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6 Tales of Filipinos in Brunei Darussalam

Identities, cultural flows, histories, and personal narratives

Chester Keasberry, Phan Le Ha and Yabit Alas

Introduction

Let's start with "who we are" and "how we pulled together" this chapter. We are Chester Keasberry, Phan Le Ha, and Yabit Alas, three colleagues and friends working at Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) in Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei). Chester and Yabit are Bruneian, and Le-Ha is Vietnamese-Australian. Brunei is a small Islamic sultanate on the island of Borneo in Southeast Asia, with a population of 440,180 people as of 2021, based on *Worldometer*'s elaboration of the latest United Nations data. Brunei depends largely on foreigners for its nation building project, particularly after its independence from the British in 1984. Today, Filipinos form the largest expatriate/diasporic community in this sultanate and are present in many aspects of Bruneian society, ranging from everyday hospitality and food services to other businesses such as health, medical, and domestic domains, as well as churches and education. It is almost impossible not to encounter a Filipino in Brunei.

This chapter is informed by scholarly and personal interests as well as life stories that all of us bring and share: Phan Le-Ha's long-term research on transnational mobilities with a current focus on inter-Asian mobilities; our shared interests in language, education, and society, and many conversations that have followed; our life experiences and memories; and our self-generated and interview-generated narratives on the topic. Together with writing down our own narratives, we took turns interviewing one another and held two follow-up group discussions regarding our knowledge of the Philippines and our life stories and interactions with Filipinos in Brunei. As we shall show throughout this chapter, we each have a unique angle to engage in this topic. Our overall aim was to examine the spirit and manifestations of global Asias in the context of Filipinos in Brunei. In the process, we asked many questions concerning "what," "how," "why," "when," "who," and "to what extent." We also let the flow of our narratives and our exchanges of ideas guide our examination of the topic.

We are regular attendants of academic events at our university, including many seminars in education, arts, humanities, and social sciences. While

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Yabit Alas often comments and raises questions, Chester Keasberry keeps himself engaged by doodling ideas into images, charts and visual markers, and Le Ha is busy thinking and jotting down arguments and observations that come to her mind. In one of the seminars that we all attended, we found ourselves very keen on many ideas about history put forth by a transnational historian of Filipino background, Rommel Curaming: A colleague and scholar of Southeast Asian Studies at UBD. His seminar entitled "Intellectualist Bias and the Affective Turn: Populism, History and Popular Culture," delivered in the *International and Comparative Education Seminar Series (ICE)* on 2 February 2021, sparked so much discussion that flowed across multiple topics. One dialogue in particular is pertinent to our current discourse and focus of this chapter. As part of his seminar, Curaming put forth the premise that history has different facets. Firstly, there is history as knowledge, often of the written or academic kind. This is the past as analyzed by historians based on available evidence. Next is history as experience, where the past is seen through individual or collective experience. Next is history as memory. This is where the past is remembered and recounted by individuals and/or collectives who might not have experienced it directly themselves. Then, there is history as produced and projected in popular culture and as consumed all around us. Lastly is actual history. This is the past as it actually happened, whether or not anyone really remembers or experienced it. Curaming has conceptualized and elaborated these facets of history in his scholarship (Curaming 2017, 2018, 2019).

With Curaming's facets of history in mind, we are interweaving them into this chapter, though in no particular order. We construct, tell, recall, and engage in narratives and discourses surrounding Filipinos in Brunei. We will first introduce readers to an anecdotal history of Brunei where we combine history as knowledge (using available records) and history as experience and memory, for one of us (Yabit) has had the benefit of living through and pondering the myriad changes in the nation of Brunei across the decades, particularly with regard to the Filipino immigrant population in the nation. We then discuss Jollibee, a global Filipino fast-food chain, yet also a dear part of Brunei's contemporary food culture and identity. Lastly, we will ponder a personal narrative from one of us, Chester, that discusses what it was like to be a child raised by a Filipino domestic helper. Bringing together all the aforementioned narratives, accounts, and depictions through multiple voices, we hope to embrace the spirit of the sociolinguistics of global Asias, as we attempt to interact with the varied histories of a small segment of the diverse Filipino community in Brunei. In so doing, we engage with multiple forms of history that have brought the Philippines into the consciousness of everyday Brunei, particularly since the kingdom's independence in 1984. It should be noted that working on this chapter has been very challenging, as there is so little written on Filipino–Brunei relations as well as on Filipinos in Brunei. To date, Mani (1996) remains the only scholarly source who looks into Filipino immigrant workers in Brunei. Other sources of information are

occasional media reports, short articles from newspapers, and extracts from internet forums that we have also included in this chapter. We acknowledge that anecdotes, memories, and personal observations and reflections form the backbone of our work, and we also want to make it clear that we are not attempting to write a history of Filipinos in Brunei. Rather, we engage with "the sociolinguistics of global Asias" via the case of Filipinos in Brunei.

