

# Chapter 12

## ***Merantau*: The Worldview and Praxis of Javanese Migrants in Brunei Darussalam**



Westly Lo Siong Wei and Lian Kwen Fee

**Abstract** The phenomenon and experiences of Indonesians who leave their villages of origin to seek a life of improvement have been examined by local scholars in the past using the concept of *merantau*. In this chapter, we document the extended narratives of nine Javanese migrant workers in Brunei Darussalam from the conversations we had about their lives in Java, Indonesia and Brunei connected through the social process of migration. Every individual had a unique account of the migration story and how it relates to their experiences. However, we suggest that they share something in common. We argue that *merantau* is a worldview with which these young Javanese make sense of their lives and future, empower them, and help them overcome the existential condition of uncertainty and insecurity of life in densely populated Java. For them *merantau* is a way of life that sustains their adulthood.

**Keywords** Brunei Darussalam · *Merantau* · Javanese · Migrants · Narratives

### 12.1 Introduction

Indonesian migrant workers who are employed outside of Indonesia are no strangers to other countries in the Southeast Asia region and the rest of the world. According to the World Bank (2017: x–xi), 89.5% of all Indonesian migrant workers are employed as caregivers, domestic workers, agricultural and factory workers, service providers and manual labourers including in construction. Such employment can be characterised as 3D jobs—demanding, dirty and dangerous (Rahman 2012: 21). Those who are employed in white-collar posts make up a very small proportion of the total number of these workers. The presence of Indonesian workers is significant

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in Middle Eastern and other Asian countries such as Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan. The Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Board (Badan Pelindungan Pekerja Migrant Indonesia, BP2MI) calculates that the total number of registered workers outside of Indonesia in 2018 (before the Covid-19 pandemic) was 283,640, with the largest proportion originating from West Java (57,230), Central Java (61,434) and East Java (70,381). Among the top 10 destination countries of these workers were Malaysia (90,671), Taiwan (72,373), Hong Kong (73,917), Singapore (18,324) and Brunei (5,707) (BP2MI 2019: 4, 6).

International migration for work is generally seen as beneficial for all the stakeholders involved: the host nation, sending nations and migrants themselves. However, the outcome of such movements varies across the spectrum from positive to negative. Scholars such as Rachel Silvey (2004), Anne Loveband (2004), Kayoko Ueno (2009), Amy Sim and Vivienne Wee (2010), and Arisman Arisman and Ratnawati Kusuma Jaya (2020) have studied Indonesian migrant workers in Singapore, Malaysia, Macau, Taiwan and Saudi Arabia, and draw attention to the negative consequences of the migration experience. Realities such as left-behind children, divorce, resistance, illegal migration, trafficking, overstaying, poor working condition, abuses and deaths are recurrent narratives in both scholarly and mass media inquiries. Despite such potential risks, the number of Indonesians migrating overseas for work has persisted and grown, at least until the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic which disrupted international labour flows. One common feature in these studies is that they focus only at one point of the migration process, either at the origin or destination. The migration process begins with their life at a city, town or village of origin in Indonesia and proceeds through a period of work before eventually returning home. Confining a study to a single location enables the researcher to discuss the migrant workers' experience in rich detail. For example, Loveband (2004: 345) elaborates on the experience of Indonesian caregivers employed in Taiwan and their cultural incompatibility with Taiwanese employers. However, such studies do not capture the entire migration process. Two exceptions are Carol Chan's (2017, 2018) studies of Indonesian migrant workers who return to their homes in Central Java, and Olivia Killias's (2018) book on Javanese domestic workers who migrate to Malaysia and return to Java. These studies present a thorough account of Indonesian migrant workers' experiences, describing how they came to decide to move, return, move again and finally return to their homes in Indonesia. This series of decision-making and migration choices involves the migrant's interactions with other social actors.

In this chapter, we trace a group of Indonesian migrant workers at both ends of the migration process, examining their living experience in Java and in their workplace in Brunei. As elaborated later, we argue that the act of migrating with a purpose for a limited duration (*merantau*) became an important and inevitable social practice in these migrants' everyday experience. *Merantau*, as a concept first introduced by Mochtar Naim (1971) to refer to the customary movements of Minangkabau in Sumatra, has largely been transformed and internalised in the lives of Indonesian migrant workers overseas. Their life courses revolve around *merantau*.

