networking abilities, his efforts paid off, and his second eldest son enlisted as a kitchen steward (and later, a cook) in the U.S. Navy. It was my uncle, an older brother of my father, who took the first step into what I now understand as the Filipino diaspora. His service in the Navy paved the way for his mother—my grandmother—to step foot on American soil, petition her dependent children (those who were unmarried) to eventually immigrate, and live the life my grandfather had long aspired for his descendants. My grandfather passed away before his dream came to fruition. My grandmother made the journey to America for the sole purpose of obtaining visas for her children with the hopes of granting them a better life. Her heart belonged in the Philippines, where she eventually returned.
Hearing this story repeatedly as a child, I internalized the notion of the American dream and was taught to be grateful that my family had the opportunity to leave the Philippines, to have a “better” life. My grandfather and uncle were the “heroes” of our family narrative. Indebted to their sacrifices, we, like a majority of Filipino-American families I knew, made strident efforts to pay it forward by sending money and gifts to our relatives who were “left behind”. Being marginally familiar with the contours of the Filipino diaspora, my encounters with Balik-Islam reverts struck home with me. It was in the midst of my fieldwork that I began to develop a working theory of symbolic negotiation to help me pin down and make sense of my own experiences that resonated with what I was hearing on the ground.

As such, this chapter examines how the Filipino diaspora impacts Balik-Islam reverts by using the symbol negotiation framework. Figure 12 outlines the “social field” of diaspora and identifies what I consider the defining characteristics of a Balik-Islam habitus and capital, which both structures and are structured by the diasporic field. Through my interactions and conversations with Balik-Islam reverts like Ibrahim, it became increasingly apparent that their connections to the Filipino diaspora were more similar to the experiences of Filipinos I’d known in the United States and around the world than I had initially expected. In retrospect, I entered the field with the mindset that there must be something “religiously” distinct about a Balik-Islam’s habitus and capital. What I found, however, was less religious distinction and more mundane and worldly facets that helped me realize how the Balik-Islam are enveloped within the same dynamics and undercurrents of the Filipino diaspora at large. This chapter discusses how migration, the first global factor of symbolic negotiation, applies to the Balik-Islam
community in the form of the Filipino diaspora. In an effort to illustrate how an individual’s habitus and forms of capital are interconnected, I focus on general themes that I derived from both research and data collection in the field. My point is not to reduce the conversion experiences of the Balik-Islam to a handful of convenient motifs. Rather, I aim to paint a broad picture of the field in which a majority of Balik-Islam reverts are subject to, in which their habitus develops, and in which they gain specific forms of social, economic, and religious capital. Second, I contend that the distinguishing feature of a Balik-Islam habitus is the acknowledgement and internalization of an ethos made popular by the Philippine government. Known in the Filipino language as “Bagong Bayani”, meaning “Modern-day Hero”, this term is intended to apply to all Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) to recognize the sacrifices they make through their labor, and more precisely, the remittances they send back to their home country. Although this heroic ethos is not a defining characteristic of every Balik-Islam’s habitus, I argue it is considerably consequential in their individual processes of symbolic negotiation. Third, I employ Nicole Constable’s reworking of Aihwa Ong’s concept of “flexible citizenship” to locate the range of capital that Balik-Islam reverts accumulate within a diasporic field. Compared to Ong’s analysis of Chinese migrants, Constable argues that Filipino migrants are much more limited in their capacities to navigate the field because of their restricted forms of capital. Thus, Constable insists that OFWs possess a “flexible non-citizenship”. By piecing together these elements of field, habitus, and capital, my hope is to effectively convey the more quantifiable and material issues undergird symbolic negotiation.
Zain Abdullah’s work on transnational African Muslim migrants encourages scholars of migration and diaspora studies to rethink traditional levels of analysis when assessing a given migrant population. Abdullah highlights the importance of seeing the connections and linkages between macro and micro elements of transnationalism by emphasizing the need to consider “mid-range” or “mid-level” approaches. These modes of analysis tend to focus on community organizations, such as grassroots initiatives, “have the potential to show how the personal lives of Muslim migrants are linked to large-scale structures and global processes.” In many ways, the Balik-Islam community is a grassroots organization that provides both religious and non-religious outreach services, such as a free medical clinic, to both members and non-members. Using Abdullah’s logic behind a mid-range approach to the diasporic field, this chapter attempts

---

to convey the range of linkages between personal lives of Balik-Islam individuals and the
global structures and processes that shape the transnational and diasporic field in which
they partake in, to varying degrees.

Though it is impossible to provide a definitive picture of causal linkages to why
Balik-Islam reverts became Muslim, the model of symbolic negotiation offers a way to
conceptualize how the micro and macro processes of transnationalism impact their
journeys to a new religious life. Abdullah notes how migration in the form of “diasporic
transnationalism” affects religious communities in ways that can illuminate new ways in
which scholars can understand what identity means in a globalized context. He contends
that because religion “creates for its members identities that are transcendental or other-
worldly (producing attachments that are for the most part heavily symbolic), Muslims
entering the transnational realm help to facilitate and replicate newly designed, cross-
border meanings and personalities.”  

Because religious migrants in diaspora are
essentially displaced people, they tend to create new ideas of “home”. As such, Abdullah
adds that the diasporic field “forces us to consider how overseas populations without
adequate monetary means retain symbolic links to their homelands.” In the case of
Ibrahim, it took over 13 years to reassess his new life overseas as a lifelong Catholic
living and working among Muslims. I argue that through years of contemplation and
efforts to “make sense” of his new experiences, becoming Balik-Islam allowed him to
retain symbolic links to the Philippines while allowing him to engage in a new religious
and cultural space.

165 Ibid., 440.
166 Ibid., 430.
As migrants must retain these symbolic links, they not only reimagine spaces, but also time. Thomas Tweed, in his work on diasporic religion, notes that the diasporic field also encompasses time. Tweed explains that “diasporic time is fluid, slipping from constructed past to imagined future, and both the past and the present inform the experience and symbolization of the present.” Migration, diaspora, and transnationalism are all related concepts that pertain to the movement of people, cultures, and ideas. As scholars have long addressed how symbolic meanings are transformed through these processes, this study acknowledges the linkages between symbolism, diaspora, and religious identity by recognizing specific elements of migrants’ habitus and capital. Only by recognizing all of these moving parts, can we begin to appreciate the complexities of religious conversion in a globalized world.

Field: The Labor Brokerage

The current Filipino transnational diaspora began in the 1970s as a product of neoliberalist policies and has today become a billion-dollar enterprise that several scholars have dubbed “the Philippine Labor Brokerage”. However, it is not the labor brokerage between the Philippine state and other countries itself that fostered the beginnings of a diaspora. The colonial legacies of Spain (1521-1898), the United States (1898-1946) and Japan (1941-1945), have undeniably shaped modern Philippine history and culture and have contributed to Philippine state’s political and economic challenges.

167 Thomas A. Tweed, Our lady of the exile: Diasporic religion at a Cuban Catholic shrine in Miami (Oxford University Press on Demand, 1997), 95.
The extensive colonial and neocolonial influence of the United States, in particular, Robyn Rodriguez argues is the key instrumental force in the provenance of the Philippine diaspora. She claims that “the ravages of the Philippine-American war, the restructuring of Philippines society under U.S. colonialism, along with labor demand in the United States, produced the structural conditions for large-scale emigration from the Philippines to the United States. However, other institutional arrangements under the colonial labor system established by the Americans would ultimately serve as precursors to today’s labor brokerage system.” Rodriguez defines the current labor brokerage situation as a neoliberal strategy that is comprised of institutional and discursive practices through which the Philippine state mobilizes its citizens and sends them abroad to work for employers throughout the world while generating a ‘profit’ from the remittances that migrants send back to their families and loved ones remaining in the Philippines.”

Critics often describe the Philippine state’s labor export policy as “legal human trafficking.”

Certainly, there are many other transnational labor diasporas, given that transnational labor is one of the key cornerstones of globalization. Most labor diasporas have also emerged from neoliberalist push for export-oriented industrialization among developing countries. However, the Filipino diaspora is unique in that the state actively supports, encourages, perpetuates and maintains the transnational brokerage because its economic welfare depends on migrant remittances. According to the World Bank’s latest report, in 2018, the Philippines was the third largest remittance receiving country ($33 billion), proceeded only by India ($79 billion) and China ($67 billion). Provided that India and China each have over a billion citizens, while the Philippines has approximately one-

---

170 Ibid., x.
171 Ibid.
tenth of a billion, it becomes clear that the Philippine economy hinges on transnational labor and the state works vigorously to maintain a steady supply in a global economy demanding its labor. Moreover, China’s remittances only make up 0.5% of its GDP, India’s remittances equate to 2.8%, while the remittances sent to the Philippines totaled 10.1% of its GDP in 2018.

Per the latest statistics from the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO), there are approximately 10.2 million Filipinos living and/or working overseas.173 With a population of roughly 100 million, this means that over 10% of the entire Philippine population is currently living and working abroad. Of the 10.2 million Filipinos abroad, about 2.2 million are considered OFWs, and they are deployed around the world, both on land and at sea. Most are employed through temporary contracts that must be renewed every few years in order for them to maintain legal residence in their host countries. The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), the primary government agency responsible for processing new OFWs, reported that in 2016 there was a 16% increase in total OFWs from 2015 to 2016 alone (see table 4).

Because of the substantial number of new and continuing OFWs, keeping record of the number of Filipino citizens overseas has been challenging for the Philippine government. The Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) reported that they are currently working on creating new metrics to more accurately count their overseas citizens. According to the CFO, the stock estimate of 10.2 million is the aggregate of all

---

Filipinos residing or working overseas at a given time. It consists of three categories - permanent, temporary and irregular migrants:

1. Permanent migrants include Filipino immigrants, legal permanent residents, and naturalized citizens of their host country.
2. Temporary migrants include the documented land-based and sea-based workers and others whose stay abroad is six months or more, including their accompanying dependents. These migrants are popularly referred to as overseas Filipino workers or OFWs.
3. Irregular migrants are Filipinos who are without valid residence or work permits, or who may be overstaying workers or tourists in a foreign country.\(^{174}\)

As stated above, the population of OFWs fits within the CFO’s second category of “temporary migrants”. Notably, the characterization “temporary migrants” applies to Balik-Islam members I met who reported some sort of affiliation with overseas work, meaning they were once OFWs or their immediate family and/or close friends are OFWs. The latest available statistics specifically on OFWs is from a 2016 report issued by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).\(^{175}\) Table 4.1 below showcases the PSA’s key findings which I organized by topic.

\(^{174}\) Ibid.


120
### Table 3. 2016 Survey on Overseas Filipinos, Summary of Findings. Source: Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA)

| 1 | Number of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) | - The number of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who worked abroad at any time during the period April to September 2016 was estimated at 2.2 million. Overseas Contract Workers (OCWs) or those with existing work contract comprised 97.5 percent of the total OFWs during the period April to September 2016. |
| 2 | Regions of Origin | - Among regions, CALABARZON reported the biggest share of OFWs with 21.0 percent, followed by National Capital Region and Central Luzon with 12.9 percent and 12.7 percent, respectively. |
| 3 | Gender | - There were more female OFWs (53.6%) than male OFWs (46.4%). Female OFWs were generally younger than male OFWs, with more than two-thirds (67.8%) of the female OFWs belonging to the age group 25 to 39 years. |
| 4 | Top Destinations | - Saudi Arabia was the most preferred country of destination among OFWs (23.8%). The other preferred destinations were: United Arab Emirates (15.9%); Europe (6.6%); Kuwait (6.4%); and Qatar (6.2%). |
| 5 | Top Occupations | - Among occupation groups, elementary occupations (34.5%) comprised the biggest group of OFWs. More than half of the female OFWs were in elementary occupations (56.2%). The largest group of the male OFWs worked as plant and machine operators and assemblers (24.7%). |
| 6 | Total Remittances | - The total remittance sent by OFWs during the period April to September 2016 was estimated at 203.0 billion pesos. ($3.8 billion USD) |
| 7 | Cash Remittances | - A total of 1.9 million OFWs sent cash remittances to their families from April to September 2016. Of this number, 36.9 percent were able to save from their cash remittances. |

The PSA’s findings highlight the contours of the diasporic field in which Balik-Islam conversion narratives often transpire. The data tells a story of an increasing supply and demand for temporary workers (row 1), a large percent of OFWs from the Calabarzon region (which includes the town of Dasmariñas, where ISCAG is located) (row 2), the majority of OFWs are now female (row 3), and top destinations for OFWs are Muslim-majority countries (row 4). Rows 6 and 7 only capture the amount of remittances for six months, but nevertheless, the report indicates that 1.9 million out of 2.2 million OFWs, that is, 86% of temporary migrants sent part of their earnings back home to the Philippines. To give a more long-term perspective of how the remittance cash flows
have increased exponentially over the decades, figure 4.2 depicts the total amounts of remittances since 1977 when the country began reporting migrants’ cash inflows. In 1977, the Philippines received $339 million in migrant remittances. By 2018, the total was $33.7 billion. The growth of remittances parallels the steady increase in OFWs since the 1970s.

![Philippines - Migrant Remittance Inflows](image)


Since the mid-1970s, as the Philippine government under the direction of Ferdinand Marcos struggled to offset costs stemming from rising unemployment along with the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) neoliberal structural adjustment policies, the Philippine state embarked on a new labor export policy, intended to be temporary fix. However, even after the Marcos era and into the anticipated hopeful governance of President Corazon Aquino, the labor export policy not only continued, but proliferated into the remittance-based industry we see today. It was also during Aquino’s leadership that the popular term “bagong bayani”—meaning ‘modern-day heroes’—began to shape

---


a distinctly positive and affirmative approach to overseas labor. Although OFWs work in various industries, from professional, technical, agricultural, administrative, etc., the largest occupational category of work lies in the service industry. Household (domestic) workers, nurses, caregivers and hospitality workers top the list of jobs held by OFWs (see table 4). Women, who traditionally take on these domestic roles, are therefore markedly in demand and have been particularly vulnerable in the labor brokerage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Major Occupational Group</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Household Service Workers</td>
<td>194,835</td>
<td>275,073</td>
<td>+41.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Manufacturing Labourers</td>
<td>41,038</td>
<td>43,538</td>
<td>+6.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nursing Professionals</td>
<td>22,175</td>
<td>19,551</td>
<td>-11.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Waiters</td>
<td>18,352</td>
<td>18,812</td>
<td>+2.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Cleaners and helpers in offices, hotels and others</td>
<td>14,116</td>
<td>17,006</td>
<td>+20.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Home-based personal care workers</td>
<td>10,181</td>
<td>8,095</td>
<td>-20.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Civil engineering labourers</td>
<td>7,286</td>
<td>7,718</td>
<td>+5.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Welders and flamecutters</td>
<td>8,156</td>
<td>7,437</td>
<td>-8.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Plumbers and pipe fitters</td>
<td>6,629</td>
<td>6,696</td>
<td>+23.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Building construction labourers</td>
<td>5,870</td>
<td>5,906</td>
<td>+0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other skills</td>
<td>186,579</td>
<td>172,984</td>
<td>-20.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>515,217</td>
<td>582,816</td>
<td>-7.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Deployed Land-based Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) by Top 10 Destinations.


In addition, there are OFWs working in almost every country around the globe, but the most popular destinations continue to be in the Gulf Region. According to the official Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) report on new OFW deployment, of the “top ten” destinations for OFWs, six of the ten destinations are majority Muslim countries: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait,

---

Malaysia, Oman, and Bahrain (see table 5). Likewise, table 6 provides additional evidence that Muslim-majority destinations are popular among the general population of Filipinos overseas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Destinations of New OFWs</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>406,089</td>
<td>460,121</td>
<td>+13.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>227,076</td>
<td>276,278</td>
<td>+21.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>141,483</td>
<td>171,014</td>
<td>+20.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>133,169</td>
<td>141,304</td>
<td>+6.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>85,704</td>
<td>116,467</td>
<td>+35.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>86,019</td>
<td>109,615</td>
<td>+27.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>62,598</td>
<td>65,364</td>
<td>+4.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>26,199</td>
<td>33,178</td>
<td>+26.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>22,274</td>
<td>27,579</td>
<td>+23.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>21,428</td>
<td>21,429</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Destinations</td>
<td>225,866</td>
<td>247,162</td>
<td>+9.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1,437,875</td>
<td>1,669,511</td>
<td>+16.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Deployed Land-based Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) by Top 10 Destinations. Note: Muslim-majority destinations are highlighted in blue

Source: Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) Overseas Employment Statistics 2015-2016.\(^{179}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Destinations of Filipinos Overseas</th>
<th>2013 estimates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>3,535,676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>1,028,802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>822,410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>793,580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>721,578</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Top 5 Destinations for Filipino Citizens Living and/or Working Overseas. Note: Muslim-majority destinations are highlighted in blue

Source: Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) Overseas Employment Statistics 2015-2016.\(^{180}\)

The effects of such extensive migration can aptly be described as a diaspora.

Rodriguez notes, “in a society where people are forced to secure their livelihoods far


\(^{180}\) Ibid.
from their families and country of birth, ideas of ‘home’ and ‘the nation’ are destabilized”.

The Philippine state and its subsidiary private agencies, do, however strive to provide OFWs with a sense of stability by what Anna Guevarra calls “cultivating an ethos of labor migration.” The government and its employment agencies “do not only recruit labor but also play an instrumental role in how Filipinos come to imagine what it means to work abroad. They aggressively instill the notion that the promise of the good life is outside the Philippines while downplaying the various social costs of this pursuit”.

Guevarra’s in depth study shows how employment agencies seek to “empower” the morale of OFWs through the process of ‘identity transformation’, which promises an “elevation in social status primarily based on material (economic) resources that reposition Filipino migrants as breadwinners and economic saviors”.

During her fieldwork in the POEA, the government agency responsible for training OFWs, Guevarra found that trainers focused on empowering their workers and preparing them for difficult times ahead. “Kayanin ang trabaho” (Push yourself to do the work), [the trainer] exhorted them. They were not simply contract workers, but Filipino workers, who are known for the three M’s: masipag (hardworking), matalino (intelligent), and may abilidad (highly skilled”). Guevarra’s research demonstrates how not only has the Philippine state and economy transformed due to the diaspora, but also that Filipinos themselves have had to adapt and reconsider what it means to be a Filipino today. This transformation process is facilitated by the state’s desire to maintain

---

181 Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, Migrants for export: How the Philippine State Brokers Labor to the World (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxi.

182 Anna Romina Guevarra, Marketing Dreams, Manufacturing Heroes the Transnational Labor Brokering of Filipino Workers (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 121.

183 Ibid., 107.

184 Ibid., 64.
a successful (profitable) labor export-based economy. What scholars of the Filipino labor diaspora such as Guevarra are drawing upon is Aihwa Ong’s scrutiny of the “moral economy of the state” which she notes “must continually produce the cultural values to engender and sustain adherence to a moral-economy ideology”. The government agencies responsible for training and deploying OFWs demonstrate the state’s persistence validate and justify the protraction of a policy that was meant to be short-lived but proved to be a permanent fixture of Philippine policies.

The Philippine labor diaspora is a critical factor that impacts the Balik-Islam community in various ways. To be clear, not all Balik-Islam members have been OFWs, nor have they all had direct association with OFWs, for example, through a spouse, relative, or friend. While I find that there is a robust correlation between the systemic nature of the labor diaspora and the upsurge in reverts to Islam in the Philippines, I cannot claim that there is a causal linkage between the two. In other words, the framework of symbolic negotiation acknowledges the significance of the diaspora in one’s “field” where conversation takes place; however, symbolic negotiation is not meant to be formulaic given that each conversion experiences varies so widely. Of the more than one hundred Balik-Islam members I surveyed at ISCAG, 33.6 % reported that they are former OFWs, while 29% stated that their spouse is currently working as an OFW. 88% of those who identified as former OFWs worked in Muslim-majority countries; 68% of them were based in Saudi Arabia. Of those whose spouses are current OFWs, 90% are based in Saudi Arabia. Although not everyone in my sample population has been directly

---

associated with overseas work, they are all to some degree affected by the transnational processes involved.

Habitus: “Bagong Bayani” (Modern-day Heroes)

Identifying elements of a convert’s habitus is akin to attempting to psychoanalyze their entire life, starting from the cradle. Because the term habitus is so broad, many scholars focus on a particular scope, such as a “religious habitus”. As I explore the field of diaspora and how it relates to the Balik-Islam, I turn to David Parker’s notion of a “diasporic habitus.” Parker examines the racialization and cross-cultural tensions embodied in “Chinese takeaway” restaurants in Britain, and he focuses on Chinese diasporic culture through the lens of seemingly mundane social interactions. Parker approaches these “contact zones” between Chinese workers and white British consumers as racialized spaces comprised of transnational socio-economic transactions in which a Chinese diasporic habitus emerges to the fore.186 Parker consciously and selectively appropriates Bourdieu’s most distinguished “thinking tool”, habitus, and defines the diasporic habitus as “the generative principles which produce the mundane practices sustaining the transnational networks and social locations that define a diaspora.”187 In his example of Chinese takeaway, Parker locates diasporic habitus in the particular dispositions that constitute and maintain a “sense of being Chinese” in the midst of diasporic spaces of global displacement.188 He underscores the disposition of perceiving

187 Ibid., 74.
188 Ibid., 84.
racialized differences in terms of historical legacies of colonization and imperial dominance. This underlying tension is then embodied in the everyday and ostensibly ordinary tension and resistance at takeaway restaurants across Britain. Parker, in sum, contends that the vulnerability of being displaced, as is experienced in diasporic communities such as the British Chinese, generates a distinct set of dispositions which could be acknowledged as part a diasporic habitus.

Karl Maton cautions against the proliferation of “adjectival additions” to habitus, such as “educational habitus” or “family habitus”, because they tend to disengage and decontextualize habitus from its particular field or fields and focus solely on observed features rather than the underlying generative principles.189 Parker’s evaluation of a diasporic habitus is, however, thorough in his consideration of habitus with respect to field. The adjectival addition of “diaspora” is necessary in distinguishing contemporary modes of transnational linkages that delineate the unique political, social, cultural and religious fields of diasporic communities. Although the term habitus along would technically suffice, the notion of “diasporic” allows scholars to work within a more specific framework and acknowledge the distinctive conditions encountered by diasporic communities.

