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# Stuck in the Short Term: Immobility and Temporalities of Care among Florenese Migrants in Sabah, Malaysia

Catherine Allerton

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

## ABSTRACT

In Sabah, East Malaysia, decades of informal migration, combined with increasingly strict immigration regulations, have led to a paradoxical situation of immobility. Impoverished eastern Indonesian migrants find themselves 'stuck', unable either to return home and build a house in their home village or to plan for a future in Malaysia. Their Sabah-born children are born migrants, excluded from Malaysian schools, but mostly lacking knowledge of their parents' Indonesian homes. The paper discusses the narratives of three migrant families from east Flores, exploring how practices of care are intertwined with control exerted by the state, employers, and non-migrant kin in places of origin. It argues that many families have been led, by necessity, to emphasise short-term care and physical proximity with children over long-term care such as investment in education. However, the continued significance of Florenese commitments to land and houses can make living in the short-term morally problematic.

**KEYWORDS** Sabah; Flores; migration; care; immobility

Teresa, a middle-aged woman with gold earrings and a curly bun, was born on Adonara, a small island in eastern Indonesia, but came to the East Malaysian state of Sabah in the early 1980s. Here, she found work in the capital city of Kota Kinabalu (KK), where she met her husband Yosep, also a migrant from Adonara. The couple have four children, and live in a makeshift wooden house in a mostly-Filipino squatter village near one of KK's ring-roads. Yosep works as a gardener at different locations in the city, and Teresa takes on various part-time cleaning jobs.

Despite Teresa's friendly smile and generous manner, she has not had an easy life. Nor does she face a straightforward future. Like many Indonesian adults in KK, Teresa emphasises that migration (*merantau*) is difficult (*susah*). It may have begun well, all those years ago, but as time has passed and securing documents and work has become more challenging, the unfulfilled dreams of *merantau* have become more

**CONTACT** Catherine Allerton  [c.l.allertonlse.ac.uk](mailto:c.l.allertonlse.ac.uk)

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apparent. In Teresa's case, this feeling is sharpened by the knowledge that her siblings who stayed on Adonara have (helped by early remittances sent from Sabah) all prospered. In 2009, Teresa returned to Adonara to visit her dying mother, her first return journey after 28 years in Sabah. She described this trip as one that made her feel profoundly *malu* (ashamed/ embarrassed): a shame encapsulated in the comment from her sister that, 'You are the migrant, but you don't have any money'. Although the ideal trajectory for a person who goes on *merantau* is to build a house in one's origin village and return home with a substantial sum, Teresa and Yosep have not built such a house, and still struggle to get by in Malaysia. During my fieldwork, Teresa's visa expired and, for the first time, she found herself living in Sabah 'illegally'. 'I want to be a migrant', she once told me, 'But maybe I should have just stayed and slept in my village'.

If Teresa still defines herself with reference to an imagined parallel life in Adonara, her children, by contrast, are avowedly shaped by their lives in a migrant city. Her two daughters work and live on-site at local factories, and her eldest son Tony is a lorry-driver. Tony never received any education, and his childhood was spent playing football with Suluk (Filipino-origin) neighbours, until the day Teresa came home and found 13-year-old Tony working on a nearby building site. 'You know the fire station nearby?' Teresa said, 'He helped build that'. Though, when she first saw her teenage son working, Teresa was upset, she now emphasises that hard work has made Tony who he is.

In 2006, there was a new announcement in Sabah that anyone without a valid visa, even if they were born in Sabah and had a birth certificate, would be arrested. At that time, Teresa's three eldest children all went, undocumented, to Nunakan, an Indonesian island off the coast of east Sabah. Once they had secured Indonesian passports, Teresa's daughters came back to KK. However, 20-year-old Tony decided to visit Teresa's home village in Adonara, staying there for a year and a half. Despite Tony's initiative in instigating this remarkable 'return', Teresa's narration of her son's journey was not the positive story I had expected. 'He got very fat', she told me. 'I heard that he was sleeping late, not getting up until 10, and then he was given lots of coffee and snacks'. As Teresa saw it, people in Adonara had not known Tony when he was a child, and were just happy to have him there. But they were spoiling him, and Teresa didn't like it. It wasn't good for Tony not to work, not to have responsibility, and so eventually she made him return to Sabah.

Teresa's younger brother, Luter, was also a migrant in KK, and had a well-paid job as a businessman's driver. However, Luter had followed a completely different approach to family life. As someone whose own university education had been cut short because of lack of finances, he prioritised his four children's education. Whilst he and his wife lived and worked in Sabah, their children lived with his and Teresa's sister on Adonara, where they attended school. Once, I asked Teresa whether she regretted not sending her children back to Indonesia in order that they could be educated. 'We don't all have the same heart', she enigmatically replied, implicitly referring to Luter. Though Luter calls her 'stupid' for not sending her children home to school, Teresa is emphatic that she cannot be separated from them. Yes, she says, you can send money home for your children's food, for their education, but it's not the same as caring for them every

day. 'Who will sit with your children when they are sick?' she asks, 'That is the person they will love'.

