

# Dwelling in Transience: *Kyai*, *Pesantren*, and the Circulation of Piety among Indonesian Migrants in Malaysia

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**Abstract:** This article explores the religious life of Indonesian migrants in Malaysia. The study was conducted in a village in Selangor State. On the basis of informants' request, the real name of informants and places are not exposed. This study used ethnography, survey, and in-depth interview as techniques for data collection. The author lived with the migrants for about four years (2006-2010). The majority of migrants in the area are from East Java, especially from Lumajang, Jember and Madura, areas which are highly influenced by religious culture of Nahdatul Ulama. After immersing into their religious life, this study reveals three important topics of interest: religious ritual activities, piety, and relations between migrants and religious figures from their homeland. Although *kyai* and religious leaders are not physically present with the migrants, the migrants developed their own religious life. They create new religious figures or invite *kyai*, *lora* and *habib* who come to Malaysia for commercial or travel purposes to guide them. To a certain degree, the migrants are trying to defend their *santri* tradition amid the local government's pressures on their status as illegal migrants.

**Keywords:** Religious life, migration, migrant community.

## A. Introduction

The spectre of xenophobic violence against recent migrant arrivals, a haunting presence in today's world of globalized migration, raises with fresh urgency the vexed question of the relationship between migrants and "natives". Malaysia, one of the Asia-Pacific "tiger" economies of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been a labor-scarce economy since the mid-1970s. Today, circa 25 per cent of its labor force is comprised of foreign migrant workers, about 70 per cent of whom are from neighbouring Indonesia. Given the porous maritime border between the two countries, much of this migration is of an undocumented, or illegal nature. Since the mid-1980s, a notably xenophobic public discourse has arisen over the "illegals" who, if left unchecked, would "take over the country", especially virulent during the periodic mass campaigns of detention and deportations undertaken by state authorities.<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding all the overt hostility, there has been a marked absence of collective public violence directed against the Indonesian migrant population. This paper seeks to unravel one possible permutation of the complex relationship between itinerancy and locality, based on an ethnographic case study in Malaysia of undocumented Indonesian migrants residing in close proximity to local Malay villagers. Drawing on migrant biographical narratives, and focusing on their religious practices, we find that the common ethnic and religious heritage shared by the migrants and the locals does provide intersecting spaces of sociality which help attenuate the hostility, and cushion the danger (of police raids and the like), constantly faced by undocumented migrants.

Nevertheless, a clear line of distinction along notions of territorialized nationality—the migrants are perjoratively referred to as "Indon"—is drawn between the locals and the migrants. The official migration regime works on a "guest-worker" principle of temporary and limited entry into the national labor market, with little or no provision made for settlement.<sup>2</sup> The undocumented migrants who have sought entry into this labor market are well aware of this limitation: "This here is someone else's country. We're just putting

up here temporarily, looking for a living," says the 28 year old Mas S, who came here with his wife, undocumented, a year and a half ago.

How is *dwelling*,<sup>3</sup> once the traveling stops, to be reconstituted in transience? Or in the words of the introduction to this special issue, albeit with a somewhat different accentuation, how can religious and cultural authority be established and maintained in the host country? In exploring this question, we shall draw attention to the fact that migrant religious life has been organized *within* the ethnic community, based largely on the availability of religious expertise from within the pool of migrant workers itself, and on the general level of commitment to village religious and cultural practices of the migrants. The key to this is the institution of the rural *pesantren*, around which the religious culture of the migrants is built, and through which homeland ties continue to be structured. This "transnational" circuit of religious exchange remains a closed circuit, with little interaction with the Islamic world of the host country, or with the wider Islamic world at large.

Positioned neither in transit nor in settlement, the data suggests a condition of migrant being termed here *dwelling in transience*. It is the reproduction of religious life within the community, and by extension, to the one in the homeland, however impoverished and rudimentary, which makes this dwelling in transience possible.

## **B. The Migrant Population in ST**

In 2007, an estimated 300 migrant workers from Indonesia lived in rented lodgings in the village of ST, some 30 km from Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of the country. Another estimated 700 workers were living in so-called *kongsi* houses in the vicinity of ST. A *kongsi* house is a temporary shelter on a construction site which can house up to a few hundred migrants, of both sexes, at any one time. It is the typical form of accommodation for new migrant arrivals in the construction sector.