The next section discusses the contemporary understanding of *merantau* as a 'quest', taking into account the compelling circumstances in Indonesia to migrate,

relevant studies on Indonesian migrant workers in other host societies, and labour shortage conditions in Brunei. Subsequently, statistical data of formally employed Indonesian nationals in Brunei for 2019 are presented. Finally, we document and discuss the narratives of Indonesian migrant workers about their lives in their home villages and Jakarta, and their working and living experiences in Brunei.

## 12.2 *Merantau*: Worldview and Praxis

*Merantau* is an important term that our informants frequently used to describe their experiences of working abroad. Before proceeding to examine contemporary interpretations of *merantau*, it is useful to refer to Naim (1971: 6–11) who first applied it to Minangkabau society. In a later work, he shows how *merantau* is used in a specific context, in contrast to migration. There are six characteristics of *merantau*: (1) it involves a movement away from the migrant's village or hometown; (2) the movement has to be voluntary; (3) the movement is of limited duration, whether long term or short term; (4) the movement is carried out to seek a better livelihood, more knowledge or novel experiences; (5) the movement starts with an intention to return to the place of origin; and (6) *merantau* is a social practice that is culturally specific (Naim 1984: 2–5). Subsequent studies have built on Naim's definition and the notion of *merantau* has been applied to migrations of different communities and social groups within Indonesia, such as Acehnese and Boyanese (Salazar 2016: 26), Madurese (Lücking 2017: 254) and Javanese (Chan 2017: 249). In the Malay world, Mohamad Hanif Abdul Wahab and Azizi Bahauddin (2018: 169) argue that *merantau* is interpreted differently depending on factors such as period, locality, ethnicity and social class.

*Merantau* as a process, which Johan Lindquist (2009: 7) refers to as 'circular migration', has evolved from a heterogeneous cultural form associated with ethnic groups to a pan-Indonesian phenomenon since the early 1900s, when migration surged as people looked for new livelihood opportunities (*ibid.*: 11, 29). Lindquist elaborates that while this development referred to migration of a selected minority in the earlier phase, the trend gradually grew to encompass the widespread movement of unskilled migrants (*ibid.*: 30). The shift from an agricultural peasant economy to a capitalist-driven cash economy influenced the perceptions of unskilled workers in rural regions. This eventually led to the homogenisation of *merantau* across Indonesia (*ibid.*: 29, 52). Applying the concept to Javanese society, Traci Smith (2008: 2) suggests that the act of migration has become a rite of passage for male Javanese, distinguishing the transition from 'childhood' to 'adulthood'. Smith (*ibid.*: 4) emphasises that *merantau* facilitates the separation of Javanese youth from their parents and their home villages. Since the acceleration of migration under conditions of globalisation in the 1980s, and especially female migration, *merantau* may also be relevant to female Javanese migration (Lindquist 2013: 124).

Our respondents, who all originated from different parts of Java, saw *merantau* as a temporary migration project undertaken to improve their lives but not always or

necessarily for economic benefit. All of them hoped to improve their living standard in their home village by the time they returned permanently. In this regard, Kathleen Adams (2020) interprets *merantau* as a ‘quest’ that captures the social significance of migration for our informants:

Indonesians use the term *merantau* to cover a wide array of mobilities, encompassing not only migration, but studying abroad and even long-term around-the-world type travels to gain experience and knowledge.... I believe the notion of the ‘quest’ better conveys this cultural notion of travel as involving (a) undertaking movement in order to achieve some sort of transformation and (b) a vision of a final, permanent return home following achievement of the goal. (*ibid.*: 12)

In this chapter, we argue that *merantau* is a worldview or *Weltanschauung*, which Jerome Ashmore (1966: 215) delineates as ‘a perspective and interpretation of the universe and its events’ and is ‘held in a sustained way by an individual or by a group. The perspective functions normatively, and as a point of articulation’. What is important to note is that it is a worldview that has evolved over time by people of peasant origins living in rural society as they grapple with the challenges of a capitalist economy, which has for the most part impoverished them relatively speaking. More than that, *merantau* is a plan for action to improve one’s life and hence also a praxis.

### 12.3 International Migration in the Indonesian Context

Indonesia has long been one of the main suppliers of migrant workers in the international labour market. Graeme Hugo (2012: 192) distinguishes between migrant workers as coolie labour in the 1900s and unskilled temporary migrants in the 2000s. Many Javanese were pushed to look outside of Indonesia for better livelihoods due to overpopulation and limited economic opportunities. Wayne Palmer (2016: 165–168) examines the emergence and organisation of the overseas labour migration programme in Indonesia as a response to help eradicate rural poverty and improve living standards.

