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Work-life Experiences of Circulating Filipino Irregular Migrants in Sabah, Malaysia: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

The long history of economic and cultural exchange and common access to the maritime resources of the Sulu-Sulawesi seascape had allowed social groups around this territory to crisscross porous borders. This continued until the surrounding nation-states declared independence and sovereignty over territories in the first half of the 20th century; rendering these centuries-old border crossings subject to state laws and policies. Against this backdrop of changed socio-political and legal systems, why do people undertake perilous border-crossings? This paper presents an exploratory descriptive study of irregular migrants in Sabah, Malaysia from Southern Palawan, Philippines. It explores the economic and socio-cultural context of their home origins, their motivations, their lived experiences in host country and decisions to go home or come back. In addition, it explores the concept of circular migration characterising the irregular migrants' movement as a strategy towards sustaining livelihoods. The paper used qualitative data from a coastal barangay using survey of households' profile, semi-structured interviews of individual cases, key informants and observations. Interview data showed that irregular migrants' decision to migrate had the family's welfare at the centre of aspirations and such movements were either encouraged or facilitated by contacts in host country. Lacking proper documents, data showed majority of case migrants experienced difficulties in mobility and sanctions related to their irregular status but this did not deter some to come back.

Key words: *borders, circulation, irregular migrants, livelihoods*

INTRODUCTION[1]

According to the United Nations Development Programme, there were 50 million irregular migrants around the world in 2009 (Global migration Indicators 2018, p.30). This involves a small proportion of people relative to the total world population. However, their number in absolute terms is staring as a serious humanitarian concern. A large number of international migrants legally enter at places of destination. Yet, a good number also arrive without the required migration documents, eventually becoming asylum-seekers, refugees or undocumented migrants. The majority of migrants cross borders in search of better economic and social opportunities, others are forced to flee crises caused by wars or conflict, persecution and natural calamities.

[1] This paper is a revised version of a paper presented at the panel on "New geographies of Philippine overseas migration and transnational mobilities: Examining emergent spaces, connections and relations of a transnational nation" of the *Association for Asian Studies* (AAS-in-ASIA) Conference held on July 24-27, 2017, Korea University, Seoul, South Korea.

There is a burgeoning empirical literature on Filipino migration. These include but not limited to topics such as government labour policy history and destinations (Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1987), migrant remittances and returnees (Pertierra, 1992), migration and Philippine nationhood and class relations (Aguilar, 2014). In addition, a useful annotated bibliography of migration studies (Perez and Patacsil, compilers; 1998) under the auspices of the Philippine Migration Research Network deals with studies on rural-urban migration and migrant adaptation, among others, from the 1970s to late 1990s.

However, a cursory review of these materials did not reveal studies about migrant circulation. There is a lack of alternative perspective to explore migration with a view that people do not only enter and exit countries but also circulate during economic and socio-cultural seasons. Migration is a dynamic process, and as the world gets more interconnected through technological changes in communication and transportation in the 21st century, states and societies are encouraged to be prepared for this phenomenon and "build capacities" (World Migration Report, 2010) for changes that it brings, including the issue of irregular migration.

This paper presents an exploratory descriptive study of irregular or undocumented migrants in Sabah, Malaysia from Southern Palawan, Philippines. Why do they come, and continue to come? What were the motivations for migration, the conditions of work and life in Sabah, and reasons for consequent return to home country or oscillation between home and host country. Moreover, that irregular migration remains unabated betrays what may be a lack of attention to the phenomenon of circular migration. As WSW Hassan et al. (2010) asked, why do they keep coming back?

According to Opiniano (2007) the current international migration with 193 countries and territories crossed worldwide is a "fluid phenomenon". Similarly, it can also be assumed that an accurate estimate of the total number of irregular migrants in Sabah, and even Malaysia is elusive. In the same vein, discourse about social group from its own 'voice' is hardly available. Irregular migrants seldom have 'faces' as they are inscribed in mass media, academia, and policy statements. Thus, unlike macro demographic and survey research approaches under which migration research is traditionally approached, this paper aims to present an understanding of the experiences of a social group whose inner world is rarely accessible through the sociological interactionist-humanist approach. It illuminates the lifeworld of irregular migrants, of their life as a human experience within the interstices and margins of host countries (Plummer, 1983), thereby contributing nuanced knowledge about this group to the migration literature. Furthermore, it is hoped that better understanding of this group may lead to alternative and humanistic view of irregular migration and of circular migration in governance and policy-making.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysia and migration

Malaysia has an open, upper-middle income economy within the East-Asia and Pacific region (World Bank, n.d.) According to the World Bank, Malaysia had a GDP of 255.02 current US billions with a GDP average annual growth rate of 7.4% during the period 2000-2010. Moreover, the Department of Statistics Malaysia recorded a balance of payments of 21.9 RM billions as of September 2020. Its total population as of 2018 was 32.4 millions with a GDP per capita at national level of RM 44, 682. As a newly industrialising economy, the WB further indicated its life expectancy at birth as 74 years and internet usage as percentage of population was 56.3%.

In its drive for national economic development starting from 1957 with the granting of independence from Great Britain, foreign labour from neighbouring countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines was encouraged. Labour power was supplied by foreign migrants - both regular and irregular, as workers in agricultural plantations, construction, manufacturing and services sector. The continuity towards development was further bolstered by financial investment and labour inflow with the Look

East policy launched in early 1980s (A.Tajari & N.Affendi, 2015) and succeeding development decades to reach its zenith by 2020. Malaysia's development, of which the state of Sabah is a part, decidedly made and is still making it both as an end country of destination and as transit country for other developed countries/ regions.

