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# Philippine Prison Marriages

## The Politics of Kinship and Women's Composite Agency

*Sif Lehman Jensen*

■ **ABSTRACT:** This article, from the perspective of how agency is nested in this choice, explores why women marry imprisoned insurgents from the southern Philippines. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Maharlika Village, a major Muslim community in Manila, the article discusses how women negotiate gender relations, family, and insurgency politics against the backdrop of political conflict and their precarious everyday lives. The analysis asks how prison marriages feed into the women's everyday maneuvering of the metropole, and how marrying a political prisoner is embedded in moral and gendered obligations arising from the entangled relationship between kinship and insurgency politics. Theoretically, the article argues that prison marriages are part of the women's composite agency, which captures how they aim at fulfilling contradictory desires, notions of morality and gendered obligations, which enables them to momentarily attain their own aspirations.

■ **KEYWORDS:** composite agency, gender, insurgency politics, kinship, Mindanao, the Philippines, political prisoners, separatist conflict

This article takes its departure in a group of women who are married to imprisoned rebel suspects in Manila, the Philippine capital. The women originate from Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, the country's southern region, where the Muslim separatist movement has its stronghold and the armed conflict has played out over the past nearly 50 years.<sup>1</sup> Their husbands are accused of being involved in rebellion and have been arrested from the same conflict-ridden areas in Mindanao. Subsequently, the men have been transferred to a jail within the proximity of Maharlika Village (henceforth Maharlika), the largest Muslim neighborhood in Manila, where the women have been residing for varying periods of time. Most of the women married the men *after* they had been incarcerated. On this basis, I ask why women marry political prisoners.<sup>2</sup> This question allows for an exploration of different forms of agency nested in the women's decision to marry political prisoners against the backdrop of political conflict and precariousness that permeates their everyday lives. The prison marriages enable the women both to insert themselves in the city and to respond to norms and questions of morality, which are socially and politically embedded in the home communities that the women have left behind in Mindanao.

Agency in this article is thus understood in line with a body of feminist scholarship, which challenges Western liberal ideas that tend to couple the question of agency with resistance to power and emancipatory potential (Mahmood 2001, 2005; Mohanty 1991). Following Saba Mahmood's (2001, 2005) argument against reducing women's actions to a dualistic question of either subordination to or rebellion against patriarchal norms, I suggest a multiplicity of rela-



tional preconditions and obligations are reflected in women's enactments of agency. My aim, however, is also to draw attention to how choice is at stake in shaping women's agency. I introduce the notion of composite agency to capture the women's diverse and persistent courses of actions as they strive to fulfill contradictory desires, which arise from social norms as well as their personal aspirations. Mahmood (2005) allows us to understand how women willingly appropriate domains of patriarchal dominance that secure their own subordination, and how norms serve as the foundation for asserting agency. Drawing on these points, I want to stress how women also creatively negotiate their opportunities and engage in mutually beneficial exchanges within their social worlds to deal with their precarious everyday lives.

To grasp the notions of morality underlying prison marriages, I turn to Nerina Weiss's (2010) analysis of gender norms in the Kurdish nationalist movement. Weiss usefully stresses how political leadership acts as an extension of kinship through which gendered obligations are derived, and impinge on women's conduct. We may understand these entanglements of political movement, community, and kinship as a politics of kinship, which is fundamental to the women's enactments of agency. As this article shows, it is important to stress that the women's actions do not arise from political participation or resistance; rather, the political is embedded in notions of social belonging and morality that they strive to fulfill. This outlook allows me to inquire into how women's desires and courses of action are shaped by and against social norms and commitment toward extended family structures in which the separatist project is enfolded.

There is expansive literature on how kinship and politics merge in the Philippines, which shows how local and national politics are organized around strong familial networks (see Abinales and Amoroso 2005; Lara 2014; McCoy 1994; Roces 1998, 2000). Similarly, families and kinship networks constitute the foundation of separatism in Mindanao. Historically, the recruitment to the Moro National Liberation Front, the armed group that initially led the separatist struggle, was carried out among leading political clans and families in the Muslim areas (see Abinales 2010; McKenna 1998; Noble 1976). While these analyses tend to revolve around elite politics, perspectives on how kinship politics permeate family life and gender relations in the everyday of women remain unexplored. I seek to address this gap by reflecting on how women maneuver the entangled relationship of family and insurgency politics that characterizes their home communities in everyday life as migrants at the urban periphery of Manila. I employ the term maneuver to draw attention to how women assert different forms of agency in order to negotiate, bargain, and navigate the social and political relations that impinge on their daily lives. Hereby, I seek to contribute to the vast literature on kinship, gender, and politics in anthropology and beyond.

The ethnographic material was gathered primarily during my stays at the house of Amira, one of the prisoners' wives in Maharlika. Here I engaged with a varying number of Tausug<sup>3</sup> women and occasionally their children over a three-month period in 2017, of whom the four women presented in this account became my key interlocutors. In addition, I had informal conversations and conducted interviews with other residents and barangay<sup>4</sup> staff around Maharlika, whom I met at the local town hall or at the mosques. These interactions allowed me a contextual understanding of Maharlika and insights into the position of the wives of political prisoners in the community.

