

# Invisible children? Non-recognition, humanitarian blindness and other forms of ignorance in Sabah, Malaysia

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## Abstract

In the Malaysian state of Sabah, public antipathy towards the presence of large numbers of migrant workers influences a widespread ignorance of the educational and other exclusions of their children. Children of migrants are rendered invisible in Sabahan cultural discourse because they are not recognized as proper subjects, or even as ‘normal’ children. Cultural denial of such children’s circumstances can be seen in local newspaper reports that consider such children with reference to fears of ‘illegals’ and their threat to future Sabahan citizens. This discourse draws on a particular understanding of child deservingness, and utilizes what Cohen describes as ‘neutralization techniques’. However, such apparently wilful blindness can best be understood by considering it on a spectrum of different forms of ignorance and denial. This includes the blatant lack of recognition afforded by powerful individuals who should be more aware of the children of their workers, the humanitarian blindness of volunteer teachers who over-emphasize the saving power of education, and the complex and situational ignorance of children of migrants themselves. Appreciating other, potentially more benign or protective, forms of denial is crucial to understanding how ignorance of the complexity of the situation of children of migrants continues, even among those hoping to resolve it.

## Keywords

children, exclusion, ignorance, Malaysia, migration, Sabah, wilful blindness

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Sabah, an East Malaysian state in north Borneo, has long been a place of regional migrations and mixtures. However, since the late 20th century, the scale of these movements has increased dramatically. First, between 1972 and 1977, a separatist war in the southern Philippines forced about 100,000 Muslim refugees to flee to Sabah (Kassim, 2009: 58). Second, since the late 1970s, and increasing rapidly thereafter, migrants from eastern Indonesia and the southern Philippines have come to Sabah to work in key industries and services that are almost wholly reliant on foreign labour. Sabah is home to at least 44% of Malaysia's foreign workers (Kassim and Abdul Hamid, 2004: 81) and has the highest population growth rate of any Malaysian state. However, while the state, like the country, is clearly dependent on migrant workers, immigration regulations have become increasingly restrictive, forcing many migrants into irregularity. Migrants and their families are 'demonized' (Majid Cooke and Mulia, 2012), tend not to have their contributions to Malaysia recognized, and there is no public discussion of migrant rights (Gurowitz, 2000). Children and grandchildren of migrants, in particular, face systematic exclusion from public services, from Malaysian citizenship, and from different spaces of Sabahan life. Though the vast majority of these children have been born in Sabah, and may never have visited their parents' or grandparents' place of origin, they are nevertheless considered 'foreigners' in the state, and are often undocumented and at risk of statelessness. In addition, since 2002, children of migrants have been excluded from Malaysian government schools (UN Human Rights Council, 2009), as well as from subsidized health care.

The stark educational and other exclusions faced by these children, their potential statelessness, and the lack of any detailed work dedicated to highlighting their experiences, led me to conduct a year of child-focused fieldwork in Sabah's capital Kota Kinabalu (henceforth KK), from 2012 to 2013. This fieldwork aimed to uncover children's understandings of exclusion and statelessness, but also of possible inclusion and belonging. Previous studies of migrants in Sabah had often focused on how they were perceived by wider society (Kassim and Abdul Hamid, 2004; Majid Cooke and Mulia, 2012). I was determined, in my research, to foreground the perspectives and experiences of children of migrants themselves, and not to make any assumptions about their identities or loyalties. Nevertheless, both during and after fieldwork, I was struck by a peculiar ignorance, among a range of actors in Sabah, and in a variety of different spheres, to the practical and legal difficulties of these children's situation. Moreover, when presenting this research at seminars or conferences, I have often been asked *why* there seems to be little public or political will in Sabah to do anything about their very real exclusion. Therefore, in this article, by exploring a range of forms of wilful ignorance, I try to illuminate the processes by which these children move in and out of social visibility, and with what consequences.

Wilful ignorance has been defined as 'a systematic process of self-deception... that infects those who are in positions of privilege' (Tuana, 2006: 11), and is central to the perpetuation of nationalist sentiments that demonize migrants and their families. Steyn (2012: 10) argues that wilful ignorance is a

‘social accomplishment’, noting that it is cultivated through micro-political acts of learning ‘what not to know, what not to notice’ (2012: 13). Such a description is clearly relevant to Sabah where, despite ethnic and linguistic similarities between many Malaysian citizens and migrants, the latter have come to be treated as a stigmatized, semi-ethnic category. Yet, as the editors of this special issue make clear, wilful ignorance, or blindness, is also a contradictory concept (Bovensiepen and Pelkmans, 2020), revealing the tension between the apparent lack of sight of a person, institution or society, and the reality that *should* be clear to them if only they *looked properly*. But what does it mean to ‘see’ a group of people – in this case a group of children – properly? Honneth and Margalit (2001) argue that the difference between being seen or not seen, as a person, maps on to the difference between cognition and recognition. To be socially ‘invisible’ does not mean that a person is not cognitively *perceived* but rather that they are not socially recognized (2001: 112). To not ‘see’ another person in this way, to not give any expressive signs that one recognizes them as a person, is a form of ‘moral disrespect’ (2001: 123).