The majority of these Indonesian migrants in ST originated from East Java (especially the districts of Lumajang and Jember) and

Madura—both areas known for their poor soils and harsh terrain (see map below). Although known collectively as “Indon” to the locals, ethnic affiliation—Javanese or Madurese—is critical and continues to delineate migrant community life. The local villagers of ST are themselves third and fourth generation descendants of immigrants from Indonesia, the majority of Javanese and Minang stock.

Our 2007 survey of 113 Indonesian migrants in the village showed that all were employed in manual occupations, largely as construction workers or cleaners. Only 20 per cent had work permits; the rest were overstayers, working illegally in the country. The age distribution showed a bulge in the 30-49 age group, with several males aged above 50 and only one below 20. There was a fairly balanced gender distribution, with a male:female ratio of 6:4, pointing to a high incidence of marriage and household formation among the migrants.

The vast majority were recent arrivals, although some had been in the country for more than 10 years. The majority would also have arrived in their twenties. For all of them, the reason for their migration to Malaysia is clear: “*untuk cari makan*” (to earn a livelihood), as Pak Kur says. The calculation is simple, according to the former religious teacher and government officer:

The young people, their aim is to improve their fortunes, nothing else. At home, they don't have anything, those who don't have a motorbike want to have a motorbike. Because in Indonesia, just to buy a motorbike is very difficult. Here, if you save for a year or two, you can buy a bike. It's easy here. I earn RM 30 a day, spend RM 10 or RM 15 on food, RM 10 or 15 remains. In one month, that is RM 300; if converted into rupiahs, that's 750,000. With that, you can buy a bike in two years. In Indonesia, one day's work just covers one day's expenses.

For some, especially the older migrants, the search for a livelihood was aggravated or precipitated by debt. Malaysia is *Melayu*, says Pak Yai, another older informant. “And in Javanese, *melayu* means ‘to run away’—heavy debts.” Pak Yai, a Javanese, and Pak Kur, a Madurese, were, as we shall see later, the informal authority figures in their community. They had one competitor.

### C. The Constraints of Illegality

A key, and feared, figure in the migrant community was Pak S, who was one of the few Indonesians in ST who had acquired Malaysian citizenship and had access to locals, including the police. This gave him the cachet to demand “protection money” from his fellow-Indonesians in the village who were there without valid documents. The monthly payment was RM 30 per head. His gang of seven men, plus his reputation for cruelty, including murder, ensured that everyone paid up.

The relative security provided by this “protection” was undermined by Pak S’s fall from grace with the local police after an attack by his gang on a local Malay security guard. In the ensuing fall-out, several raids were conducted against illegal migrants and many of the villagers were detained and deported. Some months later, police set up road blocks on a few occasions at the commuter station just at the time when the migrants were returning from work. Several migrants were caught but this time, they were let off after payment of money to the police.

Similarly, in the *kongsis*, with their large concentrations of migrant workers, all have to pay “protection” money to the police beat in the vicinity in order to avoid being raided. Each resident pays RM 100 a month (RM 50 for women), deducted from his monthly salary by the employer, who would have negotiated the deal with the police. The ketua *kongsi*, usually an Indonesian migrant in possession of a Malaysian identity document, acts as the middleman to the employer and the police. This “protection”, however, only covers the premises of the *kongsi*. One can still be caught while traveling on the highway, as was Bang F, or anywhere else outside of the *kongsi*.

Migrant life is thus plagued by a pervading sense of fear and insecurity. The fear of police raids precipitated by local complaints has induced an attitude of wariness toward local society, and strengthened the isolation of the *kongsi* as an off-limits enclave to local society.

### **D. Relations with Local Malay Muslim Society**

Relations with local society, largely descendants of Indonesian migrants of an earlier generation, are thus fraught with ambivalence and hostility. When asked about the Indonesians in the village, the local headmen replied:

Of course it's not very satisfactory from the perspective of culture. Because these people come from very different parts, so their culture, you know, is discomfoting. Sometimes these people have no discipline, the way they—it's not at all satisfactory.