While Parker locates habitus in a “sense of being Chinese”, I strive to identify habitus in a “sense of being a Catholic Filipino” and then grapple with the question of what it means to develop a “sense of being Balik-Islam,” particularly as an overseas worker. Much of the literature on the Filipino transnational labor diaspora centers on questions dealing with agency and identity transformations of OFWs. Scholars recognize

that even though OFWs are touted by the state as bagong bayani, “new” or “modern-day” heroes, a gender neutralizing term, the labor diaspora is highly gendered, both in its structuring and in its experience by OFWs. Rhacel Parreñas argues that the neoliberal policies of multinational banks directly target and emasculate poorer developing countries. Countries like the Philippines which have been substantial suppliers of labor become feminized within a gendered capitalistic economy that desires and demands for cheap labor. Within this feminized moral economy, Filipinos, male and female, undergo further feminization that becomes considerably evident while working overseas. In general, the majority of Filipino OFWs in the 1970s and 1980s were men. Primarily due to the restructuring global economy after the oil crisis and subsequent oil boom in the Middle East and Gulf region, most men flocked to these regions as skilled laborers in construction and manufacturing while others took to the seas as crewmen. By the 1990s and especially early 2000s, there was a decline in male-oriented jobs and rapid demand for female domestic workers in and beyond the petrodollar countries. While Filipino women were once used to staying home as their husbands traveled the world, the transition meant that women had to leave their homes, husbands, and children in order to take care of other families in the Europe, East Asia, and of course, the Middle East and Gulf countries.

Parreñas’ research focuses on Filipina migrants and their experiences in the global economy. Her discussion of identity transformation among these women is predicated on what she terms “the force of domesticity” which is “the continued relegation of housework to women or the persistence of the ideology of women’s domesticity, in the

---

labor market, the family, and the migrant community, as well as in migration policies and laws.”.\(^{191}\) Pei-Chia Lan’s ethnographic study of Filipinas in Taiwan illustrates the impact of the “continuity of domestic labor” by highlighting how many Filipinas working overseas as domestic helpers (commonly known as DHs) must renegotiate their transnational identities as both “maids and madams”.\(^{192}\) Lan addresses the difficulties of Filipina mothers who become “transnational mothers, substitute mothers, and even remote madams who hire maids in the Philippines” and also points to single women who struggle to build their own families and become stigmatized as perpetual maids.\(^{193}\) Although this dilemma reinforces the feminization of labor roles upon Filipina OFWs, Lan argues that by closely considering the multiple identities of “maid and madam” we can better understand how migrant women are actively negotiating their opportunities within an outwardly repressive system of continued domesticity. For example, Lan notes how “transnational mothers send remittances and gifts to sustain family ties impaired by physical separation, while searching for emotional attachment and moral recognition in the paid mothering work” which shows how “they reconstitute the meanings of womanhood when occupying multiple positions or shifting between them, and they bargain with the interchange between monetary value and emotional value associated with their multiform labor”.\(^{194}\)

Claudia Liebelt’s work on Filipina migrants in Israel aims to go beyond the physical, material, and emotional impact of the labor diaspora and draws attention to how

\(^{191}\) Ibid., 9.
\(^{193}\) Ibid., 191.
\(^{194}\) Ibid., 205.
women’s spiritual identities are both transformed and transformative. Liebelt recognizes that a vast majority of Filipinos, upwards of 90% in some polls, identify as religious or believing in a Christianity-centered God. Because the majority of OFWs are practicing Christians, many aspire to live and work in Christian countries. This, in small part, explains their proclivity to work in North America and Europe. Liebelt focuses on women’s spiritual engagements in diaspora and argues that when women conceptualize their migration as a pilgrimage in which they make sacrifices for the sake of their families, then they “reconstruct their lives as moral persons” by embodying virtues such as “patience” and “compassion” particularly for labor that is physically and emotionally strenuous like “care-giving” for the elderly. Being in Israel, which many Filipinos still envision as “The Holy Land”, is seen by many OFWs as a blessing. Their ethical and moral formation ultimately gives new meaning and purpose to their work overseas. Liebelt’s study cogently demonstrates how the female migrants should not be mistaken or stereotyped as “docile and subservient bodies” and that many not only cope with their roles as domestic laborers, but they are empowered by renegotiating their identities as they navigate through the new terrain that transnational opportunities provide.

Although the global demand for male-oriented labor has decreased since the 1980s, male laborers still make up about half of the Filipino overseas workforce. However, the higher demand for female labor has had an enormous impact on families, particularly because the traditional gender roles carried over from colonial patriarchy in many instances is switched when the husband is left to stay home and the wife becomes

---

196 Ibid., 76.
the “breadwinner”. This emasculating act whereby the female assumes the traditionally male role of provider is one of many consequences in what Jane Margold describes as the “crises of masculinities”.\textsuperscript{197}

Margold’s research focuses on Filipino male workers in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region and argues that neoliberalism, capitalism, and the gendered moral economy not only advance the feminization of poorer countries and populaces, but it simultaneously contributes to “a disintegrating sense of self and the dismemberment of their masculinity”.\textsuperscript{198} Among the Filipino workers in Saudi Arabia, Margold notes that many left the Philippines invigorated with the symbolic and social capital of being “heroes” and good husbands, fathers, and sons—in that they would seek and provide a better life for themselves and for their families, in the same way Ibrahim sought work in Saudi Arabia. Yet once they arrived in their host country, hostile employers, false contracts, coercion, exploitation, etc., stripped them of their masculinity and perceived autonomy. Margold also notes that “de-skilling was as common as fraudulent contracts that forced men to learn jobs on the spot or be deported”.\textsuperscript{199} De-skilling meant that Filipinos who were once professionals or highly skilled workers in the Philippines were obliged to engage in menial labor and unskilled work in order to send remittances back home and be good providers for their families.

Margold also underscores how the labor diaspora is not only gendered but it also racialized. Another major issue Filipino men face in overseas work is “a hierarchy of difference” that “positioned Asians as a lower Other than the expatriate Arabs, then

\textsuperscript{198} Ibid., 275.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid., 287.
distinguished among Asians, endowing them with imagined cultural attributes that sought
to explain their differing pay. Filipinos were said to be “cleaner” and hence deserving of
higher wages than Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans”.\textsuperscript{200} One of Margold’s interlocutors
even mentioned how Arabs see Filipinos as dogs: homeless and scavenging.\textsuperscript{201}

Steven McKay builds on the premise of Margold’s work and assesses how a
feminized and racialized global economy affects the Filipino male seafarers. He
maintains similar observations to what Margold found in Saudi but utilizes approaches
found more prominently in literature on Filipina workers, Steven McKay emphasizes the
process of identity formation among male OFWs. First, McKay claims that the ‘crises of
masculinities’ among Filipinos can be viewed as a “double masculine consciousness”
which he defines as “trying to assert themselves as men, but within a context of being
both racially marginalised in the labour market or workplace and often labelled
effeminate by dominant groups of seafarers”.\textsuperscript{202} McKay argues that despite the
emasculating and racist subordination imposed on Filipinos in the labor diaspora, they—
like their female counterparts—are far from subordinate, docile beings. Embodied
resistance to the economic hegemony of capitalism is a frequent trope in the literature.
McKay sees how Filipino seamen “navigate multiple masculinities both at home and
onboard, and fashion themselves as masculine exemplars in order to invert exploitation
on the job, assert their status as mature Filipino men, and otherwise help them ‘cash in’
on their symbolic capital as migrants and ‘heroes’ in their local communities.\textsuperscript{203}

\begin{flushright}
\\textsuperscript{200} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., 288.
\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 626.
\end{flushright}
Essentially, McKay asserts that Filipinos engage in the construction of “Filipinoness” which they imagine as a positive and empowering identity. The purpose of this is twofold: to endure the harshness of overseas working conditions and to reassert and reproduce their traditional male gender roles at home. In turn, going full circle back to the role of the state, it becomes evident that the state’s efforts to produce cultural values that promote the labor-export economy has become successfully embedded in the hearts, minds, and spirits of a vast majority of OFWs. Alongside the POEA training materials and the state’s nationwide campaign honoring bagong bayani (modern-day heroes), the Philippine Seafarers Promotion Council (PSPC) emphasizes that Filipinos are “reliable, resilient, well-trained and loyal”—all qualities that become internalized, embodied, and transformational among OFWs worldwide.

In addition to the contours of gendered labor experiences, one of the most significant facets of the Filipino transnational labor diaspora are Filipino encounters with Muslim-majority countries. Roughly 90% of Filipinos identify as Christian (80% or so Catholic, 10% other denominations). The Muslim population, although growing in converts, is between 5-7%. In general, Muslims and Christians in the Philippines have had a historically tense relationship. To briefly recap chapter two, Spanish Catholicization began in the late 16th century and continued in the northern provinces. Islamization took place centuries early throughout the archipelago, but indigenous Muslim communities (Moros) were unable to withstand colonial powers and were thus marginalized and stigmatized as the dangerous and menacing Other for at least three solid centuries during Spanish rule. After American occupation and post-war independence, Muslim separatist movements branched out into militant and terrorist organizations that
have intimidated and terrified many Filipinos up to the present day. However, despite the fears and imagined “clash of civilizations” between Christendom and Islam, Filipino overseas workers, many of whom are Christian, continue to seek employment in Muslim-majority countries. The top destination remains Saudi Arabia, an Islamic country governed by a particularly conservative interpretation of Islamic law (see tables 5 and 6). Saudi Arabia and other Gulf country hosts have been prime destinations for overseas work since the 1970s because of newfound oil money that allowed for rapid growth in infrastructure. Vivienne Angeles notes that the booming economy of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait occurred during the height of political unrest and economic instability in the Philippines.\footnote{204} It was for many OFWs a difficult but necessary choice to leave—for the sake of their livelihood, for their families, and for generations to come.

Angeles adds that as Saudi Arabia’s economy flourished, more laborers were needed to sustain the economy. This meant that Filipino workers could opt for more diversified occupations including various skilled and unskilled work, domestic help, service and hotel industry, etc. Most importantly, though, these Muslim-majority countries tended to offer better allowances and relatively higher pay than others in East Asia or Europe.\footnote{205} Though the pay was higher, as Mark Johnson discusses, so too were the risks. Johnson addresses three specific factors that makes the Kingdom a precarious destination infamous for reported cases of forced labor, trafficking, and slavery-like conditions. One of the most restricting factors is what is called the kafala system which is a “system of visa sponsorship that legally ties workers to their employers and severely

\footnote{205} Ibid., 164.
constrains workers’ capacity to act either as ‘free’ labor or as free people”\textsuperscript{206} However, Johnson finds that within this system of constraints which can leave OFWs victim to emotional or physical abuse, he has found many women “gamble” or try their luck \textit{(swerte)} by fleeing \textit{(becoming TNT- tago nang tago, which means “to hide and hide”)} and depend on nearby networks of Filipinos for assistance.\textsuperscript{207} Johnson argues this is “freelancing” denotes a form of agency, a way to regain control of their lives.

While Johnson focuses on runaway OFWs as displaying agency, others, like Angeles bring attention to the way a growing number of Christian OFWs in Islamic countries assimilate through choosing to converting to Islam. These are the Balik-Islam.

By converting to the dominant religion of the state, these converts often enjoy the advantages of better treatment and higher wages. In sum, despite what is a highly restrictive system which too often places overseas Filipino workers at risk, particularly in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and parts of the UAE, what scholars have consistently pointed out are ways in which OFWs must reevaluate their identities for the sake of their own livelihood as they navigate the field of transnational labor diaspora. With support from the Philippine state touting them as “modern-day heroes,” despite the numerous risks and challenges that accompany overseas work, OFWs have and will likely continue to adopt and internalize their roles as heroes. Taking Bourdieu’s description of habitus as “the social embodied”, the institutionalized construct of “\textit{bagong bayani}” is a deeply-seeded feature of a Filipino habitus. That is, it contributes to a “sense of being Filipino” in the

\textsuperscript{206} Mark Johnson, ”Diasporic dreams, middle-class moralities and migrant domestic workers among Muslim Filipinos in Saudi Arabia.” \textit{The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology} 11, no. 3-4 (2010): 461.

\textsuperscript{207} The status of TNT is a common term among Filipinos around the globe. These are typically temporary migrants who overstay the valid duration of their visas and become what The Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) refers to as “irregular migrants”.

136
present day and ultimately facilitates the justification and perpetuation of the Philippine labor diaspora.

Capital: “Flexible Non-Citizenship”

The literature covering the Filipino transnational labor diaspora is steadily growing, especially as the production of OFWs has become deeply rooted in the political, social, and economic fabric of Philippine life. In many cases, to be a successful Filipino citizen means to be able to live and work overseas and to send remittances of currency more valuable than the Philippine peso. As noted above, scholars often discuss the hardships of such a reality—living a life of servitude, perpetual domesticity, enduring emasculating and feminizing biases—all while dealing with separation, disorientation, and isolation. However, like Johnson and Angeles’ nod to OFWs exercising agency, Aihwa Ong’s work on transnationalism and neoliberalism sheds a slightly more encouraging light on the transformations taking place at the local, state, and global level of understanding. Many scholars writing on the Filipino labor diaspora use Ong’s notions of “neoliberal exception” (2006) and “flexible citizenship” (1999) to anchor their ethnographic data and help frame OFW experiences not as a singularity but as part of a global resistance to neoliberal orthodoxy.²⁰⁸


In general, Ong’s notion of neoliberal exception involves spaces which categories of people such as migrant domestic workers are excluded from the benefits of citizenship and denied human rights, or also spaces where privileged citizens and skilled or
professional migrant workers receive special benefits.\textsuperscript{209} In her study on transnational Chinese elites, she identifies their capacities to navigate the capitalistic contours of globalization and develop strategies to accumulate their own capital and power as migrants. She calls this phenomenon “flexible citizenship” which involves “the cultural logic of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions.”\textsuperscript{210} Although the connection has not been made explicit, I find the “Philippine Labor Brokerage” that Rodriguez laments can be reconceptualized as a neoliberal exception in which OFWs are not only exercising agency, but more precisely, as demonstrating their “flexible citizenship” as shown by the daily choices their make for survival. However, I make this connection loosely. As Liebelt has argued, although both Chinese and Filipino migrants tend to develop culturally infused strategies to maximize benefits, and engage in reconfiguring their identities as migrants, the one major difference between Chinese transnationalists and Filipino overseas workers in the diaspora are that OFWs are “far less economically privileged than the Chinese” and they “typically labor hard and long in order to move”.\textsuperscript{211} Instead, Nicole Constable’s work builds off this conversation and suggests that migrant workers like OFWs can be said to demonstrate flexibility in their non-citizenship, thus exhibiting “flexible non-citizenship”.\textsuperscript{212} Because, as Johnson and

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{209} Aihwa Ong, \textit{Neoliberalism as exception: Mutations in citizenship and sovereignty}. Duke University Press, 2006.
\item \textsuperscript{210} Aihwa Ong, \textit{Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality}, (North Caroline: Duke University Press, 1999), 6.
\item \textsuperscript{211} Claudia Liebelt, "On sentimental Orientalists, Christian Zionists, and working class cosmopolitans: Filipina domestic workers’ journeys to Israel and beyond." \textit{Critical Asian Studies} 40, no. 4 (2008): 571.
\item \textsuperscript{212} Nicole Constable, \textit{Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers}. 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), 27.
\end{itemize}
others have noted, OFWs’ lack of rights as noncitizens in their host countries force them to develop innovative ways of dealing with the tensions and finding a sense of belonging.

Constable’s reworking of “flexible non-citizenship”, I contend, is most useful for discussing the ways in which Filipino migrants demonstrate agency within the transnational diaspora. Constable’s studies of migrants in Hong Kong depict Filipinos as agents of resistance to neoliberal capitalist forces. However, of the many other migrant communities, she projects that the growing population of Indonesian labor migrants indicates possible competition with the Philippine state’s labor brokerage. In recent years, the Indonesian government has taken notice of the Philippines’ high remittance inflow and has mimicked many of its labor export policies. In top OFW destinations that are Muslim-majority countries, this may soon contribute to rising competition in the labor market. The World Bank reported that the number of Indonesian overseas workers increased from three million in 2005 to nine million in 2016. Moreover, Lan suggests Indonesians are viewed as more docile and subservient than Filipinos. Most Indonesians are already Muslim and better acclimated to facets of Islamic culture. This cultural familiarity can be an advantage for Indonesian domestic helpers who are accustomed to cooking halal food, for example. However, Filipinos also hold a competitive edge in their proficiency in English and Americanized sensibilities. It will be interesting for scholars to monitor if the Indonesian government continues to follow the

---


Philippine economic model that hinges on remittances and the impact of such a trajectory.

Balik-Islam converts who were once OFWs demonstrate “flexible non-citizenship” largely by utilizing their accumulated economic, social, religious, and cultural capital, combined with their individual habitus, to strategically navigate the diasporic field and make everyday decisions that maximize their competitive advantage. I use the term competitive advantage to denote both monetary returns as well as achieving an overall sense of well-being (including corporal, spiritual, emotional, and mental health needs). As alluded above, Angeles’ work on linkages between the Philippines and the Middle East and Gulf region illustrates how although the two regions have shared historical connections through trade and politics, she argues that “it is labor migration to Saudi Arabia that has led to changes in the composition of Muslims in the Philippines, which, in turn has resulted in the growing plural nature of Philippine Islam.”

Angeles points to Saudi Arabia’s restrictions on religious practice which has, in turn, limited how Catholic (and Christian) OFWs engage in the public sphere. While many Catholic OFWs find ways to covertly practice their religion in private spaces, they are also at risk being penalized or even deported. Angeles found that due to the limits imposed by OFWs’ temporary migrant status along with government restrictions on their religious freedom, some Catholic OFWs opt to convert to Islam to circumvent these obstacles while gaining an advantage in the field via religious and cultural assimilation. Similar to the accounts I heard from Balik-Islam interlocutors, Angeles explains how simply being Muslim in


Saudi Arabia can yield numerous benefits for Filipino migrants, such as receiving higher wages, easily obtaining contract renewals, being referred to new employers, or expanding their social networks. Angeles does not discount these conversions as insincere, but rather, through OFWs’ willingness and inclination to learn more about Islam, many converts reported that their initial pragmatic reasons for converting eventually lead to authentic belief in Islam as the “true” religion. I understand these conversions as illustrating how OFWs can initially use their flexible non-citizenship as capital to invest in their own livelihood and security, and that of their families and dependents back home in the Philippines. The deliberation leading up to an OFW’s decision to convert are all part of the symbolic negotiation process. OFWs must weigh the pros and cons of accepting such a life-altering path. I contend that the degree to which one is willing, able, and inclined to make such a commitment and reevaluate the social structures that grant them a sense of plausibility depends entirely on other factors of the symbolic negotiation model, namely their association with fields of discord and *da‘wah.*
CHAPTER 5:

DISCORD: DISRUPTION AND DISORIENTATION OVERSEAS

Maryam

During my initial meeting with Ibrahim, I expressed how I wanted my research to be as transparent as possible. This meant, in part, that I hoped to genuinely collaborate with the ISCAG leadership while getting acquainted with the Balik-Islam community at large. My first rookie mistake was that I failed to confirm a future meeting. All I had was hope, the prospect that dropping by his office the following Monday afternoon would land me some time to continue our conversation. The guard at the second gate recognized me from the week prior and kindly informed me that Ibrahim had just finished a seminar and was back in his office. I let out a hefty sigh of relief. He’s here. That’s a great start. I remembered my way around the building, walked up the staircase to the left, passed by the women’s da‘wah section where I momentarily made eye contact with two veiled women talking amongst themselves at the desk. I proceeded to Ibrahim’s office door and gave a gentle knock. No answer. I tried again, with more gusto. I hear a “Yes?”, which I perceived as granting permission to enter. I slowly turned the knob and pushed the door open to just enough visibility to see Ibrahim in the middle of a conversation with a male visitor. A tad embarrassed, I reverently expressed my apologies and told Ibrahim that I would be outside his office if he had anytime to meet afterward. There was a bench and several chairs in what appeared to be a waiting area. I took a seat and collected my thoughts, practicing in my mind what I’d say verbatim.
As I waited, there were several male staff members shuffling from room to room, opening and closing doors as if there was a meeting about to start. Directly in front of me was Ibrahim’s office, to my left was Penalber’s office, and to my right was some sort of large conference room. Several times staff personnel would inquire if Ibrahim knew I was waiting for him. They were obviously attentive, concerned, and transfixed on my “foreignness”. Since my hair was visible, perhaps I was seen as just another visitor seeking conversion. But my presence seemed to solicit curious stares. Were they already informed that I was a student? A researcher? A potential convert? After roughly ten minutes, I noticed a tall male, light complexion, most certainly in my mind of Arab descent. He appeared to be an honored guest, perhaps an ustaz. I knew then that the hustle and bustle of Eid al-Fitr was far from over. I came at the wrong time, I thought to myself. Ibrahim was surely busy. As my thoughts reorganized, the sweat from my forehead and nose were streaming down my face. As I rummaged through my bag for tissue, a woman, veiled in a black and white animal print headscarf took a seat next to me on the waiting bench. She asked if I was waiting for Ibrahim. I nodded and explained that he knows I’m here. She adjusted her posture and sat comfortably on the bench next to me, knowing that she’d be waiting a while for her turn. After a slight pause, she then turned to me and asked who I am and what I’m doing at ISCAG. As if it was a script I memorized for a play, I shared my name, where I’m from, and that I’m a student/researcher, all in acceptable Tagalog. It wasn’t that I was an American that piqued her interest; rather, it was that I was a researcher trying to understand more about Balik-Islam and the ISCAG compound. She continued the conversation in English which made me feel like my attempt at Tagalog was subpar. But as she introduced herself as a
former journalist who “understands how to research and ask questions”, I realized she wanted not to dismiss my Tagalog, but to showcase her expertise in journalism and in English.