In an effort to decrease dependence on foreign labour, and thus minimise or control the number specifically, of irregular migrants, Malaysia resorted to an array of measures ranging from arrest and deportation to amnesty and regularisation. In 2004-2005, by virtue of the Immigration Act of 2002 (WSW Hassan et al.), Malaysia carried out mass deportation of undocumented migrant workers. For the period 1990-2007, the total number of repatriated "immigrants" was 298,601, that is, (54% were Filipinos and 44% Indonesians) (Tajari & Affendi, 2015).

Despite the above measures, the repatriated migrants still "come back" (WSW Hassan et al., 2010). Filipinos figured out as the most "frequent illegal returnees", two times more than Indonesians, for the period 2003-2008. The intensification of the campaign somehow led to allegations of police brutality against legal overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), including the rape of Filipino women by Malaysian jail guards in Sabah (Ubac, 2014). Admittedly, "deportation leaves many issues unresolved" (A.Tajari & N.Affendi, 2015) and that the irregular immigrants-the exercise to deport them, and the returning deportees - may well be the "never ending story" of Sabah (WSW Hassan et al., 2010). According to the Philippine Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Esteban Conejos (Chew, 2013), an estimate of 200, 000 undocumented Filipino workers are living in Malaysia. Recently, however, in a discussion among Sabah officials, it was revealed that 140,000 undocumented migrants are holding IMM13, Kad Bancian and Pas Burung Burung documents that were issued in the past. A conservative figure of 500,000 was mentioned especially for those who arrived with their families as well as new transient migrants (Lai, 2019).

The International Organization for Migrants (IOM, 2019) defines migrants as persons who "move away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State" (p.137). Moreover, according to the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (Migrant Convention from hereon), which was adopted by General Assembly resolution 45/158 of 18 December 1990, migrant workers and members of their families:

> (a) Are considered as documented or in a regular situation if they are authorized to enter, to stay and to engage in a remunerated activity in the State of employment pursuant to the law of that State and to international agreements to which that State is a party;
> (b) Are considered as non-documented or in an irregular situation if they do not comply with the conditions provided for in subparagraph above.

Simply put, irregular migrants are migrants in an irregular situation or undocumented migrants. The IOM and the international community encourage the use of the terms "undocumented" or "irregular" as an alternative to the term "illegal" (p.30). Furthermore, the IOM, citing the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3449 (Measures to Ensure the Human Rights and Dignity of All Migrant Workers (9 December 1975), contends that:

> The term "irregular" is preferable to "illegal" because the latter carries a criminal connotation, is against migrants' dignity and undermines the respect of the human rights of migrants. Migrants, as any human beings, can never be illegal; they can be in an irregular situation, but it is inaccurate to refer to a person as "illegal" (p.30).

Within the context of Sabah, Azizah Kassim (2009, p.8) defines who specifically are "illegal (sic) immigrants" as follows:

> (a) A foreigner who enters a country without permit or pass. (b) A foreigner who slips into a country through undisclosed channel. (c) A foreigner who enters a country legally but stays on without renewing the permit or pass. (d) A contract worker (expatriate/semi-skilled and skilled) who violates the work permit by changing his/her work or employer. (e) A foreigner who misuses the pass visit, for instance those who enters on tourist or student visa but abuses the given visa by staying on to do other things. (f) Those who possess fake document or legal document gained through illegal means. (g) A foreign worker who fails to renew his or her working permit. (h) A refugee who fails to renew his or her yearly IMM13 pass.

Azizah Kassim (2009 holds that Filipino immigrants in Sabah are officially classified as follows: refugees, economic migrants and illegal (sic) immigrants. Refugees refer to those people who moved/ pushed here due to the outbreak of conflict in Mindanao in the 1970s and have been granted official status as such either by Malaysia or UNHCR or both, but whose stay need to be renewed regularly. Economic migrants are basically those who legally arrived in the 1980s for work or job prospects. Illegal (sic) migrants are those who come without the required migration papers or whose papers have expired or have been invalidated (p.24). Moreover, WSW Hassan et al. (2010) contended that irregular immigrants are "foreign nationals who enter the country through legal ways but overstayed or those who slipped into the country through illegal channel, or foreign workers who work without required permit").

Aside from 'migrant' and 'migration', the terms 'immigrant' and 'immigration' are also being popularly used in mass media and policy announcements. While a migrant is defined as a person moving within a state or across international borders, the IOM (2019) defines "immigrant" as "(f)rom the perspective of the country of arrival, a person who moves into a country other than that of his or her nationality or usual residence, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence." Both migrant and immigrant involve movement within a state or across international borders, but the immigrant is normatively viewed as going to an embassy or immigration office in order to get documents for his or her residence in the country of destination for a relatively longer period of time. Immigrants are migrants but not all migrants may become immigrants. However, there seems to be a conflation of these two concepts as they are currently used. In fact, the Malaysia Immigration Act of 1959/63 consistently uses the terms 'immigrant' and 'immigration' to refer to individuals coming into Malaysia regardless of duration of stay. The academic literature is also littered with this condition as shown in the foregoing discussion (Azizah Kassim, 2009; WSW Hassan et al. 2010; Tajari & Affendi, 2015).

