Examining Identity Formation of Third Culture Kids Through Transnationalism Experience

George Amurao, Mahidol University International College, Thailand

Abstract

Globalization has resulted in the significant migration of workers and their families, either parents bringing along their children, or reuniting with them in their host countries, or workers settling down in their host countries and raising their families (Ittel, 2012). These children, called Third Culture Kids (TCK) or "Global Nomads" (Sheard, 2008) comprise a group of individuals who are considered culturally unique. One of their characteristics is travelling with their expatriate parents in several countries and growing up in cultures other than their so-called "passport culture." Bonebright described them as combining "portions of both their home culture and the host culture, building a new cultural identity that reflects all their experiences without developing a sense of belonging to any single culture." (2010, 52)

As a result, they develop a third culture, or as Sheard further amplied, a "culture within a culture" (2008, 31).

These children, added Bonebright (2010) are usually children of military personnel, diplomats, businessmen with business interests abroad, and missionaries. In recent years, media representatives and technical aid workers were added in the list of TCK parents.

Some general characteritiscs of TCKs based on surveys include:
- 90% feel "out of sync" with their peers.
- 90% report feeling as if they understand other cultures/peoples better than the average American.
- Linguistically adept
- More welcoming of others into their community.
- Lack a sense of "where home is" but often nationalistic.
- Some studies show a desire to "settle down" others a "restlessness to move." ("What is a Third Culture Kid")

Regional Migration Trends

A good backdrop for this study would be a glimpse into regional migration trends. In a general sense, migration usually denotes migrant workers seeking greener pastures. There are migrants, however, who settle in another country and raise a family either with a spouse from the host country or someone from the passport country.

Indonesia is a major sending country in Asia (ranked at no. 9) with Saudi Arabia and Malaysia being the leading destinations for its migrant workers. Total number of migrant workers reached a peak in 2008 with 748, 825 according to government statistics.Vis-à-vis these migration figures are the numbers of Indonesians who settle permanently in other countries, notably its two immediate neighbors, Malaysia and Singapore. Studies showed that the population of Indonesians who become either citizens or permanent residents in Singapore was pegged at 54,404 in 2010, almost double of the 29,314 accounted for in 2000. On the other hand, Indonesians account for the more than half of 1.38 million Malaysians born in foreign countries.Studies have also shown that a significant number of Indonesians are marrying people from other countries. One study showed that many Indonesian-Taiwanese and Indonesian-Vietnamese couples are getting married (Aris & Nurvidya Arifin, 2014).

With these trends, it is clear that there would be a growing population of Indonesian TCKs born out of cross-cultural parents and growing up in a host country.
Another example worth noting is that of Filipinos. The Philippines stands as among the top migrant-sending countries in the world. It is reported that 10% of the Philippine population, translated to 10.5 million Filipinos, are migrant workers (Casco, 2013).

For purposes of this study, it has been noted that majority of Filipinos who raise families abroad can be categorized as either engaging in "family reunification" or in "international marriages."

Majority of these family reunification takes place in the United States, Canada, Australia and other countries considered as traditional immigration countries.
On the other hand, in recent years, it has been found that of 333,672 Filipinas who have foreign spouses, 30% are married to Japanese nationals while 41% have American spouses. The rest have South Korean, Taiwanese, and Chinese husbands and have settled in their respective husband's countries (Zosa & Orbeta, 2009).

Identity Formation

Any discussion of migration and migrants would inevitably be incomplete without a review of national identity. What is national identity? What factors comprise it? Poole (1999) asserted that national identity is constituted by language and culture. All aspects of culture like rituals, customs, myths and others find expression and propagation through language. "The basic framework is provided by the language and cultural symbols in terms of which we become aware of ourselves and of others." A shared language and culture then proceeds to form a platform for a shared sense of belonging, or in other words, a nation.

Migrants, once they arrive in their host country, is placed in a limbo, neither belonging here nor there, his host country or his passport country. "He is alienated from his origins but does not fit with his new environment either. His belonging to a place is either disturbed or lost altogether and he is not sure of his identity anymore as a result of this." (Lehmann, 2012)

On the other hand, TCKs, who are brought by their parents to their host countries, attain their identity by combining aspects of both their passport and host countries/culture.