Filipinos in Brunei: An anecdotal history

We would now like to bring readers to our seminar room at UBD, where we spent hours discussing and exchanging ideas and interviewing one another regarding the focus of this chapter. What is presented in this section is centered on Yabit's memories, experiences, and narratives. Chester and Le-Ha have crafted a representation of those days that Yabit lived through in Brunei.

Filipino products, the Istana Project, and Filipino hangouts

This history begins in the 1970s, before Filipino politician Ferdinand Marcos became the tenth President of the Philippines. There were a lot of Filipino products exported to and sold in Brunei, although there was not yet a large Filipino presence there. Once the Marcos era began, however, the entire market for these products collapsed. At the time, many wondered what had happened, though answers were not readily forthcoming. The early 1980s saw an influx of Filipino immigrants, starting with Filipino engineers and construction workers brought over by the Ayala Corporation, which was contracted to build the Sultan's palace: The Istana Nurul Iman Palace. The Istana (the Malay word for "palace")—the official residence of the Sultan of Brunei, Hassanal Bolkiah, and the seat of the Brunei government—was designed by renowned Filipino architect Leandro V. Locsin and largely built by Filipino workers between 1981 and 1984 (Alabastro, 2013).

It was then that the Filipino community first arrived in large numbers and kept increasing. Thousands and thousands came to Brunei. Recalled by Andy Latif, a long-term Filipino living in Brunei since the mid-1970s, who got married to a Bruneian man and became one of the most successful Filipinos in Brunei:

> The '80s was a banner year for Filipino overseas construction workers here when the Ayala Corp. was awarded a consultancy in the building of the sultan's Palace–Istana Nurul Iman. At that time, there was no Philippine Embassy in Brunei and some friends were teasing me… I was like an informal ambassador dealing with the needs of the Filipinos. I assisted in helping find a place for the first Philippine Embassy, and later, its staff, as well as in social and cultural matters.
>
> (Alabastro, 2013, n.p.)

By 1992 there were 25,268 Filipinos in Brunei (Mani, 1996). Owing to this new large immigrant community, Filipino products saw a resurgence to meet the renewed demand, and by the 90s, Brunei's imports from the Philippines amounted to $2.48 million Brunei dollars and included food, beverages, tobacco, and various manufactured goods and articles (Mani, 1996). Yet the sale and availability of these products were concentrated in those areas where the Filipino community often congregated, such as at multi-story parking structures in the nation's capital, Bandar Seri Begawan (often simply referred to as "Bandar" or BSB for short). The market economics surrounding these "community commons" were quite sensitive and would naturally ebb and flow depending on the communities that influenced them; at times, products would be predominantly Filipino, and other times, they would give way to Indonesian or Thai products when workers from those nations arrived and changed the demographics of the immigrant community. Yabit recalled that Thai and Indonesian workers were also everywhere in Brunei and, together with Filipinos, they were essential in the building of the independent Brunei whereby a new energy and vision found themselves unfolded in endless construction projects and in developing a new country for Bruneians.

In the early 1980s the phenomenon of hiring Filipino domestic helpers was not common yet in Bruneian society. However, once Brunei gained independence in 1984, things slowly began to change. By the early 1990s, along with the aforementioned shift in the labor market with Filipino, Thai, and Indonesian immigrant workers dominating, there were smaller numbers of South Asian nationals (Bangladeshi and Indian) arriving as well. Because of the large Filipino presence brought in by the Istana project, various sectors soon began hiring Filipino nationals, and thus Filipino labor was no longer concentrated at the palace but also spread across both the public and private sectors. One unexpected economic side effect of this was a drop in some salary scales; for example, the construction sector at the time had been dominated by Malaysian migrant workers from the East Malaysian state of Sarawak, mostly of Iban descent (a major ethnic group in Sarawak). Their salaries were considered high as they were in the range of thousands in Bruneian dollars. But with the Filipino influx and their willingness to work for less, salaries changed, and more and more Filipinos were brought into the sultanate.