## The Long- and the Short-Term of Children's Care

This article is about the ambivalent intersections of care and control found among families who, for various complex reasons, have become 'stuck' in their lives in KK: unable to return to their origin villages, but also unable to secure a better life, or to make plans for the future, in Sabah. Despite their initial migration to Sabah, and despite transnational connections with extended kin in Indonesia, many people's lives are marked more by immobility than mobility. In such a context, families have had to make difficult decisions about the care of children, often prioritising what I call short-term care over long-term investments in education or the building of a family home. This means that migrant family life has a distinctive temporality: a necessary attempt to focus on the present, and a putting-off of future, almost-impossible plans. This can be compared with the temporality that Berlant describes as 'ongoingness': a form of 'getting by, and living on' in contexts where structural inequalities limit agency to an 'activity of maintenance' (2007: 759). Such a temporality also shares similarities with what Kloos calls the 'makeshift' in contemporary Indonesia: practices of 'adaptation and improvisation' shaped by 'the forces of migration and experiences of transience' (2015: 147). However, as I shall explore, focusing on the short-term and the temporary can nevertheless be difficult for migrant families, particularly for those with an ambivalent awareness of longer-term, transnational obligations, and can further contribute to a sense of 'stuckedness'.

Located in north Borneo, Sabah has long been a place of migrations and mixtures (Lumayag 2016: 196). However, from the 1970s, the scale of immigration increased dramatically, with the arrival of large numbers of Muslim refugees from the war-torn southern Philippines, and economic migrants from rural areas of eastern Indonesia. In this article, I concentrate on migrants from the culturally and linguistically-connected east Flores region: the areas around the town of Larantuka, and the small nearby islands of Adonara, Solor and Lembata. I focus in particular on three Catholic families who I came to know well during fieldwork in KK from 2012–2013, and whose stories resonate with others I heard from both children and adults. Such Florenese migrants are known colloquially in KK both as *orang Om* ('Uncle people') after the Indonesian term *Om*, by which many male workers are addressed, and as *orang Timor* (Tirtosudarmo 2006: 138) a designation probably originating from the name for the eastern Indonesian province of Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT). This is one of the poorest provinces of Indonesia, where the population continues to depend on agriculture and fishing, and where there are no developed industries. However, whilst noting the lack of economic opportunity in NTT, Florenese migrants also emphasise that the 'culture' or *adat* in their homeland remains strong and that members of patrilineal sub-clans are connected, both regionally and transnationally, through on-going material and other obligations.<sup>1</sup>

My terminology of ‘short-term’ and ‘long-term’ care draws on and extends Parry and Bloch’s classic theory of the different transactional spheres involved in the reproduction of ‘social and ideological systems’ (1989: 1). In an introduction to a collection concerned with the comparative moral evaluation of monetary transactions, Bloch and Parry argue for the universality of a general pattern of two separate transactional orders. The first of these is characterised as a sphere of ‘short-term’ transactions concerned with ‘the arena of individual competition’ (Parry and Bloch 1989: 24), as when people exchange goods with strangers in a market. The second transactional sphere, is one concerned with the ‘reproduction of the long-term social or cosmic order’, such as Merina descent groups, or the ‘immortal chiefdom’ of Shona people (ibid: 24). In most societies, they argue, the long-term order must, for ideological purposes, be kept separate from the (potentially morally polluting) sphere of short-term exchanges, and yet must also be related to it, as when ‘conversions’ are made between the two (ibid: 25–26). Such ‘conversions’ include the process by which Malay women ‘cook’ the money brought into the house by men, thereby socialising it and endowing it with the values of kinship morality (Carsten 1989). For Bloch and Parry, this theory of short-term and long-term transactional orders offers a way to think about the relationship between ‘transient individuals’ and a wider, enduring, social order.

In utilising and adapting Bloch and Parry’s language of the ‘short’ and ‘long-term’, by applying it to care, I want to draw attention to the different temporal frameworks that care involves in the context of transnational migration. ‘Care’, of course, is not a straightforward or a singular phenomenon, and, as studies have shown, transnational families are able to ‘do’ care in multiple ways, depending on mobility, resources and institutional contexts (Kilkey and Merla 2014). Of particular interest to the concerns of this article is Coe’s analysis of how Ghanaian migrant women are able to provide care for both younger and older family members by ‘coordinating their life courses with others’ (2016: 2). She argues that migration must be understood not just as trans-local but also as ‘transtemporal’, in that it covers ‘multiple temporalities’. However, she also notes that the ever-growing temporal control exerted by receiving states – seen in practices of detention, or endless waiting on bureaucratic processes – makes migrant attempts to ‘orchestrate various temporalities’ of familial care increasingly difficult (ibid: 3). Care and kinship are, therefore, ‘inherently chronotopic’ (Rutherford 2015: 242), existing in, and creating, space and time. However, as Coe suggests, and as I shall explore, in contexts of increasingly immobility, kinship chronotopes unravel in new ways.