The work of Chan (2018) and Killias (2018) accounts for the lives of Indonesian migrant workers and their experiences of the migration process. Chan (2018: 177) highlights that Indonesian migrant workers do not simply move to earn money, but rather that the *merantau* process is enmeshed in various local and cultural regimes of value and morality. For her part, Killias (2018: 201) argues that Indonesian domestic workers view *merantau* as holding ‘the promise of changing one’s fate, of building a house of one’s own, and to catch up with what is perceived to be development and progress’. Killias draws on her respondents’ belief in ‘changing your fate’ (*ubahlah nasib*), who think fate can be influenced if effort is put into it.

Looking more closely at the migration process, migrant workers’ pre-existing overseas networks or social capital are influential in determining what country and type of work the migrant has access to (Paul 2019: 19–20). In a quantitative study of Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers, Anju Mary Paul (2019) finds that Indonesian migrants are comparatively disadvantaged in securing better jobs.

They know fewer existing migrants in the host country, have a less geographically widespread network of key contacts and a less middle-class composition. In addition, Hugo (1995: 289–290) finds that Indonesian migrant workers' decision to undertake *merantau* is often made with family members and existing migrant networks. Maruja Asis (2004: 219–220) calls this a 'migration trail' which provides some certainty to the migrants and reduces risk and vulnerability. As such, the quantity and quality of pre-existing networks matter. However, previous migrant workers' trails do not perfectly inform new migrant workers' expectations or experiences. Stacey Yuen Xin Er and Anju Mary Paul (2019: 128), for example, show that Indonesian domestic workers are not informed about their workplace entitlements in Singapore. Similarly, in Hong Kong, they have little knowledge of their entitlements to maternity leave, a weekly rest day and regular wages, or their right to retain their personal documents.

Despite that, a typical pattern in managing the fruits of their labour is observable. Md Mizanur Rahman and Lian Kwen Fee (2009: 117–118) demonstrate that Indonesian migrant workers and their recipients manage remittances differently according to gender. Female migrants tend to remit more money in real terms, preferring to send remittances to female relatives in their home villages, who then use the money to develop human capital and create savings rather than spending it on physical capital and immediate consumption (see also Chapter 8). Our respondents' narratives presented in this chapter demonstrate similar features in Indonesian migrant workers' experiences in Brunei.

## 12.4 The Brunei Context

Brunei is widely known for its affluent oil-based economy which has historically been responsible in raising its gross domestic product (GDP) per capita to very high levels. This source of wealth has made Brunei a rentier state, similar to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and offers Brunei citizens a socioeconomic system characterised by minimal taxation, generous welfare assistance and comprehensive provision of education (Asato 2019: 136). Wako Asato elaborates that due to high female participation in the labour market, foreign domestic workers are needed to do the housework and provide care for children and the elderly. Two decades ago, Parvez Azim (2002: 53–54) highlighted that Brunei was already experiencing an aging population and declining fertility levels. A rising trend in general educational qualification of Bruneians also meant that local people would be less attracted to the idea of taking up 3D jobs, resulting in a pressing need for migrant workers in the local economy.

The Employment Order 2009 (Department of Labour 2017: 4, 6) requires employers to ensure labour standards and conditions for workers, for example on working hours, rest days, overtime payments, paid leave and maternity leave for all local and migrant workers. However, it has been found that foreign domestic workers continue to be exploited today (Asato 2019: 145). Such violations include prolonged working hours, unpaid tasks that are not related to housekeeping and insufficient

food (see also Chapter 8). Away from domestic work, Djoen San Santoso (2009: 536) reveals that construction workers of Indonesian origin are often exploited and not paid in order to reduce costs. Like many other countries, the Brunei state has refrained from making an effective effort to protect migrant workers and ensure proper working conditions.

## 12.5 Indonesian Migrant Workers in Brunei

### 12.5.1 *Statistical Data*

Table 12.1 shows the number of formally registered Indonesians living in Brunei in 2019, and does not cover Indonesian nationals who did not apply for a new identification card or renew an existing one that year. Exclusions also include undocumented migrant workers who are in Brunei illegally. Although this data set does not represent all Indonesian nationals, it provides a fair representation of the migrant population. Since the working age group constitutes 95% of the total number of registered Indonesian nationals and they are overwhelmingly employed in 3D and service jobs, it is clear that they represent a large manual labour group which cannot be supplied by the local labour force.

