Being and Not Being Filipino: Children of Refugees, Muslim Belonging and Multiple Refusals in Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract

The experience of children of Muslim Filipinos in Sabah provides an intriguing case study for understanding "refugeeness" and children's identities in protracted situations of displacement. For complex historical, political and social reasons, these children both are and are not Filipino. Their families assert a cultural citizenship across political borders, while Sabahans stigmatize Filipino and refugee identities. The children themselves foreground their identity as Muslim, allowing them to assert a form of place-belonging that is not recognized by many Sabahans. The article theorizes these assertions and denials through the concept of refusal, arguing that in this context, refusal takes multiple, competing forms.

Keywords:

Muslim Filipinos, Sabah, children, refugees, migrants, refusal

How should we think about the identity of children born to refugees in another country? What kinds of connections do such children feel to their parents' place of origin, or to the place where they live? And what is the role of religion in the process of making these connections, and in children's understanding of their position in the wider society? Such questions have become hugely important in today's world, as numbers of displaced

people grow, and as many thousands of potentially stateless children face practical and existential questions about where they belong. Children of refugees may experience terrible hardships, but they are not passive in the processes of family life, and they do not necessarily share the perspectives of their parents and other adults.

In this article, I explore these complex issues of children's identity and belonging in contexts of displacement from the unique vantage point of children born to Muslim Filipinos in the Malaysian state of Sabah. From the 1970s, tens of thousands of refugees came to Sabah from Jolo, Zamboanga, Tawi-Tawi and elsewhere in the southern Philippines, fleeing the violence and chaos of war (Asis 2006, p. 127; Lumayag, Esteban, and Dumanig 2021, p. 54). Initially welcomed and given refuge by Sabah's government, they were later joined by migrants escaping continued poverty, violence and lack of opportunity in their homelands. However, since the official end of hostilities in the southern Philippines, and as the number of Filipinos in Sabah has grown, the attitudes of the Sabah government and public towards forced and other migrants have hardened (Somiah 2021, p. 32). Immigration rules and requirements have become more restrictive and expensive, and "operations" to round up "illegals" are increasingly frequent. Filipino Muslims in Sabah, many of whom are undocumented, are the targets of both general anti-migrant feeling and specific anti-Filipino prejudice (Loganathan et al. 2022, pp. 9–10).

In this context, many children find the identity of "Filipino" a difficult one to embrace.[1] Their family histories identify them as "Filipino", but other experiences and identities make them less so. This ambivalent Filipino-ness is not just caused by prejudice and stigma, but also relates to the history of Muslims in the southern Philippines and the ways in which refugee families perceive their connection to Sabah. In this article, I draw

on the literature on refugeeness to argue that this unique context—where people assert a cosmopolitan belonging across a long-standing cultural zone—unsettles various assumptions about the nature of refugee displacement. I also turn to theorizations of refusal in order to make sense of the multiple and ambiguous understandings of the place of Muslim Filipinos in Sabah. I show how refugee refusals of "foreignness", and assertions of belonging, whether as members of an ethnic group or as Muslims, are met by counter-refusals from Sabahans. I also suggest that, despite the politics of such counter-refusals, children embrace the potential of their Muslim identity to connect them to Malaysia.

One encounter with a "Filipino" child sticks in my mind as representing the ambiguous position of such children in Sabah. At an informal learning centre next to a large water village outside the city, I asked a young boy, Faizi, where he was born, to which he replied, "Pilipin Sabah". This led another boy who was listening to laugh and incredulously ask, "Where is that Pilipin Sabah?!" And yet, Faizi's response gets right to the heart of the experience of Muslim Filipino children in Sabah: what does it mean to be *both* Filipino *and* Sabahan in a context that makes such an identity problematic, if not impossible? How has long-term migration and uncertain legal status in Sabah transformed understandings of being a Muslim Filipino?

Refugeeness, Children's Identities and Refusal

In order to understand the unique position of children of Filipino refugees in Sabah, it is useful to consider the wider literature on what has been termed refugeeness. Refugeeness refers both to the delineation of "refugee" as a bureaucratic category, and to the connected but separate idea that those labelled as refugees might share similar, lived experiences of

displacement. Zetter (1991, p.40) first drew attention to the construction of "the refugee" as a stereotyped bureaucratic identity, arguing that this "labelling" was a transforming and politicizing process, and noting that refugees often conceived of their identity in "very different terms" from those "bestowing the label" of refugee on them. In a later article, Zetter (2007, pp. 181–82) argues that in the twenty-first century, the refugee label has been "radically transformed" in the face of its bureaucratic "fractioning" into numerous other labels, including the widespread terms "asylum seeker" and "irregular migrant". Zetter (2007, p. 188) argues that these new, often pejorative, labels make claiming the status of "genuine refugee" a "prized status and expensive commodity". Responses to the recent European refugee crisis have revealed just such a "fractioning" of categories, with politicians and the media keen to parse the moral deservingness of the "involuntary" refugee from the apparently less deserving "voluntary" movement of the "migrant" (Holmes and Castañeda 2016, p. 13). As anthropologists and others have made clear, such desires for specific, morally laden labelling ignore the complexity of migration in the context of "structural violence and post-colonial economic inequalities" (Holmes and Castañeda 2016, p. 17).