These sorts of market shifts were seen in different sectors, and it was not uncommon to see Filipinos work as teachers, manual laborers, or as cashiers and shop assistants in supermarkets and department stores. The retail and services sector in particular has historically been one of two sectors that have hired the largest number of Filipino workers, the other being domestic help (Mani, 1996; Sim, 2006). Two such places with a large number of Filipino employees were Klasse Jaya Department store (See Figure 6.1), which opened its doors in the late 1970s, was known as the first building in the country with escalators, and had what many saw as a more contemporary shopping aesthetic, and Yaohan (See Figure 6.2), a now defunct Japanese

Figure 6.1

retail supermarket chain, which opened a four-story department store in Brunei in 1987 (The Straits Times, 1987). Tagalog, English, and Malay were the main languages of communication in those stores. They were indeed "spaces of multilingualism" (Blommaert et al., 2005), capturing language and "superdiversity" (Blommaert, 2013).

English spoken in Brunei was so "Filipino": Bruneian-Filipino intermarriages and Filipino amahs

Along with market shifts, there were other changes in Brunei life as well; sociolinguistically, there was suddenly a sense that the English spoken in Brunei was very "*Filipino*." This phenomenon could be explained in two ways. First, many Bruneian locals—usually men—had started marrying Filipino women. These intermarriages produced children of Filipino heritage who would grow up to have Bruneian-Filipino accents. Interestingly, it was less common for Bruneian women to marry Filipino men. One of the main reasons for this was citizenship; if a Filipino woman married a Bruneian man, she could apply to become a Bruneian citizen. However, the reverse was not true—a Filipino man could not become a local citizen through a Bruneian wife. But beyond personal citizenship, this would also affect any possible future children; in Brunei, children's nationality follows their

Figure 6.2

father's, and therein lies another reason that marriages between a Bruneian man and Filipino woman were more commonplace. Nevertheless, the result was the same; there were now children of mixed Bruneian and Filipino heritage and accents.

Second, it became quite commonplace to hire Filipinos as domestic helpers. Domestic helpers are often referred to as *amahs*, a Malay term which encompasses both the roles of a maid and a nanny for children. Thus, it was common for an *amah* to spend a lot of time raising their employers' children while both parents worked full-time (one of us, Chester, experienced this firsthand, as will be shown later in this chapter). One of the reasons for this was that most Filipinos spoke English quite fluently, especially as a lingua franca with their employers, and so many Bruneian parents hoped that this command of English would benefit their own children's English language education and early exposure to the language. According to Mani (1996), almost all the Filipino domestic workers/helpers working in Brunei claimed that they could communicate in English, regardless of their educational levels. This linguistic advantage then made Filipinos favored by Brunei's middle and upper class educated families, who generally enjoyed a high command of English as they used it much at home. These families were also the ones who could afford stay-in *amahs*. Consequently, owing to this increased amount of familial intimacy and interaction between *amahs* and their wards, it was not unusual for the children of Bruneian families to pick up the Filipino-accented English of their main caregiver.

This phenomenon of Filipino English was widespread enough that even the Ministry of Education took note, and negative connotations associated with it started to develop in the educated circles of society, as Yabit recalls. In the past decade or so, this accent issue among Bruneian kids has lessened somewhat, owing to another shift in the 2000s. Many Filipino domestic workers began to be equipped with relevant skills and training by the Philippine government so that they might be paid more in Brunei. Other measures included pre-departure seminars and protection for their workers in the form of certified contracts and processes by which they could file claims against their employers (Sim, 2006). Their government also hoped these protections and training would help prevent any potential issues later on. Around 2006, a minimum wage policy for Filipino domestic workers was implemented by the Philippine government (Bandial, 2015). In spite of this, many Filipino workers claimed that not much had been done to enforce the policy in the ensuing years, and the Brunei government itself had no such minimum wage policy in place. In fact, Brunei's Department of Labour responded that there was no endorsement of a minimum wage for citizens from any nation, pointing out that salaries should be guided by market demand. By 2015, the Philippine government issued a memo announcing they would begin to take steps to ensure that this minimum wage was met. As a result, many Bruneians began to avoid hiring Filipino domestic helpers and hired helpers from other nations instead (particularly from Indonesia), since their salary requirements were usually lower while they shared linguistic similarities and religious values with Malay Bruneian families. This change could be one of the reasons that more and more workers from Indonesia have been employed in domestic and other sectors in Brunei, while fewer and fewer Filipinos remain working as *amahs* in Bruneian households. The number of Indonesian immigrant workers in Brunei is estimated around 35,000, which is higher than that of Filipinos (Bandial, 2015; Sim, 2006). Besides economic factors, the Filipino government mandates a weekly day off—usually Sunday—for Filipinos working overseas, since the day is reserved for church, religious duties and social life. Indonesian workers, on the other hand, usually have no official demands for mandatory days off. Another significant factor behind the declining number of Filipino workers in Brunei has been the Brunei government's push for hiring local workers over foreign workers, a sentiment that is reflected in other nations where national policy prioritizes local socio-cultural interests over the free movement mentality and aspirations inherent in globalization (e.g., McIntosh, 2020).