Migration is a process whereby a migrant's status whether regular or irregular may be defined by circumstances, socio-economic and political context and at times, by arbitrary decisions/actions. For the purpose of this paper, the term 'migrant', as defined by the IOM, shall be used loosely and interchangeably with 'undocumented migrants' or 'irregular migrants' and focuses on individuals who have crossed Philippine-Malaysia territorial borders, regardless of the person's legal status in the host country.

Circular Migration and Sustainable Livelihoods

There is an argument that migration is not wholly an individual rational decision, but instead one that involves the household members' welfare at the core of that decision; and by which family members' or kin-groups' moral and financial support are enlisted for the project (Bakewell, 2014). Moreover, such decision is also pushed or influenced by broader structural conditions like poverty, unemployment, or social inequality, at the same time, by the pull or attractiveness of countries of destination. In addition, as propounded by the theory of migration system, the *dynamics* of each of the *elements* (for example, the role of kinship and job networks between the home country and host country) and conditions in the broader environment are also seen as impinging on the decision to

move. From countries that are less-developed, countries of destination are commonly seen as wealthier, and are perceived as places of better economic opportunities and advancement (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2014; Kaur, 2004).

Meanwhile, within the sustainable livelihoods framework, population movement especially in much of Africa and South Asia, "**is** the established pattern, and migration is both a strategy of survival and livelihood and inseparable from identity" (McDowell & de Haan, 1997, p.3). This argument springs from a critique of western traditional "sedentaristic" assumption of normal patterns of life (bold and quotation mark emphases in the original) while pointing out that in human history, there existed a broad continuum of migration types-from the pastoralists to the settled urbanites, the voluntary-forced, spontaneous-planned types and the different categories between each side of the continuum. Viewed from a sustainable livelihood perspective, there are 3 elements of livelihoods in developing countries mentioned above: these are agricultural intensification, livelihood diversification and migration McDowell & de Haan, 1997, p.15). Migration is seen to promote the first two elements- agricultural intensification and livelihood diversification.

International labour migration, whether as a government policy or family/individual initiative implies working in another country where international labour migrants are thought to earn more than working in one's country. These labour migrants have been also found to have intentions to return to the country of origin once the labour contract expired. Hagen-Zanker et al's study (2014) summarizes two baseline surveys that showed international migration is a major livelihood strategy for households from two post-conflict contexts in Nepal and Pakistan.

Similarly, the conflict between the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) rebels and Philippine government military forces in the 1970s intensified movement among Filipinos wanting to escape conflict that plagued Mindanao and the Sulu area. They took refuge in the eastern coast of Sabah, Malaysia creating a big refugee community whose descendants remain very visible to date (Pitlo III, 2013; Azizah Kassim, 2009). From the mid-1970s to 1987, the UNHCR had monitored and given welfare to Filipino refugees pushed by the conflict in Mindanao. As refugees, they were treated with special consideration and minimum welfare and services were extended to them even though Malaysia was not a signatory to the Migrant Convention (Azizah Kassim, 2009). However, after 1987 when the UNHCR pulled out of Sabah, it was expected that they and their children would have been integrated with Sabahan social life.

The eastern coast of Sabah is geographically proximate to the islands of Sulu and Tawi-Tawi Archipelago. It is no wonder that Tausugs, Bajaus and other Sama tribes from this archipelago had easily entered the ports lying along its long coastline for variety of reasons, primarily for economic and social opportunities (Hassan, 1978). Such border-crossings were facilitated by majority of the migrants having initial contacts with relatives upon arrival. Furthermore, from Simunul and Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi Province, the places of destination were Tawau, Sandakan, Semporna, Kota Kinabalu, Lahad Datu. (Hassan, 1978).

Fleeing from a conflict situation in Mindanao in the 1970s, people were displaced and forced to move. Yet, long before Southeast Asian countries like Philippines and Malaysia became nation-states in mid-20th century, and as late as 1870, economic activities – barter and trading, piracy and slave-raiding, maritime-related activities- and cultural interactions was a way of life in what Warren (2000) referred to as the "Sulu zone". In the Philippines, it was the Tausugs of Sulu and other Sama-speaking inhabitants of several islands of Tawi-Tawi, along with other groups from Indonesia and Malaysia, who roamed this ancient, transnational maritime region that was the Sulu-Celebes Seas (Warren, 2000).

Dwindling fishery resources (WB & FAO, 2009), piracy in the seas, poverty, lack of education, (Balisi, 2000) had become the scourge for the traditional way of life of ethnic groups in the Sulu and

Tawi-Tawi Archipelago driving them with little options to survive. The Bajaus had and until to date, turned to begging to become ubiquitous sightings in the streets of Metro Manila and major cities like Zamboanga, Cebu, and Iligan (Bracamonte, 2005).

Though partly externally induced, this unfortunate practice of contemporary Bajaus may be seen as a form of internal circulation (Chapman & Prothero, 1985). For Bajaus from Malawani, Basilan, begging as ("*alternatibong kabuhayan*" meaning alternative livelihood) (Balisi, 2000, p. 49) involved being away during rainy months of the year starting from August to September when they start to roam city streets. Notwithstanding the public's negative attitude towards begging, for the respondents of this study, going to Metro Manila (to beg) was a "big thing/ event…it is a nice experience" (*ang paglikas patungo sa Metro Manila ay isang malaking bagay… ito ay isang nakakalugod na karansan).* The earnings from begging are saved for the following: for the *Hariraya Puasa* celebration, for sending home for family members' needs who are expecting it, for capitalization for fishing (for those who have not abandoned it), for other purposes, and for the return fare back home usually during the *Hariraya Puasa* celebration, and the cycle of internal circulation comes full circle (Balisi, 2000, pp. 9-10).