Refugeeness as a process of labelling exists alongside, and often in tension with, people's subjective experiences of displacement. Lacroix (2004, p. 149), drawing on research with refugee claimants in Canada, argues that while categories and policies are essential to understanding refugeeness, we should also consider refugees' subjective experience of displacement. This shared experience, in a Western context such as Canada, involves a sense of rupture and being uprooted, as well as a bureaucratic process "fraught with uncertainty" (Lacroix 2004, p. 161). Significantly, this shared experience can be said to emerge in response to processes of labelling: it is a "structured subjectivity" forced

upon refugees in the context of specific and lengthy procedures (Ou and Brotman 2011, p. 264). Ramsay (2019, p. 388) similarly argues that contemporary displacement can best be defined, with reference to this kind of structured waiting and indeterminacy, as an "existential experience of contested temporal being". Moreover, Ramsay (2019, p. 400) argues that this distinctive temporality of displacement can also be seen among the homeless and others dealing with profound experiences of precarity.

While it is certainly important to attend to the subjective and temporal aspects of people's experiences of refugeeness, it is also worth reminding ourselves of Malkki's (1995, p. 496) powerful arguments against the idea that the label of refugee could denote "a special, generalizable 'kind' or 'type' of person or situation". Malkki (p. 511) strongly criticized essentialized constructions of refugeeness, arguing that much work on the so-called refugee experience assumed that, simply by sharing a bureaucratic and international humanitarian category, people also shared a "common condition or nature". Moreover, she also drew attention to the ways in which this apparently common identity was constructed with reference to what she called "the National Order of Things", in which it was assumed that those who were uprooted from a nation automatically lost their "identity, traditions, and culture" (p. 509). Against such assumptions, Malkki noted that lifeworlds across the borders of neighbouring countries were rarely alien. Indeed, in her own research with Hutu refugees from Burundi in Tanzania, Malkki (1992, p. 36) found that refugees living in towns tended to create flexible and situational identities and a "lively cosmopolitanism" as they adapted to a new setting. In contrast, she argued that it was those living in an isolated refugee camp, for whom the refugee label became most valuable, who held on to the idea of their "pure" Hutu identity. Malkki's critical approach to understandings of displacement, and her attention to shared and mixed cultures is, as

later sections will show, crucial to understanding the position of families of Filipino refugees in Sabah.

This article, like the ethnographic research on which it draws, is focused on the children of refugees and migrants. Children, as Bhabha (2014, p. 2) notes, have often been missing from the "large-scale picture" of migration, "except as occasional appendages to adults". However, a focus on children can enhance but also complicate our understandings of the refugee experience, since children may have very different perspectives from adults on refugeeness as a performed and stigmatized category (Mann 2010, p. 22). This is particularly the case in contexts such as Sabah, where children are born to refugee parents, but have not forcibly migrated themselves. One such context is that of children born and living in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, whose complex identities have been explored by Hart (2004). Just as Malkki (1995, p. 511) warned against the tendency to essentialize refugees as a fixed category of people, so does Hart (2004, p. 167) note that discourses of "monolithic and bounded identities" are particularly common in discussions of children in refugee contexts. Against such assumptions, Hart (2004, p. 175) shows how the process of identity formation among Palestinian children is contingent and historical, with children's senses of belonging and aspirations for the future ranging "far wider than adults generally suggested". Hart's research draws attention to the tension that often exists between adult refugees' sense of identity and hopes for the future, and that of their children, who are often as much influenced by the place where they live, as by their parents' original home. In this article, by focusing on children, I explore what the implications of being Muslim Filipino are for a generation who did not directly experience conflict, and who may have only a tenuous connection to, and identification with, the Philippines.

To make sense of the various ambiguities, silences and stigmas surrounding Filipino refugee children and their connections to the Philippines and Sabah that it describes, this article draws on anthropological theorizing of refusal. In *Mohawk Interruptus*, Simpson employs the concept of refusal as a way to describe Mohawk rejections of the "gifts" of American and Canadian citizenship. Simpson (2014, pp. 11–12) argues that "refusal" works as a "political alternative" to multicultural "recognition", and is deployed as an ethical stance that pushes back against "settler logics of elimination". Refusal, for Simpson (p. 173), is a *positive* act that, in the Mohawk case, references a longer standing "felt" or "primary citizenship" outside of, or prior to, the nation-state. Building on Simpson's work, and in particular the Maussian understanding of the social implications of gift rejection, McGranahan argues that refusal can also be generative of new obligations and subjectivities. She emphasizes that refusal is not "another word for resistance", but should be seen as critique and revenge, even while it is also fundamentally hopeful (McGranahan 2016a, pp. 322–23). In her own ethnographic work, McGranahan explores the power of Tibetan refugees' collective refusal of citizenship in South Asia. Such a refusal of the "gift" of citizenship is, she argues, a claim to being permanently Tibetan, even as one is temporarily a refugee. It is, in her words, "belonging as refusal" (p. 337).