I argue that marrying a prisoner is a central component of the women's composite agency, which draws attention to their multiple courses of action that help them accommodate conflicting desires and social pressures that mark their everyday lives. The marriages enable the women to respond to notions of morality and gendered obligations, which form part of a politics of kinship that characterizes the women's (and their husbands') place of origin. The women's own aspirations of migration and striving toward detachment and independence in everyday life

also inform their agency. Marriage, however, also comes with the risk of having to return home because of having children, or their husband's possible but unlikely release.

In this article, I begin with an introduction to the ethnographic context, where the women reside, and an examination of how relational and political entanglements are encapsulated in the organization of the prison marriages. The subsequent analysis is divided into two parts, exploring why women marry political prisoners and how different forms of agency are reflected in this choice. The first analytical section explores the women's agency from a perspective on how mobility and sustaining urban life is at stake for the women. The second part reflects on the politics that informs the women's reasoning about their choice of partners. A commitment to care for and stand with the men, who are suffering as a result of the political conflict, is reflected in the women's pursuit of marriage. Moreover, the women are driven by a desire to have children, which is not only a personal but also a collective concern that feeds into the narrative of Muslim nationhood. Thus, inside the prison there is a secluded section for the couples' intimate encounters. Yet, the women's political commitment appears versatile in their everyday lives, which I suggest enables the women to creatively maneuver the politics at work in the prison marriages. In conclusion, I revisit the notion of composite agency and how and to what extent it can help us understand the women's choice of marriage.

### **Organization and Relational Entanglements of Prison Marriages**

I first became acquainted with this group of women during previous fieldwork among women political prisoners in 2014 and 2015 inside the same prison where their husbands are detained.<sup>5</sup> The wives would often stand in front of the prison facility awaiting permission to visit their husbands. One of my companions during this fieldwork had worked with the prisoners' wives and became my entry point to the group through Amira. The trustful relationship between my gatekeeper and Amira allowed me to be introduced to the group despite being a non-Muslim, privileged outsider who was not in a position to help them or their husbands in the legal system, or to provide assistance that could ease their struggles to sustain life. Despite the sensitive nature of the topic, the men's imprisonment, and the troubled relationship between the Muslim south and the Philippine state, the women's political positions and the conflict became manifest in various ways both explicitly and through silences in our conversations. My previous engagements with inmates inside prison, of whom some were related to the women, were helpful in creating a connection to the women, and prompted conversations about their familial affiliations with the insurgency movement. In this sense, notions of Muslim nationhood and the political struggle seemed to run along lines of extended kinship, which serves as the women's fundamental social structures. In the setting of their daily routines, however, the women appeared unwilling to talk politics; they also denied being affiliated to the separatist movement themselves. This ambiguous positioning demonstrating relational embeddedness in and distance from the insurgency is central to the women's maneuvering, which I return to in the final analytical section.

The women reside in informal housing in Maharlika, which has a Muslim population of more than 20,000. The community was originally an informal settlement of some 20 Muslim families, which gained official status as a subdivision in 1973 during the early stage of martial law, which was declared partly as President Ferdinand Marcos's response to the Muslim uprisings against the state in the south of the country. The project was part of the government's plan to establish a model residential area for Muslims, who were then expected to refrain from joining the rebellion. This strategy was emphasized by calling the subdivision Maharlika, which translates into "noble people" (Watanabe 2007). Initially, the Muslim elite who supported the

regime inhabited Maharlika. During the following decades, however, maintenance of the subdivision was neglected, and informal settlements increasingly turned it into a neighborhood of mainly poor urban dwellers who had been resettled from other Muslim communities in Manila, and migrants originating from the south of the country. Thus, today it is predominantly Muslim Mindanaons wanting to pursue the economic possibilities that can be attained in the capital and by going abroad who inhabit Maharlika. In this sense, the women form part of the majority in Maharlika, as they struggle to survive financially, which includes their continuous attempts to find work overseas. To sustain life in Maharlika, marrying a political prisoner becomes an opportunity for the women (and their children), which I will return to in the next section.

Understanding the social structure of prison marriages requires one to have some perspectives on the kinship organization and the traditional marriage ideals in Tausug society, from which the women originate. As in the Philippines as a whole, kinship among the Tausug is bilateral, which ideally gives male and female lineage equal importance (Jainal et al. 1971; Kiefer 1974). Patricio Abinales and Donna Amoroso (2005) note that the practice of cognatic kinship allows men and women to be included as members of the natal family after marriage. Moreover, it gives rise to “fictive kinship” through which people who are not blood related designate each other as relatives. This proliferation of family has resulted in a wide-ranging kinship system, which is further enlarged by tracing third and fourth degree cousins. Central within Tausug kinship is the notion of *buddi*,<sup>6</sup> which denotes a responsibility to fulfill reciprocal obligations toward kin (Jainal et al. 1971; Kiefer 1969). As Tuan Iklali Jainal and colleagues note, “the kinship system can be viewed as a flow of reciprocal services, gifts, loans, and aid between pairs motivated by the concept of *buddi*” (1971: 81). This insight allows for questions about how social norms and exchanges form part of the prison marriages.

In his analysis of traditional marriage arrangements among the Tausug, Thomas Kiefer (1974) outlines three processes that lead to marriage: negotiation, elopement, and abduction, of which the first is favored and usually involves, besides the parents of the man and woman, large numbers of relatives and neighbors in the arrangement. He further ascribes certain practices to Islamic customary laws, such as the payment of bride wealth to the woman’s parents, and polygamy (see also Kiefer 1969). These understandings of how extensive kinship is socially recognized allow me to explore how extended family is at work within prison marriages and to what extent they draw on kinship and marriage ideals.

