

RESEARCH BRIEFS

# Religious Experiences of Filipino Catholic Women Migrants in Japan: The Case of the Kaagapay Oita Filipino Association

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Japan is fast becoming a multicultural society (Chapple, 2009). One contributing factor to such growing diversity is the increasing global migration to the country (Douglass & Roberts, 2002). There are already a plethora of studies looking into diaspora of people to Japan. Researchers of Japan have examined migrants' experiences (Ishii, 2005), migration policy issues (Douglass & Roberts, 2012), migration networking (Dizon, 2003), push and pull factors (Higuchi & Tanno, 2003), labor to permanent migration transition (Sato, 2004), and international marriages (Nakamatsu, 2002). In terms of marriage and family research, there are studies that dwelt on religious intimacy (Lopez, 2012) and identity (Almonte-Acosta, 2008).

In this paper, I would like to describe how a Filipino Catholic group organized themselves as a community and how their activities are associated with identity affirmations, both in religious and ethnic standpoints in the community they belong. Discussion of this paper is partly based on my three years stay in Japan as a doctoral student. Also, some data of this paper were culled from a focus group discussion. This paper is a response to a research gap on intercultural marriage discourse. Lopez (2012) maintained

that many researches on such marriage revolve around "gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity" (p. 282). To address the gap, Lopez wrote an article about how religion, particularly Catholicism, is negotiated and assimilated into the Japanese-Filipino homes. To extend the argument, this paper moves beyond the family. The Filipino mothers also negotiate their sense of place in Catholic churches in Japan. The purpose of this paper is to examine how Filipino women immigrants in Japan practice and negotiate their "Filipino" Catholic faith in the Japanese Catholic churches with the Kaagapay Oita Filipino Association as a case in point.

## **CATHOLIC CHURCHES IN JAPAN AND THE FILIPINO PARISHIONERS**

The Catholic Church of Japan consists of 16 dioceses, one each in Hokkaido, Tohoku, Shikoku, and Chugoku; two each in Chubu and Kinki; three in Kanto; and five in Kyushu (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan, <http://www.cbcj.catholic.jp/eng>). The Catholic Commission of Japan for Migrants, Refugees and People on the Move conducted a survey in 2005

to estimate the number of Catholic migrants in the country. Based on their data, there were about 42,749 Filipino Catholics under a permanent visa status and 38,117 Filipino Catholics who were spouses of Japanese nationals. Many of the Filipino Catholic migrants reside in big cities like Tokyo, Yokohama, Saitama, and Nagoya. The Filipino is the fourth largest Catholic migrant group in Japan following the Koreans, Chinese, and Brazilians.

Zarate (2008) mentioned that “Filipinos are in every diocese of Japan” (p. 30). Filipinos go to church to profess their commitment to their faith and to touch base with co-Filipinos. Going to church is also a strategy to deal with homesickness and emotional adjustments. One coping mechanism adapted by migrant Filipinos to respond to their emotional insecurity is to go to a church (Ogsimer & Gatpatan, 2008). As a result, they are able to develop a strong sense of identity. Palumbarit (2012) also noticed the same observation in her study on Filipino women migrants in Korea. She noted that religion has helped the Filipino women integrate and has offered them “physical and social refuge against marginalization and has provided them a sense of belonging to a new community and new religious identity” (p. 236). Likewise, Fresnoza-Flot (2010) similarly contended that Filipinos views the church as a “center of collective identity, a source of empowerment, and instrument of social control” (p.345).

Filipinos play an active role in English masses in many Japanese churches. They are often asked to serve the masses as scripture readers or as choir members. Besides religious activities, some communities also extend their help to Filipinos who are experiencing immigration and family problems (Zarate, 2008). Some Filipino church leaders also sit in the parish councils. While their primary concern is to socialize their families into the Catholic faith (Lopez, 2012), Filipino women in Japan are now slowly trying to evangelize their faith to their fellowmen as well as to their

Japanese friends through active participation in the church. In fact, Tondo (2010, p. 239) reported that “diasporic communities aspire to translate home cultural practices and replicate familiar and recognizable homeland landscapes in their places of settlement.” LeMay (2008) even gave them the epitaph as “the international ambassadors of the Catholic faith in Japan” (p. 77).

Through Internet research, I came across a number of Filipino Catholic religious communities that includes the Kaagapay Oita Filipino Association, which is the subject of this paper (see Table 1). While these organizations are all Church-based, there are a few of them that also hold activities that are not religious in nature. Many of the organizations conduct Filipino religious rituals that are foreign to Japanese Catholics. These include the Flores de Mayo, Santa Cruzan, Christmas caroling, and block rosary. They also hold Christmas party, Bible-sharing, charity bazaar, and fund raising activities.