He mentions the theft of fruits from the fruiting trees, the theft of water from public pipes, the way the women bathe in public, the way the men look at the local girls, the fact that they don't frequent the *surau* or local mosque: "These people say they are muslims, but don't go to the surau. That's a problem—we're Muslims."

Most likely, these comments were directed at the migrants living in the *kongsi*. Clearly however, such sentiments affect relations in general, and as noted above, the activities of the gang based in ST did not help matters. Shortly after the raids and police road blocks in the earlier part of the year however, an Indonesian construction worker by the name of Pak P died in hospital of dengue fever. Three others, who were also hospitalized, survived. This incident revealed the social potential in the shared religion and shared language of the migrants and the locals.

The local headman, whose remarks were quoted earlier, together with the owner of the house which the four men had rented, visited them in hospital. The burial of Pak P in the local cemetery was entirely organized by the headmen and other villagers from the local surau. The house-owner, Pak L, even organized the *tahlil*, prayers for the soul of the dead, in his house, on the first, third and seventh day after the funeral. About 20 people attended the *tahlil*, the majority of them migrants from Lumajang in East Java, where Pak P came from. It gave them an opportunity to get together in company, something they would otherwise fear to do, as this would often engender 'complain' on the part of the locals. This time, the locals were part of the company.

### E. The Reconstitution of Religious Life

In the re-constitution of Islamic religious life in the world of the *rantau* (diaspora), three different levels of practices can be distinguished: (a) The ritual observance of calendrical events, such as Mauludan (Prophet Mohammads's birthday), and life-cycle events, such as death/birth ceremonies; (b) The observance of regular Islamic ritual obligations, in particular the fast and the congregational Friday prayers; (c) The practice of magical protection through use of amulets known as *azimat*.

#### *Rituals and Community*

Death was one occasion when "community" was called for, and community was constituted. Burial requires the right of access to a local cemetery, an issue of paramount importance to a population of migrants. This—an acknowledgement of belonging to the community of Islam—was readily granted by the local community, as seen above. Noteworthy was also the fact that the entire religious ritual of burial according to Islamic rites could be conducted with resources internal to the village—in this case, both from within the migrant and the local community.

Another major life-event is birth. When a baby named Imran was born to Mbak K, who had been living in ST for several years, it was striking how religious rituals and customary practices, truncated though they may have been, were adhered to, again with resources locally available, this time only from within the family and migrant community. *Slametan* (festive meal) to which all the relatives and neighbours were invited, with prayers led by the 59 year old Pak Kur, the informal religious leader of the Madurese migrants in ST, were held during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> month of the pregnancy, the day of birth, the 40<sup>th</sup> day, and the 7<sup>th</sup> month after birth. According to Mbak K, many of those who come from Java and give birth in Malaysia do not maintain the *slametan* tradition. She herself does it, she says, with the hope that her child would grow up to be pious and contribute to religion (*agama*), country (*nusa*) and nation (*bangsa*).

Bang A and Mbak K, the parents of Imran, were "officially"

married by Pak Kur. Bereft of identity documents, marriages in Malaysia among migrants cannot be registered and are not officially recognized, neither by the Malaysian nor the Indonesian state. Pak M, who took a second wife in ST, had also asked Pak Kur to conduct the religious ceremony—“rather than do something improper and sinful, it’s better that I marry again here. Pak Kur officiated. We were married properly.” Pak Kur himself notes the danger of temptation in the circumstances under which the migrants live—and to prevent them from behaving “like animals”, he is prepared to act as “*hakim*” (judge) to conduct officially fictive marriages.

Doing this is not without its dangers. Pak Yai is another former religious teacher who came to Malaysia in 2003 to work as a cleaner, but with an official work permit. He is a Javanese from Malang, while Pak Kur is a Madurese from Jember. When it comes to marriages, Pak Yai says, he hesitates.

Because that is prohibited by the government, illegal marriages without permits are prohibited here. I do it only if they come surreptitiously into the room, with their two witnesses.