If we turn to children’s care, in particular, we can say that it involves attention both to short-term needs, and to longer-term concerns. Short-term activities include the kinds of practices of physical intimacy that we most commonly think of as ‘care’: bathing, feeding, clothing, and tending a child when she is sick. These can be characterised as ‘short-term’ since (although they have long-term physical and psychological implications) they respond to immediate needs in the present, such as hunger, cold, fever and thirst. By contrast, ‘long-term’ practices of care for children might include investment in education, ensuring children’s incorporation into clan or other kinship networks, or training them in particular religious traditions and practices. The

framework I am introducing here, which distinguishes between two temporal orders of (material and non-material) care, can be productively applied to many situations of transnational care. Take, for example, the frequently-reported phenomenon of children being left in the care of extended family when their parents migrate. In such contexts, although short-term care is delegated to, say, aunts or grandparents, what *parents* often emphasise is the significance of the long-term care they are providing by earning the money that allows their children to attend school. In some ways, such parents adopt a form of what Povinelli calls the ‘future anterior’ tense, in which present harms and sacrifices are justified from the perspective of a perfected future (2011: 2–3). By contrast, children themselves have been described as pining for acts of short-term care and physical intimacy, such as hair-brushing or hugging (Parreñas 2005: 123, 127); significantly, they emphasise the ‘durative present’ (Povinelli 2011: 12), and it is only when they are older that they can appreciate the significance of long-term care (Parreñas 2005: 128).

In Sabah, short-term and long-term practices of care for children – and the balance between them – are strongly influenced by the state’s desire to control migration, and the resulting problematic position of migrants’ children.<sup>2</sup> Whilst KK’s smooth running is dependent on migrant labour, such labour is imagined, in immigration regulations, as mobile and independent. Unskilled and semi-skilled ‘foreign workers’ are not supposed to marry whilst in Malaysia, nor are they allowed to bring their families with them into the state. Although many migrants have lived in Sabah for decades, their Sabah-born children are configured as ‘impossible’ children: they are not supposed to *be* in Sabah, and they are perceived, in public and political discourse, as an unsolvable problem (Allerton 2018). Significantly, such children are denied access to state-provided education or healthcare (Lumayag 2016) and are at risk of statelessness (Allerton 2017). This situation is a strong example of what Katz (2001) has called ‘vagabond capitalism’: the manner in which modern states access labour, without paying for its reproductive costs. More explicitly, we can say that, in this context of harsh immigration control, family care practices are presumed (by the state) to be predicated on a geographical separation of (adult) workers from their dependants.

For the families whose narratives I describe here, the problems of social reproduction in Malaysia translate into some difficult personal decisions. In particular, should parents send their children back to Indonesia for education (thus prioritising ‘long-term’ care) and, if they do, what might be lost or gained? I began this article with an account of Teresa, and in particular her perspective on the difficulties of family life in Sabah. Teresa’s language of care prioritises physical proximity and short-term care, particularly tending to children when they are sick. For Teresa, despite the problems of family life in Sabah, sending her children back to Indonesia for schooling would have meant *losing* them *as* her children. She told me that sometimes, when Luter phones Adonara, his children cannot be bothered to talk to him, since they don’t really *feel* that Luter and his wife are their parents. Hence, although Luter characterises Teresa as ‘stupid’ for letting her own children remain largely uneducated, she sees Luter’s long-term practices of care as coming at the expense of daily intimacy. What Teresa’s narrative seems to suggest is how, in a difficult context, the kinship chronotope of short-term, proximal

intimacy may come to be imbued with greater moral worth than the enduring long-term.

## Stuck in Sabah

In the case of each of the families, I focus on – Teresa and Yosep, Rofina and Paulus, Rida and Leo – the parents came to Sabah in the 1980s as young, independent migrants. By the time I met them, they had become precariously-settled migrants-with-families. Although, some 30 or so years after their initial move, this older generation holds on to the idea that their migration is only *temporary*, and although immigration regulations continue to assume they constitute a flexible and mobile workforce, their migrant life in Sabah has, in fact, become particularly sticky. Why is this, and what does it mean to describe people as ‘stuck’?