In this article, I argue that children of migrants are in many respects invisible in Sabah because they are not recognized as proper subjects. In particular, as I will show, this is because of wider discourses on the greater deservingness of ‘children of the nation’. However, the dynamic between visibility/recognition and invisibility/non-recognition is complex, and at times certain aspects of the lives of children of migrants are made visible, in order that they can be recognized as particular *kinds* of subjects. The issue at stake is not simply blindness versus visibility, or conscious versus unconscious prejudice, but rather different forms of perception and recognition found among different social actors and in different spheres of society. Against the argument that only one particular kind of ignorance should be understood as ‘truly’ wilful, I follow the editors of this special issue in suggesting it might be more productive to see different kinds of ignorance as existing on a spectrum. This helps us to see how ‘elite’ ignorance relates to the ignorance of other, less privileged actors (for whom ignorance may have protective implications), and indeed how these different kinds of ignorance, although arising from very different positions, might be mutually reinforcing. To introduce the three different forms of ignorance regarding the exclusion of children of migrants in Sabah that I have chosen to focus on, let me begin with a description of three different people whom I encountered during fieldwork, each of whom occupies a very different social position, with very different personal stakes in the issue of child statelessness and exclusion.

Mr Chan is a wealthy Chinese-Malaysian businessman, who lived in the same building where my family and I rented an apartment. Early on in fieldwork, Mr Chan asked me why we were living in Sabah, and I briefly described to him my research with the children of Filipino and Indonesian refugees and migrants. In response, he became thoughtful. He told me he was a property developer, and that he had many Filipino construction workers on his building sites. He added that he knew many of them had children, as they had sometimes mentioned them to him. But, he said, he had never really thought about these men’s

children; he had never really thought about where they were living, or whether they were going to school. Significantly, Mr Chan's temporary thoughtfulness about children of migrants was not accompanied by any sense of shock or surprise on his part. It was a simple statement of previous, and most probably continuing, disinterest. In the months that followed, Mr Chan never asked me again about my research or about the children I was meeting.

By contrast, Teacher Anna was very aware of the presence and needs of children of migrants in KK. A Christian Tagalog-speaking Filipina who had been in Sabah for over 20 years, Anna was a part-time volunteer teacher at an alternative learning centre for children of Filipino migrants. Despite believing in the importance of education, Anna expressed ambivalent opinions about the non-Tagalog-speaking, Muslim (Bajau, Yakan and Suluk) children she taught. She said that she 'felt sorry' for these children, because they were 'not properly looked after', claiming that their parents send them, 'out on the street'. Assuming that I shared her ambivalence as well as her humanitarian impulses, Anna told me that teaching such children was hard, because they are 'not like *our* children' in their manners and behaviour.

Finally, Ikram was a 12-year-old boy who attended the learning centre where Teacher Anna volunteered. He was born in Sabah to a Bajau mother, who left the Philippines when she was 12, and a Suluk father who was himself born in Sabah. Ikram, like his father, has never been to the Philippines. He holds an 'IMM13' identity document, of a type issued to refugees and their families, which protects him from illegality, but does not entitle him to Malaysian citizenship, or to state education. Ikram enjoyed attending the learning centre with his friends, and said he hoped to be a doctor when he was older, insisting that Sabah was a beautiful and safe place. In the past, Ikram had briefly attended a Malaysian primary school, before he was asked to leave. He didn't say much about this experience, but when I asked him why 'foreign' children can't go to Malaysian government schools he replied, 'Because they are not clever.'

I argue that these three individuals are representative of three different forms of ignorance regarding the social exclusion of children of migrants in Sabah. The invisibility of such children to Mr Chan, a man who employs large numbers of migrant workers at his construction sites (where, in KK, they usually occupy on-site, makeshift housing with their families) could be seen as a particularly blatant kind of wilful blindness. However, I hope to suggest that even in his case, ignorance is not always intentional, and is not always complete. What is significant is that Mr Chan's choice not to see (in the sense of not recognizing) the children of migrants is supported by wider cultural discourses in Sabah, particularly in media reports that present a misleading picture of such children's lives. I explore such discourses here, utilizing Cohen's notion of cultural denial to analyse the specific representation of children of migrants as less 'deserving' than other children. By contrast, the particular ignorance of a volunteer teacher like Anna relates, not to newspaper reports, but to the ambiguous blindness of humanitarian projects and their need to present 'children in need' in certain stereotypical ways.