Both Pak Kur and Pak Yai are frequently called upon to lead collective prayers by members of their respective ethnic communities. These rituals, held in small groups of friends, neighbours and relatives, were not infrequent, and were also held for events, especially deaths, of close ones which would have occurred in Indonesia in their absence. A rudimentary community religious life has thus been reconstituted around the rituals associated life-cycle events such as births, marriages and deaths. The maintenance of these life-cycle rituals demonstrate the determination to reconstitute a moral order—and the ability to do so—in the shadow of illegality and in the vacuum of official documentation of personal existence.

The importance placed on calendrical festivities testifies to the same desire. The highlights of the calendrical year are the *aidil fitri* and the *aidil adha* festivals, celebrated in conjunction with the end of the fasting month and the middle of the pilgrimage month respectively. There is also the important birthday of the Prophet or *mauludan*.



Back home, *mauludan* brings the entire village community together in festivities centred on the local *surau* or mosque. It begins with *isya* prayers in the mosque, followed by a religious talk on the birth of the Prophet. Every single household in the neighbourhood of the *surau* sends cooked food (enough for three to four people) to the *surau* for the communal meal that follows the final reading of the prayer. Throughout the subsequent days of the entire month, guests are invited home for servings of fruit and for collective prayer. Prayers, both at the *surau* and in the homes, would be led by a *kyai*, a religious scholar and teacher who heads a *pesantren*, or Islamic boarding school.

In Malaysia, in the *kongsi* house, *mauludan* was celebrated in the individual rooms (which served as homes), but the mood was somewhat subdued this year as the construction project was nearing its end and most of the workers had already left. The *surau* had already been dismantled, and this year, no visiting *kyai* from Madura came to grace the occasion, as had often been the case in the past.

In the more settled “village” community in ST, a festive atmosphere of busy gaiety was clearly in the air. Several homes were filled with guests, food and fruits, and prayer, on the night of *mauludan*. At the home of Mas Pdn, a *lora* (member of a *kyai* family) from Lumajang who had just arrived in Malaysia was invited to lead the prayers. At other homes, Pak Kur or Pak Yai were invited to lead the prayers.

A strong sense of communal solidarity was evident in the lavishness with which *mauludan* was celebrated. As the house to which guests had been invited was generally home to several migrants who were merely renting rooms in the house, everyone chipped in to cover the expenses incurred. Some guests brought *beras* (uncooked rice) with them. In the village, it is the custom for the invited neighbours and kin to bring rice, a symbol of solidarity, with them to the *slametan*. Some migrants were still practicing it in ST, buying sacks of rice to bring with them to the hosts, to help cover the expense of communal feasting. The migrants could not help commenting on the fact though, that there was just one difference to the way *mauludan* was celebrated here—it lacked the communal focus on the mosque.

The neighbourhood mosque or *surau* in ST is dominated by

locals, and cannot be used by the migrants as a centre for their religious activities. Constructing their own *surau*, as is done in the *kongsis*, and as has, and would have been, the way in which community would have been reconstituted and given form and substance in the *rantau* or diaspora, is no longer possible in Malaysia under the present Islamic order. The formalization of Islam in the country has led to the development of a religious administration with strict control over the erection and management of all *suraus* and mosques in the country. Only in the closed migrant world of the *kongsi* can temporary migrant-run *suraus* be erected by the migrants themselves, and for their own purposes. The absence of a *surau*, as a visible symbol of, and religious vehicle for, the formation of community and identity, is what gives migrant community life here its truncated, rudimentary and transient character.

### *The Observance of Faith*

The death of a fellow migrant in the *rantau* is of particular poignance, and an occasion for strengthening the religious faith of the migrants. Pak Yai was given the honorary title of *kyai* by his Javanese fellow migrants after the death of a worker living in a large *kongsi*.

There was this man dying, and the people around him were just shouting 'da rema-da rema'. I went straight to him and prayed (*zikir*) into his ear—Allah, Allah—until he died. Then I read the *yasin* (Koranic verse for the dead)... I also washed his corpse at the hospital in K. ...that's when I became the imam, that's how it started.