In the works of Simpson and McGranahan, refusal is positive and generative. But refusal can take many forms. In the context of Palestinian refugees confronting a long history of displacement and a deeply uncertain future, Feldman describes refusal as an active form of "non-reaction". She argues that Palestinians in refugee camps may refuse to react to political proposals and discussions, not because they are passive, but because they refuse to "exhaust themselves" by giving in (again) to false hopes (Feldman 2016,

p. 418). The idea of multiple forms of refusal finds support in Honig's recent feminist analysis of the three forms of refusal found in *The Bacchae*. Like indigenous thinkers such as Simpson, Honig (2021, p. 133n1) intends to "depathologize anger, silence, resentment and refusal" and to see them instead as legitimate political responses. In this article, I take inspiration from these theorizations of refusal as generative, active and multiple, and try to track the refusals of children of Muslim Filipinos and their families. I will show how, in Sabah, a context where migrants and their families lack many fundamental rights, and where political "resistance" is difficult, refusal is a better way to describe people's avoidance or rejection of certain identities and affiliations, and a useful way to make sense of children's ambivalence and silences. I will also argue, as a contribution to the discussion of multiple refusals, that the refusals of the marginalized may be met by counter-refusals from those who reject the terms of any potential political inclusion.

Malaysia, Refugees and Illegality

This article draws on a year (2012–13) of ethnographic research with the children of Filipino and Indonesian refugees and migrants in Sabah's capital, Kota Kinabalu. This fieldwork was conducted in Sabahan Malay, which all children spoke, and utilized a range of participatory and visual methods. Through various informal learning centres providing education to such children in Kota Kinabalu, I worked with roughly equal numbers of Filipino- and Indonesian-origin young people, aged between eight and 18. Such young people are often a focus for concern in Sabah, and yet no previous research had attempted to find out their perspectives regarding their situation. In some learning centres I taught English, in others I observed lessons, and in all I talked with children about their lives

and families. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with a number of teenagers and visited children at home in squatter settlements and workers' housing.

My project was inspired by the difficult structural and legal position of children of refugees and migrants in Malaysia, which is worth briefly outlining before moving on, in the next section, to the specificities (and ambiguities) of Filipino forced migration to Sabah. Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, or to the 1967 Protocol (Loganathan et al. 2022, p. 2). What this means is that the category of refugee is not recognized under Malaysian law, and there are no specific legal protections in place for refugees or their families (Imam Suppat 2014, p. 121). Instead, the Malaysian Immigration Act of 1959 simply recognizes migrants as either "legal" (having a valid permit or pass) or "illegal", meaning that refugees (who arrive in Malaysia without valid documentation to stay) are indistinguishable from the broader category of "illegal immigrant" (Imam Suppat 2014, p. 128). Hoffstaedter (2017a, p. 33) notes that government-controlled media in Malaysia tend to portray those claiming refugee status as "deviant" and as "threats to law and order".

Despite this official rejection of the category of refugee, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) does maintain a presence in Kuala Lumpur (Nah 2015, p. 126) and Malaysia allows the UN refugee agency to register refugees in line with its own procedures and to issue them with UNHCR cards identifying them as refugees (Hoffstaedter 2017b, p. 288). UNHCR has appealed against some sentences handed down to asylum seekers and refugees, but such appeals are granted as "exceptions" and do not challenge the idea that such people are "illegal" by default (Nah 2015, p. 125). Significantly, Malaysia does have a history of engaging with and sometimes offering

official status to displaced people, particularly when such groups—for example, Cham from Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1970s or Acehnese in the early 1990s—are understood as fellow Muslims (Nah 2015, pp. 290–91). However, there are limits to this apparent generosity. Protection of refugees is "contingent on the goodwill and recognition" of ordinary citizens and Malaysian immigration officers, and UNHCR cards are often "confiscated, thrown away or discarded as fakes" (Nah 2015, p. 288). In recent years, large numbers of Muslim Rohingya refugees have come to the country but they are not officially recognized as refugees (Imam Suppat 2014, p. 121).

Overall, then, the label of "refugee" is a highly contested one in Malaysia, where migration is increasingly securitized and criminalized. Being recognized as a refugee by UNHCR does not translate into wider recognition under Malaysian law, and asylum seekers and refugees are most likely to be labelled as "illegal" immigrants. Refugee children are "not expressly mentioned or covered" under the Child Act 2001 and are unable to access Malaysian government schools (Imam Suppat 2014, pp. 132–34). Thus, children or grandchildren of refugees who were born in Malaysia and have never left the country are considered permanently "foreign". However, as I shall go on to explore, such imposed foreignness does not go uncontested.

Refugeeness and Cultural Citizenship in an Interconnected Zone

Sabah and the geographically close islands of the southern Philippines have a long history of interconnection. Prior to becoming British North Borneo, Sabah was part of the Sultanate of Sulu, a maritime trading state, and this history has continuing repercussions in the present. Indeed, despite contemporary political boundaries, there is considerable

evidence that the peoples of this region are members of what Warren (1981) calls a "zone", an interdependent area of geographic, cultural and religious connections. In this region, borderlands are watery and "porous" and sea voyages between Sabah and the Philippines are "historical, centuries old, plied for trading purposes, piracy and to visit relatives" (Hilsdon 2006, p. 405). This "persisting logic of history, geography and shared culture" (Asis 2006, p. 123) has been explored in ethnographic work on the "general movements of people and goods" between the southern Philippines and Sabah (Johnson 1997, p. 185), including music and dance videos that reveal continuing trans-local identities (Canuday 2013). Indeed, Somiah (2021, p. 156) argues that the Sulu Sea offers an "alternative geography" of belonging and kinship for those who move between the southern Philippines and Sabah.