The concept of circulation in migration looks at movements of people that involve moderately long durations of stay at a destination that do not necessarily eliminate an eventual, and equally 'permanent' return to the places from which they originated (Chapman & Prothero, 1985). It is regarded that in many developing countries particularly in Melanesia, the authors wrote that "people's mobility behaviour is viewed as a system whose locus is the village, the local subgroup, the extended or nuclear family compared with more open systems…where individuals or groups shift successively from one place of residence to another" (Chapman & Prothero, 1985, p.15). Identifying/ defining this movement as circulation, the authors further wrote:

> Circuits of movement consequently were and still are one means to achieve a desired end and physical transfer need not be accompanied by social-structural displacement. Where sizable numbers are away, regardless of whether the time involved is a day or much more and whether the destination is a neighboring village, a distant town, a different country, or even another continent, the social structure is bi- or multilocal and these varied destinations become a socio-spatial extension of the 'home' community (Chapman & Prothero, 1985, p.17).

METHODOLOGY

Bataraza, Southern Palawan: A Snapshot

Bataraza is about five to six hours by land travel from Puerto Princesa City, Palawan's capital. Also, Bataraza is only five to eight hours by sea travel to Kudat, Sabah, depending on the point of embarkation from among several islands of this southern tip of mainland Palawan. Bataraza has a total land area of 957 km². It is bounded in the east by the Sulu Sea, in the west by Mount Mantalingahan (the highest peak in the province) to Mount Malitub, and in the southwest by the West Philippine Sea. The main industries of Bataraza include farming, fishing, and nickel mining and nickel processing.

Bataraza, is a second-class municipality with a population of 63,644 (National Statistics Office Phillippines, 2010). It is one of the fastest growing towns in Palawan surpassing the population of Brookes' Point (61,301) from which it was carved to become a municipality by itself. Of the total population, approximately 40% are Muslims, the largest group being the Jama Mapun from southwest Sulu Sea, Cagayan de Tawi-Tawi and some from northern Borneo, followed by Tausugs/ Joloanos. Less numerous in Bataraza are Molbogs, Pangutarans, Yakans, and Maranaos (Eder, 2010, p. 409). Compared with other Muslim-inhabited parts of the southern Philippines, Palawan Island is distinctive because most Muslims—like most Christians—are of migrant origin (Eder, 2010).

Bataraza is basically an in-migrant community that was frequently visited or settled in for reasons of trade or social kinship ties by social groups from proximate areas like the Sulu and Tawi-Tawi archipelago and eastern Sabah. Long-time residents started settling in from late 1960s (S. Didik, personal communication, July 2014). Moreover, it was also around this time, when large deposits of nickel were known in *Barangay* Rio Tuba (RT). Subsequently, Rio Tuba Nickel Mining Corporation (RTNMC) was put up in the inner terrestrial area of RT in 1967. Soon, in 2002, the Coral Bay Nickel Corporation (CBNC), was established to process the former's by-product. About one third of RT population was employed in a variety of jobs either on regular or contractual status in these two mining operations. Nevertheless, majority of those employed here were non-Muslims who passed the required qualifications, leaving almost 60-70% of the barangay population mainly dependent on fishing, farming and other service occupations (G. Miano, personal communication, July 3, 2014; S. Didik, personal communication, November 3, 2015). This makes for out-migration as one option for livelihood among some residents.

In July 2014, an ethnographic exploratory study in Bataraza focusing on two coastal *sitios* (village)- Pendulunan and Buaya[2] (not the real place names) of RT was conducted for a research project (Lumayag et al., 2014) entitled *Sustainable Livelihood Practices, Immigration and Ecological Responsibilities in Coastal Communities: Case Studies from Sabah, Malaysia and Mindanao, Philippines*. I was the co-investigator for this geographical segment of the project. Based on 50 household survey baseline data gathered and by direct observation, said *sitio* residents generally belonged to low-income groups and wanting in basic services and facilities. With the minimum wage set at 264 pesos including cost of living allowance for Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon and Palawan subregion, the average expenses for food of 228 pesos/day, 219 pesos/month for electricity, 972 pesos/ month for school expenses, 1,234 pesos occasionally for clothing, and 13,800 pesos occasionally for house improvement were inadequate for the *sitios*' average family size of 7 (Taberdo and Lumayag, 2014). In addition, only 38% of households had toilets while drainage and sewerage systems, postal service and internet were non-existent. Pendulunan and Buaya residents deserve a better, clean, and decent housing location and not in marginal coastlines that imperil both human lives and the broader ecosystem. An interviewed *barangay kagawad* (councilman) (P. Molijon, personal communication, July 4, 2014) mentioned plans of the local government for relocation of these communities, but much were still in the drawing board.

Data and Methods

Data used for this paper were culled from the following data sets obtained in the respective field sites and dates as follows:

1. As part of a broader research project on sustainable livelihood practices, immigration and ecological responsibilities in coastal communities (Lumayag, et al., Dec. 2013-Dec. 2014) in RT, Bataraza in July 2014. The study was basically ethnographic[3] and exploratory employing mixed methods in data collection and analyses. Primary data were gathered through semi- structured interviews, in-depth interviews of fishers, residents, village leaders and *barangay* officials, and *barangay* volunteer workers. Secondary data were also employed from *barangay* and other government documents, research studies, newspapers.
2. I was also part of another field work undertaken in January-February 2016 in Sabah, Malaysia– in Kudat's coastal communities and Kota Kinabalu's (KK) market where many Filipino migrants – regular and irregular, worked. I have observed that some

[2] From hereon, the term 'Bataraza' shall be used interchangeably to refer to *sitio* Pendulunan of *Barangay* RT (study setting) and Bataraza municipality unless otherwise qualified.