Her English was seamless; her hospitality was as palpable as the beads of sweat that continued to drip down my face. Fortunately, with auspicious timing, she pulled out a fan and began vigorously wafting the air into a cool breeze that struck my cheeks with relief. Thank you, I told her. We talked for what felt like at least fifteen minutes about my reasons for studying Islam, for not converting, for wanting to dispel dangerous misconceptions that homogenize all Muslims as one unitary global community. She understood my defense and seemed glad that I would venture on such a challenging enterprise. She was also curious, just as was Ibrahim, that I had substantial knowledge about the religion, yet had not yet declared Shahadah. She then proceeded to disclose a serious personal matter that caught me a bit off guard, considering we just met. She prefaced her story by expressing she does not intend to offend or deface Moros or “born-Muslims” in the Philippines. She simply stated that most have a different attitude, especially toward women. It turns out that her (now ex-) husband is a “born-Muslim” from Zamboanga in Mindanao. They have been separated for at least two years, though not officially divorced at the time of our meeting. Just days prior, during the Eid celebrations, her husband visited the ISCAG compound and allegedly took their eight-year old daughter with him back to Mindanao. When relaying the story, she appeared extremely distressed, almost as if she would burst into tears. She held back though, possibly thinking I’m a stranger who might think ill of her sudden meltdown. She ended her narrative by avowing that she would certainly find a way to get her daughter back.
Midway through our talk, I realized this woman pouring her heart out in front of me was nameless. I asked in Tagalog for her name. She said “Maryam”. As I’ve done with most women my elder, I request to call her “Ate”, literally meaning “elder sister”, but symbolically it’s a sign of respect without making the woman feel old. We keep talking about other issues with no particular sequence or direction. Maryam showed a great deal of interest and respect for my project. She kept reminiscing about her previous life as a journalist and thus offered any help she could provide to ensure that I obtain the data and interviews necessary to write an “accurate” account of ISCAG and of Balik-Islam in the Philippines. Ibrahim emerged from his office regretfully saying that he had no time to meet this afternoon as ISCAG is hosting several guests from overseas (hence the Arab man). Maryam was disappointed more than me since she needed to speak with him as well. I learned that while her full time job was at a local call center, her part-time work was helping Ibrahim with administrative duties at ISCAG. ISCAG president, Omar Penalber, also exited his office; they were on their way to a meeting downstairs. This was the first time I saw him in person. It’s such a strange feeling to be “following” the man for months online and then finally feel his presence. It was larger than life experience. We exchanged eye contact for a brief moment. I had a feeling he knew who I was.

Maryam didn’t hesitate to get up and introduce me in the kindest way possible. Penalber was very gracious and was apologetic that he was too busy to meet that afternoon. He asked that I schedule an appointment so we could have enough time to talk. Again, I wasn’t too disheartened because I knew there was a lot I could learn from Maryam.

After the men left for their meeting, Maryam and I headed downstairs to where there were electric fans. What a relief! I ended up speaking with her for nearly an hour
more. Our conversation developed into a pragmatic one; we exchanged contact information, talked about availabilities, and how to proceed with my research. She even volunteered to introduce me to other members of ISCAG for future interviews and offered her presence in case of any communication or translation issues. I found her willingness to help quite genuine. On my way out, I asked her where I could purchase hijabs or at least some Muslim-appropriate headgear. Rather than just directing me, she accompanied me outside to a Muslim vendor nearby. She recommended the type of hijab I had in mind, an easy one-piece slip on that was long enough to cover my arms and my bottom. This way, she explained, I could wear and remove the piece after leaving the ISCAG compound. Interestingly, Maryam chooses not to wear hijab anywhere outside of the ISCAG compound. She explained that most Christian Filipinos will never understand. To avoid the judgmental stares and “tsismis” or gossip, she doesn’t wear the hijab in public to avoid unnecessary drama.

The following day, we met in the lobby of the administrative building and relocated shortly to a sitting area near the ISCAG school’s canteen. A few minutes into the recorded interview, the adthan—call to prayer—took place steps away, and immediately after, students flooded the canteen and adjacent basketball courts. Though I was concerned that this would yield the interview inaudible, this was a prime opportunity to immerse myself in life at the compound. Although I was obviously foreign, I managed to fit in somewhat with my newly purchased teal hijab and floor-length black skirt. I set the voice recorder on the table between us, praying that the background noise wouldn’t drown out our voices. I didn’t really know where to start. I wanted to know everything. It was like I was eager to hear the continuation of a TV series that, regrettably for Maryam,
was all too real. Part of me also felt like I was exploiting her story just to create an interesting dissertation project. I acknowledge that by conducting such “research”, I possess an unfathomable discursive power that may perhaps affect the future of this woman and those who have endured similar hardship. I don’t consider myself heroic in any capacity; rather, I felt guilt and an overwhelming sense of responsibility to tell her story.

Maryam spoke most often about her multiple marriages and family as they relate to her “reversion story”. Despite converting to Islam initially out of practicality and convenience, Maryam also admitted that from the moment she wed her Muslim husband to the moment they divorced, her faith in Allah and understanding of “true” Islam grew as time passed. She experienced multiple bouts of discord that challenged her Filipino and Catholic values, compelling her to reassess her beliefs. After her first marriage to her Catholic husband, she experienced a sharp separation from her former life by moving away from her hometown in the northern Philippines to the south. When she married a “born-Muslim,” she quickly became immersed in a Muslim household yet still declined to convert. It was only after her (now ex-) husband left the Philippines to work in Abu Dhabi as an overseas contract worker did she feel trouble start to brew. The long-distance marriage caused immense strain on their relationship. Though he provided Maryam and their young daughter ample financial support in remittances, he also began an extra-marital relationship while abroad. Maryam eventually discovered the affair when he returned to the Philippines and decided to marry the other woman as his second wife. Maryam immediately sought for divorce and for custody of her child. Although Maryam nominally embraced Islam when she married her Muslim ex-husband, she continued to
attend Catholic services and recite Catholic prayers. However, since her youngest daughter was Muslim and attended a Muslim school, Maryam gradually felt urged to take Islam more seriously. She said she was desperate to resolve the situation in her favor and would do anything to ensure she wouldn’t lose custody of her daughter. Not only did her ex-husband take on a second wife, but allegedly he was also physically abusive.

After years of continuing to practice Catholicism while being outwardly Muslim, Maryam reached a point where she could no longer maintain both worlds. From all the discord, suffering, and sacrifice she endured during her second marriage, she eventually found harmony by renegotiating her values in light of her current circumstances and choosing to conceptually bridge the gap between her Catholic and Muslim lives.

Introduction

I spent the majority of my childhood as a denizen of Las Vegas, or “Sin City” as it’s universally known. My mother raised me and my two sisters Catholic. In a city filled with commercialized vices, she prioritized Sunday as a day when we’d all attend mass together in addition to another family activity (e.g. eating at a restaurant, watching a movie, shopping, etc.). Like most Catholics, we viewed completing fundamental sacraments, such as Reconciliation, First Communion, and Confirmation as significant milestones in our lives. Like clockwork, we performed all the rites with precision, we recited prayers from memory, and we made certain to begin and end every supplication with the “sign of the cross”. Though we never read the Bible from cover to cover, we were quite familiar with excerpts associated with parables of Jesus that were taught in catechism. From receiving baptism as infants, being Catholic was always second nature to us. Being Catholic and believing in the precepts of the Church not only provided us a
sense of stability, structure, and purpose, but being Catholic also provided us a sense of identity. Through routine practice and a gradual development of the skills and language necessary to partake in Catholic services, we acquired a Catholic habitus that may arguably remain with us at some level of sub-consciousness for the remainder of our lives.

It was during my sophomore year of high school when my Catholic identity began to disintegrate. Once the bedrock of my sense of stability and certainty, my Catholic worldview—my symbolic universe—filled with neatly structured rules and traditions, sharpened lines that demarcated good from evil, and a strong conviction in my purpose in this life and the hereafter gradually began to lose meaning and credibility. I tried to cling onto my faith by volunteering with my church’s youth group and choir. However, these efforts weren’t robust enough to withstand my discovery of alternative explanations of reality that I encountered in various religious, philosophical and scientific-based texts I was reading at school. Despite my ever-growing doubts and questions about my beliefs, I managed to maintain and preserve my Catholic identity on the exterior for another four years. All the while, my internal symbolic universe was in utter disarray. It wasn’t until after I moved away from my hometown and made a new life for myself in Washington D.C. as a sophomore in college that I finally came to grips with my new, exciting, and yet terrifying truth that I had become Agnostic.

In hindsight, because of my experience with what scholars would classify as a “deconversion”, I felt a deep and intrinsic connection with Maryam and other Balik-Islam converts when they opened up to me about their journey from Catholicism to Islam.\[217\] As

---

\[217\] Heinz Streib draws upon John Barbour and Charles Glock’s works on deconversion to develop a set of five core characteristics that aim to conceptualize what is meant by “deconversion”. These five are: (1) loss of
such, this chapter on “discord” is a particularly personal and cathartic effort to illustrate the multifaceted process of symbolic negotiation. This chapter explores how Balik-Islam reverts negotiate the symbolic structures that once supported and reinforced their symbolic universe, and how these structures, over various periods of time no longer provided the cohesion and relevance needed to sustain a plausible and compelling symbolic universe, which in effect, creates space for new structures to supersede the old. The field of discord plays a prominent role in this process, as it is often a trigger point that prompts recognition of waning symbolic structures. Among the Balik-Islam I spoke with, I listened to experiences that conveyed instances of disruption with a former way of living that ultimately signaled the need for a “new” direction in life. Since the scope of my inquiry focuses squarely on religious conversions, I analyze the various experiences of discord specific to how Balik-Islam reverts perceived ruptures in their Christian identities and how they strive to fill these gaps and realign the structures that uphold their symbolic universe with Islamic notions of identity, values, rituals, and truths.

Provided that the majority of this study’s respondents identified as former Catholics (in contrast to other Christian denominations), my analysis draws upon specific aspects of Catholicism, and more particularly, the dynamics of Catholicism in Philippine society. Nearly 79% of the Balik-Islam participants self-identified as being raised Catholic, while the next highest percentage was tied among Protestant, Born-Again, and Iglesia ni Cristo (Pentecostal), at about 6% each. I begin by exploring the field of discord

specific religious experiences; (2) intellectual doubt, denial, or disagreement with specific beliefs; (3) moral criticism; (4) emotional suffering; and (5) disaffiliation from the community.” See Heinz Streib, “Deconversion.” In Marc David Baer, Todd Michael Johnson, Lily Kong, Seeta Nair, Henri Paul Pierre Gooren, Peter G. Stromberg, Fenggang Yang et al., The Oxford handbook of religious conversion. Oxford Handbooks, 2014.
and how it compares to the literature on religious conversion. I then characterize the field as acute periods of trials and tribulations. While some converts may consider their conversion as a sudden realization or epiphany embodied in a single event, most converts experience numerous incidents of tension that gradually foment into a life-altering decision to convert, which, for most, ultimately aids in resolving the tension. Using the symbolic negotiation framework, I argue that within the field of discord, Balik-Islam reverts reveal their Catholic disposition—their habitus—of internalizing suffering and sacrifice as meaningful conduits to the divine. Paired with this habitus are faith and hope, which I consider as two significant forms of capital that allow the Balik-Islam to persevere through the discord and locate new meaningful alternatives that better correspond to their current reality. Figure 14 outlines the “social field” of discord and illustrates the relational composition of a Catholic habitus to its forms of capital, all of which define the parameters and extent to which a convert may experience discord.

![Figure 14. The Structure of the Field of Discord within a Symbolic Universe. Source: Author.](image-url)
Field: Trials and Tribulations

Among scholars of conversion, there are varied opinions on whether or not “conflict”, in general, is a prerequisite for religious conversion. However, most all agree that some form of conflict appears in an overwhelming amount of conversion narratives. Although it is prudent academic practice to refrain from homogenizing all conversion experiences as conforming to a single formulaic standard, it is undoubtedly difficult and perhaps unfeasible to discuss the nature of religious conversion without establishing certain criteria that distinguishes conversion from other phenomena. Returning to Table 2 from Chapter 2, the second “step” for each of the popular models of conversion address the element of discord in various ways. I find all of these theories valuable in painting the broad landscape of the field of discord.

Lofland and Stark’s stage 1 “tension” and stage 2 “problem-solving perspective”

In Lofland and Stark’s assessment, stages 1 and 2 account for the discord that occurs prior to conversion. They contend that although the first stage of “tension” is insufficient as a stand-alone condition for conversion, it is necessary since it begets the need for some sort of corrective action, i.e. via the process of conversion. Consistent with the framework of symbolic negotiation, and how shifting plausible structures may disrupt one’s supreme symbolic universe, Lofland and Stark describe tension as “a felt discrepancy between some imaginary, ideal state of affairs and the circumstances in which these people saw themselves caught up.”218 In other words, tension occurs when one’s idealized reality no longer harmonizes with their actual lived reality. Through their 1965 study on a millenarian Korean cult known as the “Moonies”, they identified the

following sources of tension among their participants: “longing for unrealized wealth, knowledge, fame, and prestige; hallucinatory activity for which the person lacked any successful definition; frustrated sexual and marital relations; homosexual guilt; acute fear of face-to-face interaction; disabling and disfiguring physical conditions.” These sources of tension are just a few examples of the host of possible reasons why tension may occur.

The second stage in Lofland and Stark’s model is the “problem-solving perspective” which transpires if and when one desires to relieve the existing tension and pursue a viable alternative solution. Based on their collected data, they discuss three categories of solutions that correspond with the type of tension involved: the psychiatric, the political, and the religious. Psychiatric solutions locate tension in one’s mental health and thus involve a “manipulation of the self” which may include various forms of therapy. Political solutions identify tension existing in social and economic apparatuses and encourage political change. The third, which takes on the religious perspective, “tends to see both sources and solutions as emanating from an unseen and, in principle, unseeable realm.” I find Lofland and Stark’s use of the terms “unseen” and “unseeable realm” rather notable and accurate descriptors of religion and its emphasis on the “other worldly”. This is why symbolism is such a critical aspect of religious conversion. Symbols represent something other than what is apparent or at face value. Symbols are often used to infuse meaning and significance into ordinary objects, activities, and

219 Ibid.
situations, by transforming the mundane into a representation of the ineffable, the holy, the absolute, the perfect.

Loftand and Stark’s thematic pairing of tension and problem-solving is a helpful way to conceptualize the disparate reasons why people might convert to a religion. Their study shows that those who described their tension as more “secular”, that is, either psychiatric or political in nature, were less inclined to commit wholeheartedly to the millenarian cult, while those with religious tensions were more open to conversion as a viable solution. While these general divisions between secular and religious problems may seem sensible from a methodological approach, they can also be misleading. What I argue through the symbolic negotiation framework is that what may appear as a “religious” source of discord is actually a complex amalgamation of secular and non-secular factors. Even if a convert self-identifies their source of tension as religious, scholars should be wary of classifying “religious” as wholly distinct from social, psychological, and political factors altogether.

Rambo’s “crisis”

In an effort to approach religious conversion more holistically than Stark and Loftand’s highly structured “world-saver” model that focuses on “deviance”, Lewis Rambo’s 1993 “systemic” model uses the term “crisis” to denote the tension and discord that occurs among converts in his study. Rambo contends that conversion is a process that involves the seven stages listed in Table 2. Though the stages are typically sequentially, sometimes they are not. Rambo tends to emphasize the relational aspects of the stages rather than dwell on their progression. However, it appears far from coincidental that the “crisis” happens to fall under stage 2 after “context”. Crisis by its very nature is typically
a response to or effect of a particular set of conditions. In the symbolic negotiation framework, these conditions—or the “context”—are the “fields” in which a person inhabits. By the same logic, it is not surprising that all the models in this discussion are quite similar in their general composition.

Unlike Stark and Lofland’s specific breakdown and typology of tensions, Rambo’s remains cautiously general in his description of crisis. He maintains that “two basic types of crisis are important to the conversion process: crises that call into question one’s fundamental orientation to life, and crises that in and of themselves are rather mild but are the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back.”

Rather than examine types of crises to differentiate among the religious versus secular, he draws attention to the varying degrees of magnitude and subjective qualities of what may constitute a crisis. Rambo insists that, “it is easy to see that death, suffering, and other painful experiences can challenge one’s interpretation of life, calling everything into question, but other events that appear to be rather insignificant may also eventually serve as triggers—crises in retrospect.”

Rambo makes an important insight through his two broad understandings of crisis. The first category of crisis is the discernably earth-shattering kind that most everyone would associate with the word crisis. The second category are the subtle tremors beneath the surface that are gradual but cumulative in nature, and therefore have the potential to produce just as powerful an impact as the first.

Because Rambo’s notion of crisis is quite broad and all-encompassing, he generally agrees with Stark and Lofland’s idea that “tension” can spark one’s religious

---


222 Ibid.
quest. Rambo notes that whether it’s framed as tension, stress, crisis, or any other analogous term, these in isolation cannot explain why conversion occurs. Instead, he discusses a list of “catalysts for crisis” he gathered from his research, which include the following: mystical experiences, near-death experiences, illness and healing, existential dissatisfaction, desire for transcendence, altered states of consciousness, search for stability and selfhood, search for emotional resolution, apostasy, and external stimuli, such as missionary activity. Whatever may generate one’s crisis, once the process begins, Rambo maintains that the next stage entails a “quest” to remove or resolve the crisis. In the symbolic negotiation model, this is precisely where “negotiation” begins to occur. Neither Rambo or Stark and Lofland mention whether cognizance of the crisis or tension is necessary. Nonetheless, I would argue that neither the problem-solving perspective or quest must be conscious efforts. As I delve further into the chapter, given the subconscious dynamics of field, habitus, and capital, I find that cognizance of symbolic negotiation may be transpiring at a virtually intuitive level.

*Iyadurai’s “disenchantment” and “crunch”*

Moving forward from Rambo’s 1993 study to Iyadurai’s 2011 step model, we see a very familiar theme in the second and third steps: disenchantment and crunch. Similar to Stark and Lofland’s stages one and two, these work in tandem to demonstrate what Rambo collectively calls “crisis” and what I term as “discord”. Disenchantment and crunch are part of a series of seven steps that are not intended to be definitive but rather heuristic. They serve as tools to help capture the complexity of the conversion process by providing

---


156
thematic markers of distinct phases that are typically but not necessarily sequential. Iyadurai contends that his model is valuable in the way that it takes on a “phenomenological perspective”, meaning that his methodology predominately rests on obtaining and analyzing conversion narratives and interpreting these as their authentic experiences.\textsuperscript{224}

Disenchantment for Iyadurai generally follows a potential convert’s “exposure” to a new or unfamiliar religion. Vexingly, he does not give the reader an explanation for his choice of the term “disenchantment”. Iyadurai’s analysis of disenchantment focuses entirely on how participants in his study reported their sentiments about their religion of birth and its incapacity to fulfill their current sense of satisfaction. Similar to what I heard from Balik-Islam members like Maryam, Iyadurai recounted how “Mala, a medical doctor, said, “I fulfilled all rituals so that I could be happy but the end was vain... but I couldn’t find permanent satisfaction in any; everything was mechanical.”\textsuperscript{225} According to Iyadurai, other reasons why participants felt disenchantment include the following: absence of peace, absence of fulfillment, meaningless rituals, absence of the concept of forgiveness, fear of punishment, absence of an eternal dimension, irrational beliefs, failure, lack of absoluteness, and issues of social and economic discriminations.\textsuperscript{226}

Crunch signifies a difficult situation or period of time prior to one’s conversion. In a way, crunch is both tension and crisis, as it is described as an internal conflict for which no clear solution can be found. Through Iyadurai’s study, he identifies the

\textsuperscript{224} Iyadurai describes phenomenology as looking “for the meaning of an experience while committed to ‘thick’ descriptions as it appears.” Joshua Iyadurai, "The step model of transformative religious experiences: A phenomenological understanding of religious conversions in India." \textit{Pastoral Psychology} 60, no. 4 (2011): 505.

\textsuperscript{225} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{226} Ibid., 508-509.
following types of crunch among respondents: psychological, behavioral, crisis in studies, crisis in health, crisis in a new location, crisis in relationships or family, life-threatening crisis, crisis of poverty, financial crisis, crisis of a perceived evil attack, and an existential crisis. Iyadurai does note that some converts reported to experience no crunch. This finding allows Iyadurai to conclude that crunch is not a cause of conversion but rather, part of the context of a conversion experience.

Iyadurai uses samples of narratives from converts to Protestantism in India as interpretation of their own transformative experience. Though he recognizes the limitations of relying solely on such data, he insists his study is interdisciplinary and takes into account both the “role of religious practices and social psychological factors” in the conversion process. While I do agree with this approach, and use it myself within this study, the limitation of taking narratives at face value without investigating deeper beyond the surface of rhetoric can only produce another “step model” of conversion, of which there are already many similar models saturating the field. By concentrating exclusively on religious experience, the methodological risk at hand is conflating correlation with causation. In other words, because a convert displays disenchantment with their former religion does not necessarily mean that is a cause for conversion.

Iyadurai does, however, fill the void of “phenomenology” that Rambo identified as missing in his own work. But aside from this, the step model appears to only offer slightly more specific and nuanced terms of the same process-oriented phenomenon.

227 Ibid., 509.
228 Ibid., 511.
presented in Rambo’s “holistic” approach and even Stark and Lofland’s “social psychological” model (shown in table 2). By no means do I disagree with these paradigms, which do, in my view, capture the general patterns and processes that many religious converts follow. But by examining the logic of these models, comparing “discord” for example in this chapter, it is clear that the study of religious conversion is stunted by the process model and would require a robust conceptual overhaul in order to achieve any new theoretical or scholarly insights.

My goal is to show how the symbolic negotiation framework can help scholars take a leap in a different direction in order to unearth more of the richness that religious conversion can reveal about human nature. I chose the terms “discord” and “disorientation” to indicate the prior existence of a sense “accord” and “orientation”. Unlike the terms “tension”, “problem-solving perspective”, “crisis”, “disenchantment”, or “crunch”, discord and disorientation point directly to the stability, harmony, and guidance provided by a functioning, balanced, and effective symbolic universe. I am in no way suggesting that an imbalanced or fluctuating symbolic universe is either negative or positive. There is no role for value judgement in the symbolic negotiation framework; rather, it attempts to illustrate the way things are.