One of the younger women, Aisa, explained how the marriages are usually arranged: when one of the prisoners wants to find a wife, he turns to the chairman, the highest-ranking member of the respective insurgency group within the prison, who is in charge of the marriages. The chairman ensures that the customary rules within the Muslim communities are strictly followed, such as paying bride price and asking the woman’s family for permission. As the man usually cannot afford the bride price himself, other inmates and the chairman will contribute. As a first step, the chairman discusses the marriage request with some of the wives of other prisoners. Personally, Aisa remarked, she refrains from taking part in these arrangements because she does not want to be responsible should the marriages end up failing. The other wives, however, assume the task of introducing suitable acquaintances to the man longing for marriage. The potential wives are usually found among newcomers from Mindanao and migrant workers returning from the Middle East who originate from the same communities. The easiest way for an inmate to marry is if the woman has been married before and is either separated or widowed; then the chairman does not have to ask the parents for permission.

Moreover, the women and their husbands’ families are related or connected through their common origin. Aisa recalled how the woman who is now her mother-in-law, but was also a relative, had persuaded Aisa to marry her son, Hamed. After Aisa returned from a work stay in

the Middle East, the mother started visiting her and teased her about not being married, indirectly hinting that Hamed was available. Aisa was hesitant about going along with the mother's courtship on behalf of the son, because Aisa knew he was in prison, and she wanted to go abroad again for a new job. Meanwhile, the recruiter, who could set her up with a new contract as an overseas worker and was a close friend of the mother, also started convincing Aisa to marry Hamed. In this way, it was arranged that Aisa would go abroad for another two years, and when she returned, they would marry. During her stay abroad, the mother-in-law continuously wrote Aisa, who was not in contact with Hamed himself, and reminded her about his qualities. Thus, Aisa concluded, it was the mother-in-law who "bridged" them together.

This illustrates the social embeddedness of the marriages and how they are well-organized from both inside and outside the jail, involving the families, home communities, the separatist movement, and the women in Maharlika who are already married to men inside. Similar to Aisa's story, the other women explained that families and friends had taken part in setting up their marriages and they had come into contact with the men through some of his relatives, whom they knew from home. Moreover, the women themselves come from families involved in rebellion and have relatives imprisoned in the same prison in Manila. Thus, the two sisters, Amira and Jana, had a brother who was imprisoned in the same section as their husbands. Their mother's cousin, Amira added, is also confined in another section of the jail for rebels belonging to a different separatist faction.

The women's extended familial networks, which they are related to not only through blood but also common origin and political association, are braided into the arrangement of the prison marriages. Sara, one of the other wives, explained the intricate social relationships by asserting that all Muslims are related and when someone belongs to a Muslim community, the person is considered "close family." She added, "Even if they are not related by blood, their treatment of one another is as of one family." Here the notion of *buddi*, which invokes indebtedness toward extended kin relations, is useful to understand how a sense of belonging and loyalty to these intertwined relationships is reflected in the women's choice of marriage.

Marrying prisoners associated with the Muslim rebellion, coming from families and communities involved in separatism, further points to the political entanglements of these marriages. Penny Johnson, Lamis Abu Nahleh, and Annelies Moors (2009: 16) usefully introduce "political marriage" in the Palestinian context. Analyzing marriages over the course of the first and second Palestinian intifada, the authors demonstrate how political affiliation is a strong component in desirability that "may well override other considerations, such as those pertaining to religion, class, location and kinship." These perspectives offer insights into what makes the political prisoners desirable as husbands and how we may understand prison marriages as inherently political. Muslim identity, kinship, and common origin are, as the ethnographic account will show, reflected in the women's pursuit of marriage. While, political affiliation in the Palestinian case may function as "de facto" kinship ties, I suggest the political project in the context of the separatist movement in Mindanao is inextricable from kinship relations, which is reflected in the social structures of the prison marriages.

In this light, echoing Weiss's (2010) point about how kinship norms are adopted into political organizations and inform gendered performance, we can understand the women's desire to marry political prisoners as rooted in how family networks and the insurgency merge and create certain moral obligations that these women respond to. Yet this is not all there is to the women's choice of partners, as the marriages also support the women's aspirations of independence and spatial detachment. These perspectives serve as the theoretical outset for the following accounts on how marrying political prisoners plays into the women's maneuvering of insurgency politics and kinship in their daily lives, through which I aim at developing the concept of composite agency.

## Maneuvering the Politics of Kinship

Amira appeared as the leader among this group of prisoner's wives. She took on the responsibility of welcoming and, if necessary, accommodating newly arrived women to Maharlika. During the period I spent with the women, 13 people were residing in the 20 square meter, one-room house. Besides a small kitchen, the house consisted of a makeshift restroom and a staircase leading to an unfinished second floor without a ceiling, which was used for storage and drying clothes. In one end of the house, three beds made up a sleeping area for Amira and her four children. At the other side of the staircase, a two-deck piece of furniture was placed, where Amira's sister, niece, and two children occupied the upper part, and a friend used the lower part with her two small sons. Another niece who had recently arrived from Kuwait also stayed at the house while trying to get a new work contract overseas. Initially, the other residents of the house continued their daily activities, preparing food and getting the children ready for school, while Amira sat down with me and dutifully answered my questions. Gradually, the other women began taking part in the conversations and sharing their own personal stories about how they had ended up in Maharlika and about their marriages.