Though teachers' attitudes are motivated by more benevolent intentions, they still contribute to a misrepresentation of children's experiences.

Finally, even children like Ikram may themselves, for all kinds of family, developmental and other reasons, be ignorant of – or in denial about – aspects of their current and future situation. Given the tendency in much anthropological literature, as well as in many societies, to represent children as naturally ignorant, the ways that children may not appear to 'see' or recognize their own exclusion might not seem so unusual. However, child-focused ethnographic and theoretical research suggests that the picture may be much more complicated. Take, for instance, Myra Bluebond-Langner's (1978) ground-breaking research with leukaemic children on a US hospital ward, where parents and other adults were determined to 'protect' children from the knowledge that they were dying. Bluebond-Langner shows how the children, as knowledgeable social actors who observed the routines of the ward, worked out very quickly that they were dying, but chose to maintain a pretence of ignorance in order to protect their parents. This suggests that children's apparent 'ignorance' should not always be taken at face value, and may be more wilful than we might assume. By considering a spectrum ranging from the most privileged or political, to the most benign or protective kinds of denial, I argue that we can better appreciate how wilful blindness to an apparently 'obvious' problem can continue to flourish through time.

### **Sabahan cultural denials and comparative deservingness**

The psychological and sociological work of Stanley Cohen (2001) on 'states of denial' and the ambiguity of 'knowing' is helpful for thinking about the production of different forms of ignorance. Cohen not only teases out the subtle complexity of different forms and aspects of denial of the suffering of others, but also emphasizes the intriguing similarities between processes of individual psychological denial, and denials at the societal level. In doing so, he utilizes the 'core five techniques' discussed by 'neutralization theory': denial of responsibility; denial of injury; denial of the victim; condemnation of the condemners; and appeal to higher loyalties (2001: 60–1). In my discussion of the ignorance of relatively privileged Sabahans to the situation of children of migrants, I draw in part on Cohen's discussion of such neutralizing accounts which do not necessarily attempt to *justify* a situation but, rather, refuse to 'accept the category of acts to which it is assigned' (2001: 77).

Cohen (2001: 10–11) characterizes 'cultural denial' in terms of 'unwritten agreements' that societies arrive at regarding 'what can be publicly remembered and acknowledged'. Significantly, he states that the 'mutual dependency' between this kind of diffuse cultural denial, and the official denials of governments, is most visible in 'mass media coverage' (2001: 11). During fieldwork, because of the politically sensitive nature of my research, I was unable to talk to immigration or education officials, or to local politicians. However, I did pay close attention to local news reports, particularly those in three key Sabah newspapers, the *Borneo*

*Post*, the *Daily Express* and the *New Sabah Times*. Copies of these newspapers, which are published in English, Malay and Kadazandusun, are available in KK's coffee shops and restaurants, and all papers have online editions.<sup>1</sup> Following Cohen, I suggest that media coverage in KK contributes to a diffuse local blindness regarding children of migrants and their exclusion, such as that seen in Mr Chan's statement that he had 'never really thought about' them.

Anti-migrant sentiment in Sabah focuses on two, apparently contradictory issues: first, fear that the state is over-run with 'illegals', who threaten public order and services; and, second, anger that Muslim immigrants have (in what is known as 'Project IC') been irregularly granted citizenship in order to bolster electoral support for the Barisan Nasional coalition that governed Malaysia for 61 years up until 2018 (Sadiq, 2005: 105). Local newspapers in Sabah carry regular reports of the detention of 'illegals' or 'PTIs' (*Pendatang Tanpa Izin*) following immigration raids, always listing the (often quite high) numbers of babies and children detained.<sup>2</sup> Other stories in the media about such children are frequently negative, such as the claim that children of illegal immigrants are being used as 'street child drug pushers,' or that the birth certificates of dead Malaysian babies have been appropriated for use by teenage 'illegals'.<sup>3</sup> The latter stories are examples of Cohen's 'denial of the victim' technique of neutralization: children of migrants are not 'victims', but should be categorized as criminals, who push drugs and who desecrate the memories of dead Malaysian babies.