Wohlrab-Sahr’s “Symbolic Battle”

Because the step model is intrinsically limited in its potential to capture the magnitude and complexity of “discord”, I turn to Monika Wohlrab-Sahr’s paradigms of symbolic battle and symbolic transformation for further insight. In many respects, these concepts incorporate elements of tension, crisis, crunch, etc. as discussed above. What Wohlrab-Sahr adds to the conversation, however, is an explicit focus on the dynamics between a
converts’ agency in their conversion and their unique biography. Rather than concentrate on a formulaic process comprised of steps or stages, Wohlrab-Sahr draws attention to the symbolic meanings that a convert might ascribe to various aspects of the conversion process, which are, as she argues, formed by one’s individual circumstances, environment, and amassed biases, both conscious and unconscious. In what she terms as “biographical rationality”, Wohlrab-Sahr posits that a person’s decision to ultimately convert is determined by numerous internal and external factors. In conversions from Christianity to Islam, where—as I discussed in chapter two—these religions carry immense historical baggage, and are still in some circles framed as representing contradictory “western” and “non-western” cultural values, external biases can often become internalized as truths and cannot be overlooked in conversion experiences. She argues that by “taking both into account—the biographical background of conversions and the symbolic connotations of conversion to Islam in the West—the interpreter gains a better understanding of the ‘biographical rationality’ of the conversion decision and, by means of that, the profits and losses of that decision.”

Wohlrab-Sahr’s overall conversion paradigm embodies the heart of the symbolic negotiation model of conversion, especially in the way that I apply it to the Balik-Islam in the Philippines. For example, “biographical rationality” is similar to Pierre Bourdieu’s “Theory of Practice”, in that a person’s habitus and capital, among other factors, are simultaneously structured by and are structuring the social field in which they operate. One’s agency, capacity to make decisions, and presumed “rationality” are therefore

---

produced by this complex matrix of biographical elements. Moreover, what I aim to
demonstrate thoroughly by the concluding chapter is how the perceived act of
conversion, when examined through a sociological lens, expresses one’s biographical
rationality through the process of symbolic negotiation.

In addition, because Wohlrab-Sahr focuses heavily on the dynamics of
symbolism—or how religions are represented in particular cultural settings—her
understanding of conversion looks at the relational and functional role that symbolism
serves in religious conversion from Christianity to Islam. To begin, she identifies two
principal yet distinct modes of adopting a new religion: “syncretism” and “symbolic
battle”. The former indicates a combination of an old and new religion merging into a
new hybrid, while the latter “stresses conflict and uses religious symbolism to
demonstrate radical difference.”

In one study exploring reasons why particular Christians in the United States and Germany chose to adopt Islam as their new religion,
Wohlrab-Sahr uses the symbolic battle model to account for the discursive space
necessary to address the historically symbolic rifts between Christianity and Islam. In
brief, she finds that many conversions to Islam from Christian backgrounds are “related
to problems of integration and disintegration in the converts’ own social context” and that
the foreign religion becomes a means of articulating within one’s own social context
one’s distance from this context and one’s conflictive relationship towards it.”

In other words, she notes that one way a convert denounces their former Christian life is by
embracing the religion of the “Other”. For me, symbolic battle invokes imagery of a

230 Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, "Conversion to Islam: Between Syncretism and Symbolic Battle." Social
Compass 46, no. 3 (1999): 353.
231 Ibid., 352.
battlefield where a soldier suddenly realizes he is fighting for the enemy—or the wrong side, perhaps—and decides to switch over to the other side. Or in a less combative scene, I imagine a recent divorcée seeking to start anew by moving away from any space that would remind her of her former spouse and marriage. Wohlrab-Sahr’s acknowledgement of symbolic distance is a profound insight and an important key to unlocking the question of why anyone might consider embracing a religion, culture, and lifestyle taught to be so wholly different, foreign, and “Other”.

As it pertains to the field of discord, symbolic battle points to a specific degree of disorientation, discord, tension, disenchantedment, crisis, etc. It is more confrontational, overt, and binary. While it may apply to some converts to Islam, it is certainly not universal. Perhaps this why in her later work, Wohlrab-Sahr begins to also use the phrase “symbolic transformation of crisis experience” to describe religious conversion in a more general sense. The transformation she alludes to is the same problem-solving function that conversion serves in a symbolic battle. Because the underlying impetus for conflict, battle, or crisis lies in some sort of social disintegration, Wohlrab-Sahr argues that conversion’s latent function is often a means of resolving this issue—similar to Lofland and Stark’s approach. Even though the cause of the problem may stem from a wholly nonreligious space, religious conversion has the ability to provide a solution that is expressed symbolically and performed ritually, which may in effect, enable one to experience a more robust transformation of crisis, especially when nonreligious solutions prove ineffective.

After analyzing conversion narrative samples from both the U.S and Germany, Wohlrab-Sahr identifies three overarching social “realms” in which these crises occur. She explains, “part of this problem-solving process is different forms of moralizing that refer to the realms in which devaluation, failure, and disintegration were experienced: the moralizing of sexuality and gender relations, of personal discipline, and of political and social order.” While these three broad social realms could certainly apply to any population of converts, including the Balik-Islam, my research locates more specific “trials and tribulations” reported by respondents in my study.

The field of discord is vast and essentially comprises any situation that causes disorientation or destabilization with regard to the plausibility structures that makeup one’s symbolic universe. Under this broad definition of discord, all related paradigms from other conversion models aptly fit within this field. In other words, tension, problem-solving perspective, crisis, disenchantment, crunch, and symbolic battle can be understood as various degrees of discord. I turn to Wohlrab-Sahr’s symbolic battle, however, as an insightful gateway to examining the particular dynamics of conversion from Christianity to Islam. Based on my exchanges with Balik-Islam converts, there were no definitive, categorical, or universal experiences of discord shared by all, or even most. Just as varied and multifaceted are individual biographical histories, so are the various forms of discord among converts. I conclude that the “trials and tribulations” that the Balik-Islam encounter in the social field of discord can range from “secular”, mundane and commonplace troubles, such as economic, interpersonal, emotional issues to more overtly “religious” quandaries that involve sharp bouts of earth-shattering doubt about

233 Ibid.
existential matters. Though it might come across as an evasive explanation to state that discord simply includes all of the above, I argue that this is a significant point to consider. By identifying the normalcy and ordinary aspects of religious conversion and of individual converts in and of themselves, can we as begin to accept religious conversion as a human decision-making process that is just as purposeful and instinctive as any other social choice involving costs and benefits.

However, what my research on the Balik-Islam does reveal are the primary sources from which the trials and tribulations of discord originate. As Wohlrab-Sahr stresses the significance of biographical context, so too does the symbolic negotiation model. Expectedly, the most common sources of discord I found in the present case were related to the other two social fields: diaspora and da‘wah. Thus, in accordance with the interlaced nature of a symbolic negotiation framework, I categorize the main sources of discord among Balik-Islam converts in two ways: (1) the field of discord as it relates to diaspora (migration), and (2) the field of the discord as it relates to da‘wah (proselytization). The field of discord impacted by diaspora include: stresses and pressures on migrants associated with the responsibility of being a “bagong bayani” (modern-day Philippine hero); social restrictions and regulations incurred while living in Muslim countries, exposure to new and foreign cultures and ways of living; isolation from society and long-term separation from loved ones; interpersonal issues among recipients of migrants’ remittances, including quarrels over allocation of finances (often newly incurred wealth), spousal infidelity (which occurs among migrant workers and recipients of remittances alike), and financial dependency and enablement. The field of discord related to da‘wah includes: sudden exposure or introduction to new existential
“truths” (which can cause gradual or immediate destabilization of the plausible structures that maintain one’s symbolic universe); and internal symbolic conflict associated with proximity to or affinity with Muslims, or persons who based on cultural and social biases, have been tainted as the “Other”.

At this point, I must be clear that my symbolic negotiation model does not accord with any step or stage model in which there are sequential components that operate in a cause/effect relationship. Rather, the fields of discord, da‘wah, and diaspora are so finely interrelated that is near impossible to conclude which field influences the other, and so forth. It is akin to the chicken or the egg conundrum where it becomes futile to deliberate over the sequence of events, and more beneficial to identify and acknowledge the confluence of events. This is one reason why I chose the terms “trials” and “tribulations” to characterize the sometimes sporadic, latent, episodic, recurring and/or continuing nature of discord as an inevitability of being human. The following sections, however, examine the field of discord among the Balik-Islam further by identifying the microcosm of confluent elements that impact many of the Filipinos who chose to renounce Christianity and adopt the religion of Islam—and more pointedly, how their habitus and capital effect and are affected by discord.

Habitus: Suffering and Sacrifice

Earlier this year, I visited my family in Las Vegas and attended a Catholic mass (service) on Mother’s Day. Not having attended mass in quite some time, the priest’s homily (sermon) struck a deep and personal chord within me. He vigorously reminded the parishioners (congregation) of what it means to be Catholic, what it means to live in Christ’s image, and how it all relates to what it means to be good mother. In short, it all
boiled down to suffering and sacrifice. According to the priest, being a “good” Catholic requires a steadfast commitment to following in Jesus Christ’s footsteps, which, at the pinnacle of his legacy was his willingness to suffer on the cross and sacrifice himself for the salvation of humankind. The priest certainly did not suggest that we should all bear a cross and suffer a brutal death in order to be upright Catholics. Symbolically, rather, he strived to make two powerful points on that warm Mother’s Day morning. First, that as Catholics, we should embrace life’s hardships as opportunities to demonstrate our resilience in our suffering and sacrifice, and second, that we should take the day to honor the mothers in our lives who constantly and humbly bear the cross in their everyday sacrifices for their children and families. None of the priest’s words were new to me. They hit me with intense nostalgia, as if an innate yet buried and dormant wedge of my consciousness suddenly awoke from slumber and responded to his call to action. I knew it was part of my Catholic habitus, a significant part of my upbringing, my youth, and the development of my symbolic universe.

Understanding the broad elements of a Catholic Filipino habitus as they relate to the field of discord is the first part of identifying how the field of discord can apply to the conversion experiences of Balik Islam reverts. As I have found in my research as well as personal experience, an important part of a Catholic habitus in the field of discord is one’s inclination to internalize worldly suffering as a means of approaching symbolic intimacy with the divine—be it with saints, other spiritual intermediaries, or with God in the form of Father, Son, or Holy Spirit.

Alan Delotavo identifies three images of Christ that are popular among Filipinos today. The ways in which Filipinos identify with these images shed light the broad
characteristics of a Catholic Filipino habitus. Delotavo examines how images of the “Suffering Christ”, the “Triumphant Christ”, and the Santo Nino” (Holy Child) are perceived and internalized by many Filipino Catholics. 234

According to Delotavo, the most ubiquitous image of Christ among Filipinos is the Suffering Christ. This image is archetypally presented as Jesus the Christ either carrying his cross or hung on the cross during crucifixion. Delotavo supports his argument, in part, by citing a 1980 survey run by Philippine scholar, Douglas Elwood, that concludes “most Filipinos attach greater significance to the suffering and death of Christ than to his life and teaching.” 235 Moreover, Delotavo believes that the traumatic and violent history of the Philippines under colonial oppression (first under Spain for over 300 years, followed by Japan, then the United States) largely contributes to why Filipinos identify with Christ’s suffering—because they themselves have suffered collectively.

Aside from drawing on the political and historical impacts of colonialism, Delotavo also examines key cultural markers that further demonstrate how the Filipino Catholic habitus is impacted by the Suffering Christ. Filipino culture at large can be characterized by its emphasis on sympathy and empathy. For example, the term malasakit is a cultural value that encourages feelings of sympathy, concern, or solidarity for others. Moreover, most Filipinos are raised to hold compassion and hospitality as priority values, especially in social settings. In part, this can be explained by the phrase utang na loob (literally “debt of the inside”) which refers to a sense of indebtedness, not necessarily in

235 Ibid., 143.
the material sense, but in terms of owing kindness and generosity to those who have shown the same efforts and for those who have made sacrifices for the sake of others. In a way, many Filipino relationships are constructed by a balanced reciprocation of goodwill.

In the case of the Suffering Christ, Filipino Catholics often concentrate on the “hero-martyr” aspect of his death and resurrection. By understanding and internalizing Christ’s death as self-sacrifice for the salvation of humankind, Catholic Filipinos consider it obligatory to reciprocate by suffering and sacrificing themselves. It can be construed as the ultimate utang an loob (indebtedness) one can experience. Delotavo asserts that this reciprocation is a “desire to follow his (Christ’s) tragic experiences so that they can feel a sense of solidarity with his sufferings and death, and eventually a sense of oneness with him”—therefore, “the genuine Filipino hero is necessarily a suffering servant, a martyr.”

Every year during Holy Week in the Philippines, for instance, international media reports accounts of exceptionally pious devotees who partake in self-flagellation and crucifixion in an effort to experience divine solidarity. These cases of physical suffering are notable but marginal.

A more prevalent and apt example of Filipinos embodying the “Suffering Christ” are the “Bagong Bayani” (modern-day heroes), the millions of Filipino migrants working overseas. As discussed in the previous chapter, these migrants of the labor diaspora are dubbed heroes for their economic contributions to the country. Despite the hardships of being separated from family, friends, and culture, most migrants acknowledge their “privilege” to work abroad, earn higher incomes, and gain an elevated social status in their homeland. On a socio-economic level, it appears that the benefits of overseas labor

236 Ibid., 144.
outweigh the costs. However, I argue that on an individual, emotional, mental, and spiritual level, maintaining the glory of a “Bagong Bayani” comes with considerable, often detrimental costs. The experiences of discord mentioned above exhibit fundamental instances of suffering and sacrifice in migrants’ daily lives. Yet by understanding how the Filipino Catholic habitus associates these forms of discord with the Suffering Christ, it becomes possible to see how and why many endure and sustain such an arduous means of living. As I contend further on, by maintaining both faith and hope in the symbolic meanings of human suffering and sacrifice, Filipinos possess the ability and capacity to transform the discord into a more positive situation that goes beyond the mortal sphere—that is, experiencing closeness and union with Christ, the divine.

The second image Delotavo identifies as significant to Catholic Filipinos is the Triumphant Christ. It alludes to Christ’s glorified entry into Jerusalem on what is now celebrated as Palm Sunday. As is common among Catholics, Filipinos bring home palms leaves blessed with holy water during mass. They then strategically place the leaves in their homes, at entry ways, and in their vehicles. Delotavo notes that the palms effectively serve as amulets that deflect the presence of malevolent forces, misfortune, or harm. Recalling that the indigenous Filipinos used amulets and charms to ward off bad anitos (spirits) (see chapter two), sanctified palm leaves are used to ensure protection and defense in a world of uncertainty. Delotavo contends that this demonstrates how Catholicism in the Philippines can take on forms of “split-level Christianity”, that is, a form of “folk Catholicism” that combines Catholicism with indigenous practices and can appear theologically contradictory.237 As an arguably syncretic practice of Catholicism,

237 Ibid., 142.
Delotavo maintains that Filipinos are capable of entrusting their faith in the protective power of the palm leaves as they do through their veneration of Catholic saints because the functional purposes are complementary rather than contradictory. In agreement, Kathy Nadeau adds that

Indigenous Filipinos interpreted Christianity in terms of traditional Southeast Asian cultural practices and beliefs. Many articulated the language of Christianity as means of expressing their own values, ideals, and hopes for liberation from their colonial oppressors. In effect, Filipinos developed their own version of folk Catholicism to contest and eventually transform Spanish rule.238

Nadeau’s understanding of Filipino Catholicism as a mechanism for contestation, subversion, and transformation of Spanish rule is a striking argument that sharply distinguishes the nuanced contours of a Filipino Catholic habitus. Similar subversive underpinnings exist within the Balik-Islam movement in their understanding of a reversion to a religion that predates the arrival of Spanish Catholicism on the Philippine islands. Though the linkage is tenuous and strictly speculative, what cannot be ignored is the same inclination to resist colonial power, albeit subconscious, that scholars have found integral to a Catholic Filipino habitus.

The third image of Christ is the Santo Niño, the “Holy Child”, a young and joyful depiction of Jesus. The Santo Niño is a widespread icon of adoration among Catholic Filipinos and can be found on nearly every Filipino Catholic household shrine. The most popular origin story involves the first Filipino baptism and conversion to Catholicism in 1571. According to Philippine historians, in March 1521, Ferdinand Magellan and his exploratory fleet from Spain landed in what is known today as the Visayas region of the Philippines, or the central islands. During a brief stay on the island of Cebu, Magellan

befriended the chief, King Humabon, and bestowed upon his wife, the queen, a gift of a wooden statue of the Santo Niño. Martinez notes that according to Magellan’s official chronicler, Antonio Pigafetta, the queen was “overcome with contrition and asked for baptism amid her tears… and (later) she asked to give her the little Child Jesus to keep in place of her idols.”239 At that point the queen was given the Christian name, Doña Juana, and her husband, Don Carlos.240 Essentially, this event is remembered as the first baptism and the first conversion to Christianity in the Philippines.

Today, almost every region in the Philippines holds a special feast day in honor of this image, usually celebrating a local sighting of the Santo Niño. Festival names, therefore, vary from region to region. Ati-Atihan, Dinagyan, and Sinulog are various titles for the feast day of the Santo Niño. Because of its widespread and varying modes of veneration, it is difficult to infer precisely why the Santo Niño has been such an important symbol for Filipinos. However, what is characteristic of these Santo Niño festivals is the presence of joy, which is markedly different from veneration of the suffering or triumphant Christ.

Delotavo suggests that the child symbol of Christ is closer to the hearts of Filipinos in contrast to the matured man because of basic socio-cultural elements of Filipino life. For example, a child unites a mother and father as well as other kinships and has the ability to engender a sense of jubilation and celebration. The surrounding community often seeks to please the child with food and gifts, and many show concern and share responsibility for the child’s moral upbringing. Akin to Filipinos’ instrumental

240 Jose Arcilla, An Introduction to Philippine History (Manila: Ateneo University Press, 1994) 3.
relationship with anitos and with saints, one may presumably influence more control over a child than over a grown man. In this regard, Delatavo alludes to Filipinos’ yearning to influence the outcome of uncertain circumstances. Hence, the presence of a child-like Christ can be perceived as an ally and blessing. Hinging on such blessings, however, is sustaining absolute and unwavering faith. Luna Dingayan notes that “the Sto. Niño demands earnest devotion on the part of the believer in order for him or her to receive blessings…lack of devotion means curse or disaster.” In other words, in order to reap the benefits of this celebratory Christ figure, one must keep the faith or bear the consequences of disbelief.

These three images of Christ—the Suffering, the Triumphant, and the Holy Child (Santo Niño)—each reveal different aspects of how Filipino Catholics relate to the Christ figure and, in effect, they uncover essential characteristics of what constitutes a Filipino Catholic habitus. The Suffering Christ showcases the importance of emulating a “hero-martyr” to experience closeness to the divine and to express gratitude for the ultimate sacrifice Christ made through his death and resurrection. The Triumphant Christ serves as a protector from evil and sin, and the blessed palm leaves are a ritualistic reminder of that guardianship. The Santo Niño is a more acute token of Christ’s protective faculties and represents a Filipino desire to employ their agency and effect change through their piety. However, primarily because of the festivities surrounding the adoration of this child figure and its outwardly idolatrous nature, the Vatican does recognize or sanction Santo Niño fiestas as official Catholic holidays.

---

Like the Triumphant Christ, veneration of the Santo Niño is also a form of folk Catholicism which combines pre-colonial practices with the colonial religion. The legendary story of the King Humabon and his queen’s baptism is celebrated annually in the city of Cebu, where the Spaniards first arrived. The devotional hymn below recounts the beginning of over 300 years of Spanish colonialism in the Philippines and frames the encounter as a miraculous and providential event rather than a one of catastrophe and misfortune:

**SEÑOR SANTO NIÑO HYMN**

One day to these Islands, as gift and in pledge;  
God sent you to us, Oh beloved Child;  
And always you have been, the light of our souls;  
The guide of our people, the flame in our hearts.

(Chorus) Senor Santo Nino, with your scepter guide our people,  
Who hail you king forever; the World is your Kingdom.  
Senor Santo Nino, in Your hands the world find its resting;  
Proclaim your truth and justice, bring to us Your peace and love.

The ship You were sailing, arrived at our shores,  
to conquer this land, the pearl of the seas;  
But you had decided, to stay in our soil;  
To conquer our people, and give us a name

The queen and the rajah, accepting the faith;  
Received you in their arms, and fell on their knees;  
They welcomed your presence, and called on your name.  
To ask for your blessings, and help in their needs.

More ships in the Orient, with soldiers arrived;  
And searching for gold, they found you instead;  
Legaspi, Urdaneta, the Rajah, the Queen;  
Their subjects our people, proclaimed you their king.

Now one as nation, we pay You respect,  
Our people had pledged, a long time ago;  
We ask You to hear the prayers of all;  
The sad and forsaken, the poor and the sick.
O miraculous Santo Nino! prostrate before your sacred Image, we beseech You to cast a merciful look on our troubled hearts. Let Your tender love, so inclined to pity, be softened at our prayers, and grant us that grace for which we ardently implore You. Take from us all unbearable affliction and despair. For your sacred infancy’s sake hear our prayers and send us consolation and aid that we may praise You, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.243

By placing the hymn of the Santo Niño in its rightful socio-political context, it becomes a powerful testament of the tenacity and resilience of a nation met with inevitable colonial rule. Scholars believe the hymn was likely written by a Spaniard, as the imagery and legend of the Santo Niño was spread throughout the islands and “helped a great deal in the pacification campaigns against the natives”.244 Therein this socio-political field of discord lies the question of agency and to what extent did the native Filipinos exert their own consent in the mass conversion to Catholicism. As discussed in chapter two, many natives including Muslim tribes violently resisted Spanish forces to no avail. Instead, they were forced to retreat to the southern islands in the province of Mindanao. The natives who stayed in the north and acceded to Spanish rule eventually converted to Catholicism. For the Balik-Islam, it is this point in history to which they seek to symbolically “revert”, the pre-Spanish, pre-Catholic era in Philippine history. The hymn of the Santo Niño and his widespread adoration among Catholic Filipinos today signals a continued acceptance of Christianity in spite Spain’s surrender of power in 1898. However, I argue that beneath the surface of colonial influence are the dynamic forces of a Filipino Catholic habitus, that have been developing, adapting, and evolving to accommodate and withstand whatever disruptions may transpire in the greater Philippine social field. The various ways in which the three images of Christ are

244 Dingayan, “Popular Religion and Evangelization: A Philippine Experience,” 358.
internalized and made manifest in the Filipino Catholic habitus ultimately exhibit how discord, e.g. colonialism, can be transformed and overcome. In order for this transformation to occur, the habitus must operate in tandem with one’s social capital. This process of transforming conflict is a passive yet robustly subversive act. It is precisely what native Filipinos performed at the outset of colonialism, and that I contend is evident today among the Balik-Islam as they continue to convert, or “revert” to Islam through symbolic negotiation.