The women had left their home communities for multiple reasons; the confinement of their husbands in the capital is a minor yet significant explanation of their metropolitan dwelling. A desire to escape their conflict-ridden home communities in Mindanao was central in my conversations with the women. As they explained, the war prevented them from living a "peaceful life," and they did not have any opportunities to raise a family or make a living. Rather, the women would depend on their natal family and relatives if returning home. Meanwhile, having left Mindanao, the women continuously aim at strengthening their relational ties and meeting social obligations toward their communities and kin back home. In this light, the political conflict partly explains why the women wanted to leave, *and* is a significant feature of their lives away from home through marriage with inmates associated with the insurgency. In their daily lives, however, the political conflict as such appeared absent, and only when our conversations touched on the women's extended familial networks did insurgency politics become apparent. The women's apparently opposing aspirations, simultaneously aiming at detachment and attachment, epitomize their everyday maneuvering in the metropolitan setting. These two movements informing the women's agency structure the following analysis.

### *The Compromising Promises of Marriage*

Jana, Amira's younger sister, presented herself as the first woman to marry one of the political prisoners, in 2006. Jana was the only one of the women who has not succeeded in obtaining work in the Middle East. Instead, she had come straight from Mindanao to Maharlika with the purpose of being introduced to her future husband, Yussef, who was imprisoned a few years earlier. Jana said she was interested in marrying a religious man. After one of her friends, a relative of Yussef, told her about his situation and that he was an imam, they started exchanging letters. Their interaction quickly developed into courtship on Yussef's initiative, strongly supported by his family. Jana explained that the family offered to support her if she moved to Maharlika, married Yussef, and took care of him during his imprisonment, which she had agreed to. A month later, Amira, who already lived in Maharlika at that time, had three children and was separated from her first husband, followed Jana's example and married another rebel suspect inside prison, Norman, after being introduced by Jana.

Amira herself recounted that she had left Mindanao in her early twenties during martial law,<sup>7</sup> when the armed conflict between the Moro National Liberation Front and the Philippine

government was at its peak. Without going into details, Amira shared fragments about how she and her family experienced intimidations and violence by the military. After her parents passed away, Amira had not seen any reason for staying in her home province. Before going to Saudi Arabia to work as a domestic helper, Amira passed through Maharlika, where her uncle lived. The work contract abroad expired after a year, after which she returned to Maharlika and married one of the neighbors. Amira's husband was Christian, which caused a continuous conflict between the husband, his family, and Amira, as they wanted her to convert to Christianity. Amira refused, which eventually led to her first husband leaving her. With three children and several small informal jobs that kept them afloat most of the time, Amira still had no intention of returning to Mindanao. Amira thus married Norman, which contributed to sustain her and her children's life in the city. Since then, she explained, Norman had helped out by sharing the financial support he receives from his family. Meanwhile, Amira made sure to visit Norman at least once a week even though it was a struggle to pay the 500 pesos for transportation and the food she needed to bring him. Amira and Jana's accounts offer insights into the underlying agreement of marriage, and they stressed how it supported a desire of migration: to leave Mindanao in Jana's case, and for Amira, a desire to continue life in Maharlika.

Obtaining a work contract and traveling to the Middle East as overseas workers, however, was the most desirable goal. Like Amira, the other women had made it to the Gulf countries and worked for varying periods of time before ending up in Maharlika. Sara, who had been working in Saudi Arabia for 11 years before settling in Maharlika, explained that despite the various kinds of abuse the women experienced as overseas workers, such employment is preferable, as the income allowed them to provide for their families back home. In between the aspirations of going abroad to earn enough to sustain themselves and support relatives and the unbearable prospect of having to return to Mindanao, marrying a political prisoner comes with the opportunity to at least live in Maharlika. As Jana and Amira's stories show, financial means to sustain life in Maharlika are exchanged for the moral support, visits, and necessities they bring for their husbands inside prison. In this sense, we can understand the women's pursuit of marriage as part of an attempt to detach themselves in spatial and economic terms from home. While going abroad as a migrant worker helps them negotiate their position within the family by becoming breadwinners, marrying a prisoner allows the women to sustain their city dwelling in Manila through their affinal family, whereby they become independent of their consanguine family. In this sense, finding a husband among the political prisoners serves as a temporary source of social and spatial mobility for the women.

Marrying a prisoner, however, also brings about continuous dilemmas, and challenges the women's attachment to the city. After more than 10 years of marriage without any progress in the case of her husband, Amira did not believe he would ever get out of prison. As with the other imprisoned husbands, the women repeatedly stressed that their cases have been stalled as part of the Philippine state's discrimination against Muslims. When I asked about their plans should her husband be released, Amira said it would cause a dilemma about where to live, as he wanted to return to Mindanao. The prospect of their husband's possible release gives rise to uncertainty about where to settle and thus endangers the women's aspirations of remaining in Manila. Moreover, the marriages complicate the women's everyday lives and add to the precariousness of their urban dwelling, as will be exemplified by Jana and Aisa's stories.