### **THE KAAGAPAY OITA FILIPINO ASSOCIATION AND ITS ACTIVITIES**

The Kaagapay Oita Filipino Association (KOFA) was founded in 2009. Prior to its formal establishment, the group already existed although as a small functioning group of Filipino mothers who were organized to animate the English Sunday mass of the Oita Catholic Church. It was only after five years when the organization was given a name and gained recognition as a group of and for Filipino migrant wives. The aim of the organization is to primarily assist the Filipino migrant mothers in terms of their social, familial, and religious needs. As a community, KOFA aims to strengthen the Catholic faith of the Filipino-Japanese families.

Most of Kaagapay members are longtime marriage migrant residents of Oita. Some of them have been staying for more than 15 years

**Table 1.** *Filipino Catholic Religious Groups*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Location</b>
Amagasaki Catholic Church	Hyogo
Anjo-Kariya Catholic Filipino Community	Aichi
Filipino Catholic Association Kasukabe Church	Saitama
Filipino Community sa Yamanashi	Yamanashi
Filipinos and Friends in Fukuoka	Fukuoka
Hiratsuka Filipino Catholic Community	Kanagawa
Kaagapay Oita Filipino Association	Oita
Kasai Catholic Community	Tokyo
Kichijoji Filipino Catholic Community	Tokyo
Kurume EMP	Kurume
Kyoto Pag-asa Filipino Community	Kyoto
Nagahama Catholic Filipino Community	Shiga
Nunoike Filipino Catholic Community	Nagoya
Toyoshiki Catholic Community	Chiba
Tsu Catholic Filipino Community	Mie
Women's Heart	Oita
Yokosuka Mikasa Filipino Community	Kanagawa

already. Members of Kaagapay during a focus group discussion cited various benefits of joining the association. Being close to God was the most common. Many of them shared that because of their involvement in Kaagapay they were taught how to pray the rosary and open the Bible. They also disclosed that they were not as religious when they were in the Philippines. Members also reported that through their Bible sharing, they are able to tone down or if not change their negative traits and gain new insights on how to raise their Filipino-Japanese children.

The organization's main activity is the Bible-sharing, which they conduct on a weekly basis. The activity is being attended by Filipino mothers who devote their Wednesdays for their Bible activities, some of whom had to travel long distance or to skip their part time jobs just to be able to attend. KOFA members usually start their

Bible study by selecting some scriptures with which they base their discussion. After reading, they then share their own understanding of the scriptures and contextualize them using their personal experiences. Cathartic in nature, the activity allows the Filipino wives to share with the group their personal struggles with their own family or their family in the Philippines. Through their discussions, some of the wives get to solicit pieces of advice on how to deal with their own problems.

Kaagapay members also animate the Sunday English mass by singing songs, reading scriptures, offering gifts, and managing the logistical needs of the mass. Some of them also take charge in inviting their friends to attend mass. They also conduct house visits for their block rosary. They hop from one house to another to encourage Filipino mothers to pray the rosary and to remind

them of their Sabbath obligations. Aside from their regular activities, Kaagapay also organizes its annual Santa Cruzan and family barbecue party. The aim of the said activities is to provide an opportunity for their Japanese husbands to interact with each other and to provide a venue where they could bond with their family members. Kaagapay also holds special events like sports fest and charity show. One of the biggest shows staged by Kaagapay was the *Kansha (gratitude)* concert. The aim of the event was to raise funds for Kaagapay's charitable endeavors and to showcase Filipino culture.

### Issues and Prospects of Integration

During the early beginnings of Kaagapay, its members expressed dissatisfaction for the lack of support of the parish and the gap between Japanese and Filipino parishioners. They were not happy with their parish priest who seemed to be distant and indifferent. The members also shared that the Japanese parishioners viewed them as time insensitive. When there are church activities, Filipino parishioners are always reminded on the importance of being on time. However, with the appointment of a new bishop of the Diocese of Oita, members of the Kaagapay felt some changes with regard to their relationship with the Japanese parishioners. They felt that they are now more integrated into their parish. The members also acknowledged the role of their parish priest in forging positive relationship between the Japanese and the Filipino parishioners.