Capital: Faith and Hope

Terry Rey and Alex Stepick lucidly explain that “religious habitus…inclines people to embrace symbolic systems that pronounce for them their worthiness, systems that are predicated upon the existence of supernatural forces, and thus orient their lives in accordance with them.” They rightly emphasize that one’s habitus only inclines someone to accept certain symbolic systems. The theory of practice and the process of symbolic negotiation are in no way deterministic. Rather, these concepts help to narrow down the many reasons why some people may be more or less predisposed to assenting to religious plausible structures over other alternatives. As illustrated in previous chapters, one’s habitus is “the social embodied”, meaning that it can only be understood in relation to one’s environment, circumstances and experiences. This is why the symbolic negotiation paradigm attempts to depict how habitus and capital develop within a social field. As such, while I find that “suffering and sacrifice” exemplify the heart of a Filipino Catholic habitus, the counterbalance to this seemingly negative attribute is the

---

245 Terry Rey and Alex Stepick, Crossing the water and keeping the faith: Haitian religion in Miami. NYU Press, 2013, 10.
social capital many Filipino Catholic acquire within the field of discord: faith and hope. Arguably general and cliché notions, I contend that faith and hope are incredibly robust and underestimated sources of capital that warrant further unpacking.

As it applies to the Catholic habitus of Filipinos, discord can be understood as a natural sanctified demonstration of God’s love for sinners, as shown through the Suffering Christ. In order for Filipinos to maintain this plausible structure system composed of symbolic meaning, they exercise both faith and hope. In brief, faith and hope are inextricably linked. By having faith in a particular system, one believes in its veracity or at least capacity to yield its promised outcome. By default, hope is an intrinsic part of upholding faith, as hope is the expectation that the system will produce certain results. The two forms of capital, in turn, function like a glue that adheres, solidifies, and maintains the plausible structure that the divine (God/Jesus)—as presented in Catholic teachings and tropes—exists, and that any experience of discord is justified and reimagined as a natural phenomenon meant to be surmounted.

Rey and Stepick explain this dynamic in Bourdieusian terms, noting that “when laypersons embrace the symbolic systems of a given institution, say, the Catholic Church as legitimate, they do so, according to Bourdieu’s theory of the ‘religious field’, because that institution has secured them the recognition (or the ‘misrecognition’) that it possesses ‘religious capital’.”246 Furthermore, they discuss how these symbolic capital are “resources that can be transformed or ‘transubstantiated’ into material capital”.247 In essence, what Bourdieu proposes is that religious people make calculated and rational decisions to accept religious symbolic system based on the perceived capital gains

246 Ibid.
247 Ibid., 11.
involved in such a choice. However, one the fundamental difference between a conventional rational choice theory of conversion and Bourdieu’s theory of practice is that Bourdieu acknowledges how many of these decisions and calculations are unconscious and internalized responses to our social environment based on previous socially conditioned experiences (i.e. *habitus*), rather than a genuine act of individual agency. Bourdieu would argue that most human decisions, including conversion, are illusions of rational choice; they are instead, outcomes of our interaction with the world.

Since our world and our personal microcosmic environments are constantly in flux, it would be presumably mentally strenuous for the plausible structures that make up our symbolic universe to change concomitantly with our surroundings. The theory of practice accounts for how humans intrinsically manage these changes by recognizing “capital” as a cornerstone element of our behavior. Functioning like a survival mechanism, the recognition of capital, in the form of a comparative advantage or added benefit, gives us the capacity to make better decisions. As noted above, religious institutions can appeal to particular people because of the religious capital they provide. Religious plausible structures tend to be more broad and comprehensive symbolic systems. For this reason, it religious institutions can serve as an ultimate reality, absolute truth, and panacea for encounters with discord.

For Filipino Catholics, the most robust forms of religious capital in the Catholic institution are faith and hope because of their ability to be “transubstantiated” into material gains. For instance, in Valerie Yap’s research on Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, she calls attention to the importance of religious institutions in aiding workers to endure new and difficult situations overseas and how faith can act as pathway
toward both spiritual and material advantages. Yap reasons that “the domestic worker’s strong reliance on religion stems from the belief that religion helps individuals bear the bewildering and confusing moments in their lives by providing an explanation and a strategy to overcome despair, hopelessness and futility…Their deep faith acts as a shield rendering them invisible even in the most hazardous circumstances.”

Further, she uses Werner Schiffauer’s term “defensive religiosity” to describe the functional purpose of faith in these instances “where immigrants utilize religion to search for solutions to problems resulting from migration, to handle anxieties, and to cope with the changes and discontinuities associated with transitioning from a rural existence to an urban environment with more freedoms.”

In my interactions with Balik-Islam members, both faith and hope appear to function in the same capacity as part of a “defensive religiosity”. The obvious difference is a change in religious institutions. This finding leads me to believe even more strongly that the Filipino Catholic habitus and acquired social capital prior to one’s reversion to Islam remains intact, and is simply enhanced by the new contours that shape one’s recent identity as a Balik-Islam Muslim. The Filipino Catholic habitus, marked by suffering and sacrifice, paired with faith and hope that a) the discord is an expected part of divine will and b) that the discord can be overcome and transformed into something positive, enables Filipinos overseas workers to adapt to foreign environments, situations—including new or foreign religious institutions.

As I will discuss in greater depth in the concluding chapter, the primary factors of symbolic negotiation and the theory of practice (field, habitus, capital) are not unique to the Balik-Islam or religious converts or any particular or single community. These are fundamental elements of human behavior, that when applied closely to a specific social phenomenon or group of people, can illuminate specific sociological, cultural, political, and economic reasons why a certain trend occurs. For example, by considering particular and distinctive patterns that occur among shared habitus, it becomes possible to consider alternative and perhaps unconventional reasons for why these phenomena occur. My attempt to paint a picture of a general Filipino Catholic habitus is only one approach to understanding the process of reversion among Balik-Islam Filipinos. It is not meant to generalize all Filipinos, though I am aware that by employing such a categorical approach, I am partaking in the homogenization and essentialization of a “Filipino” identity. However, I see this method as using conceptual tools toward understanding religious conversion and social behavior as a multifaceted and multilayered process. By accepting, to a certain degree, the existence of a Filipino Catholic habitus, and its adaptive and transformational nature can we then begin to appreciate the symbolic negotiation involved in transitioning from one religious institution to another.

As explained in previous chapters, one way I interpret Balik-Islam in the Philippines is a process of “becoming the Other”. Given that the vast majority of Balik-Islam members are former Catholics, it makes sense to be cognizant of the contours of Filipino Catholicism and how it might impact Filipinos on an individual level. As such, I argue that while Balik-Islam may appear on the surface as a cultural anomaly and oppositional to the Catholic institution, the fact that Balik-Islam members tout the anti-
Spanish and anti-colonialism rhetoric to generate appeal among potential reverts, rather than overtly anti-Catholic teachings, suggests that by “becoming the Other” does not necessitate rejecting one’s former self. In other words, Balik-Islam reverts generally retain their Filipino Catholic habitus as they explore how the plausible structures presented in an Islamic symbolic system aligns with their ever-changing and shifting symbolic universe. Through this transition to an alternative religious institution, however, their faith and hope in God remain steadfast.

The “negotiation” part of the reversion process is nebulous as it should be, since every person’s experience with symbolic negotiation will vary. Symbolic negotiation can entail what Wolrab-Sahr described as “symbolic syncretism”, “symbolic battle”, or “symbolic transformation of conflict”. Depending on one’s habitus, capital, and specific field of discord, the ways that one can “become the Other” are numerous. Some Balik-Islam respondents reported converting immediately after hearing about the notion of tawhid—the Islamic belief in the unity and singularity of God. For them, the notion of the Trinity—the Christian doctrine of three aspects of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—either no longer (or never) made sense a plausible structure. Others took months or even years to eventually become Balik-Islam accept Islam as a symbolic system. They reported having to grapple with their Catholic identities before eventually finding a resolution through the Balik-Islam teachings and community. The following chapter delves further into how and why discord among Balik-Islam members is often resolved through the assistance of other Muslims.
Ibrahim

The first time I spoke with Ibrahim I was a bundle of nerves. I wasn’t prepared with specific questions because I was still finalizing my IRB-approved question set. I sincerely hoped to gain his trust while finding an appropriate balance between a casual conversation and professional interview. For this meeting, I wanted to follow-up on our previous conversation with the aim of digging deeper into “why” he chose to convert to Islam. I arrived at the ISCAG (Islamic Studies Call and Guidance) compound around 3:00 pm. Maryam was expecting me and was waiting in the lobby. She accompanied me upstairs to Ibrahim’s office. Though he already knew who I was, it was nice to have someone reintroduce me just in case his memory was fleeting. Again, the burst of cold air from the air-conditioning was most welcome in the tropical climate. Ibrahim was on the phone, in the middle of a heated conversation about the ISCAG school and its Arabic requirements. I learned that they were trying to enforce stricter policies for potential graduates. If students earn a degree from ISCAG, they must be able to fluently read Arabic. I felt a bit awkward for eavesdropping on his conversation and gestured to Maryam that we wait outside until he finished. She whispered “it’s OK”, as if it’s normal practice for people to linger in the office. A few minutes later, Ibrahim intentionally hurried along the conversation, seemingly annoyed by whomever he was speaking with and motioned that I come take a seat near his desk. Maryam waved goodbye and waited for me downstairs until I was done. She thought it would be a quick follow-up meeting,
so she had arranged one of the *ustadz – da‘wah* instructors – ready and waiting for an interview once I was finished with Ibrahim. Little did I know that we wouldn’t finish our conversation until over two hours later. We took a brief 15 minute break midway as the *adthan*, the call to prayer, beckoned his *salat*—prayer. Other than that, there was no break in the conversation.

As soon as I sat down and reminded him about our last meeting when he divulged his life story, I eagerly told him that I have a set of particular questions this time, just as he requested the last time I sat in the same hot seat. But first, like any good legitimate researcher, I pulled out a copy of the informed consent form and read it aloud. I imagined that this process of obtaining consent would take a few minutes as it did with Maryam, but with Ibrahim, it took three times as long. After I read it slowly, he reread the copy to himself as I waited patiently in complete silence. Racing through my mind were doubts – could he possibly say no? After reading the first page, he looked up, murmured his approval and signed his name and date. Whew! I exhaled a sigh of relief.

With the uneasy consent process out of the way, I could move on to the questionnaire. There are three parts, I informed him. The first is biographical, the second, about conversion, and the third, a series of opinion questions on various issues. Since we had already discussed his “spiritual journey” on how he came to embrace Islam, we could skip part two. However, prior to even filling in the blanks on his personal life, I explained that because of his unique position as Operations Manager of ISCAG, I asked if he would be able to address questions I had regarding statistics and the demography of Balik-Islam converts. Specifically, I began by asking if there are any available records that account for the exponential growth and popularity of Islam in the northern Philippines – i.e.
records of conversion through *Shahadah*. It was then he let out a sigh – not of relief, but of exasperation. He kindly elucidated on the question, touting it as a good one, to my surprise. He explained that this is a matter of utmost interest to him as evidently, they (ISCAG) do not have enough resources to follow-up with converts. After they take their *Shahadah*, there is no formal process of continued support. It is up to the converts to continue their life as a Muslim – or not. Even though I understand there being little to no follow-up, I found it strange that there are no official ISCAG records of who and how many take *Shahadah*. ISCAG has been an established and well-known institution of Muslim affairs in the Philippines since 1992. Surely, I kept trying to probe, there must be some extant data. Rather dejected, Ibrahim advised me to visit the NCMF, the National Commission for Muslim Filipinos. All records from ISCAG and other Islamic organizations, including Shariah courts in Mindanao are obliged to submit their records – conversion, marriage, divorce, etc. – to the NCMF. As a side note, later that summer, I met with an officer in the Bureau of Muslim Settlements at the NCMF headquarters in Manila. Similar to ISCAG’s challenge with counting the Balik-Islam population, the NCMF could only provide estimated numbers. As of the end of 2014, the NCMF projected the Balik-Islam population to be anywhere from 200,000 to two million. The data I obtained was unreliable since it did not isolate the Balik-Islam into their own category. Instead, Balik-Islam was lumped together with other Muslim tribes under “Other Groups”.

Back to Ibrahim—I wasted no time and bluntly inquired his understanding of “what is Balik-Islam?” My fingers were crossed at this point. My entire thesis depended

---

250 Before 2008, the National Commission for Muslim Filipinos (NCMF) was known as the Office of Muslim Affairs (OMA), which was established in 1987.
on his reply to this question. I prefaced by sharing that my understanding, based on external literature, was that the Balik-Islam movement in the Philippines was unique in that “balik” refers not only to the doctrinal fitra or innate nature as Muslims, but more specifically, it refers to the history of the Philippines, a “return” to pre-colonial days when Islam was the religion of the entire Philippine archipelago. Fortunately, Ibrahim replied in the affirmative and explained that this history, “kasaysayan” was precisely the main reason “unang dahilan” why Filipinos are keen on reverting to Islam. After our talk on Balik-Islam and its construed meanings, the adthan—call to prayer—resounded throughout the compound. For a minute I felt like I was in Cairo or Jerusalem, awaiting the signal when the most pious of believers would stop in their tracks and head for the nearest mosque to pray. In the kindest way possible, Ibrahim motioned that he must go downstairs to join the other men in dzhor prayer. I was trained for these moments when I’d be tested on my religious sensibilities. I immediately got up from my seat and gracefully excused myself to wait in the women’s section until he finished.

I headed downstairs and joined Maryam and the women’s da’wah leader in the semi-enclosed women’s area, located just outside of the men’s (air-conditioned) da’wah office. I plopped down on one of two sofas surrounding the office desk. Maryam sat directly across from me on the other. She asked how things were going so far. I said good— but naturally didn’t give any specifics. Seated at the desk was Noura, the head of the women’s section. Maryam introduced us and Noura, perhaps, as per routine, offered me numerous pamphlets and information about Islam. Maryam clarified that I’m a researcher and not a convert, but also that the material would assist in my personal and academic goals. Both agreed in faithful optimism that maybe one day my heart would turn to Allah.
I briefly inspected the pamphlets as any trained scholar would do – I searched for the author and publisher. Most all came from the same source, an Islamic Institute in Riyadh. Noura explained that most of their material is donated by them, Qurans and Arabic books included. As we sat there waiting for Ibrahim’s return, the three of us were occasionally joined by women passersby, greeting Noura or asking her administrative questions. I’m still not sure how the topic arose, but somewhere along the conversation I learned that Ibrahim is, as the women put it, a cancer survivor. He was diagnosed with prostate cancer years ago, but it’s now in remission. They also mentioned that he’s running for a local congressional position with hopes that he can represent the underrepresented Muslim communities in Dasmariñas. Moments after these fascinating pieces of “tsismis”, gossip, were said, Ibrahim reentered the building and I followed him up the steps to continue the interview.

It was about 4:00pm when we reconvened. He was such a busy man, perhaps the busiest in the compound. I didn’t want to take up too much more of his time, but I had so many more questions on my list. Thankfully, he never seemed bothered by the sheer amount of queries; he actually became more enthusiastic in his responses as the interview carried on. As we finally got to part three, which was meant to prompt rapid response answers on assorted issues to effectively help me gauge how strict or conservative one’s views are, Ibrahim offered lengthy and thorough responses. What struck me most about Ibrahim’s views were his more “liberal” stances on women’s rights. From our first meeting, I was a bit disheartened by his explanation of Adam and Eve—a Christian reading of Eve born out of Adam’s rib—which made him inclined to believe that women are somewhat subordinate to men. However, on the question of birth control, as made
popular by the recent Reproductive Health (RH) Bill in the Philippines, he astonishingly approved. His reasoning, which contradicts most all religious groups’ stances in the Philippines, is that the RH Bill gives women a choice about their bodies on the issue of contraceptives.

His respect for women was further exemplified by his commitment to his one and only wife as well as his construal of divorce in Islam. Ibrahim firmly believes in the sanctity of marriage, yet unlike his former Catholic self, he also admits there are times when divorce is needed. What he admires about the process of divorce in Islam is the obligatory three-month period of waiting before obtaining legal divorce status. Though from what I remember from my studies, the primary function of this waiting period called ‘iddah is to ensure that the woman is not pregnant before the couple splits. If pregnant, the divorce is null to ensure the baby has a father. Ibrahim did not mention this legal aspect whatsoever. Instead, he focused solely on the reconciliatory aspect explaining that during the three-month period, the husband and wife must continue to live together in the same house so that that may have a chance at reconciling their disputes. Ibrahim’s use of the term “reconciliation” indicated a profound fluidity between his Catholic and Muslim convictions. He sounded more like a priest than a sheikh. Though he has been a Muslim for over 25 years, there are clear remnants of his Catholic habitus, especially in the ways he continued to use terms like “sin” and “salvation” quite frequently.

On more politically oriented questions, Ibrahim gave very diplomatic answers. For instance, I asked about the role of SharīꜤah in the Philippines and whether or not he condones its existence in a “democratic” republic. He specified that the SharīꜤah only applies to Muslims, so yes, he agrees with it and considers it imperative for proper
Muslim livelihood. However, he does not approve of the current system of *Sharī'ah* in the Philippines. He claims it is corrupt with conflicting political agendas and tribal conflicts. Yet, I was rather alarmed to hear that he finds the Saudi Arabian system of implementing *Sharī'ah* as an ideal model worth emulating. When I asked for clarification, he pointed to murder as an example. If someone commits a heinous murder in Saudi, then they too will be put to death. “An eye for an eye” he quoted is true justice. But in the Philippines, the death penalty, along with another punitive means are quite lax compared to Saudi Arabia. That’s why, he reasoned, there continues to be rampant crime in the Philippines. The *Sharī'ah*, he continued, is meant to apply legal means of justice and to prevent injustice. Therefore, even though it may seem brutal to cut off the hand of one who steals, the point is to ensure that others will not consider doing the same.

Nonetheless, as we continued, I found Ibrahim’s thinking was not as rigid as it first appeared. He was quick to qualify his statements and added that in the end, the punishments stipulated by *Sharī'ah* must and should be applied on circumstantial bases. For example, a man caught stealing food for his starving family cannot be punished according to a just *Sharī'ah* system. Rather, he should be given mercy and charity and enabled by the community so as to be a law-abiding citizen who contributes to the well-being of the whole. If, on the other hand, a man steals out of pure greed, simply not content with his own wealth, then he should be punished accordingly. In sum, the *Sharī'ah*, Ibrahim explained, can only function in a society where the basic material and spiritual needs of the people are satisfied, and where there is no apparent reason to harm one another. If this does not exist, then the application of *Sharī'ah* would be wholly unjust. I thoroughly respected his viewpoints, though I am still confounded by his
opinion that the state of Saudi Arabia would qualify as a “just” nation permitted to enforce *SharīꜤah*.

On the topic of Wahhabism, Ibrahim expressed that the problem with this interpretation is that the particular Saudi culture and customs on which Wahhabism is based is all too often conflated with the religion of Islam. Suffice it to say, Ibrahim believes that religion and culture can and should be kept separated. As a student of religious studies, what he said goes against my fundamental understanding of how religion operates in the world. But since my task at hand is to listen, not to argue, I politely nodded my head. Religion separate from culture? I ask myself over and again these days. Does Ibrahim have a point that precludes scholars like myself from seeing religion through the eyes of true believers? Though Ibrahim implored that there is only one Islam as there is one Allah, this one Islam is strictly a Sunni one; Shi’ism for Ibrahim is dismissed as a cultural aberration.

My final questions revolved around the idea of the “Other”. What’s the difference between a good person and a good Muslim?—I asked with candor. What about non-Muslims? Non-believers? Without much surprise, Ibrahim answered these hardball questions with the same tactfulness and introspection he had demonstrated throughout our conversations. “A good Muslim,” he stated, “follows the laws and commandments prescribed by Allah as revealed through the Prophet Muhammad. A good person abides by these basic humanitarian principles, especially the preservation of justice and charity. Yet, a good person will not receive ‘salvation’ in the afterlife as would a good Muslim.” For this reason, Ibrahim devotes his life to spreading awareness of Islam through *daʿwah*. While he seemed to have a great deal of respect for non-Muslims, he strives to ensure
that he does his part in disseminating the message of Islam that drew him close to God—that there is one God. Beyond these efforts, Ibrahim made it clear that there is “no compulsion in religion.” He firmly believes that all human beings are bestowed free will—the capacity to choose their own way of life that best suits their needs and wants. Because it took Ibrahim over forty years to find and then choose to live an Islamic life, he said he refrains from judging others who choose not to. Moreover, Ibrahim recently organized several interreligious events that promote inter-faith dialogue and understanding. “We need to understand one another”, he asserted. “Love and respect comes in only when we understand one another, our similarities and especially our differences.”

I came to realize after several hours of conversations with the man that he has an enormous heart that is full of love and a mind filled with optimism and hope. Before we ended the session, I inquired about rumors of him seeking election in the upcoming congressional race. His expression turned bleak in an instant. With an air of desolation, he explained that he did—he does—want to become a politician in order to be a voice for the impoverished neighborhoods of Dasmariñas, of which there are many. He explained that many of the people who seek services—medical, social, and spiritual—at ISCAG are destitute, deprived of even the most basic of needs. Ibrahim didn’t want to be a “Muslim representative”, but rather a representative who happens to be Muslim. After his rather moving explanation, he told me that according to preliminary polls, he only had a 30% chance of acquiring funding from donors. From the look on his face, he seemed to have conceded the race before he even had a chance to run. Ibrahim said if he doesn’t get a
chance to serve the disadvantaged populaces through politics, there are other means for him to help, that is, inshaAllah—if God wills it.

At 67 years old, Ibrahim appeared healthy, active, and strong. However, Ibrahim revealed that he was diagnosed with stage III prostate cancer in 2005 and continues to battle illness on a daily basis even though the cancer is in remission. It was because of his cancer that Ibrahim returned to ISCAG from Saudi Arabia in 2008 to receive appropriate medical treatment in Dasmariñas city. Perhaps it was his nearness to death that sculpts his refined views on life, religion, and God. Or perhaps it is, as he puts it, his faith in God that gives him strength to face the hopelessness of death—a faith that he strives to share with others who are enduring hopelessness in this life.