### 12.5.2 *Respondents' Profile*

In this research, we interviewed nine Indonesian migrant workers in Brunei (Table 12.2). We came to know a few of them initially through the first author's involvement in delivering fresh vegetables to the kitchen of a canteen that served non-halal Chinese

**Table 12.1** Data of registered Indonesian nationals in Brunei, 2019

Details	Number
Formally employed (aged 18–55, excluding students, dependants, homemakers, housemen, and employed above age 55)	24983
Males	16668
Females	8315
Type of employment:	
Manual labour and service	24233
White-collar and managerial	750
Total registered Indonesian nationals	26292

Source National Immigration and Registration Department, Brunei Darussalam (2019)

food. He met and became friends with them through daily interactions at the canteen they were working at; the canteen is a subsidiary business of a large plywood and furniture manufacturing company. Other than walk-in customers, the canteen mainly catered for other Indonesian migrant workers as well as migrant workers of different ethnic and national origins employed in the huge furniture workshop next door. The migrant workers employed in the kitchen and the workshop stayed in the same staff quarters above the canteen. The workshop, canteen and hostel are located on industrial land that is far from commercial services and shops.

The respondents introduced us to their friends who worked in the workshop and then during the conversations they introduced us to others and helped with translation whenever needed, and, most importantly, made the interviewees more at ease by sharing accounts of their lives. We interviewed in a mix of Indonesian and standard Malay but quite often they mixed this with Javanese. Such switches between languages did not make the conversation difficult for us to understand. Quick translations or explanations were either done on the spot or after transcribing their narratives. In rare cases, the respondents used specific English phrases. Johari, who had been working as a labourer in the workshop since 2013, was the only respondent who spoke more English. All the respondents originated from Java. Other than Hartono and Johari who are from West Java and East Java respectively, the remaining interviewees are from Cilacap regency in Central Java. Their backgrounds and experiences are very much related to the majority of Indonesian workers in Brunei because they belonged to a similar age group and employment status as those shown in Table 12.1.

Surprisingly, the respondents' accounts contradicted the negative impression we held that Indonesian migrant workers are badly treated by their employers. Other than being assigned to work that was not in their contracts, the overall experience of working in the company was generally not bad. The company was committed to the punctual payment of wages, gradual wage increments and the proper handling of legal documents. Nevertheless, both the furniture and canteen businesses were labour-intensive enterprises to begin with, and the company was concerned with cutting the costs of production. For instance, workers in the canteen were entitled to two days off per month but this had been discontinued since a few workers had left and the company took its time to employ new workers. On the other hand, workshop workers earned more than their canteen counterparts, but they had to pay for their own food in the canteen. The furniture workers often worked long and extended hours each day, from 7.00 a.m. to 9.00 p.m. without compensation for the extra hours.

Table 12.2 Profile of Indonesian migrant workers interviewed

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Siblings (position)	Status	Partner	Children	Origins	School	First year in Brunei	Employment type
Malisa	19	F	3 (1st)	In relationship	In home village	-	Cilacap, Central Java	Secondary	2018	Waitress
Suniarti	25	F	2 (1st)	Married	Brunei (cook)	-	Cilacap, Central Java	Secondary	2015	Waitress
Azizah	21	F	6 (2nd)	Single	-	-	Central Java	Secondary	2018	Waitress
Johani	37	M	5 (2nd)	Married	In home village	1	East Java	Diploma (not complete)	2013	Workshop labourer
Pribadi	28	M	2 (2nd)	Single	-	-	Cilacap, Central Java	Secondary	2014	Workshop labourer
Sidik	27	M	12 (6th)	Widower	-	1 (Adopted)	Cilacap, Central Java	Secondary	2018	Kitchen helper
Hartono	31	M	2 (1st)	Married	Taiwan (maid)	1	Subang, West Java	Secondary	2013	Kitchen helper
Yulianto	26	M	6 (5th)	Married	Brunei (waitress)	-	Cilacap, Central Java	Secondary	2013	Cook
Suparno	27	M	4 (2nd)	Married	Singapore (maid)	1	Cilacap, Central Java	Diploma	2019	Workshop labourer



## 12.6 Conversations and Narratives

The people who stay in Indonesia always see us [migrant workers] as enjoying an easy life working in a foreign country such as Malaysia or elsewhere. Easy work and a high salary. In truth, the work is exhausting and not easy to do at all. All work that we do is not easy. I know that the people here [Bruneians] don't like to work although there are many vacancies for them. They want to work but want to have a big salary. They don't want to say that they only want an easy job.