In the 'Forum' pages of the *Daily Express* from 14 October 2012, an opinion piece entitled 'Better for the illegals to leave now' argues that immigrants and those with 'dubious' citizenship should 'leave Sabah voluntarily with honour and dignity and not wait to be evicted'. No mention is made of where children, including those of mixed marriages, should voluntarily return to, nor of the moral responsibility a society might have towards the children of its workers. Rather, following Cohen's fifth neutralization technique, an appeal is made to higher loyalties, since Sabahans have 'the moral responsibility to take care of their own future generation'. This kind of article, which appears quite frequently in this newspaper, is also an example of what Cohen calls 'interpretive denial', which does concede that 'something is happening' but insists this must be 'seen in a different light from what is alleged' (2001: 22). Thus, the author of the Forum piece refuses to acknowledge the economic dependence of Sabah on these workers, or the complex ways in which their lives are entangled with the state, but emphasizes that 'neighbouring countries' must simply take back their citizens 'as they are their very own children'. As in other contexts in which migrants are seen as 'not our problem', responsibility for their human rights is seen to lie outside the 'host' country (cf. DeBono, 2011: 146). Note, too, that 'children' here refers to national subjects (the children of the nation), whatever their age, and not to actual minors with specific child rights.

In April 2014, the *Borneo Post* reported on the death of 12-year-old Alminda binti Jalimin, who had been struck on the head by a golf ball, while working as a caddy at a golf club. She immediately fell unconscious and was taken to hospital. Later, she was discharged, but once home in the worker's housing where her family

lived, she began vomiting and died at 5 a.m. the next morning. In only the second sentence of the report on Alminda's death, she is described as 'a Filipina who did not have any documents'.<sup>4</sup> Two days later, a further report on the golf club's investigation into her death stated that Alminda had been working as a caddy at the club for two years, and notes a comment from the District Police Chief that her parents also lacked identification documents.<sup>5</sup> These reports are perfect examples of the cultural denial surrounding children of migrants in Sabah. A child has been working as a golf caddy since she was 10 years old, and has died as a direct result of this work at the age of 12. However, rather than choosing to investigate why a child has been working at such a young age in a country that prides itself on its economic and educational development, the newspaper focuses on her apparent lack of identity documents. Alminda's personality, poverty and possible exploitation are kept invisible, in order to make visible her archetypal status as a 'foreigner'. She can be recognized as an 'illegal', but not as a vulnerable child worker.

In newspaper reports that focus on or mention the issue of such children's access to education, there is sometimes an explicit denial of the problem of systematic exclusion. Thus, children of Filipino refugees may be described as competing with Sabahans 'for the use of public amenities such as the school',<sup>6</sup> despite the fact that in practice only Malaysian children can attend schools. An article on the opening of a learning centre quotes the deputy education minister on the government's realization that these children 'could not meet the conditions' to be enrolled in government schools.<sup>7</sup> What cannot be acknowledged here is that the government could change these enrolment conditions. Indeed, articles on informal schools or alternative learning centres tend to sidestep issues of immigration or statelessness and to describe such centres as for 'underprivileged', 'disadvantaged' or simply 'poor' children.<sup>8</sup> An account of estimates of numbers of Filipino immigrants and stateless children notes that such children 'could not go to school because of documentation problems', but connects such problems with parents' failure to realize the importance of having a marriage certificate.<sup>9</sup> No mention is made of the impossibility of such children attending school, even if they have documents. Compare this with an article on a 14-year-old Sabahan boy from a remote village, who could not access school until he was 10, but whose 'quest for formal education is an inspiration' and who was awarded education assistance by the state oil and gas company, Petronas.<sup>10</sup>

When non-governmental organizations and United Nations organizations discuss the difficulties faced, in many contexts, by children 'born out of place' (Constable, 2014), they tend to do so in terms of *rights* (Plan and UNHCR, 2012). However, in Malaysia, where 'human rights' are often seen as a Western discourse not applicable to a context of 'Asian values' (Gurowitz, 2000: 864), discussions tend to focus not on rights but on *deservingness*. Indeed, 'deservingness' has been discussed as 'the flip-side of rights', in which claims are 'articulated in a vernacular *moral* register that is situationally specific' (Willen and Cook, 2016: 96). In Sabah, the situation faced by the children of migrants is continually avoided or denied in public discourse because of what is thought to be the greater

deservingness of *other* children. Such ‘deserving’ children include those living in Sabah’s underdeveloped interior (such as the boy whose struggle to go to school earned him a Petronas scholarship) and the future, unborn children of ‘native’ Sabahans, whose moral claim to the state’s resources and services is thought to be imperilled by ‘foreign’ children. A best-selling book regarding the issue of the granting of false citizenship to migrants is, significantly, titled *Fake Identity Cards: Depriving Sabah’s Children of Their Rights* (Daud, 1999). As Cohen (2001: 71) notes, ‘ideas of social justice and equity’ can be key situational influences on bystanders to suffering, since they often mean that ‘deserving victims should be helped more than undeserving victims’. In Sabah, these local understandings of justice and deservingness, in which only ‘native’ children have ‘rights’, help explain the systematic production of blindness to excluded and stigmatized children of migrants.