Introduction

While many Balik-Islam reverts experience various sorts of discord—most of which are ripple effects of the labor diaspora—another significant factor that heavily influences one’s decision to embrace Islam is da’wah. Da’wah, is a global and Islamic practice of inviting others to learn about the knowledge Islam has to offer. In Arabic, it can mean “a call”, “an invitation”, and in many instances, it is summarized as “mission activity” or an Islamic form of proselytization. However, da’wah is much more complex than proselytization. Rambo would likely classify da’wah as part of a convert’s “encounter” and “interaction” in his systemic model. In this chapter, I explore the social field of da’wah as it relates to the Balik-Islam in the Philippines. Using the symbolic negotiation paradigm, da’wah becomes an influential factor in the reversion process for Filipino

251 See Larry Poston, Islamic Da’wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3-4.
Christians particularly when cultural values of “utang na loob” (indebtedness) and “pakikisama” (togetherness/cooperation) are present.

**Figure 15. The Structure of the Field of Da‘wah within a Symbolic Universe. Source: Author.**

Field: Answering the Call

The question of authenticity lies at the heart of the social field of da‘wah in the Philippines and in the greater Southeast Asian context. Although several countries in Southeast Asia have Muslim-majority populations, i.e. Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and others have sizeable Muslim-minority communities, i.e. Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines, Southeast Asian traditions of Islam have long been viewed as part of the “periphery” in relation to the Middle East or Gulf “center”, the center of Islamic authenticity. Islam spread to Southeast Asia primarily through Sufi merchants largely between the 12th and 15th century. Because Sufism embraces mysticism and inclusiveness, new converts to Islam could easily assimilate the rituals and the concept of *tawhid*—the oneness of God—with their indigenous, primarily animist belief systems.
Eric Tagliacozzo’s historical survey of the hajj, the most important pilgrimage for Muslims, illustrates how converts from Southeast Asia began performing hajj as early as the 1370s. He shows how the hajj was first regulated by colonial powers and then regulated by Muslim leadership post-independence in the 20th century. Ronit Ricci delves deep into the translocal spaces where Islam spread throughout South and Southeast Asia in what she calls “the Arabic cosmopolis...a translocal Islamic sphere constituted and defined by language, literature, and religion”. Ricci and Tagliacozzo’s studies on the production of Southeast Asian Islamic identity illustrate the multiple means and modalities in which Islamic discourses were derived and transformed. However, what is also common among these and other studies on Southeast Asian Islam is the perceived origin of Islamic authenticity. Performing hajj is an integral act of worship that is situated in a specific place: modern day Saudi Arabia. Ricci’s Arabic cosmopolis intimates that Arabic continues to be understood as the authentic language of Islam. What this means for Muslims in Southeast Asia—and particularly new converts to Islam—is that in order to practice an “authentic” form of their faith, they look to the Arab world for guidance.

Searching for authenticity in a postmodern, globalizing world is a challenge for many Muslims in Southeast Asia specifically because of their “place” on the periphery. Von der Mehden’s classic book Two Worlds of Islam: Interaction between Southeast Asia and the Middle East traces the political, economic, and socio-cultural linkages between

---

these two regions from the pre-colonial to postmodern modern period. He emphasizes how the legacy of European colonialism in Southeast Asia has shaped the diverse forms of Islamic practices and discourses, just as it did throughout the Middle East. Yet, he focuses primarily on a post-colonial, post-independence period, when Southeast Asian Muslim leaders and politicians began to more readily associate with and support the political and Islamist movements in the Middle East as a source of establishing Islamic legitimacy. Von der Mehden also highlights the socio-economic significance of petrodollar subsidies for building mosques, welfare services, and scholarships to study in Mecca or al-Azhar in Cairo. These more contemporary transnational linkages have significantly blurred the lines between local and global discourses of Islam in Southeast Asia and set the stage for understanding da’wah as it pertains to the Balik-Islam in the Philippines.

As discussed in previous chapters, since the 1970s, political, social, and economic linkages between the Philippines and the Middle East expanded significantly. As “born” Muslims in Mindanao strengthened their desire for independence and autonomy by organizing movements such as the Muslim National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Muslim Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), they received international attention from Muslims around the world. In particular, the state governments in Malaysia, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran were sympathetic to the Moro struggle and provided Moros with financial and logistical support, including scholarships for Islamic studies overseas for

---

activists and military training for rebel fighters. Moreover, the Jamiat Tabligh, a robust traveling da’wah movement—with suspected (yet unfounded) ties to terrorist organizations such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)—promoted teachings of Islam that emphasized reversion to a pre-colonial era throughout the Philippines. Banlaoi explores how the increased involvement of these foreign governments and international networks opened the doors to establishing the da’wah networks that operate today. Furthermore, Banlaoi argues that these transnational da’wah activities have heightened the Islamic consciousness of Philippine Muslims (Moros) which encourages their struggle for self-determination.

As Vivienne Angeles points out, the Balik-Islam movement first emerged in Mindanao during the Moro liberation efforts of the 1970s, even before the Philippine labor diaspora extended to the Middle East. By the time there was an influx of OFWs (Overseas Filipino Workers) in the Middle East and Gulf region, “Balik-Islam” was already, for some, a recognizable idea. According to a special report from the Philippine Armed Forces, the first documented revert to Balik-Islam was Hajdi Akmad del Rio when he embraced Islam in 1981 after moving from the northern Philippines to Muslim Mindanao. He then reportedly organized a small da’wah movement funded by foreign organizations such as the Islamic Missionary Council in Saudi Arabia. However, it was not until the early 1990s when Balik-Islam really gained traction among Muslim groups

256 Ibid., 185.
in the Philippines. This rise in popularity was due, in large part, to the increasing number of OFWs working in Muslim countries.

Angeles emphasizes that the Balik-Islam movement is not a monolithic movement. With the confluence of increased labor migration to Muslim countries, transnational networks of Muslim organizations, and foreign support for Moro activists, the broad notion of Balik-Islam manifested in a wide spectrum of sects, ranging from pious reverts who peacefully promote the teachings of Islam to militant rebels who violently seek to Islamize the entire country.

The most prominent example of a “radical” sect that emerged from the Balik-Islam movement is the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM), founded by Ahmad Santos, following the September 11, 2001 attacks by al-Qaeda. Santos embraced Islam in 1992 while working as an OFW in Saudi Arabia where he encountered a preacher promoting Wahhabi interpretations of Islam—a highly conservative and puritanical doctrine. Santos studied these teachings for another two years before returning to the Philippines and forming the Fi Sabillilah Da’wah and Media Foundation, Inc. in 1995 to propagate “the true essence of Islam and to correct the misconception about Islam and Muslims.”

Fi Sabillilah’s objectives include the following aims:

- The creation of a network that would employ TV, radio, and print media to serve as the propaganda and propagation arm of Salafi Islam;
- The creation of Balik Islam communities that will attempt to return to the early stages of Islam when it was yet unadulterated, as well as communities that will embrace Shariah and the Islamic philosophy;

---


• The Islamization of Luzon and the creation of an Islamic movement that intends to establish an Islamic political entity with Ahmad Santos himself as the Amir.\textsuperscript{261}

While the \textit{Fi Sabillilah} is officially registered as a religious organization, Philippine police and intelligence officials suspected Santos formed the group as the legal front for the RSM to promote Wahhabism in the northern Philippines.\textsuperscript{262} Santos named RSM named after Rajah Solaiman, the last Muslim sultan of Manila before the Spanish conquered the islands. Philippine security experts contend that although the RSM emerged from the Balik-Islam movement, they make up a significantly small portion of the broader Balik-Islam community. In contrast to the Balik-Islam who peacefully propagate the notion that Islam is the original religion of the Philippines, RSM and other militant groups fervently promote the Islamization of the islands, often through violent means. Security studies scholars also note that

As self-described ‘radicals’ in their Islamic preferences, members of RSM have strong ties with the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the regional terrorist group Jemaah Islamiah (JI) and various other international terrorist groups (such as al-Qaeda), from which it has received funding. Because of this transnational quality, some Philippine security experts consider RSM to be one of the most serious threats to the Philippines.\textsuperscript{263}

In 2005, Santos was arrested for his alleged involvement in terrorist activities. In June 2008, the US Department of State designated both the RSM and Santos as Specially Designated Global Terrorists following the UN Security Council’s decision to acknowledge eight members of RSM as al-Qaeda affiliates.\textsuperscript{264} Santos remains in prison

\textsuperscript{262} Banlaoi, “Transnational Islam in the Philippines,” 182.
\textsuperscript{263} Borer, Everton, and Nayve, “Global Development and Human (In)security: understanding the rise of the Rajah Solaiman Movement and Balik Islam in the Philippines,” 183.
\textsuperscript{264} According to the US Department of State, “The RSM, a Philippines-based extremist group, was established by Ahmad Santos in January 2002. Santos, has been involved in the planning of bombings against Philippine and non-Philippine civilians and the stockpiling of weapons to conduct those operations. RSM has assisted with terrorist plots of the ASG in Manila and in the northern Philippines. In February 2004, RSM members were involved in ASG’s bombing of Super Ferry 14, resulting in the loss of an estimated 196
while the *Fi Sabillilah* continues to operate its missionary work by publishing *da‘wah* materials and hosting television and radio programs from the metro Manila region.265

Because the term Balik-Islam encompasses all Filipino converts to Islam—the peaceful and the militant groups—it is no wonder why communities like ISCAG remain suspect to governments and the local Christian population in the northern Philippines. However, Banlaoi finds that, “the Philippine government lacks a coherent and nuanced understanding of transnational Islam. It tends to equate transnational Islam with transnational terrorism.”266 While there have been isolated linkages to militant individuals—Ahmad Santos included—the leadership of ISCAG today contests any association with RSM, the Abu Sayyaf, or any other terrorist organization. ISCAG is, however, openly transparent about their connections to other transnational Islamic organizations. Here, Banlaoi summarizes ISCAG’s broad goals and activities:

Founded by Bienvenido “Khalid” Evaristo, a former overseas worker in Saudi Arabia, ISCAG has a declared objective ‘to bring the true message of Islam to the Filipino people towards the understanding, prosperity and peace of the country.’ ISCAG has strong links with mainstream Islamic charities in the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia and Libya. Officially accredited by the OMA [Office of Muslim Affairs], ISCAG is actively involved in Islamic propagation activities and charitable missions. ISCAG also grants scholarships to Muslims in various professional fields. More importantly, it regularly conducts forums, seminars and conferences to propagate Islam in the Philippines. Because of its link with other transnational Islamic groups in the Philippines, ISCAG’s Islamic propagation activities have helped to make Islam the fastest growing religion in the Philippines.267

The social field of *da‘wah* is just as multifaceted and complex as the many interpretations of what true *da‘wah* entails. Khurram Murad identifies three broad levels of *da‘wah* that

116 lives, the worst act of maritime terrorism in recent history. RSM members were also involved in the February 2005 Valentine’s Day bombings in the Philippine cities of Manila, General Santos and Davao as well as several plots to bomb high profile targets, including Manila public utilities, tourist areas, and the U.S. Embassy in Manila.” See: [https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2008/jun/105926.htm](https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2008/jun/105926.htm).


267 Ibid., 183.
are helpful for distinguishing the different means in which Balik-Islam reverts encounter and engage in *da’wah*. The first level is “organized macro” which is supported by governments. The second is the “intermediate” level which is supported by large institutions and groups such as mosques, schools, and businesses. Third is the “micro” level which is *da’wah* carried out by individuals and small organizations.268 The Balik-Islam community at ISCAG essentially participates in all three levels to different degrees. At the macro level, although the Philippine state does not directly sponsor *da’wah* activities, the government does recognize ISCAG as an official Muslim organization and has been registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) since 1992. The Philippine government requires all transnational religious organizations to register with the SEC to maintain legal operation.269 The ISCAG community itself, located in a suburb of Metro Manila operates at the intermediate level. The leadership provides education, housing, and medical services for the local region in addition to the over 100 families living in the compound apartments. Lastly, at the micro level, individual reverts share their positive experiences with Islam with their families, friends, and coworkers.

In addition to the various levels at which *da’wah* is conducted, Larry Poston notes that there are generally two modes of *da’wah*: direct and indirect. Direct *da’wah* refers primarily to active propagation or “activistic preaching” which indirect *da’wah* alludes more passive forms of propagation or “lifestyle evangelism”. 270 As it applies to the Balik-Islam, active *da’wah* encompasses how the Balik-Islam engage with their non-

---

270 Poston, *Islamic Da’wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam*, 4.
Muslim community. Key approaches include frequent visitations to local prisons and penal colonies, hosting of free informational lectures and events, heavily subsidized education, as well as low-cost medical services—all available for Muslims and Christians alike. As listed on their website, the types of propagation activities ISCAG participates include the following:

- Providing Islamic lectures to various individuals and groups, Muslims and non-Muslims alike who come to visit ISCAG
- Symposia in different parts of the country including lectures to students and teachers in both public and private schools and universities
- House to house da’wah programs by duat (propagators) assigned in different parts of the Philippines
- Radio Programs
- Live-in seminar for new Muslims with emphasis on Taharah (Purification) and Salah (Prayer)
- Seminars, orientation and training to Islamic propagators
- Islamic Lectures/Qutbah (Sermon) in jails and other mosques
- Distribution of Islamic books, pamphlets and literature to ISCAG visitors, other Islamic organizations, schools and to the public in general
- Translation of Islamic literature (from English to Filipino and Arabic to Filipino language)
- Participations in outside Islamic Seminars/Forum/Meeting/etc. 271

By indirect da’wah, I am referring largely to al-Faruqi’s notion of da’wah as manifest in a virtuous lifestyle. For example, the Balik-Islam in the ISCAG compound observe very particular “Islamic” inspired rules—such as gender segregation and adherence to hijāb by males and females. 272 Ismail al-Faruqi made strides in distinguishing Islamic da’wah from Christian proselytization by arguing that da’wah is non-coercive, universal, rational, and innate among all human beings. 273 Al-Faruqi turns to the Qur’ān 16: 125: “Call men unto the path of your Lord by wisdom and goodly counsel. Present the cause to them through argument yet more sound” to illustrate how da’wah is essentially an invitation to

271 This list is taken directly from the ISCAG website: https://iscagphil.wordpress.com/about/
272 Hijāb in this sense alludes to modest dress for men and headscarf for women
live virtuously. In other words, according to al-Faruqi, the concept of proselytization in Islam is not about compelling or persuading non-Muslims to convert to a different or novel religion. Instead, *da‘wah*, done properly, should allow others to recognize that Islam is natural and intrinsic to our human nature. In this regard, many Muslim communities, including the Balik-Islam translate *da‘wah* as “propagation” rather than proselytization.

Examples of indirect form of *da‘wah* at ISCAG include the following, which are listed online as “social/other services”:

- Marriage Solemnization
- Janaza Assistance (Islamic Burial)
- Agiga Services (thanks giving rituals for the new birth)
- Counseling Services
- Collection and distribution of Zakat/sadaqah (Charity)
- Iftar (breakfast) meals during the month of Ramadan every year and Udhiya (sacrificial animal) program during Eid Al Adha.
- Scholarship program to deserving Muslims in Elementary, High School and College/University levels.
- Sponsorship education of orphans through the effort of ISCAG.
- Relief program during disaster/calamities
- Medical/dental mission/blood letting program

By spearheading activities that support the well-being and livelihood of both Balik-Islam members and the greater Philippine community, ISCAG engages in indirect *da‘wah* as it strives to embody the virtues of Islam through its actions. Whereas direct *da‘wah* generally involves the propagation of Islam through words and teachings targeted at certain people (e.g. giving sermons at jails or preaching on television, radio, or internet), indirect *da‘wah* is meant to attract converts by setting a moral example. In the Philippines, this is especially important since Islam is essentially “competing” with and viewed in comparison with Christianity.

---

274 This list is taken directly from the ISCAG website: [https://iscagphil.wordpress.com/about/](https://iscagphil.wordpress.com/about/)

200
Both direct and indirect modes of *da’wah* are facilitated by a widely circulated set of Islamic literature translated from Arabic to the Tagalog. Most all are published by Saudi organizations such as the Cooperative Office for Call and Guidance in Al-Batha, the Islamic Center in Unaiza, the Islamic Propagation Office in the Rabwah district of Riyadh, and the Hessah Nasser al-Rajhi Foundation in Riyadh. In addition, the is a widely distributed Qur’an printed by the Qatar Guest Center for Islamic Information, also translated into Filipino. Every time I visited the ISCAG compound, I was graciously given different pamphlets that are used for *da’wah* and for general education among the Balik-Islam community. The material covers many topics anyone—particularly any Christian Filipino—may have about Islam. The following is a list of selected titles of pamphlets I collected during my time at ISCAG:

- *Ano ang Islam?* (What is Islam?)
- *Ang Maikling Paglalarawan ng Pamamatnubay Tungo sa Pag-Unawa sa Islam* (A Brief Guide to Understanding Islam)
- *Paano Maging Isang Muslim* (How to become Muslim)
- *Iisang Mensahe Lamang* (Just One Message)
- *Ang Totoong Mensahe ni Cristo Jesus* (The True Message of Jesus Christ)
- *Kami ay Naniniwala Kay Hesus* (We Believe in Jesus)
- *Maria Ina ni Jesus* (Mary, Mother of Jesus)
- *Ang Talakayan ng Kristiyano at Muslim* (A Discussion between a Christian and Muslim)
- *Mga Karapatan ng Babae sa Islam* (Women’s Rights in Islam)

While these pamphlets provide specific information about Islam for potential reverts, overarching and recurring themes include an emphasis on *tawhid*—the oneness or unity of God, references to science and logic, and constant comparison to Christianity. Moreover, as reflected in the pamphlets, reversion rather than conversion is perhaps one of the major hallmarks of *da’wah*. Karin Van Nieuwkerk identifies the following three central tenets that distinguish Islamic propagation from Christian proselytization:
• First, the message of Islam is argued to be the universal and original message of the oneness of God, *tawheed*. Muhammad, as the last prophet, sought the reversion of all humanity to this message of *tawheed*.

• Second, Islam is considered the natural religion…That is, everyone is born as a Muslim and left to itself would become Muslim but many are socialized into being Christian, Jew or atheist”

• Third, everyone is born sinless and, by becoming Muslim, the revert returns to this original natural condition at birth.  

Furthermore, Van Nieuwkerk notes that “the conceptualization of conversion as a form of reversion is also the underlying religious logic for the lack of ritual elaboration of the declaration of faith. Since human beings are born in a state of natural purity, there is no need for a divine transformation of their nature.  

Because the process of reversion to Islam essentially only requires one to recite the *Shahadah*—there is no God but Allah, and the prophet Mohammed is his messenger—this minimal effort to accept *da’wah*—the call to Islam—is an appealing factor for potential Christian converts.

Therefore, the modes of *da’wah* among Balik-Islam—whether direct or indirect—focus largely on 1) the simplicity of the reversion process (e.g. taking *Shahadah*), 2) the rationality of Islamic precepts (as a natural, universal, and original religion of humankind) and precolonial legitimacy in the Philippines, and 3) the inclusivity of Islam (unity of God, shared belief in Christian prophets, Jesus, and Mary). About a third of the respondents I surveyed expressed significant spiritual dissatisfaction with Christianity and more than half professed that they found Islam to be a “true” religion. Not only did respondents appreciate the simplicity of *Shahadah*, but they also emphasized the simplicity of *tawhid* (i.e. one God), in contrast to the complex and obscure nature of the

---


276 Ibid.
Trinity (i.e. God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). In addition, for former Catholics, the absence of priestly and saintly intercession was noted as something that just “made sense”; having a direct connection to God (Allah) was a significant factor for reverters in their decision to choose Islam over Christianity.

Habitus: “Utang na loob” (Indebtedness)

I can vividly recall from my childhood the preparation involved when my family would visit relatives, friends, and neighbors. Sometimes it felt as if the most important part of the visit was ensuring we had a sufficient and appropriate gift in hand. It didn’t have to be elaborate—a simple home-cooked dish, a box of chocolates, or any thoughtful offering would suffice. It was an obligatory gesture to show appreciation to the host that I thought was a normal, ubiquitous practice until I got older and slowly realized that it wasn’t. Certainly, gift-giving is universal; however, the way I experienced and internalized it was what I know now to be uniquely Filipino. Gift-giving in Filipino culture is a complex and multilayered act rooted in a value system centered heavily on reciprocity and kinship. Jeremiah Reyes reasons that Filipino values are “the result of the unique history of the Philippines, namely a Southeast Asian tribal and animist tradition mixed with a Spanish Catholic tradition for over 300 years.”

As I consider gift-giving to be a performance of values, I find it represents something deeply embedded in the habitus of Filipinos.

In particular, gift-giving is a common display of utang na loob, a Filipino value that can be summed up as “indebtedness”. As mentioned in the previous chapter, utang na loob generally refers to a sense of owing kindness and generosity to those who have

---

given the same. Gift-giving, therefore, is a reciprocal transaction that must be performed in order to maintain harmony and equilibrium. Literally meaning “debt of the inside”, Reyes notes that *loob* is often misunderstood when translated as “inside” and would be better translated as “relational will”. Hence, most Philippine scholars translate *utang na loob* to “debt of gratitude”. Moreover, while the reciprocity of indebtedness does exist between peers, scholars note that it historically occurs between a person of inferior status and one of a relatively superior status. For example, under colonial Spanish rule, the interaction between tenants and landlords helped strengthen the bonds of indebtedness. For this reason, scholars like Mary Racelis tend to view *utang na loob* more critically, as it was used to exploit and oppress the colonized masses. Coupled with principles of suffering and sacrifice taught by the Catholic Church, *utang na loob* can be construed as a demonstration of centuries of political, social, economic, and religious suppression.

I argue that *utang na loob* is a significant part of Filipino culture that directly influences potential reverts to Balik-Islam within the field of *da’wah*. *Da’wah* is transactional—meaning that it fundamentally involves a call and response, an invitation and a reply, an action and reaction. To Filipinos for which *utang na loob* is deeply ingrained in their habitus—their “matrix of perception”—encountering the social field of *da’wah* may activate this sense of indebtedness, depending on how *da’wah* is posed and through whom. For example, of the Balik-Islam community I surveyed, about 28% were “guided” to become Balik-Islam by their spouse, 29% by a family member, 27% by a friend, 8% by their employer, and about 8% by a *da’wah* preacher (*da’i*). From this

---

278 Ibid.
280 Ibid.
sampling, we see that more than half of the reverts were influenced by close relatives, while nearly all experienced *da’wah* from either family or friends.