After a few years of marriage, Jana's husband chose to take a second wife, which Jana initially supported. In fact, she took the initiative to accommodate her husband's desire. Jana sought out and introduced an acquaintance to Yussef, and they decided to marry. However, the new and much younger wife ended up sidelining Jana. With acute sadness, Jana shared how the second wife did not tolerate her and Yussef's relationship. When the two women ran into each



other inside the prison, the young wife would start quarreling and humiliating Jana by loudly proclaiming she, not Jana, was Yussef's first wife. Jana did not want to face such humiliation, so eventually she stopped visiting her husband, which led to the cessation of the economic support from his family. As a result, Jana ended up relying on Amira's income, and she spent her days helping the other wives with their children and housework. Once in a while, Jana remarked, she still went inside the prison just to see Yussef, but never to interact with him. Now, even though she considered Yussef the love of her life, Jana wished to separate from him, to which Sara added, "Even if we want to be separated, divorced, and the husband [does] not permit it, you cannot do anything because those are our rules." Referring to the Islamic rules that prevent Muslim women from separating without the husband's approval, Sara's comment explains how Jana is caught in a conflictual marriage.

Aisa, who has been in Maharlika since 2012, expressed the dilemmas and constraints that her marriage had brought about. She was pregnant for the fourth time, her oldest son was four years old, the daughter nearly two, and then she had a boy in between, whom she lost two years earlier. After giving birth to the girl, she had decided to send the middle child back to her family in Mindanao. A few months later, the boy became severely sick, and before she had had a chance to go to her home province, the son had passed away. Aisa explained the complication of everyday practicalities of having another child. Her youngest child still had to be carried, and as she soon would have a newborn baby, Aisa rhetorically asked, "How do I even get around?" She pointed at her oldest son, an energetic child, who ran around playing, and added that she is not even able to get a hold on him when they have to go somewhere. Aisa then contemplated that if she returned to her parents' place, her family would be able to help take care of the children. However, she felt it would be too big a failure to become dependent on her own family again, and she could not leave her husband by himself: "I want to stand with my decision about moving here and getting married, and not depend on my brothers and sisters." On the other hand, she lacked the financial means and support to stay in Maharlika, while having another child would made it impossible to find work, not to mention to get a new contract overseas. To go abroad again, Aisa remarked, would, however, solve her financial shortcomings. In addition, her parents wanted her to come back home, which, Aisa said, her husband agrees with most of the time, adding pressure on Aisa to leave Maharlika. Yet, Aisa concluded, "Even though it is hard to be here, it is harder to go back to Mindanao."

Jana's story of failed marriage and Aisa's reflections of how her stay in Maharlika seems to have come to an end epitomize the predicaments that mark everyday life in the city as a prisoner's wife. The choice between a difficult life in Maharlika, being alone with three children and without financial means and family support, or returning to become a dependent in her family's household back home leaves Aisa with a sense of being stuck in a situation where there is no desirable way out. Choosing to stay in Manila over returning to Mindanao at least allowed Aisa some sense of independence, which she wants to hold on to in order to stay loyal to her decision of marriage despite it no longer providing her with the means to sustain her and her children's lives. Similarly, in Jana's account, the promises made to her if she married Yussef were short-lived and had turned into a sorrowful and precarious situation for her. On the new wife's taking Jana's place, the financial support she received from the husband's family had ceased. Hence, Jana had become financially dependent on her sister, which allowed her to stay on in Maharlika. In this sense, marrying political prisoners provides the women with opportunities of migration and independence, even while the marriages over time endanger these very same promises.

Continuing to live in Maharlika thus depends on the women's maneuvers to bypass the impositions that constantly interfere with their everyday lives, which partly result from their marriages with prisoners. To sustain life and secure their foothold in Maharlika, the women, when

the promises of marriage die out, had sought out supplementary means through which they could secure the independence that life in Maharlika had to offer. For some of the women, these sources of livelihood arose from access to the prison, where their husbands were held, allowing them to combine frequent visits with an income. Aisa brought goods on demand inside the prison, and one of the other women had set up a *sari-sari* store, a small convenience store, where she sold single rations of instant coffee, noodles, and detergent to the inmates and prison guards. Amira had various small, informal jobs, which made it possible for her to make ends meet. She served as a trained, although unlicensed, midwife in the neighborhood for women who cannot afford to go to the official health facilities. As a result, Amira had fallen into disrepute with the barangay council because of a ban on carrying out home births. Moreover, she took cooking jobs, sold bags of ice out of her window, and worked as a beauty therapist giving manicures and pedicures in the homes around Maharlika.

These examples illustrate how the prison marriages are central to the women's day-to-day maneuvering, which revolves around financial survival that allows the women to remain in the city. In this sense, there is an instrumental aspect to marrying prisoners for the women, at least fleetingly, to realize their personal desires of mobility, economic support, and a sense of independence. The emphasis on not wanting to rely on their own natal families back home that can be heard in the women's accounts suggests that independence is not about freeing oneself from the social pressures of family. Rather, the kind of spatial and economic detachment from home that these marriages support is about not burdening family and preferably being able to contribute, which the women's attempts to become breadwinner demonstrates. On this basis, we may understand the women's agency as oriented toward multiple and conflicting social pressures and relational expectations they seek to accommodate while also striving at fulfilling their own desires. The composite aspect of the women's agency thus denotes the bargains they strike in their everyday lives with the promises, dilemmas, and impositions that come with marrying a prisoner. The momentary and precarious nature of their opportunities requires them to change tactics and maneuver at various tracks simultaneously to hold on to the initial gains of independence and mobility. This is illustrated by how the women persistently aimed at securing their metropolitan dwelling when the marriage vows die out, and over time, the marriages end up compromising the women's continued migration, as returning home eventually becomes unavoidable because of having children or the release of their husbands, who wish to go home. More than the momentary gains of marrying a political prisoner, the women's agency draws from notions of morality and gendered norms stemming from home.