And because of this, Pak Yai says, he took on the task of spreading religion, just as he had done back in his own village earlier. After the *tahlil* for the dead man, he said to the crowd in the *kongsi*,

Even though you are in the *perantauan* (diaspora), don't go to the extent of failing to perform your worship (*ibadah*), because we are all sure to die, like he did. After that, they all called me *kyai*.

For the *rantau* can be corrosive of faith. "Not all fast. Here, your life is your own", noted Mas S. Fasting, and attending Friday prayers at the mosque or *masjid*, are the key obligations imposed on the Muslim, and the test of his *keimanan* (faith). 28 year-old Mas S has strong views on this matter: migrant life, in his opinion, is dominated

by the question of money; those who would have fasted and attended Friday prayers back home in the village are far less inclined to do so here.

Apart from the observance of the fast, there is the question of the obligatory Friday prayers. Attendance by the migrants at the local village *surau* is low, as the headman had pointedly observed. Mas S confirms this observation, noting that if all 300 Indonesians in ST were to attend the *surau*, it wouldn't be big enough to hold them all. Many do not go to the mosque either, he adds.

But even the pious Pak Yai does not go to the *surau*—on account of his poor command of Malay. For many others though, the reason given for not going to the local *surau* was fear, on account of their status as *orang kosong*, or undocumented migrants. Hence, many preferred the anonymity of the nearby university mosque. Fasting was also difficult to sustain under the very harsh conditions of construction labour, in which most of the migrants were engaged. These arguments however, cut no ice with community of the faithful.

The position indicative of mainstream opinion within the community on this—obviously important and contentious—matter was the one taken by the 28 year old Ustadz S:

Nonetheless, if the *iman* (faith) is strong, it doesn't matter where one moves to, as far as *ibadah* (ritual performance) is concerned, there will definitely be no changes.

And indeed, it was impressive to see the extent to which members of the migrant community, both in the *kongsi* houses, and in the village setting, were committed to re-enacting their religious obligations and sustaining a religious life even under such trying conditions, including that of not being able to have their own *surau*, where they could have worshipped in peace and security.

### ***The Power of Magical Protection—The Azimat***

The traveling *lora* (addressed as *kyai* by the migrants) from Java who had conducted the prayers at the *mauludan* celebration had come with a bag stuffed with bottles of oil said to be filled with *azimat*. Objects infused with magical power through the incantation of

prayers by a holy man are transformed into *azimats*. When the prayers were over, the assembled guests were addressed by a friend of the “*kyai*”, who said that the “*kyai*” had come all the way from Madura to help lead the *slametan*, and also to sell the *azimat*-filled oil. The bottles of oil, at RM 50 each, were labeled with an Arabic word. *Azimats* offer protection.

Tired limbs and fevered bodies are the common lot of migrant construction workers subject to the daily grind of hard, unremitting labour in the blazing heat of the tropical sun. The work also entails great danger. Falls from the scaffolding, often nothing more than a rickety bamboo-pole construction, are not uncommon. Bang F relates in his interview how just the other day, someone fell and lost five teeth. Five lives have been lost at one of the buildings under construction in ST. These are the occupational hazards against which one has to be armed with *azimats*. Another are police raids, detention and deportation.

“*Keselamatan*” or safety, both the physical and the legal, was the primary concern of all the migrants, as it was the main determinant of the success or failure of the migration project. Given the arbitrariness with which safety could be threatened, magical protection was in great demand. This was where the *azimat* came in. Pak Yai, the informal religious leader of the Javanese in Sungai T, says that every migrant in ST who leaves for Malaysia will have brought with him an *azimat* given by his own *kyai*.

Before coming to Malaysia, the migrants, especially those who are in ST, will already have a *kyai* in their kampung there. They will bring the *azimat* from their *kyai* there... Everyone has an *azimat* from their *kyai*... Those who work here need the *azimat*.

According to Mas S, migrants leaving for the *rantau* will receive a *bekal* or parting gift from the family in the form of an *azimat*. Mas S carries his *azimat* from his family with him all the time in his wallet. *Azimats* are also acquired in Malaysia itself. Pak Yai says that he has been asked for one. The itinerant *kyais* or *loras* travelling to the *kongsis* in Malaysia will also bring with them fresh supplies of this all-important religious commodity.

