

The Filipino in Laos in the 21st Century

When Rodolfo 'Rody' Sanchez landed at Wattay airport in Vientiane on September 17, 1965, he was arriving as the first resident consular officer of the Philippine government. 'There were no porters, no customs officer on duty. It was eerily empty,' he said, nothing like what an 'international' airport should look like.

He had received his orders to leave his post as political officer in Burma (now Myanmar) to open an Embassy in Vientiane for the incoming first resident Philippine Ambassador Felipe Mabilangan. Burma itself was classified by the Philippine Foreign Affairs Office as "50 years behind times". What could Laos be?" he thought with apprehension. To play safe, he instructed his family in Burma to return to the Philippines while he checked out his new posting.

There was a reason for the forlorn look of the airport in 1965. No one, unless he had to, would wish to come for an extended stay. There was a civil war raging, a real hot war with people dying during this Cold War period, pitting combatants and their proxies for control of a newly independent country. On one side was the Royal Lao Government, its patron the U.S. government and its allies Thailand and South Vietnam. On the other side: the insurgent Pathet Lao and its allies North Vietnam and China. The briefing notes on Laos he had read prominently cited Operation Brotherhood as a good source for Lao lifestyle orientation. So off he went to the OB office in That Luang.

'There I met my first Filipinos in Laos' Jovito 'Vito' Naranjo, the project manager and his assistant manager Bonifacio "Boni" Gillego, who jokingly told me that they mistook me for a drug company salesman. Then and there I felt that Laos was going to be a pleasant assignment after all."

The assignment involved looking after the consular needs of "my-constituents" a sizable population of Filipinos employed by, in addition to OB, the United States Agency For International Development (USAID), the Eastern Construction Company in Laos (ECCOIL), the charter airlines Air America, Continental Air Services, Bird & Sons, teachers, contractors altogether close to 900 persons. They composed one of the largest expatriate group in Laos and perhaps in the Southeast Asian region at that time. Most lived and worked in the capital. Dozens, such as the OB medical teams, were posted in provincial capital towns along the Mekong river valley.

The Filipinos of the mid-1960s and 1970s were spared the carnage of the war zones outside the capital. Because this third-world city of 60,000 people had few amenities, they indulged heartily with communal celebrations, notably birthdays, in their quarters or in restaurants. OB members resided in a private house and in an apartment in That Luang near their hospital. ECCOI personnel occupied an apartment near the Wat Simuang Buddhist temple. USAID Filipinos clustered in a compound in Nahaidio where 22 families lived in duplex residences. Marriages among and between the group members flourished. During the 18-year period of their sojourn, 83 couples took their marital vows that's 163 singles. As a result marital 'ninongs' and 'ninangs' (godparents or sponsors) extended the family ties beyond Laos after they departed.

Nahaidio "became a popular gathering place at the back area that was shaded by a big tree," remembers Connie de la Pena-Frias, "eating potluck lunches together. The camaraderie was close-knit and we treated each other like relatives". Employment contracts had loosened to allow spouses (and children) to join their husbands. A Philippine International School opened. On January 1, 1965 a hugely grand celebration marked the birth of the Filipino Association of Laos. Its lineup of officers included representation from all the major groups. It even found a spot for the one and only Filipino pilot Jose Blanco flying with the Royal Air Lao national airline.

For some of the men, mahjong, basketball tournaments between these groups and forays to the one night club in town, the Vieng Ratry, were welcome breaks. The all-Filipino night club band preferred the snappy cha-cha beat to the slow moving lamvong. At the clubhouse of the American Community Association inside the USAID compound, another band of moonlighting Filipinos played American tunes in the recreation hall. Romy Pestanas with the harmonica, guitarist Fidel Padayao, Celso Orense with the maraccas and Virgilio Conception on the drums.

At one time, about 25 men organized golf outings to the National University grounds outside the city environs. The make-believe "green" was mainly sand mounds and trees. They started with about half a dozen men playing three holes and sharing three clubs. They called their group the "All-In-One Golf Club." Rody had hoped golf would lure away men who took up cockfighting with fervor, but which the Lao authorities frowned on because of the heavy betting. "I failed in that mission. Worse, I learned later after my term that an official of our Embassy was the most ardent sabungero" (cockfighting aficionado)".

The war intruded into their cocooned lives several times. In 1960, after a coup d'etat by a Lao paratroop battalion captain seized the city, a counteroffensive by a general resulted in a three-day pitched battle in December within the city that destroyed buildings and killed an estimated 1,000 people, mostly civilians.

In 1963 two Lao generals squared off their forces in an intramural fight for power. An OB accountant, caught in the crossfire, was killed by a rifle bullet at a street checkpoint. In 1975 the close-knit world of the Filipino community shattered when the victorious Pathet Lao took over the country and ordered all foreign aid workers to leave. The Philippine Embassy closed in 1980 and for the next 18 years the ambassador in Bangkok took charge of Philippine affairs. In 1997 when Laos joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Philippines resumed appointing resident ambassadors, among them Mario Galman who in 2002 launched the Balik-Laos project of former Filipino expatriates.