Between 1972 and 1984, about 100,000 people fled to Sabah from the civil war in the southern Philippines (Azizah 2009, p. 58; Hilsdon 2006, p. 407). The geographical closeness of Sabah, the historical links with the islands of the southern Philippines, and the initial support for the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)—many of whose fighters were trained in military camps in Sabah (Blanchetti-Revelli 2003, p. 62)—made the state an obvious destination for those escaping violence (Horvatich 2003, p. 29). These Muslim Filipinos were recognized at the time as refugees by UNHCR, and were given basic housing by UNHCR in resettlement villages, plus special permission to stay and work by Sabah's chief minister (Azizah 2009, pp. 57–58). However, since the official cessation of hostilities in the Philippines in the 1980s, their position has become more ambiguous. UNHCR closed its office in Sabah in 1987 and today categorizes the original refugees as "people of concern", whose situation remains difficult but whose needs are not urgent (Azizah 2009, p. 57). Although the original refugees are still entitled to a pass

(IMM13) that allows them to live and work in Sabah, this requires annual renewal for a fee, which can be problematic for large families (Azizah 2009, p. 62; cf. Lumayag, Esteban, and Dumanig 2021, p. 54). Many people have therefore slipped into an unauthorized status (Loganathan et al. 2022, p. 9).

However, despite such changes in refugee labelling (Zetter 1991, p. 40), historical and contemporary connections between Sabah and the southern Philippines have important implications for understanding conceptions of refugeeness in this context. For Muslim (southern) Filipinos, Sabah is explicitly *not* imagined as foreign (Asis 2006, p. 124), and certainly not as a place that can be called "abroad" in the same sense as the Middle East or elsewhere (Johnson 1997, p. 46). From this perspective, the movement of refugees from the southern Philippines to Sabah can be seen as movement within an interconnected cultural zone, a space of shared cultural citizenship (Rosaldo 2003). Such a perspective that asserts social and political connections across borders (Simpson 2014) is at odds with the "national order of things" that Malkki (1992, p. 25) sees as fundamental to international, pathologized understandings of refugees as "uprooted" peoples. Against any assumption of refugeeness as a common experience of displacement (Lacroix 2004, p. 162), we should consider this emphasis on Sabah as a "familiar" place (Asis 2006, p. 124) to be a refusal of both illegality and foreignness.

In refusing the "national geographic" (Malkki 1992) that would designate them as being rooted only in the southern Philippines, Muslim Filipinos in Sabah continue to refuse the idea that they do not belong in Sabah (cf. Hilsdon 2006, p. 412). Indeed, in asserting the "persisting logic" of their connection to Sabah, they also refuse to see themselves as displaced peoples who should therefore seek "return". During my

fieldwork, a learning centre for "Filipino" children organized document-processing by the Philippine Statistics Authority. However, several children told me that their families (despite being at risk of statelessness) were not interested in applying for Philippine documents. This refusal of the "gift" of documents is rather different from McGrahanan's (2016b, p. 336) description of Tibetan refusals of Indian citizenship. In this case, refusal of documents asserted a connection to the "host" context (one that straddled a watery border) rather than to a supposed homeland.

However, just as Mohawk refusals of settler politics exist alongside Canadian and US refusals of indigenous sovereignty (Simpson 2014, p. 117), so do many Malaysian Sabahans cling to a national geographic that refuses to recognize the cultural citizenship of "Filipinos". Despite the initial welcome that was afforded to Filipino refugees in Sabah, they have gradually lost many of their rights and have come to be seen as "illegal immigrants" (Azizah 2009, p. 67) or criminals (Asis, 2006, p. 127). Public statements by politicians contesting the validity of the term refugee in Sabah have also supported such perceptions (Azizah 2009, p. 67), and many former refugees and their family members risk being held in congested detention centres or deported to the Philippines (Somiah 2021, p. 51). What explains this second, powerful refusal, the Sabahan refusal of Filipino cultural citizenship? Two factors are of crucial importance: first, the particular status of Sabah's "natives" within the Malaysian biopolity; and second, the history of what is called "Project IC" (Identity Card).

Since the formation of Malaysia, "indigenous" Malays have enjoyed certain privileges as *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) and have benefited from a system of "graduated sovereignty" in which the government puts more investment into their "biopolitical

improvement" (Ong 2006, p. 80). However, in Sabah, the majority of the *bumiputera* community (including the largest group, the Kadazan-Dusun) are non-Muslim (Doolittle 2005, p. 105) and the ethnicization of native categories is a distinctly political process (Majid Cooke and Johari 2019, p. 131). This politically driven grant of citizenship is known as Project IC and is associated with federal Malay politicians who hoped to "Malayize" Indonesian and Filipino immigrants and thereby alter the "demographic and political character of Sabah" (Kamal 2005, p. 116; cf. Somiah 2021, p. 9).[2] It is this complex political and religious background that explains why many Sabahans refuse the cultural citizenship of Muslim Filipinos in Sabah (Dayang, Wan Shawaluddin, and Kim 2015, p. 297). Such a background is also relevant to contextualizing children's engagements with being both "Filipino" and "Muslim", as the next sections will further explore.