In this paper, I contend that TCK identity formation is influenced in large part by their own transnational activities involving their passport culture and, at the same time, ongoing negotiation with the culture of their host country.

Transnationalism, according to Vertovec (2009), describes a condition in which, despite great distances and nothwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all kinds of relationships and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common—however virtual—arena of activity.

Lima (2010) amplified this by writing that transnationalism "refers to the regular engagement in activities that span national borders by foreign-born residents as part of their daily routines."

Analysis

For this study, I decided to interview two of my own children. They came to Thailand in 2006 when my wife and I decided to relocate for better employment opportunities. Paulo was 7 years old back then, and Isabelle was 6 years old.

Paulo is now at the time of writing (December 2014) a 15-year-old student in Year 10 at International Pioneers School in Bangkok, Thailand. His sister, Isabelle is 14 years old, and is enrolled in Year 9 at the same school.

It is quite interesting to note that the two respondents diverge in the development of their Third Culture. It was noted that Isabelle expressed more ease and comfort in negotiating with the local culture (Thai) while Paulo is still facing a struggle in the said area.

Isabelle says she is fluent in English and can speak fluent Filipino though she finds it hard to read and write using it. On the other hand, her Thai language skills are fair.

> I can speak, read, and write basic Thai, and I find it easy to understand my friends when they converse in Thai. (I. Amurao, personal communication, 10 December 2014)

On the other hand, Paulo claims he is fluent in both English and Filipino but his skills in the Thai language is quite limited to functional purposes only, for instance ordering food.

Isabelle exhibited one of the basic signs of being a TCK, namely, feeling more associated with her fellow TCKs and having many friends from other nationalities. She had been studying at International Pioneers School since 2009, or five years now as of this writing. Aside from Thai students, she has also made friends with Indian

students whose parents have recently migrated to Thailand, Thai-Indian students, and Filipino students who, like her, have grown up in Thailand.

> I find it easier and more comfortable to be around the friends that I've made here in Thailand than those that I've made in the Philippines. I think it's due to the fact that I grew up and spent more time with my friends here. (I. Amurao, personal communication, 10 December 2014)

Paulo showed the opposite sentiments, however, when he said that he is still adjusting to making friends in Thailand, at the same time still feeling close to friends he had left behind in the Philippines.

> It was awkward and was quite difficult for me to interact with Thais in a normal conversation due to language barriers… my friends in the Philippines are easier to interact with as I did not face a language barrier and they are much easier to understand and socialized with. (P. Amurao, personal communication, 9 December 2014)

At the same time, it is significant to note that Isabelle feels "alienated" every time she goes home to the Philippines, her passport country.

> It does feel different whenever I go back to the Philippines. I'm used to the friendliness here in Thailand. There are times when I feel more welcome in Thailand than in the Philippines. (I. Amurao, personal communication, 10 December 2014)

Paulo also reported feeling the same sensation of alienation every time he visits his passport country.

> Yes, for example, whenever I go to a mall in the Philippines I would feel different compared to when I go to a mall in Thailand. (P. Amurao, personal communication, 9 December 2014)

Even though she is still in her teenage years, Isabelle now engages in transnational activities (from below). For one thing, she always asks her mother to buy for her Philippine snack food and canned goods that are sold in Philippine stores in Bangkok or in groceries in the Philippines whenever her mother or father visits their passport country.

She also said that she likes attending gatherings of Filipinos in Thailand like birthday parties or Christmas parties. At the same time, she said she feels awkward most of the time especially if she only knows a few of the people she meets in the party.

Like his sister, Paulo also likes eating snacks and other food from his passport country. He also enjoys the company of other Filipinos during social gatherings.