[3] Loosely used here to mean research methods which include fieldwork, observation, interviewing, small group survey and not the extended stay in the area lasting for several months or years.

Filipino migrants at markets both places had adapted the practice of wearing *kumbong* or headscarves covering their hair and neck.

3. In the course of repeated observations in Bataraza, it became apparent that some fishers we interviewed had, at some point in their life course, tried an "alternative livelihood" (Balisi, 2000) or earned money by getting jobs in Sabah but not necessarily to permanently settle (Chapman & Prothero, 1985; Hagen-Zankar et al., 2014). Thus, this study was conceived. Subsequently, additional in-depth interviews of fishers-turned-migrants and other population groups such women migrants were conducted in November 2015, October 2016 and March 2017, specifically in preparation for a conference in Seoul, South Korea in June 2017. Consequently, further interactions with some barangay officials were sustained as in the case of Kagawad Didik (mentioned above) and Kagawad C. Dela Chica who shared information about plans to improve employment in the barangay possibly via ecological tourism (personal communication, 2015).

Except for Item 2 above, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted. These interviews were tape-recorded, and in keeping with research ethics, prior consent of the recording was sought from the study participants. The language used was Filipino. The average duration of interview per se was about one hour and 30 minutes although the interview encountered which included the preliminaries and leave-taking lasted for about two hours. The interviews were transcribed, and the transcriptions yielded encoded data in USBs that were stored in the computer and another "hard copy" on paper.

Following the procedures of grounded theory in analysing qualitative data laid down by Straus and Corbin (1990), open coding, axial coding, selective coding and analytic memo coding were done. Specifically, during selective coding, major themes / patterns and concepts in the participants' stories were noted and provided guides to further understand irregular migrants' experiences and lives. For example, the overarching big 'chunk' or theme on 'Migration History; Migration Aspirations' below include sub-themes like the place of origin, what it was like there particularly, livelihood options, intentions to leave, and so on. Then, I read the transcripts while listening to the interview tape recording and reread several times the interview transcripts for a "sense of the whole" (Moustakas in Guerrero, Ed. 1997). This is also what Belenky et al. (1986) consider "contextual analysis" in their study of women's ways of knowing.[4]

In interactionism, "interviewees are viewed as experiencing subject who actively construct their social worlds; the primary issue is to generate data which give authentic insight into people's experiences" (Silverman, 1993, p.91). Nevertheless, such data do not remain "raw" but become a co-production or accomplishment of both the interviewee and the interviewer. As May (2001) put it: "it is worth emphasising that the data derived from interviews are not simply 'accurate' or 'distorted' pieces of information but provide the researcher with a means of analysing the ways in which people consider events and relationships and the reasons they offer for doing so". (Punctuations are originally author's) (pp. 144-145).

Furthermore, Plummer (1983) laid down a 5-point Continuum of 'Contamination' (or the extent of researcher's *interpretation*), ranging from the subject's 'pure account' (raw) such as diaries, autobiographies, etc. to the sociologist's 'pure account' such as sociological theories. At the centre or middle ground (III) is the Systematic thematic analysis. This harks back to the type of analysis that accounts for the interviewees' view that has been framed within the sociologist's conceptual frame. In this study, the big chunks or themes distilled from the analytic process were migration history and

[4] See Ibarra-Taberdo (2008), for similar procedure of analyzing qualitative data on Philippine Maranao Muslim women's lives.

migration aspirations, work-life as irregular migrants, arrest, detention and deportation, reasons for returning home/oscillation.

Sampling and Study Participants

The study cases or participants were recruited from Pendulunan, a low-income, Muslim-majority coastline *sitio* of RT, in Bataraza town, lying within the interstices of RTNMC with its stockyard of mounds of soil being processed for nickel elements. Some Pendulunan residents here were employed as contractual stevedores and few worked in white-collar jobs inside its offices. Fishing was a source of income but during the last few decades, local fishers were getting less catch due to dwindling fishery resources. As mentioned above, the socio-economic level was below the poverty line and the state of services and infrastructure was wanting. With its geographical and socio-cultural affinity with the eastern seaboard of Sabah, migration was an option to try their luck for betterment. Pendulunan (and Buaya) were originally chosen as research setting for a broad research mentioned above because of its location as coastal communities where fishers were assumed to have perspectives on their immediate environment. However, the theme of migration was an emerging discourse, which I followed up, in the following years.

Given the varying count of irregular migrants in circulation and the fluidity of this phenomenon (Openiano, 2007) (unknown population), I used non-probability sampling, specifically, snowball sampling. I first started with two cases recommended by the Secretary of *Barangay* RT, then asked these two to recommendation people they knew, and so on. My interviews were facilitated by key informants and a research assistant who also resided in Pendulunan and whose father, a long-time resident, also served as a key informant.

Interview data used for this paper were derived from six cases/ participants[5] from Pendulunan. They were the following: (1) Daud, 48, belonging to Mapun ethnic group, and married with 11 children; (2) Jamal, 62, belonging to Bangingi-Tausug, and married with 2 children; (3) Wahab, 49, belonging to Mapun ethnic group, and married with 7 children; (4) Malik, 30, a Bangingi, married with 3 children; (5) Mariam, 33, a Mapun but grew up in KK, with 6 children; (6) Salma, a Mapun-Tausug, 24, unmarried.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following interview data were organized according to the themes as propounded in the objectives above. As the original interviews were conducted in Filipino, the responses were translated in English and the participants' responses were presented verbatim. As I presented each theme of irregular migrants' life, I put my commentaries/views as researcher side by side with those of the cases.