### Humanitarian blindness

Since they are unable to attend Malaysian government schools, the only educational option for most children of migrants is to attend what are called ‘alternative learning centres’. Access to such centres is highly variable, depending on location and ethnicity, and many centres operate in precarious circumstances, facing problems with funding and recruitment of teachers. Only a few of these learning centres have the required permits, and most operate ‘illegally’. Because of anti-migrant sentiments, many centres keep a deliberately low profile and do not advertise their premises (Schulz, 2017: 308–9). Two individuals who ran a learning centre for Indonesian-origin children told me how difficult it was to find appropriate locations, since although people may not openly oppose the existence of such facilities, they do not want to *see* them in their neighbourhoods. Given the links between ‘visibility’ and social recognition (Honneth and Margalit, 2001), this suggests that KK residents prefer the ‘invisibility’ of children of migrants, as a way to maintain their own blindness to such children’s educational exclusion. Even those learning centres that manage to get a permit as a ‘tuition’ centre may find various restrictions imposed on their operations. One learning centre for children of Filipino migrants initially opened five days a week; however, the education department has since insisted that it can only operate for *four* days. In addition, the centre’s students are no longer allowed to wear the standard, cheap and easily available uniform of Malaysian primary schoolchildren, but are instead now wearing coloured T-shirts with a logo. These kinds of restrictions seem almost perversely cruel, as though to deliberately and physically mark out these children as non-citizens. By wearing ‘normal’ Malaysian school uniform, children of migrants are able to ‘pass’ as citizen children; that is, in standard uniform, they are less visible as *different* children. The request for them to *not* wear such uniform seems to be a way of making them more visible, as non-citizen children who cannot attend a ‘real’ school.

Despite their important work in helping children of migrants access education, and despite their own criticisms of wider Sabahan attitudes, I found that many teachers at learning centres also did not see these children as ‘normal’ children.



Teacher Anna's comments, implying that her young students were neglected by their families, are symptomatic of some teachers' perception that there was something uncivilized about children of migrants. At an informal centre next to a large squatter settlement for Filipino-origin families, the (Christian) teaching staff from a local independent church told me how the (Muslim) children had been 'like wild animals' when their centre was first opened, not knowing how to sit still, and continually breaking water pipes. 'We pity these children from the slums', one of the volunteers told me. Teacher Anna herself seems to perceive children of migrants as both vulnerable (since 'no-one looks after them') but also as *other* (since they are not really like '*our* children'). In these kinds of comments, one aspect of who these children are ('slum children' whose parents apparently neglect them) is made visible through making other aspects (such as children's strong sense of morality, or their parents' care for them) invisible.

Even those who would never make such negative comments still emphasized the necessity of providing children with education in order to 'save' them. At a fund-raising event for a learning centre with a strongly Christian ethos, one of the teachers declared that three young women of Filipino parents, the first children to be educated at the centre, would 'basically be illiterate', were it not for the compassion of the learning centre's founder. Yet I knew from the women's mother that they had been studying at Malaysian government schools until they were ejected in 2002, had all been numerate and literate, and had entered the Christian learning centre in an attempt to receive education in English. Founders of, and teachers at, learning centres tend to set up an unrealistic contrast between the educated child with a bright future and the uneducated child with a potentially criminal future. Even while they receive only minimal, 'basic' education, children at learning centres are often told that education is the only route to their future success, and are continually encouraged by teachers to have ambitious goals of becoming teachers or doctors (Schulz, 2017: 312). Such talk is deliberately blind to the virtual impossibility for such children – who have little chance of receiving formal qualifications – of ever attaining such professional work. Significantly, while my child interlocutors would reel off these ambitions for me (as when Ikram insisted he would become a doctor), when I asked them what jobs their *friends* were likely to do in the future, their answers were more realistic: labourer, cleaner, construction or factory worker.

