

Borderless Nationalism

By Maria Deanna P. Santos

On June 12th each year, the Philippine flag is raised in many parts of the world to celebrate the country's independence day. While it is standard practice for diplomatic posts in various countries to display their flags to signify their presence in foreign lands, this practice has taken on an entirely new meaning as far as the Philippines is concerned.

With seven million overseas Filipino workers scattered around the globe, ceremonies such as these allow Filipinos to rekindle nationalistic sentiments, while toiling many miles away from home. After lengthy absences from one's motherland, I believe that even the most hardened of hearts would likely feel a sense of nostalgia at the sight of one's national flag or upon hearing a rendition of the national anthem. Therefore, these activities have almost become essential elements for survival of Filipino migrants in far-flung destinations.

Due to growing internationalization, Vice Consul Edna May Lazaro of the Philippine Consulate General in Toronto notes that the current view in diplomatic and government circles is that nationalism cannot anymore be limited within strictly geographic confines. She explains that there has been a realization that, both national and international development cannot be fully attained without accepting and facilitating the inevitable growth of international migration, trade of goods and services and other types of transborder activity. Indeed, it would seem rather simplistic in this day and age to adopt a "purist" view of nationalism where one is expected to live and die in one's native land to prove fealty and patriotism.

But then again, the concepts of a borderless world and a true universal spirit have yet to achieve the ideal. While various social ills such as extreme poverty, inequitable distribution of wealth, environmental degradation, ignorance and racial prejudice exist, the struggle continues.

For whatever it is worth, please allow me to share below the text of the welcome remarks I delivered at the flag-raising event held at Toronto City Hall on June 12, which touches upon this very issue of what I refer to as 'borderless nationalism':

"Today we are celebrating the independence day of our beloved country, the Philippines. Only thing is, we are celebrating not in the Philippines, but in our adopted country, Canada.

So why are we here? Why do we need to celebrate the independence day of the Philippines in a foreign country? Is it not ironic that we are celebrating national independence yet we chose to leave the Philippines, to seek greener pastures in another? Is this not what we often hear from others – that we are un-nationalistic for having opted to leave instead of stay in the country and be part of nation-building? Have we really given up on the Philippines by choosing to reside in a foreign land?

I am sure the answers to these questions are as varied as our specific personal circumstances. But one thing is certain: that it is not easy to deny our identity. Our identity as Filipinos can never be erased regardless of whatever foreign citizenship we may have obtained, the languages we now speak or the culture we may have acquired.

Identity is both internal and eternal. Our Filipino identity is **internal** because it is deep-seated and no external force or influence can take it away. Our Filipino identity is **eternal** because it lives within and dies with us, regardless of what our present situation is and what our future may hold.

What has our Filipino identity got to do with what we are celebrating today? In my view, everything. We are celebrating Philippine independence day because we recognize our Filipino heritage, our Filipino roots and our undeniable Filipino identity. Indeed, we are very blessed to live in a multicultural country such as Canada and even more blessed to live in the most diverse city in the world: Toronto. This diversity and multicultural atmosphere allows us to freely celebrate our ethnic roots without fear of being treated as second-class citizens, or worse, as outcasts in a place we have considered as our second home.

We would also like to thank our non-Filipino friends who came to join in today's independence day celebration. Although they may not share our Filipino identity, they are here to prove that citizenship and belonging are not based on one's ethnicity or race, skin color or native tongue. Rather, true citizenship and belonging are, and should be based on a common vision to build a better world for ourselves and for future generations. So while we are here today, many thousand miles away from the Philippines we need not give in to suggestions that we are un-nationalistic or un-patriotic for having chosen to reside elsewhere. There is no use pointing fingers at, or judging each other, that one is more nationalistic than the other simply because one chose to stay in the Philippines while we ended up elsewhere.

Whatever our reasons for being here today, let us all be grateful and allow this to be a time for reexamination. At the very least, each and everyone's presence here today, including those of our non-Filipino friends, is a touching witness of our unity and respect for each other, of our recognition that what we are celebrating today is important enough to grace with our very presence.

It does not end here of course. In thinking of ways to prove our 'nationalism', 'patriotism' or even 'universalism', let us all be reminded that symbolic gestures mean nothing if we fail to follow through with concrete action, for the good of our fellow human beings, in the Philippines, Canada or elsewhere. May we all be encouraged by the thought that any and all good that we do for others is a good that we do for ourselves.

Thanks very much for listening, happy Philippine Independence day and may God bless us all."

The author would also be interested to hear your views on this matter and may be reached at mdsantos@osgoode.yorku.ca.