Tagalog entering formalized and officialized teaching and learning space

The numerous effects of transnational mobilities in Southeast Asia did not go unnoticed by regional governments. At a summit in 2000, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) launched the Initiative for ASEAN

Integration (IAI) in order to "narrow the development divide and enhance ASEAN's competitiveness as a region to provide a framework for regional cooperation through which the more developed ASEAN members could help those member countries that most need it" (ASEAN, 2009, p. 95). Over the next decade, the nations of ASEAN would work toward the goals of the IAI in their own ways and at their own paces, but all would agree that narrowing the development gap was of core importance. By 2009 the importance of IAI had intensified and filtered down to educational institutions in Brunei, and it was against this backdrop that Yabit realized that Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) as an academic institution had to respond and contribute according to its capacities. As the Director of the Language Centre (LC), which focused on language education at UBD, he thus submitted a proposal in 2010 to begin offering ASEAN languages as part of their curriculum. Among those approved was Tagalog (the official language of the Philippines is Filipino, which is the standardized version of Tagalog), and LC managed to hire a Filipino language lecturer to head the module.

The language module turned out to be quite successful, and this popularity might be due to the children of Bruneian-Filipino parentage seeing how, when the language module was first launched, many of the students who signed up were from mixed Bruneian-Filipino backgrounds who desired to reconnect with their Filipino roots. Moreover, the Bruneian Embassy of the Philippines at the time had various programs, but never anything formally educational or scholastic. In planning ahead for the language module, Yabit and the LC's Filipino lecturer also conducted a few discussions with the embassy and broached certain questions: *What is next for Filipinos once their work contracts end? What happens when Filipinos go back home?* These queries and dialogues prompted the embassy to begin offering more formal educational programs, such as Tagalog language and skill-based courses to equip Filipino workers with various skill sets. These courses would also go on to serve the increasing numbers of Filipino expatriates who arrived in Brunei with their families in tow; fearing the loss of their language, owing to a lack of community, they joined the embassy courses to bridge that gap. Thus, LC's Filipino lecturer (who spearheaded the embassy courses) would teach regularly both at UBD and at the Philippine Embassy.

Later, the Filipino language program would develop further, moving beyond UBD and becoming of interest to the Bruneian government. The large presence of Filipinos in the community brought its own sets of social problems ranging from conflicts with and mistreatment by employers or misuse of visas as they intertwined with Bruneian society. Up to this point, local law enforcement had from time to time called in UBD's Filipino-speaking lecturers to serve as consultants in cases where a translator was needed, and they thus found themselves serving in court as interpreters more than once. Eventually, Bruneian authorities felt they needed to be able to better approach any potential challenges and started to show more interest in learning the Filipino language. Hence, Filipino language courses began to

be offered to different ministry officials and members of local law enforcement from various departments and branches of the government.

Filipinos and urban space: The capital of Brunei

Comparing the state of the capital Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB) a few decades ago to the capital as it looks today can be quite telling when considering the settlement of the immigrant communities into the common spaces of BSB. Before Brunei's independence from the British in 1984, BSB was a vibrant area, and business was busy and thriving. Most of the government offices were concentrated in the capital, and it was the main hub of activity in the country. The two predominant communities in BSB that fueled the capital's economy at the time were local Malays living in Kampong Ayer (Malay for "Water Village," a historic settlement area) and Chinese, who were mostly first or second-generation members of the Chinese diaspora who had come in from Malaysia and settled in Brunei over the years.