"Pilipin Sabah": Ambiguity and Children's Refusals

The Filipino-origin children whom I knew in Sabah described themselves in a variety of ways, but were more likely to self-describe with reference to a specific ethnic group (*bangsa*) than as simply "Filipino" (*Pilipin*) (cf. Asis 2006, p. 129). The largest group were those who described themselves as Suluk or Pilipin Suluk. As many children were aware, this is a Sabah-specific designation for those who are generally called Tausug in the Philippines (Dino 2015, p. 15). The second largest group of children referred to themselves as Bajau, a catch-all term corresponding to the term Sama in the Philippines (Horvatich 2003, p. 27). Other significant ethnicities in Kota Kinabalu were Yakan, Cagayan and Ubian, and a number of the children I knew were of "mixed" ethnicity, mostly Bajau-Suluk but also of mixed Filipino-Indonesian or Filipino-Malaysian

ethnicities (cf. Majid Cooke and Johari 2019, p. 135). Many Muslim Filipinos in Sabah use place names (for example, the name of an island) as ethnic terms. Interestingly, some younger children told me they were from "Pilipin" before giving the names of Semporna or Sandakan (both towns in Sabah). Such children's self-description demonstrates an intriguing lack of awareness of political boundaries that fits with the previously described sense of membership of a cultural zone. Indeed, most Filipino-origin children I knew had a strong sense of attachment to Sabah, were fluent in Sabahan Malay and usually refused the idea that they were foreign.

For Muslims in both the southern Philippines and contemporary Sabah, "Filipino" can be a problematic label, although for rather different reasons. In the former, the Philippine state has faced what Blanchetti-Revelli (2003, p. 45) calls a "chronic legitimization crisis" in relation to its Muslim subjects (cf. San Juan 2006, p. 398). Muslim Filipinos "resisted the national identity of Filipino", both because they did not feel part of the Philippine state and because "they understood that Muslims had no place in a nation-state that consistently disregarded and denigrated Islam" (Horvatich 2003, p. 23). The MNLF adopted the word *Moro*, the Spanish term for Muslims, as part of an explicit attempt to construct a specifically Philippine Muslim identity that would "cut across ethnic and class positions" (Horvatich 2003, p. 26). Indeed, it has been argued that the national identity affirmed by the MNLF was one that was "antithetical to *Filipino*" (Blanchetti-Revelli 2003, p. 62). In Sabah, by contrast, Muslims of Filipino origin, even while they were aware of the differences between themselves and Christian Filipinos, seemed to have little patience for the identity politics of Muslim separatism and, with the exception of a few men educated in the Philippines, I never heard anyone identifying themselves as "Moro". However, even while adults and children would describe

themselves as Pilipin to me and others, they were highly conscious that this had become a denigrated and stigmatized identity in Sabah. Therefore, in certain contexts they might downplay their connections to the Philippines, emphasizing their identity as particular kinds of Sabahans.

Anti-migrant sentiment in Sabah results in particularly prejudicial attitudes towards Muslim Filipinos. They are often referred to by the term "Pilak", which may originate from the Suluk word for silver/coins/money, but which has racist connotations (Somiah 2021, p. 11). In popular discourse, Filipinos are also associated with criminal activities, particularly the sale and use of the drug *syabu* (Asis 2006, p. 127). During my fieldwork, anti-Filipino, and in particular anti-Suluk, prejudice was further heightened by what has become known as the Lahad Datu standoff (Dayang, Wan Shawaluddin, and Kim 2015, pp. 299–300; Somiah 2021, p. 38). In February 2013, over 200 self-professed followers of the Sultanate of Sulu, some of them armed, entered Malaysia from the Philippines and holed up in the remote village of Tanduo. These followers, who apparently hoped to reassert the territorial rights of the sultanate in North Borneo, were subsequently encircled, bombed and killed or arrested by Malaysian security forces. After this event, people of Suluk descent were targeted in spot checks of documents, and authorities started to reject IMM13 refugee cards as valid identification. More generally, the very presence of Suluk migrants in Sabah came to be connected with the state's apparent "infiltration" by Suluk "terrorists", causing some former refugees I knew to fear that they would have to flee again.

For complex reasons, then, but largely because of social prejudice, being "Filipino"—and, in particular, being "Suluk"—is a problematic identity in Sabah.[3] Many

of the older children I knew were very aware of such prejudice. A twelve-year-old Suluk boy who had once attended a Malaysian government school confided that he used to keep quiet about being Filipino. Similarly, several other children told me that they did not always admit to being Suluk or Bajau if they were with "local" children. However, while they are sensitive to such prejudicial opinions, children themselves have a variety of different perspectives on the Philippines as a place. A very small minority of the children I knew had been born in the Philippines. Some of these could no longer remember their place of birth, while others recalled it as a place where (unlike Sabah) they could go to school and had many friends. Other children who were born in Sabah but had been taken on at least one trip to the Philippines often described these trips to me as "the best experience of my life", remembering ferry journeys to Zamboanga or fishing trips with family members.