### F. *Kyai, Pesantren, and the Circulation of Piety*

The close association between the power of the *azimat* and the *kyai* is specific to the traditionalist Islamic *santri* culture which has developed in the East Javanese and Madurese countryside in the course of the long process of islamization of the original Hinduized kingdoms and peasant cultures of Java.<sup>4</sup> Generally, Islamic schools and centres of religious learning—the *madrassa*—are located in urban centres. That the *pesantren*, Islamic boarding schools headed (and owned) by *kyais* or religious scholars, came to be located in the Javanese countryside, especially on its eastern board, was due to the repressive policies of the Dutch colonial state toward the Indonesian religious elite in the 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>5</sup>

Needless to say, *santri* culture had to accommodate the local beliefs and religious needs of the peasantry. The long-held animistic belief in the power inherent to objects in the natural world was carried over into the *santri* universe in the form of *azimats*, sanctified by the power of the *kyai*, the holy man blessed with *barokah*, or charisma. The magical power invested in the *kyai*, thanks to his *barokah*, found expression not only in the awe with which he was treated by his *santris* in the *pesantren*, but in the loyal following he gathered around himself as head of a *sufi* order or *tarekat*. Especially in marginal economic and cultural areas like Madura, where the state has little presence even today, *kyais* as masters of religious power are treated with great reverence and deference by a local society for whom the only other source of power and authority is the *blater*, the gang leader and master of violence, prototype for the protection rackets indispensable to undocumented labour migration in Malaysia.<sup>6</sup>

The acceptance of knowledge and practices outside the strict fold of the Hadith and the Koran in the traditionalist *santri* culture helped, no doubt, in the early Islamization of a peasantry much attached to its older past. At the same time, the presence of *santri* institutions in the peasant world of East Java and Madura has led to the strengthening of orthodox Islamic piety in the peasant society into whose social fabric they have since become so deeply interwoven.

In these rural tracts of East Java and Madura, it is said that in

almost every family, there would be at least one member who would have attended a *pesantren*. This move is driven by piety and poverty. The *pesantren* is the cheaper alternative to government schools at secondary level. 28 year-old Bang F, one of the younger migrants who continued to observe the fast here, comes from an impoverished peasant family in a remote hill-side village in Madura. After six years of free public schooling, he spent 2 years in a *pesantren*.

I am uneducated. I'm only an elementary school graduate. After I finished elementary school, I went to a *pesantren*. I'm from a poor family, you know. So I just went for a few years, two years only.

So did Mbak K, the woman who had her marriage "solemnized" here by Pak Kur. Indeed, as Bang F noted, this was the norm for the poor peasant households who could not afford to send their children on to secondary schools. In these *pesantrens*, which dotted the Madurese countryside, the young peasant men and women learnt the basics of Islamic piety, namely, to fast and pray. They also established a life-long personal relationship to the *kyai* of the *pesantren*, one which would extend across the border into Malaysia.

In Malaysia itself, it was possible to find those from *within* the migrant community with a higher level of religious knowledge, also acquired from the *pesantrens*, who could meet the ritual needs of Islamic piety, and play the role of *kyai*. At a minimum, what is required for the performance of collective rites is the presence of a prayer leader. Speaking of another such religious leader, the young *ustadz* in a *kongsi* house, Bang F notes, "He is like one of us, also working here. He has the knowledge to lead the prayers collectively, to teach religion."

The *ustadz* of the temporary *surau* in the *kongsi*, now working as a construction worker, is a 28 year-old who had 13 years of *pesantren* education at the Nahdatul Ulama Bata Bata pondok.