Migration History; Migration Aspirations

In this section, I presented the findings on the participants' migration history, place of origin, specifically its socio-economic situation, livelihood options, and aspirations in life.

Just like much of the population of Bataraza, the study participants and their parents were not really natives of the place. Daud's and Wahab's parents were members of the Mapun indigenous group hailing from Mapun (now Cagayan de Tawi-Tawi), Tawi-Tawi Province who decided to settle in Bataraza sometime in the 1960s. Daud's parents engaged in rice and copra trading plying Bataraza-Mapun-Labuan route, when the latter used to be an "open port". One of the parents each of Mariam and Salma were Mapun. On the other hand, Jamal, who was still unmarried, came from Jolo, Sulu during the Martial Law years, first arrived in Puerto Princesa City. Looking for a "mosque", he landed in Bataraza. Malik was born in Basilan, stayed sometime in Quiapo's (Metro Manila) big

[5] Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identity.

Muslim community, eventually establishing his stilt house connected by slabs of lumber, just at the back of his elder brother's dwelling. In other words, the study participants were second generation offsprings of parents who originally came from the Sulu-Tawi-Tawi Archipelago within the Sulu-Sulawesi seascape as described by Warren (2000).

Being residents of coastal community, Daud (personal communication, Nov. 3, 2015) and Jamal (personal communication, Nov. 3, 2015) were fishers just like many residents in Bataraza. However, as an extractive livelihood using traditional methods and highly dependent on resources from the sea, income was not stable and dependable.

> Daud: "Everyone knows that in fishing, there are times when there's enough catch, but sometimes there's nothing. During typhoons and we could not fish, life was really difficult…if the typhoon stayed for a week…there's nothing we could give to our children for their needs."

During the time when he was just using the traditional *banca* (a dugout canoe often provided with outriggers), hook and line, and net for fishing, he thought and aspired for a better fishing technology, one that uses high power motor for his *banca*.

> Daud: "Their [referring to fellow fishers] boats were motorized, they just passed by me. I said, a few years from now, I can also buy one. I really aspired to have a motorized *banca.*

Illegal fishing was resorted to as an easier way of livelihood but undermined the integrity of marine life and resources as well as its capacity to regenerate for people's livelihood and food. During the heyday of sharkfin fishing ("*pamating*") in the early 1980s, before its official banning, many fishers in RT including Daud and Jamal, actively engaged in it.

With minimal catch from the sea, and the consequent banning of shark fin fishing, Daud, Jamal and Wahab turned to migration to Sabah. If the push factor of migration such as loss of livelihood due to constraints in access to marine resources as above was strong, the pull factor could be equally strong. In the case of Wahab, he was just a high school graduate in 1983. One day, an uncle who was a contractor of buildings in KK made a visit. He told him: "If you want to have money, you come with me to KK". So, he heeded his uncle's invitation and went to KK but did not find a job in the uncle's construction site. Instead, he landed a job in a fishing trawl.

On the other hand, another migrant, Jamal (personal communication, Nov. 3, 2015) intended to raise money for a possible entrepreneurial project. He said:

> Jamal: "My plan was to earn for capital from a job that would pay me about 10-20 pesos per month".

At the center of Daud's and Wahab's aspirations was the welfare of the family: for Daud to be able to buy a better, more productive fishing technology in order to increase his catch, and for Jamal, to be able to raise capital, which they thought could be realized by going to Sabah. But the decision to migrate or leave one's home was not made without an expectation/ offer of help. In the case of Wahab, the invitation came from an uncle and in the case of Jamal, he said that he had two brothers in Kota Kinabalu. This substantiates Hassan's (1978) findings in a survey that showed the role of relatives among Filipino migrants to Sabah. More than three fourths of his respondents had family members who migrated to Sabah. This also supports the phenomenon of "chain migration" (Pertierra, 1992) among Filipino migrants to other parts of world.

Work- life as Irregular Migrants

This section presents the experiences of six study participants in the host area, Sabah, specifically how they negotiated the new social environment: 1) their experiences and perspectives on their situation as undocumented migrants, and 2) their experiences of arrest, detention and deportation.

Daud, Jamal and Wahad, worked, though separately at different times, in fishing trawls owned by Chinese (referring to Chinese Malays) capitalists, usually with an all-Filipino crew. They usually fished in Philippine- Malaysian boundary waters. They didn't have passports and work permits and thus, they were, in Daud's words "illegal aliens". I asked how was it like to be an irregular/ undocumented worker?

> Jamal: "I worked in a fishing trawl for 3 years. Because I didn't have IC, I hid when there's police operation, when the police were gone, I went out to work".
>
> Daud: "It's difficult when one has no passport, secondly, it's difficult to work in a foreign country. It's very difficult because one can't work as expected because when the police came, we had to hide, as if we were thieves".

When asked whether, he knew that a passport was required to enter Malaysia, Daud said yes, but that he didn't have money to get one.