This quote from Pribadi highlights three important and recurrent elements in the following story. First, Brunei society requires the service of foreign workers like Pribadi to do manual jobs. Second, Pribadi commented that the act of migrating out of Indonesia to work has been positively promoted and that other Indonesians considered it desirable. And third, the reality is that this work is 'exhausting' and 'not easy', in contrast to what the recruiters promised them. However, in the end, can the money that these migrant workers earn from their exhausting work compensate for the selling of their hard labour? As Lian Kwen Fee et al. (2016: 6) argue, researchers must not only look into the 'push and pull pressures' and the monetary benefits of migration. The following narratives of these migrants' lives show the significance of *merantau* in helping them make sense of the need to migrate and make a living—a life journey—despite the hardships they face.

### 12.6.1 *The Village and Jakarta*

#### 12.6.1.1 Family Backgrounds, Responsibility and Aspirations

The majority of our informants come from simple (*sederhana*) family backgrounds. In Hartono's terms, this means 'just right, not having too little or extra'. The division of roles in their families was characterised by a working father and a homemaker mother. The type of work that their fathers did varied. It included petty commercial farming, rearing goats, cottage industries such as making brown sugar (a local delicacy), retailing electronic goods, working in poultry farms and government schoolteachers. Although few of these livelihoods involved fathers moving from one place to another within Indonesia, none of them had experienced working abroad. Mothers were rarely in paid employment or ran a petty enterprise to help earn money. The case that stood out from the rest was that of Johari's father, who worked as a government teacher and had a stable income before retirement, while his mother was a full-time homemaker. Johari put it this way:

I studied what you might call here [in Brunei] a diploma for two years before I decided to drop out and not graduate. The reason was economic. The reason is 'standard' [common]. Since I still have three younger brothers, I can't push myself to reach my dreams. I could not pursue my degree to improve my life because I needed to support my three younger brothers.

Although Johari's father's employment stood out from the rest, limited mobility continued to restrict his aspirations. Johari explained that he had an obligation towards his three younger brothers. He felt compelled to help pay for their education and provide a better quality of life for them. Johari elaborated:

When I was young, our family's finances were deeply affected by the economy [financial] crisis that happened in 1998 and my father was just a teacher. It was very bad. At the time, everything had a price increase but his salary remained small. It was not enough. It was very bad. Crime everywhere, chaos, there were many killings. Who was to stop them? Who could stop them? Robbery looked as if it was very easy and did not need any plan. For example, in the supermarket a few thousand people grabbing things as they wish inside the building. The police could only watch. Don't go back again, don't let it happen again. A pity [*kesian*].

Our respondents and their family members all suffered from the impact of the financial crisis of 1998. This shows that even in better-off families such as Johari's, the declining economy and the need to support both their parents and younger siblings had put a burden on them. Sidik came to work in Brunei in 2018 as he believed the country has a stronger sense of Islamic identity. He elaborated:

I am the sixth of 12 siblings. The 12 of us lived together when we were young. Although I liked the experience, it was tough. Conflict was inevitable because there were so many children. Luckily all of us grew up and could help our parents out today. In the past, my parents always failed to deliver their promises. They always asked us to wait whenever we asked them for something. I remember that it was very difficult to get things that I wanted. I asked for a motorcycle, it was difficult too. Regardless, it is easier now. It will not be as difficult as in the past. So the 12 of us should never abandon each other.

Limited resources plagued the growing-up experience of the respondents. Although they clarified that their parents' earnings were sufficient for everyday living, they lived through their adolescent years with no prospect of realising their aspirations, as shown in Johari's foregoing of further studies and Sidik's limited life chances.

### 12.6.1.2 Working Experience

All the informants began working almost immediately after finishing or dropping out of school. Not a single thought of further education was mentioned throughout the conversations, as if this was a point of no return. As Pribadi said:

I studied primary and secondary level in SK [*sekolah kebangsaan*, national school] from 1997 to 2009 [aged 18] and started working in sales [and] marketing. I was selling electronic devices that people use for health purposes. The company's main office was located in Jakarta but the job required me to travel from Jakarta to Yogyakarta, Bandung and Bogor, so it was always about 'rolling' work. The employment ended around mid-2013. I got a new job in a garment enterprise for about six months before I decided to come to Brunei in 2014.