The older Pak Yai and Pak Kur have become the established informal religious leaders of their respective ethnic communities, and are regarded as local *kyais*. Pak Yai had spent several years in a *pesantren* in Pasuruan, after which he had taught at a local madrasah. Crippled by debt on account of the 1997 financial crisis, he decided,

five years later, at the age of 53, to seek work as a laborer in Malaysia. Pak Kur, similarly affected by the 1997 crisis, left in 1998 at the age of 50, also for work in the construction sector. Like Pak Yai, he had received a religious education, and had spent several years teaching at a local madrassa. Brought up in the santri culture of the *pesantren*, both men are strongly imbued with the spirit of “*berjuang untuk Islam*” —or struggling for Islam, and strengthening its practice among their fellow migrants in the diaspora.

At the same time, there is a constant flow of *kyai*, or those said to be such, to the *kongsi* houses of Malaysia. They come every few months, hold *tarawih* (ramadhan prayers), give religious instruction, ask for donations for the construction of the new mosque or *pesantren* they are building back in the homeland. Or they may ask for a handphone, or some other item that might have caught their fancy, and the request is likely to be granted, given the great respect that is their due. Often they are invited by former students of theirs now working in Malaysia, eg to perform a *tahlil*. Some 200-300 may congregate in the *kongsi* house for the *tahlil*, and listen to the *kyai* preach on the need not to forget to pray. After the *tahlil*, money will be contributed for the expenses of the *kyai*. Sometimes their travel expenses are provided by the migrants here, sometimes self-supported through concomitant trading activities—they bring cloth, fabrics, amulets etc for sale here.

A two-way circulation of piety has thus been established between the migrant community and the *santri* culture and institutions back in the homeland. The *pesantrens* and the *kyais* contribute to the maintenance of piety in the *rantau*. Migrant earnings from the *rantau* are maintaining, and expanding the number of *pesantrens* back home. Pak Yai for example, is now using his savings from Malaysia to establish his own *pesantren* in Java.

### **G. Conclusion**

Living in the shadow of illegality, the social and cultural resources available to poor peasants turned urban laborers in a foreign country are severely limited. The religious life of the community reconstituted

in the labor diaspora remains, painfully evident to all, impoverished and rudimentary. Yet religious life *has* been reproduced, even in the face of such adverse circumstances.

It is the portability of the religious culture, realized through the uncoordinated and non-institutionalised actions of individuals whose religious competence and charisma is recognized by the community, which has sustained religious life in a hostile diaspora. It is sustained by religious leadership from within the migrant community itself, but also from traveling *kyai* from the homeland. The presence of these men has been critical to the reconstitution of religious life and the maintenance of religious ties to the homeland for a migrant community living under highly tenuous conditions of existence.

Against initial expectations that through the medium of shared faith and ethnicity, Indonesian migrants would share in the religious life of local Malay Muslim society, we thus found a reconstitution of religious life along migrant ethnic lines, with strong transnational links back to the home community. Malaysia, notes an informant, is a “*negara Islam*” (Islamic state). The urban, formalized Islamic regime encountered here pose barriers to the *santri* culture prevailing in the villages of Java and Madura. The barrier to local Muslim society is not hermetically sealed, but there has been nonetheless a striking lack of communication between the two Islamic cultures. For the Indonesian migrants, this has meant a dwelling in transience.[]

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Diana Wong & T. Afrizal T. Anwar, “Migran Gelap: Irregular Migrants in Malaysia’s Shadow Economy”, Battistella G. & M. Asis (eds.), *Unauthorized Migration in Southeast Asia*, (Manila: Scalabrini Migration Center, 2003); Joseph Liow, *Malaysia’s Illegal Indonesian Migrant Labour Problem: In Search of Solutions*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Diana Wong, “The Recruitment of Foreign Labour in Malaysia: From Migration System to Guest Worker Regime”, Amarjit Kaur & Ian Metcalfe (eds.), *Mobility, Labour Migration and Border Controls in Asia*, (London: Palgrave, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> James Clifford, *Traveling Cultures, Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler (ed.), (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Azyumardi Azra, *Islam in the Indonesian World: An Account of Institu-*



*tional Formation*, (Bandung: Mizan Pustaka, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi tentang Pandangan Hidup Kyai*, (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Abdur Rozaki, *Menabur Kharisma Menuai Kuasa: Kiprah Kyai dan Blater sebagai Rezim Kembar di Madura*, (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Marwa, 2004).

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