> Daud: "I didn't have money to procure a passport…we heard people say that it's okay to go there without passport, just hide…TNT, yes, in order to have a livelihood".
>
> "It's better to exert effort than steal or kill someone just to have money…Because some people have that kind of belief...thinking why exert effort to work honestly when one can rob or hold-up someone for money".
>
> Wahab: "Since 1983, I worked in Malaysia for seven to eight years, intermittently ("*balik-balik lang"*) (meaning to come and leave, repeatedly) but TNT[6]. As of now, it is not allowed to enter Malaysia without documents. Since the Lahad Datu incident, the authorities are already strict, the violators are arrested and deported to the Philippines".

Malik (personal communication, Oct. 20, 2016) and Mariam (personal communication, Oct. 19, 2016) had been using their IMM13 pass since 2013 and 2014, respectively, to enter and work in Sabah. Malik worked as construction worker in KK while Mariam worked initially as a waitress in a restaurant, and thereafter as seamstress.

> Malik: "The Chinese (referring to Chinese Malaysians) often owned the buildings to be constructed. Some were good, some were bad. We could get cash advance even after the first day of work. I experienced having no salary because the contractor ran away. I got mad but he was gone. I looked for another job…if one has no pass, he can't easily get out of the house nor go home [to Philippines]. My older brother has been in KK for 30 years with IMM13 pass but his children can't go to school."[7]
>
> Mariam: "My boss owned a factory for nurses' uniforms, blazers, coats, wedding dresses. The wedding dress was the most difficult to sew. The work quota was two dresses per

[6] A Filipino phrase which means always in hiding

[7] See Lumayag (2016) for a discussion of plight of children of stateless parents.

> day. My boss was a Mapun whose husband was a Visayan but they had been staying in KK for a long time. They had three stores…Of all her 10 seamstresses, there were three of us who were assigned to the most difficult items…During my last stint in KK, I worked for 20 days. My salary was RM700, then I was given a bonus of RM50. On June 2017, I'll return to Sabah to renew my pass, then maybe work for one month, then go home to Pendulunan."

Malik and Mariam had the same strategy: Going to Sabah to renew their pass every year, work for few months, then go home with the earnings. Malik was in KK last year to renew his pass, then worked for four months.

Salma (personal communication, March 23, 2017), although a niece of Mariam, was recruited by a cousin of her employer, a Mapun from one of the *barangays* of Bataraza, who became successful with her factory of dresses in Sabah. She went to Sabah without travel documents but on the premise that her employer shall cover for her. She was housed in the former's dormitory and was trained to sew dresses and paid. Despite having no travel documents, she moved around KK, sometimes serving as chaperone to the daughter or cousin of the employer.

Arrest, Detention and Deportation

This section presents the experience of two participants: Daud's arrest, detention and deportation. Jamal, on the other hand, was arrested and detained.

> Jamal: "I was detained for three months because our fishing vessel was impounded. I was detained for a long time because they asked for mone, I also needed money for bail. My two siblings in Malaysia helped me get out of detention". Jamal's wife had four siblings in Malaysia, but because she had no IC, she would not risk anymore visiting them, although they visited her in Bataraza three years ago. She said: "It's difficult even if we have siblings there… in the past, it was not difficult even if without passport".
>
> Daud was apprehended in Kudat near the pier for having no travel documents. Unlike Jamal whose two brothers in Malaysia helped him raised the "*piyansa"* (bail money) in order to be released from detention, Daud was detained for six months because there was nobody to help him, he had no relatives to get him out. From Kudat, he was brought to a holding center together with several others who were apprehended. From there, he was deported to Sandakan, then got down in the town of Bonggao, Tawi-Tawi where they were required to register at the Mayor's Office and given pass by the Customs authorities. From Bonggao, he proceeded to Jolo, from Jolo to Zamboanga City, from Zamboanga City to Cagayan de Tawi-Tawi, and finally back to Bataraza.
>
> Daud: "It's really difficult, firstly, to be detained in a foreign country without a violation, you didn't steal anything, then your case is only because you don't have a passport."
> "It's really difficult to be in that kind of situation wherein you are in a foreign country to earn for the family, but you don't know what's happening to them at home".

Asked as to whether, his family knew about his detention, he answered yes, but that they too could not do anything for his release.

It would seem that the above work-life experiences of the cases here were not isolated incidents. They were shared with several others in similar situation. In a study of Azizah Kassim & Mat Zin (2011), of 404 irregular migrants who were inside detention centers in the Peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak awaiting deportation, 88.5% was due to violations of Immigration Act 1959/63 and Passport Act 1996 (Azizah Kassim & Mat Zin, 2011, p.94). In addition, the top four problems of respondents were: in

constant fear of arrest (71.3%), not free to go out (68.1%), difficulty to get a job (40.6%) and problems in returning to home country (31.4%) (Azizah Kassim & Mat Zin, 2011, p.100).

Reasons for Returning Home/ Oscillation

This section presented the perspectives of study participants on why they decided to return home, and their consequent status as of this study.

> Daud: "There were lots of jobs there in Sabah. In fact, there were more jobs than workers… but if we don't have documents, it's very difficult. You are working to earn, but at the same time constantly hiding, it's very difficult".

With his experience of detention and deportation, Daud said: "I don't want to return there anymore" (laughing). Daud now has three college-graduate children, one of whom works in Malaysia, one at RTNMC and another one at the RT Barangay Hall. One of his children operates a sari-sari store near his house. Daud is serving his first term as *Barangay Kagawad* where he heads the Committee on Peace and Order.