Jakarta seemed to be a viable alternative for these respondents to earn a living without having to undertake *merantau*. In addition, the remaining respondents also took on vacancies in Jakarta for some time before deciding to return to their home villages. Suniarti, the wife of Yulianto, who came to work in the canteen as a waitress in 2015 and eventually became a cashier, said:

After passing upper secondary studies, I did a job as a cashier of a supermarket in Jakarta for more than one year. I could not stand the job because there was only one-hour rest in between. After that, I went back to the village and picked a new job as a Honda motorcycle sales attendant. I quit the new job after two weeks. I am a lazy person. At home, I woke up around 6.00 a.m. to shower, do cleaning, help with cooking. I don't do much at home, I like to play.

As Suniarti noted, the conditions of her work in Indonesia were unfavourable because of the long hours. These Indonesian migrant workers shared a common response in their idea of working in their home villages and Jakarta. Pribadi, who went to work as a labourer at the furniture workshop in Brunei, said:

I became bored with my job in Jakarta. The salary was never enough. It could only pay for my daily spending on food. In terms of supporting my parents or leisure activities such as going to a movie, it was not enough.

With the words, 'I became bored with my job in Jakarta', Pribadi highlighted that the income he received from his work in Jakarta could not support anything other than his own immediate living expenses. This also meant that he could not save up for other purposes, to improve his parents' living conditions or indeed his own life. What he earned in Jakarta offered him no prospects.

Our informants returned to their home villages and continued to work in jobs with low wages and with no security. They calculated that a change was needed but had no good options in their own locality. Hartono said:

Even if I found a job in Indonesia, the money would not be saved as well. Work for one day, finish in one day. Like that. Because the salary I earned was too small and only enough to meet my living expenses. I went from here and there to work. I wasn't yet married at that time. So I followed to work in the construction site whenever there was a vacancy, including a job that reserves motorcycle parking spots. I earned a little bit of money only. My life did not have a clear direction at that time. I did not think about the future or plan to get married or save money. After some time, my parents talked with me about it and recommended that I go abroad and said, 'You can find more money there, and eventually you will have your savings and be capable of getting married'. I should have my own money, to build my own house using my own money. I agreed with my mother and believed that my life would not improve if I continued working in Indonesia. I would not able to make a difference. So I took my parents' advice and *merantau*.

Because of their experience of underemployment in Jakarta and their home villages, the respondents were resigned to a precarious livelihood. Suparno, who came to Brunei in 2019 to work as a labourer in the furniture workshop, said:

I started working in Jakarta immediately after I finished school for almost nine years. I worked in the garment industry first. I did not have any experience in the field to begin with but I was promoted to become foreman after one year. I had 45 workers under my supervision. My boss told me to study for a diploma for two months and become a manager after finishing the programme. I completed the study and worked as a manager for a few years before the business closed down. I changed to work in a shop for one year and changed back to coolie work again in Jakarta. Before I entered my last job as a construction worker in Jakarta, I tried to work in the garment business again. All these jobs did not last more than two months.

Employment in Indonesia did not help to improve the lives of the respondents and made them pessimistic about their futures in the country. Subsequently, they resigned themselves to drifting along with their precarious work and everyday routines; as Suniarti remarked, ‘I am a lazy person’, and Hartono said, ‘Work for one day, finish in one day’. There was simply no employment that was satisfying or promising for them in Java. As a result, they lived a lifestyle that was seemingly carefree but actually hopeless. As a consequence, the respondents and their family members contemplated *merantau* to not only earn more money but also to take an important step in ‘growing up’—to be capable of being independent and handling their own lives. For this reason, Hartono’s parents encouraged him to work abroad. The informants and their parents believed that this would enable them to earn a living, save up, have their own house and family and lead their own lives. These aspirations could not be realised as long as they remained in Java. To undertake *merantau* is to make sense of a situation with no future and security and to overcome it in a tangible way.

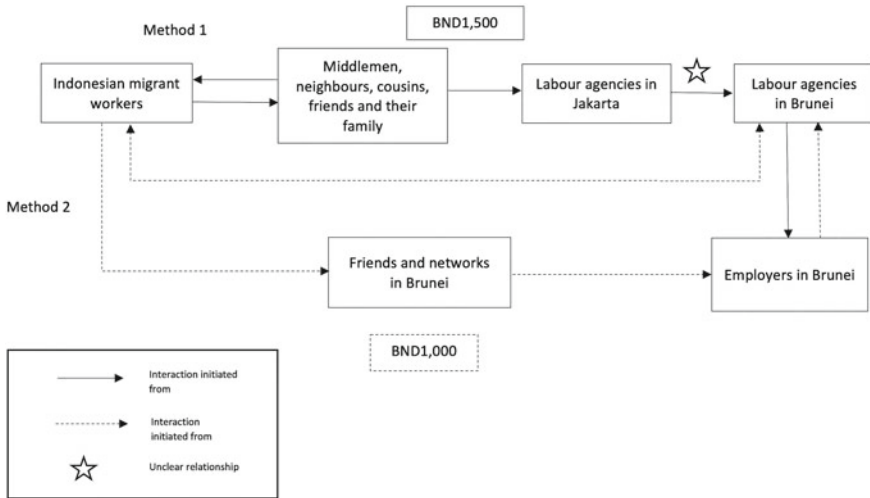
### 12.6.1.3 *Merantau* and the Recruitment Process