### ***Gendered Obligations toward Kin and Nation***

Sara, who had been with one of the inmates for more than two years, explained the problems and economic shortcomings, as well as obligations, that marriage with a prisoner entails. About their introduction, Sara said, "I got to know him by phone. Somebody just gave my number to him. So, I visited because I was curious about him." Sara thus went to the prison with Amira, who is her best friend and neighbor, and could immediately see that "he is a good person." However, several considerations kept her from marrying her partner

I want him to be out. I told him, "If you will get out of jail, I will marry you . . ." I don't want dowry,<sup>8</sup> although as a Muslim he has to pay dowry to the woman. I don't want that, I want [his] freedom, to be outside. That's the only plan . . . Life is difficult inside . . . Every day I will bring food. How will I find a job if I bring food every day? I cannot provide everything. That is one reason I don't want to marry. I cannot fulfill the obligations as a wife.

Besides separation due to his imprisonment and the uncertainty of whether he would be released, Sara's concerns about marrying her partner touch on the responsibilities that fall on wives of prisoners. The daily work of providing food and other necessities to the husband makes it impossible to find a job; however, it is what the wives are obliged to do because, as Sara noted, life in prison is difficult.

The men's suffering as prisoners was a recurrent element in the women's answers as to why they had married them. As Sara elaborated, "You feel pity for him. More than 10 years [in prison], imagine?! In that corner of a shell [referring to the very limited space inside the prison cell] . . . I don't do [anything]; I just go inside to support and sit there with him. I bring food and medication. Who else is doing that?" Sara stressed how it is the women's duty to help these men, who are suffering inside the jail without any prospect of having their case processed. Moreover, the husbands had suffered separation from their relatives in Mindanao, as they had been brought to the capital. She further explained how she is driven to provide for her partner not "so much because of love" but out of feelings of pity. In a similar vein, to the question of what initially made her interested in Norman, Amira simply answered, "I want to help."

The emphasis on providing care and ensuring the men's well-being reveals how understandings of normative gendered roles, obligations, and morality are embedded in the women's choice to marry prisoners. Elena Omelchenko's (2016) exploration of women who voluntarily marry inmates in Russian prisons shows that these relationships enable them to cultivate their own femininity and moral image. Mutual dependency and, as the title of Omelchenko's article indicates, to provide and receive "care in the careless state," in which both are socially excluded, are the women's incentives to marry prisoners, through which they gain a sense of self-worth (*ibid.*). These perspectives underscore the women's diverse desires as encapsulated within the prison marriages and how these relationships respond to the women's (and men's) social and political reality. This suggests that, beyond the question of how prison marriages feed into the women's attempts to find a foothold in the city and hereby escape deprivation and dependency at home, marriage entails a circulation of responsibilities and personal investment between the women and the men in the face of the marginalized positions of both partners. By engaging in these exchanges and providing moral support, food, and medicine for the husbands in the prison, the women are able to assume a traditional kind of womanhood. Hereby, the women become respectable in an otherwise undignified situation.

A reaction to the state's neglect and suppression also underlies these relationships. As part of the explanation of their choice of husbands, the women stressed the martyrdom the men had suffered. When our conversations occasionally touched on the political conflict and the very reasons why these men had ended up in jail, the women emphasized historical and current atrocities against Muslims, committed by the Philippine state. As an example, Jana recounted that during the martial law period, the Philippine military had killed her husband's father in a very brutal manner by burning him alive as part of an unmotivated attack on their village. Sara agitatedly interjected and asserted, "This is why you cannot blame these people inside after what they have experienced. [There is] a lot of torture even in our place. [The Philippine army] will invade your place, they will torture, so . . . [in this way, they] just make [you] a rebel." She concluded that the rest of the country ignores the continuous violence in their home communities because it "only happens in remote places, so no one is bothered to see us. They just blindfold their eyes to not see what happens in Muslim Mindanao."

Moreover, the women explained their husbands' arrests as misunderstandings, mistaken identities, and libel. Amira described how, because of a confusion around their names, her husband was mistaken for a famous rebel leader. In a similar vein, Aisa said her husband had been

arrested because the military alleges that all Muslims are rebels. These responses make it clear that the women perceive the imprisonment of these men as part of the ongoing violations in Muslim territories. As Sara stressed, “I know these are good men, who have not done anything but fight for the freedom of Mindanao and the rights of the Muslim people.”

Sara and Amira’s reasoning of marriage with political prisoners reveals a strong sense of political injustice that drives the women to take on the responsibility to stand by the men, who have been sacrificed in the political struggle against the Philippine state. This echoes a narrative of Muslim nationhood, in which the Muslim communities have historically endured and resisted foreign power and oppression (see Abinales 2010). Marrying political prisoners, we may suggest, allows the women a place within this national narrative, which is fundamental within the separatist project. I suggest that through marriage with political prisoners, the women reconfigure themselves in accordance with the ideal woman: self-sacrificing, compassionate, and caring. By fulfilling their role as caregivers for these men, and by alleviating the pain and suffering inflicted on them through imprisonment, the women are able to convert moral obligation into agency and social and political worth.