In a study of Rwandan youth, Sommers (2012) has employed the idea of being ‘stuck’ as a way to describe the difficulty for both young men and women in achieving socially recognised adulthood. Sommers describes how, due to demographic imbalance and economic crisis, youth become stuck in ‘endless liminality’, unable to build their own house (or to marry a man who has a house). The ‘shame’ of this inability to achieve adulthood leads rural youth to migrate to the city, where they experience a different ‘sense of entrapment’ (ibid: 184) as they struggle for daily survival. The idea that both lack of economic opportunity *and* expectations regarding family life can produce a feeling of being stuck is also seen in Constable’s (1999) work on domestic workers who feel ‘trapped’ in Hong Kong, and Mahdavi’s (2014) research with domestic workers in the Gulf ‘immobilized’ by familial duty. Hage has also drawn attention to ‘stuckedness’ as a form of ‘existential immobility’, in which people experience a lack of agency over their lives, a sense (whatever alternatives may exist) that they are going nowhere (2009: 99). In Sabah, Florenese migrants express a sense of ‘entrapment’ in their lives in the city and a sense of shame that prevents them returning (cf. Lindquist 2009: 8). In turn, their children feel trapped by their parents’ earlier decisions, and by their lack of Malaysian citizenship. In many cases, migrants have failed to build the house they planned in their natal village, and failed to save the money with which to return. For some, initial migration was motivated by failed educational aspirations, and yet they have been unable to provide their Sabah-born children with quality education. Far from engaging in transnational shuttling, these impoverished migrant parents often see no easy way by which they can return ‘home’ and, if they have slipped into an unauthorised status, may increasingly experience migrant life as one of immobility, not mobility. Yet, just as Hage emphasises the ‘heroism’, of those who are able to ‘wait out’ a crisis, we must recognise that Florenese migrants have become stuck *together*, by prioritising family unity. That is, the ‘stickiness’ of migration is connected not only with immigration control, but also with choices about family care.

The life of Rofina, from Adonara, is a perfect example of someone who has, over the years, come to feel stuck in Sabah. Rofina, like Teresa, came to Sabah in the 1980s, where she met and married her Adonaran husband, Paulus. Their seven children were all born in the state: the oldest now works in transport, whilst the youngest is studying at an

informal learning centre. Rofina has never returned to Adonara since she left, and the couple have been unable to put money aside for building a house. Moreover, there are significant tensions between their families, since Paulus's better-educated and wealthier family feel he married below himself in choosing Rofina, and have cut him out of some of his inheritance. Nora, their second child, tells me that her parents took the choice to keep the whole family together in Sabah, even if they were poor. But, over the years, she said, it has become harder for them. During my fieldwork, Rofina was unable to access or afford a visa, and stayed continually in their workers' accommodation, too afraid of document-checks and arrest to attend events in the extended family in KK. The only time I was aware of her venturing beyond her immediate environment was when I took the family on a trip to the zoo, and Rofina felt protected by travelling with me in a private car. On this occasion, we called into a cheap restaurant where Rofina's niece worked. As we all ate lunch together, this younger woman came and sat on Rofina's lap, tears in her eyes. Rofina's niece told me she hadn't seen Rofina for over a year, even though they live in the same city. Both women find their mobility restricted: the niece because she works all the time, and Rofina because she is unauthorised and unable to travel.

Although Nora, in her early twenties, is not employed, her brother has paid an agent to get her a work permit. The procuring of this document reveals the different layers of care that immigration control necessitates. By helping to temporarily legalise Nora, her brother has cared for her by saving her from the boredom of immobility. In turn, Nora is able to take care of her siblings, accompanying the younger ones to their learning centre, and doing food shopping for the family. However, whilst procured documents may be signs of care, they also bring with them new forms of control. Nora must be constantly vigilant to document-checking operations in KK, and constantly ready to supply stories to police or immigration officials, since her visa is for agricultural work in another town. Her brother's strategy has relieved her of the stress of illegality, but brings with it new problems. Nora thinks Rofina, her mother, wants to go back to Indonesia, but without land on Adonara, the prospects for a successful return look poor. The 'felt dimension' of Rofina's immobility is thus strongly influenced by what Conradson and McKay describe as 'translocal subjectivities': the ongoing but often problematic commitments that migrants feel to family in particular locations (2007: 168–9).

Rofina is stuck, and is seen as such by her children. Not wanting to utilise precious family resources in buying another visa, she stays at home, unable even to visit her niece who lives fifteen minutes' drive away. Her middle son, Emanuel, laments this as a waste; what is the point of his father working for money, he asks, if they cannot be free? But in sacrificing her legality, Rofina is also caring for her family. In precarious circumstances, illegality is sometimes a strategic choice, and Rofina is prioritising what the family might spend money on. Moreover, in putting Nora's legality ahead of her own, she is acknowledging her children's connection to the city where they were born and live. This shows how east Flores migrants are 'stuck' in Sabah not simply due to legal or financial issues. They are also stuck because of their children's social and emotional attachments to KK. Like most of his siblings, Emanuel has never been to Indonesia and, although he understands his parents' home language, Lamaholot, he does not



speak it. He is ambivalent about Adonara, acknowledging that it felt odd never to have visited the island or to have met his grandparents, but saying he would prefer to stay in Sabah in the future. If his parents do decide to go back, he says, he will have to reluctantly ‘just follow’ them. The connection to Adonara, although not *felt* by Emanuel, is nevertheless experienced as a form of control: ‘I cannot do anything about it’, he told me.