However, the majority of children born to Muslim Filipino parents in Sabah may have never visited the Philippines and may feel they have only a tenuous connection with the place. Pilipin may be the homeland of their parents or grandparents but it feels very distant to them (cf. Somiah 2021, p. 140). Many children have heard stories of violence and poverty from family members and consider the Philippines a still-dangerous place. Twelve-year-old Roy told me that his grandmother came to Sabah because "she was in a war, and people were shooting, and there was no work there". Rohit, a mixed Suluk-Bajau boy, told me that the Philippines was a bad place where people were violent. Children retold stories of men with guns entering their parents' or grandparents' houses, or of people having to flee villages in the night as helicopters were heard nearby. They repeated endlessly that "there is no money" or "there is no work" or "there is nothing to do" in the Philippines. Significantly, many children even said that they were scared of going to the

Philippines because it was “full of ghosts” owing to all the people who had died in the civil war.

While children with negative perceptions of the Philippines are nevertheless still interested in talking about the country, other children are equally likely to refuse any engagement with it as a place. For example, Fiqa had Suluk parents who had both been born in Sabah, and who, as traders of goods, had lived in a number of different places in the state. Although Fiqa described her parents’ ethnicity as Pilipin, she said her family mostly spoke Malay at home and that they no longer had any connections with the Philippines. “I don’t know anything about it”, she stressed. Many children would refuse to engage with my speculative questions about how life in the Philippines might be different from life in Sabah. Herman, an otherwise extremely engaged and imaginative boy who loved filling in my questionnaires and worksheets, would always draw a line through any questions about the Philippines.

Some recent work in childhood studies has noted the discipline’s preoccupation with uncovering “children’s voices” and has instead called for attention to children’s meaningful silences. Lewis (2010, p. 20) argues that “listening better” to children includes “hearing silence”, which is “not neutral or empty”, while Spyrou (2016, p. 10) argues for attending, methodologically, to “that which is vocally absent but meaningfully present”. Throughout my fieldwork, I was struck very powerfully by the number of times children told me they had “forgotten” about the Philippines, even if they had gone on a trip there quite recently. Of course, it is perfectly possible that children do forget a place they have not visited for years, particularly if a visit occurred when they were very young. However, we can also see these frequent and rather emphatic statements—such as when

children would declare, “I have forgotten everything about it”—as a particular kind of meaningful silence, similar to the occasional “non-reaction” of Palestinians (Feldman 2016, p. 418). By refusing to actively remember or speak about the Philippines, even as they undoubtedly hear news about it from family members, children may be refusing any contemporary links with it as a country. Their silence, unlike some children’s “don’t know” responses, did not seem to stem from discomfort or fear (Spyrou 2016, p. 14). Rather, their silence was defiant, as though they wanted to question why *they* should know anything about a place where they did not live, and to which others often assumed they belonged. This strategy of silence and forgetting can be compared with what they will speak about: their family identities as Muslim Pilipin people with past, present and future links to Sabah.

Muslim Place-Belonging and Sabahan Contestations

Having explored the history of connections between Sabah and the southern Philippines, and the contemporary situation and problematic identity of children of Filipino origin in Sabah, I now turn to the significance of Islam in these children’s lives. What difference does the Muslim part of being a Muslim Filipino make to children’s experiences? Understanding children’s engagement with religion is a complex task, since children are likely to have age-specific and ever-evolving understandings of religious knowledge and practice. I have chosen to emphasize those aspects of religiosity that children themselves drew attention to in fieldwork, noting here that many of the parents and children I knew had little formal education. While, in many Muslim Southeast Asian contexts, young people’s religiosity is strongly shaped by schools and other national institutions, Filipino

refugee children are excluded (by both regulations and poverty) from most such places of learning in Sabah.

Interestingly, many of the "Filipino" children I knew were explicit about the fact that although they were very definitely Muslim, they did not yet know much about Islam. For example, during a conversation with eleven-year-old Mudin and his friends, I asked the children what was most important about being a Suluk person. At first they answered "dancing" and "being able to play keyboards", a clear reference to their love of *pangalay* dancing and wedding performers' exuberant music-making at Suluk wedding parties (Dino 2015, p. 87; cf. Canuday 2013, p. 90). Then, Mudin added, "You must know the Qur'an and how to pray". When I asked him if he knew this himself, he made an apologetic face and said no, he did not. Similarly, many other children told me that they still needed to learn how to pray, or how to read the Qur'an, even as they emphasized that such knowledge was central to being a "good person".

Although many children feel that they have an imperfect knowledge of praying and the Qur'an, Islam is very definitely not perceived by them as an "abstract, otherworldly moral system" (Nadia and Fernando 2015, p. 70). Horvatich (2003, p. 30) notes that in response to questions about their identity, Sama people are as likely to say "bangsa Muslim" as "bangsa Sama". This was something I also found in Sabah, where children and adults might describe their *bangsa* (ethnicity) as, for example, "Bajau Islam" or simply *orang Islam* (Muslim). To be Yakan, Bajau, Suluk, Ubian or Cagayan in Sabah *is* to be a Muslim. For the children and grandchildren of "Filipino" refugees, Islam is something wholly normative, part of the everyday background to and substance of family life. Indeed, in emphasizing that they need to learn more about praying, for example,

children are not so different from many Muslim adults, who may also see greater knowledge and piety as an important *future* project (Nadia and Fernando 2015, p. 68).