Many teachers' discourses, then, unintentionally (or perhaps intentionally) project an image of the child who does not attend a learning centre as a 'failure', speaking of them as problematic *individuals*, or blaming their parents for lacking perseverance. Despite structural issues making it hard for children to access education, or to convert it into social mobility, the image of the unschooled, ignorant 'foreign child' is also used to criticize children who make independent decisions to stop attending school in order to work. Wati, the 14-year-old daughter of Indonesian migrant workers, had a difficult home life, with a frequently absent father. After scoring badly on a class test, Wati decided to leave the Indonesian learning centre where she was studying. She deliberately threw away her school

shoes, and spent more time working in a carwash and with her aunt on a market-stall. She seemed to relish the independence that this decision brought, and the release from feeling both a 'failure' at school, and a burden at home. Even when her friends asked her to return to the centre, she refused to do so. The decisions of Wati, and of other similar children, seemed to me to be motivated by foresight and initiative, particularly given their limited opportunities. However, teachers tend to see such children as throwing away the gift of education.

The majority of children of Indonesian and Filipino migrants whom I knew in KK had very positive experiences of learning centres, and deeply appreciated the friendships and teacher–pupil connections these centres allowed them to cultivate. Nevertheless, teachers' overly optimistic sentiments about the transformative power of education are examples of a form of ignorance that prevents them seeing the wider structural causes of children's exclusion, or how young people try to lead hard-working lives, even without any schooling. In learning centres, a particular image of a child in need is created, and even those sympathetic to helping children of migrants may echo wider views that, if such children do not have access to education, they will inevitably become criminals (prostitutes and sellers of *syabu* or amphetamines) (Schulz, 2017: 311). I want to suggest that these sentiments and discourse should be understood as humanitarian blindness, a specific type of ignorance influenced by ideas of charity, and of 'saving' children. As Ticktin puts it, while rights 'entail a concept of justice', humanitarianism is framed as 'the exception', and is 'about generosity rather than entitlement' (2006: 45). The humanitarian blindness of well-meaning teachers is therefore an inevitable consequence of the ways in which, at alternative learning centres, educational provision is depoliticized by being framed as a humanitarian project (Ticktin, 2006: 35), a charitable gift from concerned individuals rather than a right owed to children.

Significantly, at three different learning centres that I visited in KK – two coordinated by the Indonesian consulate and one run by Filipinos – the education of the children of migrants was often framed as an act of *national* charity and generosity, or was explicitly described as a way for these children to know more about their (assumed) national identity. One teacher at the Filipino centre told me that, even if these children were born in Sabah, the Philippines is 'in their blood': it is their nation, she emphasized, and so they should learn to speak Tagalog and to sing various Filipino songs. For teachers, providing education to such children is therefore also about providing them with the gift of national identity. However, seeing children of migrants as potential national subjects involves not seeing (that is, not recognizing) other aspects of their lives. In the case of Filipino-origin children, it involves not acknowledging the complexities of 'Muslim Filipino' belonging in the predominantly Christian Philippines, or the fact that many children's parents were also born in Sabah to Filipino refugees fleeing conflict. It also involves not recognizing the depth of such children's connection to Sabah: their family histories and links in the state. It is these histories that are rendered invisible when volunteer teachers make these children visible as future national subjects of

the Philippines. More worryingly, teachers' blindness to many children's lack of identification with the Philippines or Indonesia supports the wider cultural blindness that continues to categorize these mostly Sabah-born children as 'foreigners'.

### Children's denials

Finally, what of children's own perspectives? What of children like Ikram, who confidently asserts that he wants to be a doctor, or Wati, who threw away her school shoes to begin work? Are such children ignorant of their exclusion, or of their limited future opportunities? Having been motivated to pursue this research because of an expectation that Malaysian immigration and educational restrictions must limit children's lives, an unexpected early research finding was that children of migrants did not necessarily see themselves as having problems, or did not think they were the group of children who faced the most difficulties. In early, open-ended discussions with different children about 'What is good and bad about Sabah?', I was struck by their repeated mentions of the phenomenon of abandoned babies. For example, in a class of teenagers at an Indonesian school, one girl told me that there had been a recent news story about an abandoned baby, and her friends added that there were lots of such instances. On a separate occasion, at a Filipino learning centre, some younger girls told me that they had heard of a Malaysian person in KK who killed their baby and 'threw it away'. In these early, and unexpected, responses to my questions, children of migrants deflected the issue of difficult childhoods on to another group of 'abandoned' children, connected not with migrants but with Malaysian citizens.