In describing Rofina and others as ‘stuck’, or in referring to failed aspirations for migration, I do not wish to imply that my informants are personal failures. Indeed, one of the benefits of giving serious attention to care, and to the morality of different temporal frameworks, is to highlight the ways in which, even in straightened circumstances, love can flourish and people try to do the best for their families. However, the problems of care and social reproduction that many of my informants experience *are*, in various respects, the problems of an increasingly impossible migration context. Therefore, it is important to highlight ‘stories of failure’ for what they reveal about ‘migration gone awry’ (Constable 2015: 136). For young Indonesian migrant workers who become pregnant in Hong Kong, the only way to escape the shame of return is to re-enter the ‘migratory cycle of atonement’ (ibid: 137). For Florenese families in KK, it is in part the fear of the shame of return that keeps them ‘stuck’ in Sabah.

### Care and Control in a Securitised Context

How do care and control intersect in this particularly sticky migration context? As noted, Sabah’s economy is dependent on ‘foreign workers’, even as the social reproduction of such workers is *not* considered Sabah’s responsibility. For migrant families, this harsh and increasingly securitised migration context can be partly ameliorated by the actions of a good ‘boss’ who cares for his employees. Take Leo, from the island of Lembata, who is married to Rida, from a village near Larantuka. Rida works as a part-time cleaner for three different households in KK, and Leo works in a quarry on the outskirts of the city, where his family lives in on-site workers’ accommodation. The couple have five children, four of whom live with them in KK, whilst their eldest daughter is studying to be a nurse in Indonesia. Although Leo, in his 50s, finds quarry work increasingly difficult, he feels a certain attachment to his employer. The old quarry boss allowed workers’ families to live with them at the quarry (as compared with a nearby timber yard boss who declared that housing was only for workers), and would even sponsor the visas of workers’ children. However, Leo’s old boss recently died and now his daughter is in charge. Leo does not yet know what forms of care this new boss might make possible. In the meantime, his children’s visas have all expired and they must again endure the uncertainties of illegality.

Although there are undoubtedly employers who, aware of the problems of Sabah’s immigration regime, try to help regularise the position of their employees’ children, much employer ‘care’ for workers goes hand-in-hand with control. Like Leo, Paulus’s boss also provides him with accommodation next to the chicken farm where he works. This takes the form of a small house in the middle of two narrow terraces of

makeshift dwellings, often referred to as *rumah kongsi* in Sabah. Paulus's daughter, Nora, often emphasised to me that this accommodation was 'free', as was the provision of electricity and water. However, the water is frequently turned off, sanitation is poor, each family's dwelling is extremely cramped and small, and Rofina said that no improvements had been made to the house since she and Paulus first moved into it 25 years ago. *Rumah kongsi* can provide some protection against document-checking operations by immigration officials, particularly if the boss pays a regular bribe. However, having workers on-site undoubtedly brings many advantages to an employer, both in terms of surveillance and exploitation of labour. Although Paulus is the only member of his family who is formally employed in the farm, Rofina and the children often help out in the large chicken shed, collecting eggs or sweeping up. For the children, working unpaid with the chickens is a way to care for and help their father, who is getting older and more tired. It is also clearly a way to keep their father's boss favourably disposed towards the families of his workers.

The obligations entailed in living in *rumah kongsi* partly explain why Teresa and Yosep live in a squatter settlement mostly populated by Suluks. Here, they are free from the caring/controlling surveillance of both a boss and Florenese neighbours. However, squatter houses – like workers' *kongsi* – are notoriously volatile buildings, and the KK newspapers often carry stories of fires that have swept through such settlements. Due to this volatility, Teresa chooses not to keep precious family documents in her house, but instead stores them in a folder at her daughter's place of work. During conversations about the problems of undocumented children in KK, Teresa insisted that all of the documents in her folder are complete: she has her children's birth certificates, certificates of baptism and their clinic cards. She tells me she has even kept the dried-up umbilical cords of her children, because 'That is their own special medicine'. In the past, one of the birth certificates was lost, and she went to the right office to get a new one. But the woman there asked her why her children, if they have Indonesian passports, need Malaysian birth certificates, and tried to stop Teresa getting a replacement. 'I don't want to try and get my children Malaysian citizenship', Teresa says, 'But a birth certificate is their right as children born here'.

Significantly, although Teresa is someone who emphasises the importance of short-term care of children in the present, her tenacious attitude towards her children's right to documents can be seen as a form of long-term care. Certificates, and other important pieces of paper, are like the dried-up umbilical cords that Teresa also keeps: part of an individual's unique identity. In a context of shifting immigration regulations, and anti-migrant sentiments, Teresa does not keep such documents as a way of making any kind of formal claim on the state. Rather, documents can make visible and explicit the family histories that wider Sabahan society may try to deny, even to erase. Interestingly, when Teresa told me the story of the woman in the office denying her children's right to a Malaysian birth certificate, she noted that many Sabahans think that 'Timor people' are stupid. 'They assume they know us, and that they know what our home villages are like', she said, 'and I like to correct them'.