Jade Alburo’s insights on the social dynamics of Filipino culture help us understand the linkage between between *utang na loob* and *da’wah*. Alburo examines “the kinship-oriented” Philippine society and notes that “family members—both nuclear and extended—are economically, socially and emotionally interdependent”. The interconnectedness between family is so strong that oftentimes, the interests of the family will take priority over individual desires, community, or nation. Moreover, Alburo rightly concludes that

> from an early age, the Filipino sense of duty to their family is deeply ingrained. Children are taught about proper conduct and commitment… Foremost among these lessons is the *utang na loob* [debt from within; debt of gratitude] owed to their parents for giving life and making sacrifices for the future of the children…Though this debt can never be truly repaid, children are required to show their parents complete respect and unquestioned obedience in return. As adults, they are fully expected to contribute to the family’s well-being; usually, this takes the form of financing the education of younger siblings and later on, supporting their elderly parents.

While *utang na loob* is perhaps one of the most pervasive traits that exists within Filipino culture, it operates in conjunction with other traits, such as *hiya* (shyness/shame) and *pakikisama* (togetherness/cooperation). When a Filipino has *utang na loob* for someone, if the indebtedness is not adequately fulfilled, they may likely feel ashamed (*hiya*) until they are able to repay the debt and restore a sense of harmony, or *pakikisama*. Because Filipinos are generally kinship-oriented, *utang na loob* for family members is particularly robust. Thus, the likelihood that potential reverts embrace Islam is significantly higher if they are approached by a spouse, family member, or close friend. As evident in my

---

281 Jade Alburo, "Boxed in or out? Balikbayan boxes as metaphors for Filipino American (Dis) location." *Ethnologies* 27, no. 2 (2005): 139.

282 Ibid.
sampling from the ISCAG community, the vast majority of Balik-Islam were persuaded to embrace Islam through these strong ties, in contrast to weaker ties (employer, da’wah preacher, etc.).

The dynamics of labor migration further perpetuates indebtedness among Filipino families. For example, Angeles discusses how remittances sent from overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) can influence one’s decision to convert:

Accepting the conversion of a family member can also be dictated by the Filipino value of *utang na loob* or debt of gratitude because the labor migrant had provided for the family, had built a home (in the town of Morong, Rizal, locals refer to some houses as Saudi house because it was built with money earned in Saudi Arabia) helped relatives, and educated family members with the earnings from overseas. 283

As Angeles points out, *utang na loob* is common in situations where the person engaging in da’wah is also providing financial support. Whereas in some conversion cases it may be interpreted as a power play in which money is used as leverage to oblige the recipient into accepting da’wah and ultimately become Muslim, another way to understand it is to consider how *utang na loob* as “debt of gratitude” impacts one’s choice to convert. All of the respondents I spoke with were particularly vehement in expressing that they were not forced, compelled, or obliged to convert; they claim they chose to embrace Islam freely and openly. However, based on the circumstances surrounding their conversions, it gradually became apparent that *utang na loob* played a significant part in their decisions as well. Although not every Balik-Islam revert I met received monetary assistance from an OFW, the majority did. For those who did not, at the very least, they received some form of non-material support, service, or gesture that prompted recompense in the form of conversion. An example of immaterial debt is Angeles’ recollection when “an OFW

---

283 Angeles, “The Middle East and the Philippines,”169.
claimed that his conversion was a result of his admiration for the kindness of Muslims who took care of him when he was hospitalized in Saudi Arabia. After his conversion, he converted his extended family and they are now all active Muslims.”  

Capital: Pakikisama (Togetherness/Cooperation)

As introduced above, utang na loob often functions in conjunction with another Filipino value: pakikisama. Translations of the term can be tricky since it does not lend itself to a single concept in English. Broadly, pakikisama refers to an inclination for harmony and conflict avoidance. Charles Macdonald considers pakikisama to be a strategy of interpersonal relations that could be summarized as “a disposition for togetherness.”

Deeper still, the concept includes “a number of dispositions conducive to a state of felicity in interpersonal relations, namely, acceptance of the other person’s opinion, a degree of humility or self-effacement, a nonconfrontational stance, courtesy of manners, gentle and indirect speech, and so on”. In contrast to utang na loob, which I would deem part of the Filipino habitus, pakikisama functions more like social capital that is acquired through social experiences and effectively serves to benefit one’s position within the social field.

For this study, I translate pakikisama as the ability and willingness to maintain togetherness and cooperation among social networks. Pakikisama becomes the goal when there is utang na loob—that is, when a debt remains unfulfilled or owed. I argue that the likelihood of conversion increases if a potential convert both feels indebted to the person

\[
284 \text{Ibid., 168.} \\
286 \text{Ibid.}
\]
initiating *dawah* and possesses the social capital of *pakikisama*. This occurs because in order to stave off tension, discord, or conflict, accepting one’s *da’wah* and embracing Islam may ultimately be a means of achieving or maintaining equilibrium. This explanation may come across as reducing the conversion to a disingenuous tactic to appease another for the sake of harmony. Granted, while that may be true for some of the Balik-Islam, the majority I surveyed expressed a genuine attraction to the beliefs and practices associated with Islam. Based on the theory of symbolic negotiation, I understand this willingness to turn away from Christianity and accept Islam as the result of an ongoing process of negotiating the overlapping dynamics of diaspora, discord, and *da’wah*.

Although the Balik-Islam members I surveyed reported specific people who guided them to Islam (a spouse, relative, friend, employer, or *da’wah* leader), I quickly realized that *da’wah* did not necessarily operate through these single transactions alone; rather, *da’wah* operates on multiple fronts through multiple means. In other words, my assumption going in to the field was that reverts could be somewhat neatly categorized by how they eventually embraced Islam (via their spouse, friend, etc.). However, even in cases that appear clear cut, I found that *da’wah* was taking place on numerous levels, and each encounter progressively impacted one’s decision to accept Islam. The following examples are Balik-Islam reversion narratives sorted by the “primary” agent of *da’wah* (notwithstanding that other *da’wah* agents also influence their reversions).

**Spouse**

Maryam. As discussed in the previous chapter, Maryam informed me that she initially embraced Islam in order to marry her second husband in the *Sharī’ah* court system in the
southern Philippines. After Maryam’s first marriage (to a Catholic man) ended, she pursued journalism as a career and eventually moved from the central Philippines to the south in General Santos City for work. There she met her second husband, a “born-Muslim” with Middle Eastern pedigree. It was during their courtship that Maryam began to learn about Islam outside of what she knew from the media. Though her husband never compelled her to convert, Maryam said she was willing to take *Shahadah* because she fell in love with a “good man” who treated her well and demonstrated that Islam was about living a virtuous life. Although she became nominally Muslim for the sake of her marriage, she continued to practice Catholicism because it was comforting and familiar. It was not until they had a child together that Maryam decided to pursue a more robust study of Islam by speaking with *da'wah* leaders at her daughter’s school. Initially, her change of heart was prompted by her desire for full custody of her daughter. However, Maryam confessed that the more she studied Islam, the more it made sense as a “logical” religion that did not seem to contradict her Catholic beliefs, but instead, enhance and improve her understanding of and relationship with God.

Maryam’s story exemplifies both modes of *da'wah*—indirect through her (ex-) husband and direct through her engagement with *da'wah* preachers. Moreover, based on many conversations we shared, I believe Maryam felt indebted (*utang na loob*) to her second husband for his initial acts of kindness and generosity toward her. Though at the outset of their relationship she was not completely swayed by Islam, she reasoned it was best to maintain accord (*pakikisama*) with her new in-laws and convert instead of being perceived as obstinate and selfish.
Noura. Training to be a full-time *da’wah* leader (*daiya*) for ISCAG’s women’s section, Noura became Balik-Islam through guidance from her husband. Noura’s husband, a teacher (*ustadz*) in the ISCAG school, took *Shahadah* after becoming close friends with born-Muslims who moved north from the Maranao tribe in Mindanao. He was convinced of Islam’s legitimacy particularly after hearing about the precolonial history of Muslims in the Philippines. Noura was raised in Leyte (Visayas province) as a Seventh-day Adventist before leaving her church to practice as a Jehovah’s Witness for several years and a Mormon for a few months. By the time her husband steered her toward Islam, Noura was highly experienced at organized proselytization and was eager to share the tenets of Islam with her community. Noura said she was reluctant at first to accept Islam, given the negative stereotypes she grew up hearing. However, she felt driven to give her husband’s new religion a chance since her priority at the time was keeping her family together. Similar to Maryam, Noura also exhibited a sense of indebtedness to her husband and sought to maintain unity by agreeing to convert.

*Relatives*

Suraya. When Suraya was in the third grade, she recalled having to renounce her Catholic identity and become Muslim after her father embraced Islam and wanted the family to follow suit. Her father was an OFW working in Iraq in the late 1980s when he found himself embroiled in legal trouble. Working in construction, he led a rally over unfair wage practices and was imprisoned for over a year. Unable to make any contact with him, Suraya and her family back in the Philippines assumed he had died and struggled to make ends meet as they relied on his remittances as their primary source of income.
However, while in jail, da‘wah leaders approached Suraya’s father and eventually provided him bail and enough money to return to the Philippines and build a home for his family in San Pedro (Luzon province). Indebted to their mercy and generosity, he devoted the rest of his life to Islam and became a da‘wah preacher himself. Suraya told me that she was too young to really understand the significance of Islam and did not take her religion seriously until her late twenties when her father passed away. His untimely death prompted Suraya to embark on Islamic studies at ISCAG and become a da‘wah leader (daiya) like her father. Suraya expressed utang na loob—debt of gratitude—for her father’s sacrifices while demonstrating pakikisama in her efforts to pay her respects.

Abdurrahman. A student of Islamic jurisprudence at the Islamic University in Medina, Abdurrahman was visiting his two wives and three children who all lived at ISCAG. Growing up in Bacolod (Visayas province), he was quite active in his local Catholic church, serving as an altar boy and singing in the choir. Abdurrahman described his childhood as normal until his father passed away when he was ten years old. Thereafter, Abdurrahman said it felt like his life fell apart. He became a troubled teen who got involved in the “wrong” group of friends. Abdurrahman was introduced to Islam at age fifteen through his older brother who had just returned from contract work in Saudi Arabia. According to Aburrahman, Islam gave him a second chance to live life “correctly”. Islam provided structure, consistency, and a “rational” understanding of the divine. Grateful to his brother for his guidance, Aburrahman dedicates his life to learning more about Islam to spread the faith as a da‘wah leader.
Ibrahim. A former OFW for a total of 13 years, Ibrahim worked in Riyadh for nearly a decade before deciding to convert at age 40. Prior to embracing Islam, Ibrahim was a staunch Catholic who attended seminary and even admitted to having a negative view of Islam for most of his life. Although he lived and worked among Muslims for years, Ibrahim had no interest in learning about Islam until he experienced a family crisis and was in need of solace. He ultimately found comfort and solace in his employer’s words. His employer was a sheikh or Muslim leader whose teachings about Islam eventually helped Ibrahim resolve his family conflict and inspired him to start studying the religion. Indebted to the kindness and compassion shown by his employer, while aiming to preserve newly formed bonds of “togetherness” among his coworkers, Ibrahim’s views on Islam gradually shifted from negative to positive. Three years later, Ibrahim took Shahadah when he felt completely convinced that Islam was the “true” religion.

Omar. Similar to Ibrahim’s experience, Omar also embraced Islam while working overseas in Riyadh. Omar grew up as a devout Catholic who spent much time with the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternity focused on charitable works. When Omar moved to Saudi Arabia in the late 1980s, he found himself isolated and lonely. When his coworkers and employer invited him to a da‘wah event to learn about Islam, Omar was profoundly appreciative of the gesture and of the prospect of making new friends, so he gladly accepted. After about a year of attending more events and carefully studying the history and tenets of Islam, Omar took Shahadah. He helped establish ISCAG in 1992 and now serves as the community’s president and spiritual leader.
Pag-as (Hope)

Each Balik-Islam revert has a unique story of how they came to embrace Islam. While the above examples help to identify certain patterns—such as the elements of symbolic negotiation—these narratives are part of a non-generalizable sample. The point of sharing these reversion stories is to highlight how *utang na loob* as habitus and *pakikisama* as social capital ultimately impact their decisions to accept *da‘wah* and thus create the symbolic space needed to eventually move from a Catholic symbolic universe to an Islamic one. Moreover, what I found from collecting numerous reversion narratives from Balik-Islam members is that even though they take Shahadah, the negotiation between Christianity and Islam is a gradual and perhaps never-ending process for these reverts. This is perhaps why many dedicate their lives to studying Islam and engaging in *da‘wah* themselves.

A significant finding in this chapter, however, is that by applying symbolic negotiation, it appears that reverts perform *da‘wah* not just as a call to Islam, but a call to *pag-as*, meaning hope in Tagalog. Each narrative contains some degree of discord that occurs prior to or during an encounter with *da‘wah*. Whether it was social isolation, a death in the family, or legal trouble, etc., these instances of conflict produced enough of a fissure within one’s symbolic universe that acts of *da‘wah* could fill that gap and function more robustly and effectively than if discord was not present. *Da‘wah* in these cases then becomes construed as a timely blessing that helps to rectify the discord and offer hope for a new beginning.
CHAPTER 7:

CONCLUSIONS: PROSPECTS FOR SYMBOLIC NEGOTIATION

Omar

The idea for this dissertation began with a simple question as to why there has been an uptick in Muslim converts in the Philippines—in spite of recent terrorist attacks from Islamic militants along with an upsurge in Islamophobia world-wide. I began to seriously ruminate on why people convert—why they would embrace a religious tradition other than one in which they were raised. Discovering Omar’s story online lead me to explore the assumptions and mechanics surrounding religious conversion. His reversion narrative essentially inspired me to develop, revise, and expand on the paradigm of symbolic negotiation.

I looked forward to meeting Omar Penalber, the President of ISCAG, for years. I admit I had been proactively following him on the internet since it was quite easy to find data on him. There are numerous news media articles detailing his biographical information, conversion story, and work at ISCAG. Most of them deal with his da’wah efforts among OFWs in Dubai. For instance, he recently partnered with an Islamic institute in the United Arab Emirates and has been regularly posting YouTube videos featuring his lectures freely for public consumption. One of the most intriguing videos I came across was nearly two hours long. It was a da’wah event from November 2014 that featured other Balik-Islam leaders who lead a presentation of Islam before a large audience of Filipinos living in Dubai. Omar was the main speaker and the “opening act” was another Filipino introduced as Brother Nuh Capriano who lectured primarily on the
history “kasasayan” of Muslims in precolonial Philippines. At the conclusion of both talks, audience members were asked to come up to the stage and take Shahadah if they felt ready. There were dozens of men who raised their hands and approached the stage, followed by 18 women. Each group was instructed to repeat words in Arabic while holding up their right index finger to indicate tawhid, that there is just one God. Watching and examining these videos for months made Omar seem like a celebrity figure in my mind. The fact that Omar accepted the Shahadah of the famous Filipino actor, Robin Padilla, boosted his reputation even more so.

I mustered up the confidence to finally interview the larger-than-life figure of the Filipino Muslim world and arrived at the ISCAG compound ready with a light teal scarf wrapped loosely around my hair and neck. Waiting for me again in the lobby was Maryam, the best assistant I could have asked for. She accompanied me up the stairs to Omar’s office and knocked on the door. No response. Just like a professor with clearly marked office hours, there was a sign taped to the door reading, “Open, please come in”. Maryam, again, kindly introduced me as we entered into Omar’s main office space. He had a warm smile and was slightly soft-spoken. Atop his head was a taqiyah, a traditional white prayer cap. The rest of his attire was business casual—pants and a collared shirt. Similar to Ibrahim, he wore a kempt pointed beard. His face was round, complexion brown, and he was somewhat heavy-set for a Filipino, but also relatively tall. Maryam quietly bid farewell, but the door remained open most likely because Omar is a tad more conservative than Ibrahim when it comes to gender relations—or at least that’s what several ISCAG women told me. With this advice in mind, I opted to wear a hijab the entire time. The office was spacious. There were other desks in the corners, a sign that
this was a shared space. In the center was a long white conference table. Omar asked that I take a seat there; he didn’t sit in the seat directly across from me, but a seat one space to my front left. So turned at an angle and started my introductory remarks in Tagalog, which gradually dissolved in English.

Our formal interview lasted over two hours and went exceptionally smoothly. Nearly all of Omar’s responses were consistent with Ibrahim’s. This did not surprise me since they lead *da’wah* events together and preach the same message. Moreover, their experiences that lead them to Islam were also similar. Both embraced Islam later in life—Ibrahim at age 40, Omar at 30; both lived and worked in Riyadh where they ultimately accepted *da’wah* through their respective employers—Ibrahim after ten years, Omar after one. However, one striking difference is that Omar had a considerably more formal education than Ibrahim, and perhaps more than anyone I met on the ISCAG compound.

According to Omar, as he began to learn more about the precepts of Islam, it “just made sense”. As someone trained to think critically and logically in law school, Omar’s vague and rather nondescript response to why he decided to take *Shahadah* piqued my interest. It was at that point I knew I needed to unpack the notion that Islam “just made sense” to someone who had been practicing and believing in Catholic teachings his entire life. Omar did, of course, contextualize his statement and emphasized the importance of Islam’s authenticity and veracity. He noted that when he discovered that the Philippines had been inhabited by Muslims prior to the arrival of Spanish Catholicism, he became even more convinced that “reversion” was the rational and right path for himself and for all Filipinos. Moreover, he touted how the concept of *tawhid*—the singularity of God—made much more sense than the complex nature of the Trinity. The notion of God being
three persons in one—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—was much too convoluted and contrived in contrast to acknowledging just one omnipotent God who sent prophets such as Muhammad and Jesus to propagate his will.

Yet, even upon hearing Omar’s reasons for reversion, it was still unclear to me how someone could renounce their former belief system and replace it with one that he was raised to believe was violent and oppressive. I began to question what it means for a new religious truth to “make sense”. Moreover, how does someone choose to “become the Other”? Thereafter, I reflected on current theories of conversion to devise a paradigm specific to the Balik-Islam experience. I use Lewis Rambo’s definition of conversion as a springboard: “conversion is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations.”

To map out the processes and specific elements within the “force field”, I drew heavily upon Monika Wohlrab-Sahr’s concepts of “symbolic battle” and “symbolic transformation of crisis” and incorporated it with Pierre Bourdieu’s “theory of practice” (see chapter 3). Then, after conducting fieldwork in the Philippines during the summer of 2015—which entailed interviewing Balik-Islam members one-on-one, and surveying over 100 Balik-Islam residents at the ISCAG compound—I arrived at the model of symbolic negotiation and identified factors specific to the Balik-Islam “symbolic universe” (see figure 16).

---

On the whole, Omar’s story is the archetypal model of symbolic negotiation. In the early 1980s, Omar moved to Manila from the Visayas with the hope of finding a good job and pursuing higher education. Through a series of auspicious events, Omar managed to be employed by a wealthy Chinese family, primarily helping with domestic duties. After establishing close ties, the family offered to pay for Omar’s undergraduate tuition. Omar completed a Bachelors degree in Commerce then attended law school for three years. While in law school, he worked in the legal department of the Far East Bank.
Yet, rather than finish his program, he made a difficult decision and opted to take advantage of an exclusive opportunity presented to him: work overseas in Saudi Arabia. The prospect of earning enough money to support himself and his family was too good to decline. Omar sought to become a “bagong bayani”—a modern day hero—and embarked on overseas work, temporarily leaving behind his family and friends for a new life in a foreign country.

As a then-lifelong Catholic, it was during his time abroad when Omar first encountered the “Other” by living and working among Muslims. Largely secluded from other Filipino Catholics, Omar exercised “flexible non-citizenship” to navigate through and thrive within an unfamiliar environment. Although the first year was particularly tough, he knew that his “suffering and sacrifice” was for the well-being of his family back home. Rather than sulk or give up and return home before his contract was over, Omar maintained a vigorous sense of “faith and hope” and persisted. Eventually, Omar widened his social network and was invited to learn about Islam by his friends at work. Appreciative of his friends for their kindness and camaraderie, Omar’s “utang na loob” (indebtedness/debt of gratitude) and desire to maintain those friendships (pakikisama) ultimately facilitated his receptiveness to da’wah. Even after Omar took Shahadah, he continued to study Islamic teachings and memorize parts of the Qur’an (in Tagalog and Arabic) until it began to feel completely plausible as a fixture in his symbolic universe.

This dissertation is a theoretical exploration of religious conversion in an interconnected and globalized world. By showcasing the Balik-Islam—Filipino Muslim reverts—as an illustrative example of how symbolic negotiation operates, my goal is to
demonstrate how religious conversion is a multifaceted process involving multiple
dynamic social fields. I find that the “Three D’s”—diaspora, discord, and da’wah—are
the key social fields that influence Filipino Christians to become Balik-Islam. I argue that
the intersection of these three social fields significantly increases the likelihood that a
potential convert will eventually embrace Islam. However, the symbolic negotiation
paradigm is neither formulaic or conclusive. Rather, it is meant to challenge traditional
ways of thinking about religious conversion by linking micro-level and macro-level
spheres of analysis (i.e. the individual and institutional). In sum, the two most important
takeaways from this dissertation are the following:

1. Symbolic negotiation allows us to conceptualize religious conversion as a
   natural and highly complex process by which humans adapt to change and
   transform discord into stability and hope.

2. Balik-Islam in the Philippines represents more than an upsurge in Muslim
   converts/reverts. It is a direct product of globalization (labor diaspora) that
   transforms suffering and sacrifice by returning to hope, stability, joy, etc.

When I asked respondents to expand on why they choose to remain Balik-Islam, popular
survey responses include the following:

- “It is the true religion.”
- “I found the truth that satisfies my curiosity about salvation.”
- “It makes my life so easy. No matter what happens in my life—good or bad—I can
  accept it all because I know it is God’s will.”
- “Islam explains the complete system of life.”
- “I found peace, and I believe this is the complete way of life.”
- “In Islam, I found tranquility and perfect way of life here and after.”
- “I found true and deep faith in Islam. It made me realize that there’s only one God. I
  finally found peace with the faith I have chosen.”
These affirmations underscore how reverts place a premium on truth, completeness, and the assurance of salvation. My understanding of their responses is that through their reversion to Islam, their symbolic universes are no longer in flux. Although the process of symbolic negotiation is never quite “complete”, I find that once Balik-Islam reverts are able to express confidence in their newfound religion, this indicates and establishes stability within their symbolic universe. In no way does stability signify “happiness”; rather, it denotes certainty, which can for some, yield a sense of both peace and happiness.