As a result of their existing realities, the thought of *merantau* gradually dawned on the respondents. It is at this point that a pre-existing social network that could facilitate migration became relevant in this study. We refer to this network as a mix of different social actors, inclusive of family members, neighbours, friends of friends, friends’ family members, sponsors, middlemen brokers, labour agencies and the operatives of labour agencies. These social connections also served as an important source of information. Yulianto first approached a labour agency to look for employment overseas (see method 1 in Fig. 12.1):

With the situation of Indonesia in mind, I thought of going to work in Malaysia. I looked for an agent and asked if there are any jobs in Malaysia. The agent said ‘Yes, there is a vacancy to work with wood in Malaysia’. Two months later, the agent told me that the vacancy was already full. Then I replied to him saying I would do any job that he could find. So the agent told me about the same type of job in Brunei. There were no other options. So I came to Brunei. The agent always makes fake promises and sweet talk. Like salary, in Indonesia, we have this training period for the first three months of employment and the salary would be increased after that. My salary was BND390 in Brunei at that time. After working for the first and second year, it stayed the same. The agent said that I will be working with wood in the furniture factory but the boss assigned me to do cleaning jobs instead for about one month plus. After that, the boss shifted me to work in the canteen as a kitchen helper. My job became a dishwasher. I was disappointed that the job turned out to be different from what the agent has promised. I went on with it. This is my fate [*nasib*].

In addition to the recruitment process shown in method 1, Suparno added:

At that time, many of my friends went abroad so I thought they must be successful here [Brunei], but I did not look at their experience. So a friend who originated from the same village [*tetangga*], who used to work in Brunei, told me about a vacancy there. He sweet-talked about working in Brunei and introduced me to an agent, covering all the bitter stories.



**Fig. 12.1** Indonesian migrant workers’ recruitment process

Sidik’s experience also vouches for the role of middlemen and labour agencies as an important source of information and assistance in the application process. The expression of dissatisfaction and disappointment with the middlemen’s ‘fake promises’ and ‘sweet talk’ and promise of unlimited opportunities was common among other respondents. The middlemen and labour agencies have almost absolute influence in the choice of destination, jobs, pay and employer. It is also common that these middlemen take advantage of applicants by deceiving them into paying more than needed or misleading them about the jobs that are available. Desperate to *merantau*, their unfamiliarity and the difficulty in getting accurate information from these middlemen in the villages and labour agencies in Jakarta made these respondents vulnerable to exploitation. Johari added that the distance from his village to Jakarta, where passports, visas and medical check-ups are arranged, is about 1000 km. Alternatively, it takes a huge effort and risk to travel to Jakarta to meet with an agent face to face and get all the paperwork done. Under these circumstances, the first vacancy the agency offered them was almost always the final choice for all the respondents.

Other than approaching middlemen or labour agencies first, Hartono, Suniarti and Suparno were told about the idea of *merantau* by family members and friends. This means that, in contrast to Yulianto’s and Sidik’s experiences, the idea of *merantau* is not always self-initiated. All our respondents were unclear about the relationship between the labour agency in Brunei and its counterpart in Indonesia. After inquiring, they were not even sure whether the agency was based in Indonesia or Brunei. According to common knowledge, this labour agency or a freelance agent travels between Brunei and Indonesia, is in direct contact with the employer, and has a broad network helping them to recruit migrant workers from several selected locations in Java. The majority of our respondents came from Cilacap in Central Java and only

met each other for the first time at their workplace in Brunei although they were all connected to the same agent.