Certainly, during fieldwork, I became aware that people from the east Flores region had become racially marked as a particular kind of migrant. Because Florenese people,

with their darker skin and often curly hair, cannot pass as Malay in the way that Suluk or Bugis people can (Carruthers 2017: 235–236), they are more marked as ‘foreigners’ in the city (Tirtosudarmo 2006: 147). Interestingly, Catholic migrants from Flores are also perceived by indigenous (predominantly Christian) Sabahans as ‘less difficult’ than Muslim migrants, and are preferred for domestic and horticultural care. Moreover, they are less likely to be held responsible for demographic changes, linked to the corrupt granting of citizenship, that have seen numbers of Muslims increase in the state (Frank 2006: 75, 78). However, attitudes towards Florenese migrants, whilst they might seem less negative than those towards other ‘foreigners’, are also rather patronising, something of which Teresa is aware.

One day, when Rida was waiting outside the Indonesian learning centre where her younger daughters studied, she was approached by a Chinese-Malaysian woman, who asked her if she knew anyone looking for a job as a ‘maid’. This woman clearly approached Rida because, as a Florenese woman, she is ethnically marked as the sort of person who performs paid domestic work. In reply, Rida suggested her own daughter, Erin, who was at that time unemployed. For a brief period afterwards, Erin moved to work in the house of this woman, who reassured Rida that she would treat Erin just like her own child. However, in the end, since Erin was still needed at home to look after her youngest sister, this became a part-time job, with Erin living out and going to the house twice a week to clean. Significantly, Rida, Erin and Teresa all prefer to work, not as live-in help, but rather as ‘part-time maids’, thus allowing them to live with family and escape the controlling surveillance of a ‘missus’ (cf. Johnson, et. al. this volume). Again, we see a positive side to the preference for sticking things out together, even if this leads to less lucrative employment.

## Transnational Ambivalence and Missing Houses

Having considered how relationships with employers and officials involve particular intersections of care and control let me now move to a discussion of transnational families. For it is in part problems in relationships with kin ‘back home’, and the subtle ability of those kin to continue to control future plans, that make many Florenese feel ‘stuck’ in Sabah. In Teresa’s narrative, we saw how the success of her siblings back on Adonara leads her to feel shame for the failures of her migration. However, when her son Tony lived in Adonara, she felt he was being ‘spoilt’ by kin there, and was keen for him to return to KK. By contrast, in the case of Paulus and Rofina, there are more significant tensions, in part because of Paulus’s family’s snobbery towards Rofina. Although transnational Asian families can maintain emotional connections and shared livelihoods in all kinds of creative ways, we should be cautious in assuming that the transnational family is always a source of care and support. This is well illustrated by the experiences of Nora, the eldest daughter of Paulus and Rofina.

As a child, Nora attended a Malaysian primary school with a cosmopolitan mixture of fellow students. However, in her third year of studies, the headteacher informed Rofina that the school was no longer able to offer education to ‘foreigners’, and that Nora (and her older brother) must leave immediately. After this devastating event,

which occurred prior to the establishment of informal learning centres in the city, Nora was unable to access any more education, and spent the rest of her childhood helping her mother care for her younger siblings. However, at the age of 19, and still haunted by her disrupted education, Nora took the decision to travel with her father and older brother to Adonara, later staying on alone in Indonesia. She told me she had hoped to utilise family connections and to finally return to education. Sadly, Nora found her paternal relatives to be unsympathetic and unhelpful, gossiping about her single status, criticising her search for education as 'proud'. After over a year in Indonesia, and with her dreams of completing education crushed, she began the process of applying for a passport, so that she could return to Malaysia. 'I was born in Sabah', she told me, 'and all of my family were here. But the only way for me to come back to my home was with a passport'. After a childhood in Sabah in which 'short-term' care and family unity was prioritised, Nora is unfulfilled *both* by her lack of education, and by her experiences in Indonesia. She feels ambivalent about her transnational family, who failed to support her long-term goals, and estranged from both Indonesia and from Sabah, the 'home' for which she nevertheless required a passport to enter.

Rida and Leo's narrative of family life is an interesting contrast with that of Nora's family. When their two oldest daughters, Lana and Erin, were asked (like Nora) to leave their Malaysian school, Rida chose to return to Indonesia to find schooling for them. Then Lana became ill, and the whole family returned to Sabah for 7 months until she had recovered. However, at this point, Erin, who had been dropped back from secondary to primary school in Indonesia, refused to leave Sabah again. Lana then returned alone to Flores, where she lived with Rida's mother, and where her educational career has been impressive. She is currently completing university studies in nursing in Bandung.

Significantly, although the original plan was for Lana and Erin to live with Leo's relatives on Lembata, his wife Rida soon felt unwelcome, and moved to her relatives on Flores. Leo explained that this is why he has not been back to Lembata since: 'Even when my mother died', he said, 'I didn't go. I am still angry with people there for treating Rida like that'. Leo often told me that he was tired of his back-breaking work in the quarry, and that he is ready to return. 'This life is difficult', he said, 'migration is difficult', but he has to keep working to support Lana. All of his wages now go towards her university costs, and they use the money Rida earns to buy food. He plans to only work for three more years: one year to support Lana, then two years to save up money for a house in the village. Leo tells Lana she must finish her education, she must work hard, and then in the future, she can be free. All she needs to do is to remember her siblings and help them when they need it.