> Yes (I attend parties of Filipinos), if possible, because it is one of the few that could remind me about my home country and its culture. (P. Amurao, personal communication, 9 December 2014)

Asked about their self-perception, the response of both Isabelle and Paulo can be surprising. They do not display yet the characteristics of a full TCK and show the development of their own identity:

Isabelle, for one, situates herself in the middle:

> I feel more Filipino than Thai because of my preferences in things such as food. In addition to this, I speak Tagalog more than Thai. However, because I

grew up with several Thai friends, there is a part of me which feels Thai. (I. Amurao, personal communication, 10 December 2014)

And in a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest, how do they measure their being a Filipino? This is what Isabelle said:

I would say 7 because even though I've spent more years here in Thailand than in the Philippines, I still feel a sense of home whenever I visit the Philippines. (I. Amurao, personal communication, 10 December 2014)

For Paulo, he is at a stage when his cultural identity is in the midst of development.

[In a scale of 1-10] around 5-6 as I can speak Tagalog but it is rudimentary. Also, my knowledge about Philippine culture keeps me out of the loop. Thus, it makes it hard for me to make myself believe that I am a full-fledged Filipino.

I have a much stronger sense belonging in the Philippines seeing myself more of a Filipino. However, I'm beginning to lose my sense of belonging recently probably because I am not sufficiently exposed to my country's culture. (P. Amurao, personal communication, 9 December 2014)

Conclusion

Third Culture Kids (TCKs), also known as "Global Nomads" or "Second Generation," are increasingly becoming a significant part of the tapestry of the phenomenon of migration. With the rising trends in migration not only in the region but in the world, in large part owing to economic reasons, migrants are either bringing their families to their host countries, or else settling down in a host country and raising a family there with a foreign or local-born spouse. TCKs are said to imbibe a "third culture" (hence the name) that is an amalgamation of both their parents' and host countries' culture and developing their own unique identity.

This paper explored this phenomenon and bears the contention that part of the development of said culture and identity is deeply influenced by the children's transnational experience—interactions they conduct with their friends in both countries and also activities that involve events, services, experiences and people from their passport countries.

The author interviewed as informants his two children who are themselves growing up in a host country. The interview, however brief and general in scope, shows that the two informants, despite their professed recognition of and preference for their own passport country's culture, are squarely in the middle of the typical migrant's dilemma of feeling "neither here nor there." As they continue to grow up in a second country, with having more contacts with their classmates and friends, and with interactions with their fellow Filipinos only getting more limited to "transactions from below" and occasional visits to their passport country, it can only be presumed that should this practice continue, they would eventually develop a TCK identity.

References

Ananta, A., & Nurvidya Arifin, E. (2014). Emerging Patterns of Indonesia's International Migration. *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies, 51*(1), 29-41. Bonebright, D. (2010). Adult Third Culture Kids: HRD Challenges and Opportunities." Human Resources Development International. *Human Resource Development International, 13*(3), 351-359.

Casco, R. (2013, July 2). Philippines Report Tracks Rise of Migration. Retrieved November 28, 2014, from http://www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/news-and-views/press-briefing-notes/pbn-2013/pbn-listing/philippines-report-tracks-rise-o.html

Internations.org,. (2015). *The Difficulty of Life as a Third-Culture Kid*. Retrieved 7 July 2015, from http://www.internations.org/magazine/the-difficulty-of-life-as-a-third-culture-kid-15288

Ittel, A., & Sisler, A. (2012). Third Culture Kids: Adjusting to a Changing World. *Diskurs Kindheits- Und Jugendforschung Heft, 7*(4), 487-492. Lehmann, S. (2012). Transnational Identities in Michael Ondaatje's Fiction. In *Strangers, Migrants, Exiles: Negotiating Identity in Literature*. New York: New York: Routledge.

Lima, A. (2010). Transnationalism: A New Mode of Immigrant Integration.

Poole, R. (1999). *Nation and Identity*. London: Routledge.

Sheard, W. (2008). Lessons From Our Kissing Cousins: Third Culture Kids and Gifted Children. *Roeper Review*, *30*(1), 31-38. doi:10.1080/02783190701836437

What is a Third Culture Kid? (n.d.). Retrieved November 28, 2014, from http://tckid.com/what-is-a-tck.html#origin.

Vertovec, S. (2009). *Transnationalism*. New York: Routledge.

Zosa, V., & Orbeta, A. (2009). The Social and Economic Impact of Philippine International Labor Migration and Remittances. *Discussion Paper Series No. 2009-32,* 9-10.