> Jamal: "One should have a work permit in order to work, it's difficult when you get detained…if you stay there for a number of years, you pay the tax for the years of stay. Aside from paying taxes, you wait for as long as you don't have IC…the children suffer because they could not go to school".
>
> "Here at home, you need only look for food… you do a walk-about and you won't be arrested. There, you may have sufficient or big income but get arrested, so just go home. If you have enough money for capital, just go home and stop working there".

Jamal used his earnings from Malaysia for some business including a sari-sari store and two fishing boats and renting out tricycle. Referring to his dwellings "Our house is the product of earnings from abroad." He and his wife (who also worked as contract worker for some time in the Middle East) sent their two children to private schools for security reasons in addition to the belief that these schools offer good quality education. This, according to his wife, "so that they will not be like us without proper schooling."

> Wahab*:* "I have no more plan to go or work in Malaysia…at this age I have now the right mind as to how to earn a living, in the past I thought going there without passport, or via backdoor entry would be okay. Here, even without a job, you can survive, in other countries, you're on your own".

After his stint in Malaysia, Wahab learned a driving course offered by RTN, and was until now, employed there. He said that he was contented with his current life situation residing on a part of 3.5 hectares of land planted with coconuts along the coastline which his parents, as one of "original" residents, settled in from Cagayan de Tawi-Tawi.

On the other hand, Malik and Mariam had decided to continue going to and working in Sabah even if only for a number of months in a year, then would go home afterwards because of family obligations. Mariam's husband worked in far-flung barangays of Bataraza while only her senior mother was around to look after her six young children. Back in Pendulunan, Malik and Mariam did odd jobs, while waiting for the next trip to Sabah. For instance, Malik earned as stated below while Mariam accepted job orders to sew or repair dresses and uniforms. While they may not earn in Pendulunan as much as in Sabah, they indicated that the reproductive role of caring and being with loved ones was important. In their own words:

Malik: "I can work for up to one year, or until when I want, or just like last year, I worked for four months…if you don't miss your children…until this pass is valid, I maintain the same work routine. If I am in Pendulunan, I can go fishing or go with my brother sell fish in the market. He has a *suki* (someone loyal) fisherman whose catch he buys wholesale…when we ran out of cash for basic needs, I can pawn some belongings like jewelry".

Mariam: "My boss doesn't want to let me go home. When I do, she would give me about RM300 (smiling) so I would be financially tied to her…but my six children are here, they are studying here, my husband is working here although we meet only on weekends because he works in far-flung *barangays.* My old mother warned me that if in case she dies without me around, she would curse me".

Salma, unmarried and the youngest of the study participants, was prevailed upon by her mother and brother to return home in 2014, after a year of stay in Sabah. This was due to one occasion of police "operation" looking for "illegals" (sic). Her employer learned earlier, and she was transferred to another place. So, she was spared from arrest. Referring to this practice against irregular migrants and about her daughter's precarious experience, Salma's mother said: "I have nothing to say against her employer. It's fine if she would not be arrested. Even if you have been staying there for 10 years, you could still get arrested. It's good if the boss is always there to bail you out but you would still be detained for three days". As of this study, Salma was attending a one-month class conducted in the mosque in Bataraza and as a high school graduate, she planned to apply as teacher in a *madrasah*.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This section distilled the salient findings of this study using the sociological interactionist-humanist approach to the work-life experiences of irregular migrants in Sabah from Southern Palawan, Philippines. It departed from the macro demographic and survey research in analysing the participants' circular migration in search of livelihood and upliftment of life. Despite the limitations of the paper, as a case study, if at all, the summary and conclusions are presented below.

All study participants came from families with migration history originating from islands/areas of the Sulu and Tawitawi Archipelago around the Sulu and Celebes Seas and residing in the southern tip of Palawan at the time of study. Migration was carried out for economic and social betterment- to have better fishing implements, to have capitalisation for family's business, to increase income, with the family or household at the core of intentions and aspirations. The household was also a factor to go home to and to circulate between home country and host country.

Majority of study participants had kin or employment contacts which may have emboldened them to cross border. While in host country, the same contacts helped out with issues related to lodging, bail money and police/administrative problems.

Circular migration was done intermittently (*pabalik-pabalik*), that is, moving between home country and host country and back, and so on - both by irregular migrants and those who claim to have "documents". Yet, where circular migration was carried out without proper information and preparation (for example, documents, skills) for entry in host country, even with kin networks, irregular migrants experienced problems such as difficulty of mobility (TNT), arrest, detention and deportation.

Among those who decided to stay home for good, the socio-economic betterment reflected in present situation was partly attributed to working in host country even though memories of bad experiences thereof were never forgotten. The younger ones (Malik and Mariam) who continued to circulate with their documents did it as main source of livelihood and occasionally went home to perform

reproductive roles of caring for children and parents at home country. This *pabalik-balik* modus operandi manifested the dynamics of personal predicament and structural force where, as WSW Hassan et al. (2010, p.1) wrote, "migrants will continue to come back regardless of whatever measures taken by government for as long as job opportunities are abundantly available in Sabah…as well as the availability of 'shelter' (punctuations in the original) provided by their relatives who are locals".

As migration was earlier suggested to be viewed from an alternative demographic discourse, where people circulate between countries, home country may just as well equip migrants with logistic and financial support and proper information about host countries' requirements- documents, skills, qualifications and culture. On the other hand, host country may consider adopting a humanist/human rights perspective (instead of obsession with the security issue which may be pursued through regional cooperation) considering the long history of geo-social, economic, religious and kinship relations and shared access to a maritime resource, and study models based on the experience of mature developed countries that are relevant for its purposes.

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