Mahmood argues that to understand women’s agency calls for an exploration of “the relationship between the immanent form a normative act takes, the model of subjectivity it presupposes and the kinds of authority upon which such an act relies” (2005: 23). Marriage with imprisoned rebels enables the women to respond to moral obligations and to comply with social norms stemming from the home. The women’s agency thus arises from adopting a model of gendered subjectivity as a caring and compassionate wife, which, we may suggest, becomes political through supporting the men who fight for the freedom and rights of Muslim people, as Sara expresses it. In this sense, marrying political prisoners becomes a moral act as the women make their husband’s imprisonment part of a larger history of political injustices and violence that the Muslim communities have been and continuously are subjected to. Returning to the notion of composite agency, I argue that beyond allowing the women to avail some degree of independence, their pursuit of marriage is fundamentally about responding to the politics of kinship that is braided together with the insurgency back home. The political element of the women’s agency thus emerges out of meeting gendered obligations that enable them to contribute to the extended kin relations back home, which draws narratives of suffering as a Muslim nation into question. The women’s agency is to be understood not as direct political action but rather as emerging from compliance with social norms in which the political struggle is enmeshed.

Mahmood’s (2001) example further illustrates how women striving to realize piety in the eyes of God are placed in conflictual relations with multiple structures of authority. This point is useful in order to understand how the women’s engagement with the prison and pursuit of marriage with rebels is, as I learned from conversations with other Muslim women in the neighborhood, frowned upon locally in Maharlika. For example, a local official remarked with clear disapproval, “We cannot understand why they have to do this!”—as if she spoke on behalf of the Maharlika community as such. In this way, the ideas of morality that the women assert through their marriages seem to not resonate with the norms prevailing in the metropolitan setting but rather add to their socially excluded position in the city. Instead, the women submit to the authority exerted by the entangled relationship of families, home communities, and the insurgency movement. In this way, composite agency allows a lens on how the women maneuver conflicting notions of morality and how their fulfillment of social norms stemming from home may curb their own aspirations of inclusion in the city.

While national sentiments were part of the women’s reasoning about their choice of partners, the political struggle did not appear to preoccupy the women in their everyday lives in Maharlika. As mentioned, the women did not show interest in speaking about the separatist

project, and only when our conversations revolved around familial ties to the separatist movement and their husbands' arrests did the women's political commitment seem to be activated. In general, the women spoke about the insurgency with a certain distance and ambiguity. As Amira explained, they have not been involved themselves in the movement, because "we already know the result of the war, that it will not be successful." About their families' involvement in the separatist movement, Amira noted that it was not a choice in the first place but a way for them to protect their lands during the war years. Sara further elaborated that they support the political struggle but not as members of the organization, and laughingly said, "Inshallah [if God wills], it will be successful!"

In her ethnographic account on wives of political prisoners in the Palestinian resistance movement, Lotte Buch Segal (2016a) offers a conception of ambivalent attachment that captures the contradictory sentiments toward the nationalist cause in women's narratives. Segal argues that as the political goals become unattainable over the course of time, political attachment emerges from "the gap between the ideal narrative of people as living embodiments of 'revolutionary becoming' and the social and political circumstances that have decimated the ideal" (2016a: 479). The notion of ambivalence captures the women's differing positioning toward the separatist struggle. The women do not consider themselves politically engaged, because in their eyes, as Amira noted, the struggle is already lost. That does not mean, however, they do not support the separatist project and hope for a successful outcome in the future. Whereas Segal demonstrates that ambivalent attachment converts into melancholy when the ideal is lost, I want to suggest that ambiguity may also allow creativity in dealing with social and political pressures that mark the women's lives. Here I return to how marriage supports the women's aspirations, simultaneously aiming at attachment to home and spatial detachment, which form part of their composite agency.

The everyday context of migration allows the women to disengage with the separatist struggle, in which the struggle to sustain life for themselves and their children, arising from their disenfranchised position, is more acute. Meanwhile, we may understand the political component of the women's assertion of agency through marriage as a contribution to kin and nation as they take on a moral responsibility to care for the men and in this way strengthen the relational ties between kin, on which the Muslim nation is founded. In this light, the women's nationalist sentiments, as illustrated in Sara and Amira's reasoning about their choice of partners, emerge out of their commitment and sense of obligation to kin. In her analysis of agency from a position of subordination, Mahmood says, "Particular networks of concepts enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity" (2001: 210). Agency not only is the subject's capacity for change but also encompasses acts that "aim toward continuity, stasis and stability" (212), which I suggest, because of the women's ambivalence, are not mutually exclusive. The women do strive toward change, which marriage promises in terms of migration and mobility, as well as continuity in their social attachment to home. In this sense, family and kin relations are permanent and unnegotiable. Fulfilling these obligations thus permit the women to creatively maneuver the intricate relationship of family and politics, as compliance with norms allows the women spatial detachment and a degree of independence in everyday life.