The decades that followed saw a slew of factors leading to the slow decline of the capital's business and administration vibrancy. First, there was a steady exodus of people away from BSB and Kampong Ayer, mostly for economic or safety reasons—for the residents of Kampong Ayer, the rise of inland housing projects provided government-subsidized housing which drew them away in droves, and for the Chinese population in Brunei, the country's newly gained independence from British rule brought uncertainties and obstacles to citizenship which many of them to migrate to other countries. Fewer people living in BSB caused a decrease in successful businesses in the capital.

Second, there were British-era regulations that mandated all shops to close at 6:00 pm, which often left BSB a ghost town after dusk. Moreover, to this day, the rent for shop spaces and buildings has stayed prohibitively high. Faced with these challenges, the popular centers of business and activity shifted away from BSB to newer developed areas, and these businesses brought their customers with them. Along with these centers of business, all the government offices also moved to different locations outside BSB.

Third, the influx of Filipino immigrant workers post-independence had a significant influence on the demographic makeup of BSB. The majority of Filipinos stayed in the capital city, according to Mani (1996). One only had to wander the downtown capital on a Sunday to get a sense of the migrant community's size and spread. The capital has long been a popular meeting place for immigrant workers on their days off. Consequently, many locals do not spend much time in the downtown area as it is felt that the community spaces there "belong" to the immigrant workers. Thus, as the years went by, many locals had fewer reasons to venture into the capital (Alabastro, 2013).[2]

Today, BSB is quite different and is no longer the hub it once was. For their part, the Bruneian government has attempted to change social

perceptions of BSB through different revitalization initiatives, such as revamping the riverside area and building public parks and common spaces, as well as promoting events like *Bandarku Ceria* (which translates to "My city is cheerful"), a weekly event which aims to "liven up the atmosphere of Bandar Seri Begawan by making Bandar a car-free area every Sunday" (Bandarku Ceria, 2021). During the weekly event, roads in and out of Bandar are blocked and the downtown area is turned into one large public park where the populace can converge and take part in various activities like bike-riding, rollerblading, jogging, and so on. This regular flood of people in the capital is now another lifeline for the businesses that have remained, though for the rest of the week they still rely on immigrant workers as their main customers.

Another social impact can be seen with public transport. Most Bruneian families own at least a car or two and usually do not need to take public transport. As a result, the public transport system is unfamiliar to many locals, and those who have experienced it have often found it to be inconvenient and inefficient, at least in comparison to driving one's own vehicle. However, many migrant workers are not able to afford their own vehicles and so rely on the nation's bus system. This has led to the stereotype that public transport is associated with migrant workers and those few locals who are unable to drive their own vehicles. The few attempts by the Bruneian government to revamp or rebrand the nation's public transport systems have not been able to fully eradicate those connotations.

Jollibee as Part of Bruneian Identity

Jollibee—the Philippines' most successful fast-food chain, nationally and internationally—has imprinted its presence in many countries, from Asia to the Gulf region to North America (Matejowsky, 2020; Reyes, 2014). Given the Philippine diaspora, it is not a coincidence that Jollibee has opened branches in places with a significant population of Filipinos, such as Taiwan, the United States, Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Brunei. Jollibee is not just food or a brand name, but also an iconic symbol of the homeland for diasporic Filipino communities. It carries emotion and gives a sense of home to Filipinos living and working away from home. It is also a signifier of success and pride held by many Filipinos, alongside their work and labor. After Taiwan, Brunei was the first country in Southeast Asia to house a Jollibee international restaurant in 1987, marking Jollibee's ambition for a global reach. Matejowsky (2020) states that "these initial forays into overseas marketing represent a pivotal milestone in [the company]'s incipient worldwide expansion and a key harbinger of things to come" (p. 6). As of today, "Jollibee and its Disneyesque bumblebee mascot maintains an elevated status across the Philippines, Filipino diaspora, and increasingly among non-Filipino communities worldwide" (p. 5).

There are no official figures about the current number of Filipinos in Brunei, but according to an article published in 2014, about 30,000 Filipinos

were in Brunei, "Making them the biggest non-Muslim expatriate community" (Ebora, 2014). Jollibee has been growing together with this significant Filipino population living and working in Brunei. There are now 18 Jollibee restaurants/food shops in Brunei, and the number keeps growing. Jollibee has made itself well loved by many Bruneians, just like its signature Bruneian version of fast food, *nasi katok*, which is "a simple combination of white rice, sambal (a condiment made out of blended chiles and other spices) and a piece of fried chicken."[3] It is not an exaggeration to say that many Bruneians consider Jollibee part of Bruneian identity, as is the case for Chester. Jollibee has entered Brunei's everyday social and dining scenes so much so that its fast food has been identified by researchers as cause of health problems, including obesity among Bruneian adolescents and youths (Pengpid and Peltzer, 2018; Yun et al., 2018).