During my fieldwork, I ran a project called "Photos of my Life", in which children borrowed a digital camera for a week or so and were asked to take pictures of places, things and people that were important to them. When they returned the cameras to me, I would give them copies of their pictures and ask them to describe their images either verbally or in writing. Significantly, a number of children who borrowed cameras took photographs of prayer halls or mosques. As Hart (2004, p. 172) argues in describing similar photographs produced by Palestinian children, such images demonstrate a pride in being Muslim that is in stark contrast to the stereotypical perception of refugee children as passive cases of need. One Bajau boy got his many siblings and cousins to pose as if praying, a picture that other children enjoyed looking at a great deal. Several children also took pictures of posters on the walls of their family homes showing the Ka'ba in the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca. When we discussed their pictures afterwards, these children all told me that they had photographed these posters because they were "beautiful". Similarly, a number of children commented on what they saw as the incredible beauty of the Sabah state mosque in the city, which on a clear day is framed by the distant vista of Mount Kinabalu and a calm boating lake in front.

Islam, then, particularly in their experiences of mosques, and their appreciation of pictures of holy places, is a source of beauty for children, as well as a source of secure and taken-for-granted identity. During the fasting period of Ramadan (*bulan puasa*) and the subsequent feast days of Hari Raya (Eid al-Fitr), Islam also provides children with the exciting opportunity for family visits and celebrations that break up the immobility and

boredom of an undocumented existence. For many children, the Hari Raya holiday marked one of the few times when their parents were not working, or provided the only opportunity for visiting other family members in Sabah, going to special places in the city, or attending open house celebrations among their neighbours. In her "holiday diary", fourteen-year-old Farhana drew the Hari Raya outfit that she hoped to wear and listed all the special biscuits that her mother planned to bake. Children told me excitedly about the special parcels of rice they ate with meat dishes and the small sums of money (*duit raya*, often also called *angpow*[4]) that adults give to children in envelopes around the Hari Raya holiday, listing the amounts they had been given in previous years.

Hari Raya is meaningful for Muslim Filipino children and their families in Sabah, not simply because of its religious significance but also because it is a day when these families take part in the same activities as Muslim Malaysians. They dress in brightly coloured *baju kurung* (traditional Malay dress) and pyjamas, visit the graves of family members, eat delicious food at neighbours' houses and generally relax. It is a special day when children feel emphatically part of things and can blend in with other Muslim families, whatever their origin. Indeed, in general terms, we can say that not only does Islam provide children with a taken-for-granted identity but that it also offers a less problematic mode of belonging to Sabah than the cultural citizenship their parents may emphasize. For example, in describing their visits to the Sabah state mosque, these children—who are excluded from Malaysian schools and who have little access to Malaysian healthcare—did not see it as a place where they, as non-citizens, could not go. Rather, as Muslims, it was a place of beauty where they *belonged*.

However, although children may feel that in mosques or on Hari Raya they are (in the words of sixteen-year-old Jamil) "just ordinary" (*biasa saja*), the shadow of refusal still lurks over this Filipino/Sabahan Muslim identity. One such refusal stems, ironically, from the history of the Philippines as a predominantly Catholic nation. Several female, Tagalog-speaking, Christian Filipinos, some of whom were married to local Sabahan Christians, had established an informal learning centre, which I visited. Although this centre was an extraordinary place of hope and learning for excluded children, it also had an ambiguous attitude to the religion of the majority of its students. Teachers stressed their desire to instil in these children a greater love for their Filipino homeland, and some taught Christian prayers and nationalist songs, or even described their volunteering as a "mission". There was no provision within the curriculum for education about Islam, and teachers often spoke in whispers about the children being "Muslim". Thus, in keeping with Filipino nationalist attitudes to the southern Philippines, the teachers at the centre seemed to refuse, albeit uneasily, the Muslim identity of the children they wanted to reclaim as "Filipino".

A second potential refusal comes from the wider politics of religion in Sabah. I have argued that, within the context of Sabah being part of a Malay-Muslim cultural world, Islam offers refugee children an uncontested space for belonging. Moreover, this is in clear contrast with the situation in the Philippines, where Islam has historically presented problems of incorporation into the Filipino nation. And yet, for many indigenous Sabahans, non-citizen Muslim children exist in the state as potential, illicit future citizens. Their religion is not an uncomplicated source of belonging but raises troubling issues regarding Project IC and demographic change. This is the case even though children of refugees are effectively "invisible in Malaysian society", their long-

term educational exclusion leading to "economic marginalisation" (Lumayag, Esteban, and Dumanig 2021, p. 62).