Seven teen Mekong Circle members returned that year after 35 years to visit their homes of long ago that had shaped their youthful lives. During a courtesy call with the Minister of Health, he officially invited the return of the OB medical program. In 2004, another group of 27 members took their turn. By that time a new influx of Filipinos totaled about 200. A pioneer was Gina Alicando, a manager of the Novotel Hotel (now the Mercure). Laos had veered away from a socialist economy and Gina experienced its capitalist growth that slowly nurtured

private enterprise and lured increasing numbers of Filipino professionals.

Nestor Deguman, together with his Lao wife Noi, opened a restaurant named, what else 'Mabuhay' (Long Live) located, where else in front of the Embassy on Phontan Road. (It has since closed but in 2002 Noi cooked up a passable 'sinigang'). Pete de Leon was a consultant to the Electricite du Laos. Bless and Jun Miego managed hotels. Blesilda Calub headed an office of the International Rice and Research Institute. Tess Banaag and Luzviminda Balleteros run Lao garment factories. Kier Obiar works for a German company that lays communication networks across mountainous terrains. Filipino teachers staffed English language schools attended by children of the Vientiane-based diplomatic corps and non-governmental associations

Ambassador Elizabeth Buensuceso welcomed the second Balik-Laos group with a garden party on the Embassy grounds. She came aboard for her first ambassadorial posting only a few weeks before Laos hosted the 10th ASEAN summit, barely enough time to prepare for the arrival of attending president Gloria Arroyo. The next year, she had to line up events to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. That took easier than she thought because her counterparts still held fond memories of the khon Pilipin (Filipino) tan mohs (doctors) and naimohs (nurses). They are old enough to remember OB. Today, half of the population is under 25 years, born years after the Filipino exodus with no memories of their Filipino visitors of long ago.

"The Filipino community gets together during birthdays, anniversaries, national day, Christmas and other holidays," Buensuceso said. She also held prayer services at her residence, "offering potluck fare of lechon, pinakbet, sinigang, biko, leche flan. On such occasions, (we) hold Bible studies and sing Christian and secular songs using the modern invention called the 'Magic Sing'."

Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) have discovered Laos. But, said Buensuceso, "because their contracts were already signed when they are in Laos, they did not pass through duly approved procedures and requirements of the Philippine government such as conformity with minimum wage rules and provision for medical and life insurance. Thus most of the problems they encounter stem from lack of safeguards on their work conditions."

OFWs in Thailand, many of them English teachers, have chosen the Thai Embassy in Vientiane the most convenient for their 'visa runs' to renew their work permits. While their applications are in process, they stay at Bahay Pinoy Guest House and Restaurant in Rue Bourichane, only 15 meters from the Embassy. Opened in 2008 by George Hiya, 50, a Filipino engineer married to Keutmy Phanphouvanna, a Lao with whom he has three children, the six-room hostel's restaurant serves adobo, sinigang and tapsilog.

Another woman ambassador, Marilyn Alarilla, replaced Buensuceso in 2009. And yet another lady, Maria Isleta, took her turn of tour duty in November 2011. Like Buensuceso, she was assuming her first ambassadorial post and then found herself in the whirlwind of preparations for President Benigno Aquino and his entourage, arriving for the 9th Asia Europe Meeting in Vientiane in 2012.

The Filipino community now numbered about 520. "Nineteen percent working in the mining sector," she said. "16 percent are teachers, 11 percent are consultants

in education, health, agriculture and banking; 10 percent are connected with the hotel and hospitality industry. There are also accountants, heavy equipment operators in mining, engineers and nurses.

She named the more notable ones — Dr. Ruben Lampayan, a water management specialist; Dr. Cecile Lantican, coordinator of the non-governmental agency Family Health International; Dr. Bernadette Gonzales develops school and vocational curriculum for the Lao Ministry of Education; Tomas Africa, former head of the Philippine National Statistical Office assists the Lao government's census projects; Marilyn Manila trains rural women in microfinancing.

A large group of some 77 Filipino engineers — geologists, metallurgists, surveyors, supervisors — are employed by foreign mining companies, such as by the \$241 million, Australian-owned gold-silver-copper company Phu Bai. Others are helping build dams over the Mekong River's tributaries.

A measure of how the Lao reservoir of goodwill for the Filipinos remains deep is reflected in their outpouring of donations for the Filipino victims of Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) in November 2012. From an anonymous donor who gave \$5 to the Lao government's \$50,000 donation, a total of \$247,843 in cash and pledges were given. The resident Filipinos themselves organized all sorts of fundraising events: Carlo Bacalla of Don Bosco Laos sold T-shirts at a bikethon; Catholic nuns Jessie Encio, Mila Azucena and Cora Jegillo of the Sisters of Charity sold stuff at a flea market; Bernadette Gonzales organized a 'Dine For A Cause' at the Mercure hotel where patrons were serenaded and bought paintings by Lao artists, the proceeds given to the typhoon fund. Jo Mita's pastry shop donated half of her store's sales during the donation drive.