The image of the cheerful and smiley bee of Jollibee's mascot has become familiar and a part of the everyday dining linguistic landscape (Landry and Bourhis, 1997) seen and remembered by those living in Brunei and passing through this kingdom (see Figure 6.3). "Jollibee feels like a Bruneian thing, a beloved local, and you forget that it's a foreign chain from the Philippines," says Chester. There are now buildings, shopping centers, and road corners in different Brunei neighbourhoods that are associated with Jollibee. Reminiscent of Blommaert's (2013) ethnography of moving signs, the ubiquitousness of Jollibee in Brunei is a result of the expanding presence of the brand name and its signages, its brand colours of red and yellow, and its growing number of delivery bikes and drivers carrying the logo, image, and spirit of Jollibee to every *simpang* (a Malay word for intersections, small roads, and lanes) and alley possible. Indeed, as demonstrated in Puzey and Kostanski (2016), names are often markers of identity, cultural and linguistic practices, and histories about communities, individuals, relationships, and

Figure 6.3

interactions, and mobilities of peoples, ideas, and objects; the name of Jollibee in Brunei is exemplary of this reality.

"My Filipino experience": A Bruneian narrative

In this section, Chester recounts his own personal experience as a child raised by a Filipino *amah* and growing up with some Filipino culture in Brunei:

> From my earliest memories, Aunty Nita had always been there. Waking up in the wee hours of the morning and watching my older brothers get ready for school, I often sleepily watched Aunty Nita bustle about, making sure breakfast was made and school uniforms were laid out neatly so my brothers would not be late for school, which started at 7:15 a.m. My parents would also be up by this time, as they were getting ready for work themselves and one of them would have to drive my brothers to school before heading to the office. At the time, I was in the Lower Primary section at school and had classes in the afternoons; my brothers were in the Secondary and Upper Primary sections and had classes in the mornings. Both my parents worked full-time, and so, once they and my brothers left the house, it would just be Aunty Nita and me at home.
>
> As a nanny, Aunty Nita was warm and attentive. Looking back, it must have been maddening, cooking breakfast every day for a precocious child and then answering all my rambling questions while I followed her around the house as she did the daily chores. But she took it in stride, and not once did she ever snap at me for asking the same excited question for what must have been the umpteenth time. She was a Filipina through and through, and would often tell me stories of her hometown, or that something I did or said reminded her of her own kids back in the Philippines. Every so often, she would head home to the Philippines for a quick holiday to see her family, and I would always wait with bated breath for her to return. She would always come back bearing little trinkets and gifts, little odds and ends from her hometown. One time she brought back *balut*, a fertilized duck egg (though sometimes chicken is used) which is incubated for a few weeks, then boiled or steamed, and eaten right from the shell. By the time it is ready to be eaten, the duck embryo has usually developed far enough that some of the features of the duckling can be identified. As such, *balut* is a unique Filipino delicacy and quite the acquired taste for anyone not accustomed to it. I would later have an opportunity to try it again, as can be seen in Figure 6.4, where I and a few other brave souls tried out *balut* freshly brought in from Manila.
>
> Despite these tales and seeing these pieces of Aunty Nita's past and distant present, I had never viewed her as foreign, or out of place, or "other." She was just Aunty Nita, someone I spent time with every day.

Figure 6.4

I never noticed that she had a Filipino accent; indeed, at that age of five or six, I had no notion of what an accent really was, which led to much confusion when I was told later in kindergarten that my own accent had a Filipino tinge.

One day when I was seven years old, my mother took me aside and told me gravely that Aunty Nita was leaving. I was too young and distraught to properly understand where she was going or why she was leaving, and the gravity of that situation took some time to sink in. Perhaps I was in denial—how could someone who had been such a fixture both in my life and in our family just leave? When the day came, I tearfully said goodbye, but deep down I held a significant reservoir of anger. I was mad that she was leaving us. Leaving me. Did she not care about us? Was there no emotional connection that made her want to stay? Were all those past years meaningless? In the years that followed, Aunty Nita would reappear every now and then, particularly at Christmas time where she would stop by the house and drop off gifts for us. So, I knew that she was still in the country working for a different employer, and yet, I still had resentment-tinged questions–if she had left us to return to the Philippines for a time, why not work with us like she had used to once she came back to Brunei? And if she did not care enough to stay the first time, or return to us once she came back to Brunei, why maintain the connection and relationship with visits and gifts?