In Leo's narrative, we see three key themes: an ambivalence towards the unsupportive transnational family, the dream of building a house 'back home', and an emphasis on the obligations of siblingship. These themes are of course linked: for example, it is often difficulties in relationships with those in the home village that prevent migrants fulfilling the powerful aspiration of returning home and building a brick house (Graham 2008: 121). In addition, as in much of Southeast Asia, houses in eastern Indonesia are materialisations of marriage and of (a particular kind of) siblingship (cf.

Aguilar 2013: 352, 356). They are also important centres for ancestral ritual and for connecting people (through life-cycle and healing rituals) to the land (Allerton 2013). Thus, the desire to return and build a house is not simply (though it is partly) a desire to demonstrate an improved social status, but is also connected to what Parry and Bloch (1989) would characterise as an enduring social and ideological order. To build a house is a way to continue to care for one's natal land, and also, in the long term, for one's family. However, finding the resources, time and land to build a house is not straightforward. In east Flores, patrilineal inheritance rules control family plans by preventing women from inheriting land from their natal family (Graham 2008: 113). In Leo and Rida's case, this means that it is hard for them to build a house in Rida's home village, even though it is with Rida's kin that they maintain successful transnational relationships. In Paulus and Rofina's case, it means that, with Paulus's probable loss of inherited land, the dream of building a house remains just that. Writing of southern Luzon, Philippines, where money from migration has strongly influenced new urban forms in the built environment, Chris Martin (2016: 79–89) has described the 'incompleteness' of housing projects where many residential plots lie empty and potentially haunted. However, migrants who feel stuck in Sabah are haunted by a different kind of incompleteness: their imagined future landscape of return is still missing the house in which they themselves might finally rest and relax.

For migrant families in KK, the transnational family in east Flores can be an ambivalent source of care and support, particularly if this family disapproves of your marriage, controls your access to land, or leads you to feel a shameful failure. In migrant narratives, ambivalence is particularly focused on siblings, rather than elderly parents. As Aguilar has discussed, Southeast Asian understandings of 'obligatory reciprocity' among siblings can lead to conflict or oppressive expectations (2013: 361–362). Yet, despite this, siblingship may persist as an 'ideal of moral solidarity' (ibid: 364). This is strikingly illustrated by Teresa's storage of her children's dried-up umbilical cords. 'If they have a conflict in the future', she told me, 'I will take a bit of each of their cords and grind them up to mix with their food'. Such an ingestion of shared sibling substance will, in Teresa's view, lead to reconciliation. In a different vein, the ideal future morality of siblingship can also be seen in Leo's perspective on his eldest daughter, Lana. Leo does not talk of putting another child through university. Thus, although he hopes that once Lana is qualified as a nurse, she can be 'free', he also acknowledges that Lana will owe her siblings. Since they have received the benefits of short-term intimacy, but lack the possibility of higher education, Lana will owe her siblings a particular kind of long-term care, and will probably be required (once she begins paid work) to help them out with money. Whether such transnational obligations will be possible for Lana to fulfil for siblings stuck in Sabah, and whether she will be happy to have her future aspirations controlled in such a way, remains to be seen.

## Conclusion: The Difficulty of Living in the Moment

In much scholarly work on migration, it is mobility that is emphasised. By contrast, this article has described how in Sabah, decades of informal migration have led to a

paradoxical situation of immobility, produced *both* by immigration control *and* by family care. Impoverished Florenese migrants, unable to return to or to build a house in their home village, find themselves 'stuck' in Malaysia, unsure of plans for the future. Their children are born in Sabah *as* migrants, unable to attend Malaysian schools, and mostly lacking knowledge of their parents' Indonesian homes. In this context, practices of care are intertwined both with control by the state and employers, and with control exerted by non-migrant kin and places of origin. In the absence of state investments in the social reproduction of migrant families, and as most families are forced to prioritise short-term care, life has a quality of enduring temporariness (cf. McKay, this volume, on forms of ambient surveillance that characterise some transnational and diasporic relations). Indeed, the 'makeshift' (Kloos 2015) nature of life in KK is often stressed by migrants themselves. I once went with Leo and Rida to pay respects at another quarry-house where a man had just received news of the death of his mother in Adonara. As I perched on a small seating platform, he apologised for the state of his house, saying it was just a 'temporary house' (*rumah sementara*). When I asked him how long he had lived in this 'temporary' dwelling, he replied 25 years.