Many of the children I worked with were unexpectedly positive about their lives, rejecting any characterization of themselves as marginal or as facing particular problems. When I explored with them the issues they *did* worry about, they tended (in addition to abandoned babies) to mention high levels of rubbish in their neighbourhoods, or their parents' difficulties. In exercises to map out what made them happy or unhappy, they mentioned, as negative issues: fighting and arguing with other children, their parents arguing, missing their friends, being stuck at home, not having money, the death of grandparents, failing tests and not getting to watch TV. These issues are, of course, similar to those making children unhappy the world over. However, even when discussing problems caused by their mostly undocumented status, children's responses were often surprising. Nearly all the children I knew had experienced '*checking*': the examination (by police or immigration officials) of identity documents at road blocks, or in raids on migrant housing (Allerton, 2018). Significantly, though, they tended to see *checking* as a qualitative difference between life in Sabah and their parents' home countries. That is, *checking*, while scary, was seen as intrinsic to life in Malaysia, rather than something that happened because of their problematic position.

One explanation for children's tendency to sidestep issues of their own exclusion, is the normalization of such experiences in their daily lives. Many children appeared to accept their exclusion from Malaysian government schools as normal,

since it also applied to other children in the squatter villages or workers' housing where they lived. Some did not even realize that the learning centres they attended were different to Malaysian schools. One girl, whose parents were from eastern Indonesia, and who had not received any education until she was 12, told me that she had 'just played' before then and had not been anxious about her lack of schooling, or felt she was missing out. These denials of knowledge of the difficulty of their situation could be an example where 'the acquisition of knowledge is precluded by power relations' (Gilson, 2011: 313). Certainly, Ikram's comment that children of migrants cannot attend Malaysian schools 'because they are not clever' suggests an ignorance of politically motivated exclusion and an internalization of stigma. Indeed, Steyn (2012: 18) has used the term 'internalized ignorance' to describe the acceptance of the world of an excluded childhood as 'the way it is'. That is, children's multiple forms of structural disadvantage – on the basis of age, poverty or irregularity – can make it hard for them to gain full knowledge of their exclusion.

As mentioned in the introduction, some child-focused ethnographies have shown how children often have a lot more awareness or knowledge than adults think they have, and must even 'pretend' to be ignorant in order to maintain the boundary between adult and child (Bluebond-Langner, 1978; Paugh, 2012). There may, certainly, be something protective about children's 'ignorance' in the KK context, with children concerned not to worry parents or siblings by showing they recognize the harsh reality of their situation. Certainly, when given permission to do so, some teenagers I knew were very capable of criticizing Malaysia, or of reflecting on the wider politics of their situation. However, in alternative learning centres, the dynamic of 'pretend ignorance' is instrumental rather than protective. Many children of migrants must pretend to be interested in an Indonesian or Filipino nation promoted as the source of their educational 'gift'. They must learn nationalist songs in Tagalog, or must study the structure of the Indonesian constitution, in order to receive the only education to which they are entitled. And yet, in their conversations with me, many young people would let go of this nationalist pretence. One Suluk girl would roll her eyes whenever I mentioned the Philippines and tell me she knew nothing about it; another male teenager sarcastically pointed out the printed notices in his (Indonesian) school encouraging students to speak 'the correct Indonesian language', noting that in their everyday lives, all apparently 'Indonesian' students spoke Sabahan Malay. Another teenage boy at this school resisted the particular ethnic and migrant identities asserted by some of his friends, telling me that he 'felt the same as a Malaysian citizen'. Such comments suggest that 'internalized ignorance' may be less deep than it appears, that the power relations that produce it do not always go unchallenged, and that it weakens with age. In learning centres, older children may pretend a kind of ignorance of the cultural politics surrounding their childhoods, playing the part of grateful national subjects, but in other contexts may be more sceptical of nationalist humanitarianism.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have analysed three different forms of ignorance regarding the exclusion of children of migrants in KK. In order to present these different forms, my arguments have had to be somewhat speculative, and my evidence has been necessarily brief. Indeed, like much fieldwork, my research on children of migrants is strongly shaped by opportunities that arose, and by my own particular forms of ignorance and knowledge. I did not, during fieldwork, conduct research on how Sabahan citizens consumed and interpreted the anti-migrant sentiments put forward in newspapers. Instead, I observed the ways in which Sabahans like Mr Chan responded to my description of my fieldwork, and noted the common threads in media reports of stateless children. Nor, since my focus was on children, did I systematically explore the perspectives of teachers at learning centres, but instead listened to their comments about children, and conversations during breaks between lessons. Moreover, even in my more focused research with my very varied group of child interlocutors, I was unable to fully uncover all the 'facts' of what legal documents they actually had, or the ways in which their parents had accessed forged or borrowed documents in their attempts to carve out a more stable life in KK. I do not pretend to 'see' the full picture of children's lives, and would never claim that different children share the same experiences. However, what is clear is that children who were born in Sabah are seen in the state as 'foreigners' and are excluded from education and other services. This makes it extremely likely that they will, in the future, reproduce KK's underclass of undocumented, unrecognized, stigmatized 'migrants', labouring in multiple workplaces in the city.