### Revisiting Composite Agency

Wives of prisoners have not drawn much scholarly attention, and the literature inquiring into the lives of women married to political prisoners is limited. Some of these studies emphasize how women are "doing time" on the outside, suffering the consequences of separation and single parenting, and the stigma that imprisonment of their husbands brings about (Comfort 2009;

Fishman 1990). In the context of the Palestinian liberation struggle, Segal (2010, 2013, 2016a, 2016b) provides insights into how loss, stigma, and grief are inscribed into the everyday lives of wives of political detainees. These studies offer important insights on how imprisonment of husbands strongly impinges on the lives of the wives and help us understand the extent to which confinement significantly reconfigures gender dynamics and family relationships. They also show how prisoners are seen as burdens to their relatives on the outside (see also Das et al. 2008).

This ethnographic account differs from these analyses mainly because the women have chosen marriage with a prisoner. This article aims at complementing these perspectives with an exploration of not only how women suffer the consequences of marriage across prison walls but also how this choice of marrying prisoners is a way for women to exercise agency in societies marked by political conflict. I suggest the imprisoned husbands may not only be a burden but also valuable and desired by the women because they allow the women to accommodate the kinship politics stemming from their home communities and extended family networks, in which insurgency politics are enmeshed. We may understand that it is the men's very imprisonment in the metropole and their place of origin that make them desirable for the women, who simultaneously want to escape their home communities and maintain and strengthen relational ties at home. Moreover, although the women do not dwell on their husbands' roles in or political affiliation to the insurgency as an explanation as to why they married them, common origin and history, and nationalist sentiments form the basis of the women's choice of partners. Thus, by providing care, compassion, and moral support to the men, who have become martyrs, the women assume a kind of womanhood that can be socially and politically appreciated. This point has been raised in the literature on prisoners' wives in Russia (Katz and Pallot 2014; Omelchenko 2016). Elena Katz and Judith Pallot (2014) argue that the identity as a prisoner's wife allows women to identify with gendered female ideals in Russian society that connote self-sacrifice and loyalty.

I argue, however, that different forms of agency are nested in the choice of marrying political prisoners, which I have come to conceive of as composite agency. Mahmood (2001, 2005) offers useful insights into women's agency beyond the prevalent dichotomy of resistance or submission to relations of domination in western feminist theory. Rather than perceiving norms as constraints imposed on the individual from the outside social world, Mahmood suggests "social norms are the necessary ground through which the subject is realized and comes to enact her agency" (2005: 19). In this light, norms can be understood as neither established nor undermined "but performed, inhabited and experienced in a variety of ways" (22). This allows us to understand how social obligations and morality derived from the entangled relationship between kinship, home, and the separatist movement inform the women's choice of marriage. Through compliance with norms the women are enabled to enact agency. As the analysis demonstrates, however, it is not simple rule-following that is at stake in prison marriages; it is through compliance that the women are allowed a position from where they aim at pursuing their own goals. This is underscored by the ways in which the women persistently struggle to make it in the city when the marriage arrangements fail to ensure their survival.

I suggest that the notion of composite agency permits attention to the contradictory nature of the women's various undertakings through which they conform with norms and moral obligations while simultaneously bargaining with and finding ways to combine rule-following with their own desires and aspirations. In this way, the women's everyday maneuvering in the urban setting constantly seeks to keep the prospect of having to return to Mindanao in check, and surpass the impositions that having an imprisoned husband brings about. Meanwhile, fulfilling social and gendered obligations arising from home may also end up endangering their goal of not having to return to Mindanao, as too many children or the husband's release will eventually threaten their urban dwelling. In this sense, the women's creative assertion of different forms of

agency may stand in opposition to one another. While following Mahmood's point that emancipatory politics are not universally at stake for women, I do consider that a desire for independence underlies the women's choice of marrying political prisoners, as these marriages are a source of fleeting independence and mobility. Independence, however, cannot be understood as individual autonomy but appears to be about being able to contribute to and support the common good of familial networks, and thereby oneself. In this sense, politics of kinship and social belonging form a permanent and nonnegotiable basis for the women's assertion of agency.

Composite agency denotes the women's creative and diverse tactics that allow them to combine multiple and contradictory desires, aiming at strengthening relational and political attachment, through which a degree of detachment can be gained in day to day life. On this basis, I argue that prison marriages are part of the women's composite agency, through which they seek to maneuver their everyday lives, through persistent, contradictory, creative, and forever precarious attempts to stay independent, care for family, and contribute to the Muslim nation.

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## ■ NOTES

1. The separatist movement, originally led by the Moro National Liberation Front, has been fragmented into various armed organizations over the past 40 years.
2. Because of confidentiality, I have omitted the organizations with which the men are associated, and all individuals involved are anonymized.
3. The Tausug is one of the 13 Muslim ethnic groups in the Philippines, which traditionally originates from Western Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago.
4. A barangay is the smallest administrative unit in the Philippines.
5. The research constitutes one case study, which is part of my PhD project "The Intimate Insurgency: Women's Maneuvering of the Entanglements of Family Relations and Muslim Separatism in the Philippines."
6. As suggested by Thomas Kiefer (1968), the notion of *buddi* is parallel to *utang na loob* in Tagalog society, which denotes a debt of gratitude or cycle of debt (see also Jocano 1997; Kaut 1961).
7. Marcos declared martial law in the Philippines in 1972, which lasted until 1986. In the Muslim south of the country, the period was characterized by intense warfare between separatist groups and the Philippine army, which has continued up to the present with varying degrees of intensity and several attempts to reach peace.
8. In the ethnographic context, the term dowry is used interchangeably with bride price.

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