Beyond religious studies, the model of symbolic negotiation has potential to be applied to other disciplines. For example, by using the “global factors” of migration, disorientation, and proselytization (see table 1) it may be a useful tool for understanding why people change their political views or affiliations. In fact, symbolic negotiation can effectively apply to any momentous shift in one’s beliefs, ideology, or behavior. Still, while there are advantages of using the symbolic negotiation model, there are significant limitations of this study. First, it is largely based on a relatively small population sampling of Balik-Islam members living in only one city. The data collected for this study are non-generalizable and are intended to be illustrative. Additionally, symbolic negotiation accounts for self-reported conversion experiences and does not consider whether or not these conversions are “sincere” or “genuine”. Lastly, the concept of symbolic negotiation proposed here is a theoretical model and would certainly benefit from further study, assessment, and application.

The Balik-Islam are an intriguing subset of the Filipino religious landscape. As a minority in a country comprising nearly 90% Christians, the Balik-Islam are neither
Christian nor “born-Muslim” and continue to navigate the space in between. Beneath the surface of their adopted religious identities are stories of uncertainty, angst, perseverance, and hopefulness. For this reason, I encourage scholars of religion to consider religious conversion as more than a statistic, more than a psychological phenomenon, and more than just a spiritual journey—but rather as a means of resolving everyday problems through the lifelong process of negotiating symbols, meanings, and values.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Lipka, Michael, and David McClendon. "Why people with no religion are projected to decline as a share of the world’s population." *Pew Research Center* 7 (2017).


## APPENDIX A

### BALIK-ISLAM POPULATION DATA

Selected socio-demographic characteristics of Balik-Islam sample population (by percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>49.07</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50.93</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>10.19</td>
<td>6.48</td>
<td>3.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-29</td>
<td>18.52</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>13.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>27.78</td>
<td>12.04</td>
<td>15.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>25.93</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>9.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>9.26</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>3.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>4.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luzon</td>
<td>66.67</td>
<td>37.96</td>
<td>28.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindanao</td>
<td>10.19</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>7.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visayas</td>
<td>23.15</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>14.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>63.89</td>
<td>34.26</td>
<td>29.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, Never Married</td>
<td>25.93</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>17.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>7.41</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>3.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>11.11</td>
<td>13.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>9.26</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>4.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>19.44</td>
<td>9.26</td>
<td>10.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>7.41</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>31.48</td>
<td>14.81</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7. Demographic population data from ISCAG sampling. Source: Author.*
APPENDIX B

APPROVED INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) PROTOCOL:

DETAILED RESEARCH DESIGN, INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, AND SURVEY

Research Integrity & Compliance
Student Faculty Center
3340 N Broad Street, Suite 304
Philadelphia PA 19140

Institutional Review Board
Phone: (215) 767-3390
Fax: (215) 707-9100
e-mail: irb@temple.edu

Certification of Approval for a Project Involving Human Subjects

Date: 30-Oct-2015

Protocol Number: 23246
PI: ABDULLAH, ZAIN
Review Type: EXEMPT
Approved On: 30-Oct-2015
Approved From:

Committee: A2
School/College: LIBERAL ARTS (1800)
Department: CLA-RELIGION (18190)
Sponsor: NO EXTERNAL SPONSOR
Project Title: Embracing Islam: A Study on Religious Conversion and the Bahá’í-ism in the Northern Philippines

The IRB approved the protocol 23246.

If the study was approved under expedited or full board review, the approval period can be found above. Otherwise, the study was deemed exempt and does not have an IRB approval period.

If applicable to your study, you can access your IRB-approved, stamped consent document or consent script through eRA. Open the Attachment tab and open the stamped documents by clicking the View icon next to each document. The stamped documents are labeled as such.

Before an approval period ends, you must submit the Continuing Review form via the eRA module. Please note that though an item is submitted in eRA, it is not received in the IRB office until the principal investigator approves it. Consequently, please submit the Continuing Review form via the eRA module at least 60 days, and preferably 90 days, before the study’s expiration date.

Note that all applicable Institutional approvals must also be secured before study implementation. These approvals include, but are not limited to, Medical Radiation Committee (“MRC”); Radiation Safety Committee (“RSC”); Institutional Biosafety Committee (“IBC”); and Temple University Survey Coordinating Committee (“TUSCC”). Please visit these Committees’ websites for further information.

Finally, in conducting this research, you are obligated to submit modification requests for all changes to any study; reportable new information using the Reportable New Information form; and renewal and closure forms. For the complete list of investigator responsibilities, please see the Policies and Procedures, the Investigator Manual, and other requirements found on the Temple University IRB website: http://www.temple.edu/research/veraffairs/irb/index.html

240
1) Abstract of the study

As a central part of my dissertation research, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of one of the fastest growing religious movements in the Philippines since the 1970s. Collectively, the movement is known as “Balik-Islam” which can mean “returnees to Islam” (persons) or “return to Islam” (process). The members of these Muslim communities view themselves as reverts to the religion of Islam and are most often converts from Christianity. To date, there have only been a handful of ethnographic studies on varying Balik-Islam communities. My project focuses on the organizational structure, religious teachings, and especially the individual conversion narratives from one of the largest Balik-Islam communities located in the northern Philippines. By conducting one-on-one interviews, distributing surveys, and recording field observations, my aim is to gather substantive qualitative and quantitative data that will contribute to a broader understanding of conversion to Islam in a contemporary and globalized milieu.

2) Protocol Title


3) Investigator

Principal Investigator: Dr. Zain Abdullah
Student Investigator: Marybeth Acac

4) Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to gain a deeper and nuanced understanding of conversion to Islam in the northern Philippines. In the greater dissertation project, I intend to illustrate the micro and macro (local and global) processes that influence religious conversion. These include the history of Islam in the Philippines, post-colonial conflicts, state-sponsored exportation of labor, and transnational networks of Filipinos in diaspora. The purpose of conducting field-based research is to listen to conversion narratives of converts to Islam in order to analyze how these micro and macro processes correspond with individual testimonies. By focusing on the life histories and conversion narratives of select Balik-Islam members in the northern Philippines, I hope to demonstrate how their religious experiences are significantly affected by political, economic, and social factors—and not solely by “religious” aims. Moreover, it will be necessary to conduct an ethnographic study on the community/compound in which they live and call home. The compound comprises of Muslim converts (Balik-Islam) and is known publicly as ISCAG, an acronym for “Islamic Studies Call and Guidance” in the province of Cavite. By collecting data through a brief ten (10) question survey, one-on-one interviews, and field observations, I hope to acquire enough information to
piece together the myriad factors that inform one’s process of religious conversion. In my dissertation, I will compare my ethnographic data with current literature and theories on religious conversion.

My hypothesis to be tested is that conversion among the Balik-Islam is distinct because of its emphasis on “reversion” rather than conversion. The narrative of reversion appears to represent a conscious effort (or agency) toward achieving social, economic, political and religious empowerment in a highly pluralistic and competitive global environment. I believe this variable of “reversion” will yield significant nuanced findings that will contribute to a broader knowledge on various forms of religious experience and conversion in Southeast Asia and beyond.

5) Rationale and Significance

To date, there are only a handful of studies on the Balik-Islam phenomenon. Luis Lacar is the first to provide an ethnographic survey of initial converts in the southern region of Mindanao in the 1980s and 1990s (Lacar 2001). The next major ethnographic study does not occur until 2005 when Vivienne Angeles examines conversion narratives of Balik-Islam women in the northern Philippines (Angeles 2012; 2013). Another relatively recent study conducted by David Borer, Sean Everton, and Moises Nayve focuses narrowly on the Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement, a militant branch within the greater Balik-Islam populace, and uses social movement theory to explain how Balik-Islam on the whole exemplifies a rising threat to Philippine national security (Borer et al. 2009). Lacar, Angeles, and Borer et al. all provide disparate elements of a movement they all agree is one of the fastest growing religious developments in the Philippines. What is clear is that over a span of several decades, the Balik-Islam movement has expanded in number and terrain. Estimates of the number of converts range from 200,000 to two million (Lacar 2001; Banlaoi 2009). Clearly, there is much research to be done.

What is missing from these studies is a theoretical framework for understanding the significant aspect of “reversion” which lies at the heart of the Balik-Islam tradition. My project aims to build upon these few existing studies on Balik-Islam by using literature on religious conversion paired with ethnographic fieldwork to fill in the gap in current knowledge regarding conversion to Islam in the Philippines today.

6) Resources and Setting

Aside from myself and my dissertation advisor, Dr. Zain Abdullah, who serves as the principal investigator of this study, there are no other researchers involved in this study. We have both fulfilled our CITI training requirements
Protocol Template for Minimal Risk Studies not Regulated by FDA

and maintain regular and constant correspondence regarding the progress of my dissertation project; this study included.

The intended research site is located in Dasmarinas City in the Cavite province of the northern Philippines, approximately 25 miles south of the capital Manila. Self-identified as a compound, the site is known as ISCAG, short for Islamic Studies Call and Guidance. It is essentially a community of Filipino Muslims, the vast majority of whom are converts from Christianity. All potential recruits will be recruited on-site with the assistance of key informants, primarily the organization leadership. Aside from the recruitment of potential subjects, all interviews and the distribution of surveys will take place on-site.

7) Prior Approvals

None

8) Study Design

a) Recruitment Methods

This study comprises of two parts: interviews and survey distribution.

Interviews will be limited to select subjects who I deem representative of various conversion experiences. I will recruit potential subjects through an informal “snowball” method. In other words, I will rely on key informants, including the compound leadership staff, to introduce me to members who may be interested in participating in an interview. Moreover, I will recruit by discussing my project and myself with candidates and explain the interview goals and process informally before asking for formal participation. I will emphasize that participation is strictly voluntary. In this respect, my sampling will be self-selecting. My aim is to ultimately select three (3) female and three (3) male respondents and learn the details of their life histories and conversion narratives. There will be no monetary compensation for participants, however, as conventional in Filipino culture, I will give a small token of appreciation at the end of each session. These small gifts are to be determined and may include chocolates, grocery items, or other gifts that I deem suitable.

In contrast to the interviews, the survey component of the study will be broad in terms of recruitment and distribution. The survey consists of ten (10) basic questions inquiring participants’ age, sex, hometown, relationship status, education level, overseas employment and/or experience, understanding of the term “Balik-Islam”, former religious affiliation, and the reasons for conversion to Islam. The survey is anonymous and must only be completed by Balik-Islam members who are eighteen (18) years of age and older. I intend to coordinate with ISCAG administration and leadership in order to facilitate confidential, orderly, and widespread distribution of the survey
Protocol Template for Minimal Risk Studies not Regulated by FDA

throughout the Balik-Islam community. My aim is to collect one hundred (100) completed surveys from adults affiliated with ISCAG.

b) Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Since the aim of this study is to gain an understanding of the process of reversion/conversion among Balik-Islam members, I will seek a broad sampling of interviewees in order to compare their experiences. I will strive to speak with community members from different socioeconomic backgrounds, age groups, gender affiliations, and institutional roles within the organization. However, those who will be excluded from the study are members under the age of eighteen (18) as well as any person around whom I feel endangered. Moreover, the survey distribution will be limited to legal adults who self-identify as Balik-Islam.

c) Study Timelines

I plan to conduct formal interviews and distribute/collect surveys over approximately a one-month period of time in the Philippines. I expect that interviews will last approximately 60-120 minutes, depending on the length of the subject’s responses. Only if the subject consents to a possible follow-up interview, and if I find it necessary to obtain clarification, I may meet with a subject more than once. During this one-month period of fieldwork, I will also distribute a ten (10) question anonymous survey to persons who self-identify as Balik-Islam.

Study Procedures and Data Analysis

Each subject will be able to choose if the interview will be recorded either through a voice recording machine or by written notes alone. This choice is made clear in the consent form. Voice recordings will be transcribed as soon as possible while written notes will be typed into extensive field notes. I will then enumerate each interviewee (and assign a pseudonym), so as to maintain anonymity, categorize subjects by comparative socio-economic groupings, and analyze the individual responses by identifying patterns that may emerge in the narratives.

d) Withdrawal of Subjects

I anticipate that subjects may be withdrawn from the study without consent if I sense a credible threat to either the well-being of the subject or of my own safety. All subjects are informed during the time of consent that they may ask to withdraw their contribution to the study at any time; however, requests to withdraw can only be guaranteed up until one year after the interview date, when I expect that my research will be in its final stage of completion.

e) Privacy & Confidentiality

All sensitive data collected for this study, i.e., digital voice recordings, electronic transcriptions, completed surveys, and both written and electronic
field notes will be protected and kept secured at all times, during and after the study. Written notes from interviews and field observations will be recorded in steno note pads, immediately transcribed into Word documents, and kept secured in my home office until they no longer serve a scholarly purpose. I estimate ten (10) years from the end of the study. At that time, they will be destroyed in order to maintain permanent confidentiality. Electronic files, including Word documents and digital voice recordings will be stored on a password protected personal laptop. Digital voice recordings will be deleted after a successful defense of the dissertation.

Any data using personal identifiers, especially names, will be strictly confidential (unless the subject chooses otherwise). The subject will be informed at the outset of the interview that a pseudonym will be assigned immediately after the session. There will be a separation of identifiers and data. Only I will have access to any raw data gathered from the study.

It is important to note that several persons of the leadership staff of ISCAG are public figures, and they may choose exemption from name confidentiality. Several of them have already conducted public interviews with Philippine media, and part of their efforts at the compound require them to share their conversion narratives publicly. Only with their written permission will I use their real names in the dissertation and any related publications.

All subjects' privacy interests will be protected and ensured during and after the interview process. I will strive to hold one-on-one interviews in isolation from other members of the compound, if at all possible. This will be done to create a safe space where the subject can feel comfortable with sharing sincere responses without the risk of others eavesdropping. I will also aim to create a congenial environment by engaging in casual small talk before I thoroughly read the informed consent form aloud.

9) Risks to Subjects

There are no major risks associated with participation in this study. The only potential risk to the subjects during the interview sessions is possible emotional distress or discomfort when asked to recall experiences that lead to their conversion to Islam. According to my previous experience with Filipino communities, painful or traumatic experiences are frequent among religious converts. If palpable distress or discomfort occurs during an interview, I will offer the subject the opportunity to continue the meeting at another time or withdraw from the study if he or she wishes.

10) Potential Benefits to Subjects

According to the teachings of ISCAG, da'wah meaning a call, invitation, or propagation of Islam is not only a central tenet of the religion, but it is also an obligation of the faithful. On a religious level, participating in this study by
Protocol Template for Minimal Risk Studies not Regulated by FDA

sharing one's conversion/reversion narrative can be construed as performing dhikr. If this is the case, it could be taken as a potential benefit to the subject.

11) Costs to Subjects

None

12) Informed Consent

Prior to every formal interview, I will ensure that I obtain proper consent from the subject through both written and verbal acknowledgement. The consent process shall take place at the beginning of each interview session. Attached to this proposal is a copy of the consent form which I will carefully read aloud in its entirety before asking if the subject agrees to its terms. The agreement will require the subject to sign two copies of the form, one for my records and another to serve as the subject's receipt and contact reference. This process should take no longer than five (5) minutes. If the subject does not provide consent at this time or discloses that he/she has not yet reached the age of eighteen (18), then the interview will be terminated and the subject will be withdrawn from the study. As noted in the consent form, participation in this study will be strictly voluntary.

Non-English Speaking Subjects

English is an official language of the Philippines and a majority of official documents are written in English. Therefore, I will not supply a translated copy of the consent form. However, if the subject requires clarification in the regional Filipino language (Tagalog), I have enough language training to be able to clarify any concern in Tagalog. The subject will have the opportunity to speak in Tagalog during the study if he/she feels more comfortable. Any translations in the transcription of the interview will be of my own efforts.

Vulnerable populations

This study will only recruit adults who have reached the age of eighteen (18) and are cognitively able to consent to the terms of the study. Prisoners or any incarcerated persons will not be allowed to participate in the study.
Protocol Template for Minimal Risk Studies not Regulated by FDA

Works Cited


Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study:
Embracing Islam: A Study on Balik-Islam in the Philippines

Researcher: Marybeth T. Acac
Faculty Advisor/PI: Dr. Zain Abdullah

Purpose of the research: To better understand Balik-Islam and religious conversion in the Philippines by getting to know members on a personal and individual level.

What you should know about this research study:
- You volunteer to be in a research study; you can decide if you would like to participate or not
- You can ask all the questions you want before and after you decide
- By signing this consent form, you are not waiving any of the legal rights that you otherwise would have as a participant in a research study.
- The study procedures consist of interviews.
- The estimated duration of your participation is one to two hours.

Benefits and risks: The benefit you will obtain from the research is knowing that you have contributed to the understanding of this topic and helped scholars and researchers produce accurate information. The reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts are that there may be some uneasy feelings when discussing past experiences. Remember, you may also ask to withdraw your contribution to the study altogether.

Questions: You may contact me via telephone or e-mail: Marybeth Acac, and marybeth.acac@temple.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor: Zain Abdullah at . If you have questions about your rights as a participant in research, or other concerns, please contact the Temple University Institutional Review Board at +1 (215) 707-3380 or e-mail them at: irb@temple.edu.

Please state your requests regarding the use of your name and the information you provide:

[ ] It is OK to use my real/actual name in subsequent publications
[ ] I DO NOT want my real/actual name to be used in publications

My suggestion for an alternative name/pseudonym is: ________________________________

[ ] It is OK to be recorded on a voice recording device
[ ] I DO NOT want to be recorded on a voice recording device

I am over the age of eighteen (18).
[ ] YES
[ ] NO

Your signature below documents your permission to take part in this research.

_________________________  __________________________  ________________________
Signature                   Name, printed                        Date
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL/QUESTIONNAIRE
ISCAG, Dasmarinas, Cavite
Expected duration of interview: 60-120 minutes

PART I: Background/Personal Information

1) Name (optional)
2) Former name (if different before conversion)
3) Age
4) Hometown/Province
5) Marital Status
6) Children
   a. If yes, do they live with you?
   b. Do they attend school at ISCAG?
7) Highest degree of education
8) Employment (past and current)
9) Have you ever worked as an OFW (Overseas Foreign Worker)? If so, where and how long?
10) Do you live in the ISCAG compound? If so, for how long?
   a. Did you attend school at ISCAG?
11) Are you generally happy living in the Philippines? At ISCAG?

PART II: Religious Identification

12) Please tell me about your ‘conversion’ and how you ultimately came to “embrace” Islam.
   a. From which religion did you convert?
   b. What are your primary reasons for converting/reverting?
   c. When did you embrace Islam? At what age were you?
   d. Would you identify yourself as a “Balik-Islam”? Why or why not?
13) How important is being Muslim as part of your identity?
   a. How often do you attend ISCAG services and events? (Always, Occasionally, Rarely)

PART III: Views on ISCAG, Islam, other Muslims, non-Muslims, and current affairs

14) In your view, is there a difference between Moros in Mindanao and Balik-Islam?
15) Do you believe that all Filipinos are originally Muslims? (PROBE: history, colonialism)
16) What makes ISCAG unique from other mosques and Islamic centers in the Philippines?
17) In your own words, how would you define daw’ah to a non-Muslim?
18) In your opinion, are men and women equal in Islam?
19) What is your view regarding homosexuals (or the LGBT community)?
20) What is your view on birth control (RH Bill of 2012)?
21) What is your view on the BBL (Bangsamoro Basic Law 2016)?
22) What is your view of President Aquino?
23) What is your view on ISIS/ISIL/Da’esh?
24) What is your view of non-Muslims? (Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Lumads (Indigenous)
25) In your opinion, what qualities describe a “good Muslim”? A “good person”?
**EMBRACING ISLAM: YOUR LIFE, YOUR FAITH, YOUR STORY**

**BALIK-ISLAM SURVEY**

*NOTICE: You must be 18 or older to complete this survey*

1. Are you male or female?
   - Male
   - Female

2. What is your age?
   - 18-20
   - 21-29
   - 30-39
   - 40-49
   - 50-59
   - 60 or older

3. Where are you from originally?
   - Luzon
   - Visayas
   - Mindanao
   - Name of province or city: ____________________________

4. What is your current relationship status?
   - Married
   - Widowed
   - Divorced
   - Separated
   - Single, never married
   - If you have children, how many? ____________________________

5. What is your highest level of education?
   - Less than high school degree
   - High school degree or equivalent
   - Some college but no degree
   - Associate degree
   - Bachelor degree
   - Graduate degree
   - What is your current job/occupation? ____________________________

6. Have you ever worked overseas (OFW)?
   - Yes
   - No
   - If yes, where and when were you overseas?
     What was your job? ____________________________

7. Is your spouse an OFW?
   - Yes
   - No
   - N/A (no spouse)
   - If yes, where is he/she working?
     What is his/her job? ____________________________

8. In your opinion, what is the meaning of “Balik-Islam”? (check all that apply)
   - A person who returns to Islam
   - Returning to the precolonial religion of the Philippines
   - Returning to the original religion of all human beings
   - Other meanings: ____________________________

9. What was your religion before you embraced Islam?
   - Roman Catholic
   - Aglipay
   - Protestant
   - Born-Again
   - Iglesia ni Cristo
   - Jehovah's Witnesses
   - Other (please specify): ____________________________

10. Why did you embrace Islam? (check all that apply)
    - My spouse was Balik-Islam first
    - My spouse is a born-Muslim and I followed
    - My friend was Balik-Islam first
    - My family member (relative) was Balik-Islam first
    - I attended a da'wah event
    - I talked to da'wah leaders
    - I was working in a Muslim country and my friends told me about Islam
    - I was working in a Muslim country and my employer told me about Islam
    - I was unhappy with my former religion(s)
    - I experienced a personal crisis and Islam was my solution
    - I was offered money or other compensations
    - Other reason(s) or explanations of your reason(s) for becoming Muslim: ____________________________

Thank you for your participation! Your anonymous responses will contribute to important research about Balik-Islam in the Philippines. Please also encourage your friends and family to complete the survey before the deadline.

RETURN ALL COMPLETED SURVEYS TO THE DESIGNATED BOX LOCATED IN THE WOMEN'S DAWAH SECTION BEFORE (DATE TBD)

Maraming Salamat,

Marybeth Acac
Doctoral Student & Researcher
Dept. of Religion, Temple University, USA