In conclusion, I want to draw out two key implications of my argument that these different forms of ignorance should be most productively analysed as existing on a spectrum, in which all forms have the potential to be 'wilful'. Recall the reaction of Mr Chan to my description of my research with children of migrants. In that brief conversation, Mr Chan (an employer of Filipino migrant workers) did in fact shift position, momentarily becoming thoughtful about what the lives of children of migrants might be like, before (wilfully?) returning to a more comfortable position of disinterest. This shift shows not only the work involved in choosing to not see a group of people, but also draws attention to the moments of possibility of becoming less blind. These moments of possibility might exist across all forms of ignorance. Indeed, I have shown how children themselves may appear to be ignorant of nationalist politics in learning centres, only to reveal their scepticism in other settings. Ignorance is therefore never a permanent state but can shift and move across time, and even within a single conversation. Similarly, children of migrants are not completely invisible to the KK public but might be rendered visible (and therefore recognized) in different ways, whether in media reports on child street workers, or when they are forced to wear school clothes that differ from standard Malaysian uniform.

By contrast with an approach that would only see the elite ignorance of Mr Chan as truly wilful, I want to suggest that the humanitarian blindness of teachers

can also have wilful, even if well-intentioned, aspects, with the potential to reinforce wider exclusions. At centres explicitly set up for children of Indonesian or Filipino migrants, teachers may be motivated to 'save' children not only from the perils of no education, but also from their ignorance of their 'true' (national) identity. Yet these efforts are blind to the impacts of irregularity, or of life in KK, on children's understanding of where they belong. By presenting children as particular kinds of national subjects, even if this is only done as a way to allow them to access education, teachers reinforce a wider perception that Sabah-born children of migrants are 'foreigners'. This nationalistic concern to properly 'place' children (Constable, 2014) is also seen in newspaper reports that, even when reporting on a child's death, neutralize sympathy for the victim by focusing on her lack of documents. With specific reference to children, not recognizing 'foreigners' as worthy of moral respect (Honneth and Margalit, 2001) means not recognizing that theirs is a legitimate childhood. Indeed, for Sabahan nationalists, the children worthy of true recognition are the citizen children of Sabah's future, or of its rural interior, not non-citizen children of migrants.

Of course, what is at stake for different individuals in opening their eyes and recognizing a group of children as moral subjects in the here and now varies widely. For Mr Chan, we can say that what is at stake is his privilege and comfort, his satisfaction in his success. For many Sabahan readers of newspapers, what is at stake is their understanding of who gets to call themselves 'Sabahan', and whose interests should be the concern of their state. For a volunteer teacher like Anna, what is at stake is her own attachment to her national identity as Filipina, and her particular set of values, such as charity, rooted in her Christianity. For Ikram, and children like him, what is at stake is even more personal. In fully recognizing the systematic and politically motivated nature of his exclusion, while living in a context where explicit discussion of migrant rights is impossible, we could say that what is at stake are his hopes and dreams for a secure future.

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## Notes

1. The *Daily Express* also has a sister newspaper, *Overseas Chinese Daily News*, which is published in Mandarin.
2. For example: 'Among those detained were three men, seven women, 17 children and two infants' (in 'Drug addicts among 31 nabbed in swoop on squatter area', *Borneo Post*, 17 October 2013); 'Out of 266 illegal immigrants, 84 were children ...' (in '266 illegals detained in KK, Penampang', *Borneo Post*, 22 June 2015). In another raid on ferries coming from Indonesia, '24 men, 17 women and 12 children were nabbed' (in '53 Indonesians held in bid to enter Sabah illegally', *Borneo Post*, 31 October 2013).
3. 'Kids used as drug pushers in Sabah', *Borneo Post*, 16 May 2014; 'Birth certs of dead babies being used by Sabah illegals', *Borneo Post*, 15 July 2015.
4. 'Caddy killed by golf ball', *Borneo Post*, 4 February 2014.
5. 'Golf club sets up probe panel on child's death', *Borneo Post*, 6 February 2014.
6. 'Best time to resolve "stateless kids" woe', *Daily Express*, 22 November 2012.
7. 'Second learning centre for stateless children', *New Sabah Times*, 22 September 2013.
8. See, for example, '80 Korean volunteers renovate education centre', *Borneo Post*, 23 July 2013.
9. '33,019 illegal Filipino immigrants, 15,000 stateless children recorded as of October last year, says Mokhtar Yassin', *New Sabah Times*, 16 January 2013.
10. 'Petronas aid for boy who starts school at age 10', *Borneo Post*, 5 June 2013.

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