Discussion and Conclusions: Multiple Refusals

"Filipino" children in Sabah experience many official refusals in the state, as when they are told no, they cannot attend a Malaysian government school, or no, they cannot access subsidized healthcare. This is refusal at its simplest: saying no (McGranahan 2016a, p. 319). In Sabah, state authorities and indigenous Sabahans also often seem to employ refusal "as revenge" by refusing to acknowledge the cultural citizenship or Muslim belonging of those who have spent decades in the state, perhaps as payback for their own marginalization in a Malay Muslim dominant polity (p. 322). However, refusal can also be a way to stake a claim to sociality, by refusing particular affiliations or identities (p. 320). Thus, while refusal is negative, it is also a "political and ethical stance" that is employed against those "recognizing" particular identities (Simpson 2014, p. 11). For example, Christian Filipino teachers may seek to help children and their families gain "recognition" of their Filipino-ness and rediscover their connection to a Filipino homeland, but the legitimacy of this stance is questioned by children's silence about the Philippines, or parents' non-attendance at document-processing events.

In the emerging literature on refusal, those doing the refusing are always adults (whether operating as individuals or as members of a collective or state) (Simpson 2014; McGranahan 2016a, 2016b). By contrast, in this article, I have shown the utility of employing refusal to describe the actions of children. Children's frequently constrained structural position means that open resistance may often be difficult for them. Yet

refusal—as generative and wilful, or as simply saying "no"—is a strategy well-suited to children as social actors who often lack a voice, or who fear not being taken seriously. Children's refusals may be harmful to their peers, as when local citizen children refuse to treat "Filipino" children equally. However, children's refusals can also be powerfully revealing, as when children refuse to remember or talk about the Philippines. Such silence, I have argued, can be read as a defiant refusal of the assumption that they are necessarily connected with the Philippines more deeply than they are with Sabah.

Theories of refusal help us to understand the complexity of identity and belonging in a post-refugee context such as Sabah, where there is a strong contradiction between how people think of their own cultural citizenship, and how they are recognized or labelled by state authorities and others. Moreover, what is particularly striking about the Sabah context is the very refusal of refugeeness. Although this article began with an outline of approaches to refugeeness as a process of bureaucratic labelling and a shared subjective experience, the situation of Muslim Filipinos in Sabah casts doubt on the utility of such approaches to comprehending the complexities of experience of forced migrants. I have shown how Malaysia does not legally recognize the category of refugee even as it did initially welcome the arrival of Muslim Filipinos. I have also argued that former refugees, even as they might remember the violent circumstances of their move to Sabah, do not see themselves as displaced persons, since they emphasize the cultural citizenship of a zone that crosses political borders. This refusal of refugeeness-as-displacement or of "uprootedness" is a positive refusal, the positive assertion of connection on historical and cultural grounds. It is not that families refuse to be "Filipino", but that they refuse the state logics and nationalist assumptions that would see the Philippines as the place where they or their children belong. Significantly, Ramsay's (2019) characterization of the lived

experience of refugeeness as being out of time is particularly relevant to understanding the experiences of children of Filipino refugees. These children often asserted to me that they were really "the same" as the Malaysian citizen children attending government schools. They do not experience displacement as such (since they are living in the place they feel is home), but a sense of being excluded from the times of Malaysian childhood (Allerton 2023, p. 774).

Feminist theories of refusal emphasize that it is generative, active and multiple (Honig 2021; Feldman 2016). I have shown how children's refusal of the idea that they are foreign and belong elsewhere is generative of an everyday commitment to their identity as Muslim. While their occasional declaration of their *bangsa* as "Pilipin-Sabah" is complicated, their more regular assertion that their ethnicity is Muslim is, for them, straightforward. This ordinary Muslimness-in-the-present connects children with the places and practices of the city they call home and is a significant form of belonging in this context of politicized migration and citizenship. And yet, as I have described, these positive moves are met by counter-refusals: from those who wish to continue to label these children as "illegal" foreigners, and from those Sabahans whose fears of demographic change make them suspicious of such easy cultural and religious integration. It is partly the complexity of these reactions and counter-refusals that explains why this protracted post-refugee situation is so difficult to resolve. Despite the undocumented and precarious status of most of the Muslim Filipino children I worked with, they do have a kind of cultural citizenship in Sabah, and their families are committed to a future life in the state. Nevertheless, as a concept, refusal promises to highlight the limits to (as well as grounds for) belonging for Muslim Filipino children in Sabah: the

ways in which they, their parents and Sabahans both seek *and* refuse (in both explicit and implicit ways) various potential points of connection.

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NOTES

[1] Throughout this article, I somewhat awkwardly use scare quotes around the word "Filipino" when referencing children. This approach seeks to destabilize the assumptions of many Sabahans that these (often third generation Sabah-born) children *belong* in the Philippines.

[2] In December 2014, a Royal Commission of Inquiry on the presence of immigrants in Sabah finally published its report, confirming the long-rumoured existence of some form of Project IC in the state, while avoiding blaming any particular parties (RCI Commissioners 2014).

[3] Nelson Dino (2015, p. 17) describes a recent campaign among Suluk citizen youth in Sabah entitled "T-Shirt for Peace", which involved the wearing of black shirts reading "I AM TAUSUG AND I AM NOT A TERRORIST".

[4] *Angpow* is the transliteration of a Chinese Hokkien word meaning "red packet", traditionally given by married adults to children during Chinese New Year. Its use during Hari Raya demonstrates the cosmopolitan and mixed nature of much of social and religious life in Sabah.