### Challenges as Propagators of Faith

Members of Kaagapay still face hardships as they attempt to strengthen the Catholic faith of their family members and their co-Filipinos. Many of them wished that their husbands could also become Catholic. Only quite a few of the members were able to convert their husbands. Some Japanese husbands attend the mass just to

accompany their wives. When asked about what could explain this situation, one mother said that Japanese husbands are busy with work and they are already used to their own traditions even if they are not practicing Buddhists. Despite this situation, the Filipino mothers were still thankful that their husbands allowed them to raise their children as Catholics.

Indeed, one obvious manifestation of the success of Filipino mothers in propagating their Catholic faith is their being able to raise their children as Catholics. Some parents are also able to impart to their children the Catholic teachings at home by showing them how to pray and by exposing them to some Filipino religious artifacts like statues of the Holy Child and other saints. Such a practice is not common among the Japanese Catholics. In fact, the observance of the feast of the Holy Child is not a shared practiced among the Japanese. Despite their success at the family level, members of the Kaagapay are still struggling in enticing other Filipino wives to attend Sunday mass or to join their Bible sharing activity. They mentioned that some Filipino wives would tell them that they feel awkward in attending church activities since they considered themselves as sinners. Some mothers who are working at night as talents cannot attend because they have to sleep during the day. Some Filipino wives also avoid attending church activities due to their stereotypical notion that Filipinas active in church are gossipers.

### DISCUSSION

The religious experiences of Kaagapay point out several implications in relation to the understanding of religion and religious practices in the context of migration. First, membership in Kaagapay served as the social capital among its members. The church for them is like a family. Foley and Hoge (2007, p.111) maintained that "a self-conception of church as 'family'

often underlies strong bonding social capital, especially among the smaller communities.” Second, their membership to Kaagapay and their religious practices and experiences have afforded the Filipino wives some psychological comforts. As opined by Cruz (2008, p.364), “those who resort to religion as either as a coping mechanism or as a tool in the struggle for more life-giving conditions are likely to become more religious.”

Third, their being away from their home country increased the Kaagapay members’ religiosity. Some members admitted that they were not religious when they were in the Philippines. This then implies that migration may increase religiosity especially if going to Church and being with a community of believers will somehow ease their loneliness and emptiness as a result of being away from their homeland. As noted by Vertovec (2001), religion as instrumental to adaptation may result into some form of religious transformation. The religious rituals and practices that the Kaagapay members perform are manifestations of the ongoing process of transnationalizing religion. Along with people’s movement, religion has crossed boundaries. Indeed, religious life has become global (Levitt, 2004). Through their observance of Filipino religious rituals, movements of religious articles and even religious persons were evident.

Fourth, Kaagapay’s experiences tell us that Filipino mother’s negotiation of their Catholic faith is not only confined within their own homes. They too have to define their own space at the Japanese Catholic churches they belong. At some point, the Kaagapay had struggled to be able to feel the sense of belongingness and acceptance from the local Japanese Catholic parishioners. The struggle at home is of course different from the struggle that Filipino women had to face at their local churches. At home, they had to negotiate with their husbands to be able to practice Catholic religious rituals and for their children to be baptized as Catholics

(Lopez, 2012). At their local churches, their struggle is to be able to belong and to be afforded the opportunity to perform Filipino Catholic religious rituals.

As noted in the introductory portion of the paper, I argue that Filipino women are not just propagating their Catholic faith at home but also at the community where they belong. Evidence showed through the Kaagapay experience that Filipino Catholic migrants are not only propagators but ministers of faith. Their mission is not only to entice others to be Catholics but also to deepen the faith especially to those who had lost religious connection due to migration. Although outside the family, the role of the Filipino women as potential propagators of faith leaves much to be desired. The presence of Filipino Catholics in Japanese Catholic churches though offers religious cultural diversity. As Ogsimer and Gatpatan (2008, p.53) put it, Filipinos somehow offered new religious experiences to Japanese parishioners.

The religious experiences of the Filipino wives, at least in the context of Kaagapay, describe the ways in which migrants negotiate religion at home and the community where they belong. Negotiation of religious practice may be challenged or accepted depending on the sensitivity of church leaders toward religious cultural diversity. The experience of Kaagapay seems to suggest that once sense of belonging and acceptance is achieved, migrants are freer to exercise their traditional religious practices. The existence of Filipino women in churches provides cultural diversity especially in Japan, a country generally stereotyped as a homogenous society. Going to church among the Filipinos provided them some psychological reliefs. This indicates that the church is becoming a place of succorance where the Filipina seeks social support. The role of the Filipino women in Japanese churches is crucial. With Japan’s ageing society, population of Japanese Catholics may dwindle in due time. However, with Filipino Catholics intermarrying

Japanese spouses, they are able to actively spread their faith through their offspring.

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