The idea that the houses and land of one's natal village are the sources of one's true identity, and that the business of finding work in Sabah is simply a temporary matter conforms not only with the logic of Indonesian *merantau* as 'circular migration' (Lindquist 2009: 7) but also with Parry and Bloch's theory of the moral worth of transactional orders. Parry and Bloch suggest that different societies view transactions in the 'short-term' cycle of exchanges as, at best, morally neutral: examples of 'sensuous enjoyment' or 'youthful vitality' (1989: 24). They argue that it is only through conversion into the long-term transactional sphere that social groups think such short-term exchanges can become 'morally positive' (ibid: 26), as when Malay women 'cook' the money earned by men in fishing. This is because, according to Parry and Bloch's scheme, it is the long-term sphere that is associated, by such groups, with enduring social and religious principles. However, research on some 'marginal' peoples suggests a rather different moral perspective on the short versus the long-term. In *Lilies of the Field*, Day, Papataxiarchis and Stewart describe prostitutes, gypsies, peasants and others who live in poverty at the margins of specific societies. Such people, they argue, have a distinctive ethos that rejects the 'longer term orientation' of their mainstream neighbours and revels in the temporality of the present (1999: 2–3). This temporality of *living in the moment* is, therefore, an active response to social exclusion and a form of 'cultural and political critique' (ibid: 7).

I invoke the power and freedom of 'living in the moment' here, and contrast it with Parry and Bloch's arguments regarding the ideological valuation of the 'long-term', because I think that the narratives of Florenese migrants in KK suggest a more complex position. For many of these migrants, attachment to life in Sabah, and their children's sense of belonging to the state, means that they do in some respects attempt to live in the moment. Certainly, most migrants have not, like Luter, sent their children back to Indonesia in hope of a better future. However, living in the moment is not easy when one is from a 'rooted', patrilineal culture like those found in the east Flores region, a culture that does tend to emphasise a long-term (ancestral)

morality. Families may emphasise the significance of *one* temporality of care: what I have called the ‘short-term’ care of physical proximity in the present. Yet, they are also haunted by a rather different temporality of care: long-term responsibilities towards ancestral land and extended family, and the desire to invest in their children’s future. It is the struggle to reconcile these temporalities that contributes to migrants’ description of their Sabah home as a ‘temporary house’, whilst they hold on to the idea of a more permanent, future house in Indonesia. Nevertheless, some migrants do seem more disposed than others to adapting Florenese practices to a foreign land. One day, when I visited Rida, she took me for a walk up the hill behind the quarry where Leo works. Pointing to a coconut tree up on the hill near one of the quarry’s stone-grinding machines, she told me, ‘That is Angelina’s tree’, referring to her youngest daughter. She then pointed to another tree, that of her middle daughter, Dita. Leo planted these trees on top of their daughters’ buried placentas. However, Rensi, her fourth daughter, who was born on a trip home to Flores, has her own tree back in the home village. These buried placentas, and the connection between the siblings born in KK and Flores, suggest a more creative attempt to materialise a life in Sabah, and to link children to the ‘temporary’ place where they have been born.

Let me end, as I began, with Teresa. Teresa knows that her migration has not quite turned out the way she hoped it would. Nevertheless, she rejects her brother Luter’s suggestion that she is ‘stupid’ for not sending her children back to Indonesia. When Teresa tells the story of Tony’s childhood, she mentions but does not dwell on his lack of schooling. The memory that makes tears come to her eyes is that of his first day at work. This is because, in the absence of education, money, or an Adonaran house, what Teresa has to show for her migration are her hard-working children. Their productivity and love are her reward for being stuck in the short term. And the times when she is happiest in KK are when these children come home on a Saturday night, bringing with them some ‘Kentucky Fried Chicken’, sitting around telling stories in their parents’ ramshackle squatter house. Although Teresa would like to have built a house on Adonara, such longer-term perspectives do not negate the power of short-term care, conviviality and work. Indeed, in feeling pride in *not* sending her children back, Teresa at times seems to attach a higher moral evaluation to physical intimacy and the immediacy of the short-term. In a context where one feels stuck, and where it becomes harder to remember what one is making sacrifices *for*, living in the moment can sometimes be a source of relief.

## Notes

1. Interestingly, these connections provide some protection for migrants in Sabah. Hugo notes that Florenese female labour migrants in Sabah are less vulnerable than many other Indonesian overseas female workers, since they usually moved with men and have wide networks of support (2008: 66).
2. Despite the long history of migration to Sabah, and the mixed and shifting legal status of ‘foreigners’ (Allerton 2017: 258), there is a pronounced local hostility to the presence of undocumented migrants (known as PTI, or *pendatang tanpa izin*) in the state. This hostility is partly motivated by long-standing grievances regarding demographic change, and ‘Project IC’, the



apparent rapid granting of citizenship to Muslim immigrants for political reasons (Frank 2006: 73–74, Carruthers 2017: 223). The latter allegations were partially confirmed by a 2013–2014 ‘Royal Commission of Inquiry’ (RCI) into the presence of ‘illegal immigrants’ in Sabah. Interestingly, the RCI report makes a number of references to ‘Orang Timor’ who are from the Flores region (Shim et al. 2014: 174, 175, 191, 192).

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