It was not until much later that I would find out the actual, realistic, less-dramatic reasons for her departure. Aunty Nita had not really been hired as my nanny or as our housekeeper. In fact, she had been hired by my father and his siblings to take care of my elderly grandmother, who was struggling with complications due to diabetes. Aunty Nita ended up doing the multi-tasking job most *amahs* did: She cooked, she cleaned, she raised her employers' children, and she helped take care of the

elderly members of the household. My grandmother eventually passed away, and while my uncles and aunts had tried to persuade my mother to retain Aunty Nita as a housekeeper, it seemed to my mother that there was no further reason to keep her on now that her children were grown enough to not need a nanny. So once Aunty Nita's contract ended, that was that.

One thing that has remained as a mark of her legacy is my love of Jollibee. While balut had never quite caught on with my brothers or myself, Aunty Nita did instill in us a love of that Filipino fast-food joint. The flavors and experience of Jollibee are firmly couched in nostalgia and the emotional centers of my mind and heart, so much so that it allowed me to share an interesting moment with some Filipinos during an event in Hawaii. During my doctoral studies in Honolulu, I had the opportunity to show a few visiting ASEAN scholars around the city. One of our stops was a local mall where we had lunch at a food court. I had delightedly discovered during my first six months in Hawaii that Jollibee had a presence there, and I was looking forward to showing the Filipino members of our group a piece of home so far away from home. They were effusive, particularly when I threw in a few Tagalog words I had been taught in my childhood. The Filipino scholars peppered me with curious questions about why I seemed to love Jollibee as much as they did and where I had learned to say those Tagalog words. I explained that Jollibee had been a mainstay in Brunei since the late 80s and many Bruneians had grown up enjoying it and experiencing this piece of Filipino culture. In some ways, it was as if Jollibee held just as much emotion and nostalgia for us as it did them, and it would not be too much of a stretch to consider Jollibee a unique part of Bruneian culture and identity. I also pointed out that we had a sizable Filipino migrant community in Brunei and that Filipino culture was not as alien to us as some might think. While we sat there eating good food and enjoying this odd moment of globalization and international connection, I could not help but think about Aunty Nita.

In retrospect, I often wonder how Aunty Nita viewed me. Here was a precocious and often petulant child who had no doubt been a handful and who would harbor resentment for years after his nanny left her employer through no fault of her own. Over the years, I often wondered what became of her, but by the time I was old enough to consider reconnecting, the opportunities to do so had long been lost to time and the ravages of memory. Despite this loss, what she has ultimately left me with is an appreciation for the way her life has touched my own, even though it took years to fully appreciate and understand it. In all areas of my life, language, emotion, and nostalgia, the culture and history of Filipinos has shaped me, and it all began with one groggy morning filled with the smiles and love of one woman who demonstrated what it meant to love someone else's child.

Bringing the dots together

Interweaving multiple accounts and narratives together, this chapter is as much about Filipinos in Brunei as it is about Brunei society. It captures "global Asias" and their transformations and representations across time, space, place, memories, and experiences. It likewise shows "global Asias" in tandem with the global mobility of peoples, ideas, goods, and norms, both established and emerging. It also projects "global Asias" in a larger picture of the geopolitics of knowledge production, whereby knowledge from/about/on/in Asia is increasingly recognized as being specific and global from within and through its multiple outlooks. Take Jollibee, for example. Having come a long way from the periphery to occupy center stage as a global fast food chain, Jollibee has risen as a pivotal semiotic icon, embracing varied elements of "global Asias" that are physically and symbolically crossing borders. The case of Filipino culture and language encounters in Brunei, whether in terms of the semiotic scale of Jollibee or the mobility of Tagalog language resources through labor migrations, are reflective of what Blommaert (2010) has called a "messy new marketplace," where truncated multilingualism and unpredictable movements of language and people are the norm. Our unconventional approach to knowledge documentation and production in this chapter is just one attempt to try to and make sense of such unpredictability, presenting Philippine Brunei as a space to foreground the complicated layered histories, a process that will be necessary for future inquiries in the sociolinguistics of global Asias.

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