In contrast, Johari's experience in the recruitment process was different from the others (see method 2 in Fig. 12.1). Johari referred to a friend who was already employed in the furniture workshop in Brunei. He said:

My friend has been working here [the workshop] since 2005 and recommended me to his boss. He told me that there would not be a problem for me to work here but the salary would be low at the start. My friend and the boss might have been in contact with some agent to do the application but in the end it was my friend who faxed the working visa to me. The visa application is actually simple and not as confusing as I thought. It is not like me having to go to an agent [in Jakarta] to ask for work and [the] process to go to Brunei. My friend had a good connection here so the process was easy. I only needed to look for an agent to help process the application. I followed what the agent told me to do and did everything from the medical check, passport and travel myself. The last thing I knew was that my visa was already there and the application was successful. I saved a lot because I did everything myself. The difference is about BND400–500 compared to what they [who used method 1] paid for. I waited for about six months. I think my agent wants to play me, he wants to take much more money from me, he dragged out the application process.

The respondents also became aware of the possibility to *merantau* by referring to cases of friends who had worked abroad or by consulting friends or trusted people in their villages.

#### 12.6.1.4 *Merantau*: A Collective Decision

The decision and choice of the destination country involve many factors. It is rarely the case that migrant workers made choices by themselves throughout the migration process. Family members were the most important influencers in the final decision to work abroad. Hartono said:

My mother told me to go to Malaysia so I went to an agent and told him that I wanted to go to Malaysia. I signed a contract that binds me to a restaurant business [another company to the canteen] in Brunei. I thought that I would be going to Malaysia at first, but in the end the agent told me it is Brunei and not Malaysia. I didn't know what Brunei was like. I knew about Malaysia because I have neighbours there in Malaysia, working in an oil palm field.

Similarly, Pribadi said:

My choice was to go to Malaysia at first. Although the Malaysian currency is smaller, I had friends from the village [working] in Malaysia. But my mother didn't like the idea and so didn't permit me to go to Malaysia. She said, 'You cannot go to Malaysia; it would be better if you stay in Indonesia if you want to work in Malaysia. Because Malaysia has many illegal cases, those who didn't have a visa went to Malaysia with their passport but without a visa'. I wanted to follow my friend to work at a poultry farm in Malaysia but my mother didn't allow me to do it. Someone told her there was a vacancy in Brunei. According to my principles, if I proceeded to do something that my mother didn't allow or discouraged me from doing, it would always end up [with] many problems, like arguing. She was supportive of me coming to Brunei because she had an impression at home that Brunei has a good government, and the most important thing is that Brunei's Islam [Islamic identity] is very strong. Anyone outside of this country knows that this is a Muslim country.

Sidik's narrative also showed different factors that influenced his choice of country to work abroad:

My mother challenged my intention when I was thinking of leaving Indonesia. She said 'You already have enough to eat and live comfortably in Indonesia so why do you still want to leave?' I told her that God has a plan for me. I am already here [in Brunei] for two months and still healthy. I have a phone with me too. I would do Friday prayers in the mosque whenever I can. I did not have a problem with money in my life in Java. It was more than enough. I never had to be concerned about insufficiency. It was enough for food and living. So what is my objective for leaving the country if it was not to look for money? Because Brunei is a Muslim country and it is most faithful to Islam. Even Indonesia loses to Brunei in this aspect.

## **12.6.2 Brunei**

Suniarti described how Brunei was promoted as an attractive destination and her disappointment with the promises on arrival.

I thought this [Brunei] would be like a city but it turned out that there are many trees. It differed too much from what I imagined. I thought it would be similar to Jakarta. After arriving here, I found this place very quiet.

Pribadi had similar sentiments:

My neighbour who used to work in Brunei told me to just watch programmes about Brunei on television and I can learn about the country. I thought that Brunei is a good place, good government, Islam is strong, they ban cigarettes, no alcohol, like that. After arriving here then I found out that the government's law is meant to be like that, same as Indonesia, although it prohibits, it can still be done.

### **12.6.2.1 Arrival and Working Experience**

After arriving, the reality of living and working in Brunei began to hit home with the respondents. They soon realised how much control the employer had over their lives. Yulianto said:

The agent prepared all the travel documents and flight tickets. The boss paid the agent, the agent paid for us, we paid the boss. It is our debt to the boss. I am always here at the canteen. I don't usually go out from this place because I have no day off. When I first arrived in 2013, I was assigned cleaning jobs in the workshop for one month before being shifted here to the kitchen [canteen].

Indebtedness increased the control the employer had over the migrant workers. Yulianto was shifted from working in the workshop to the canteen without any choice in the matter. Similarly, the labour agency also promised Sidik that he would be working in the workshop but he ended up washing dishes in the canteen a few months after his arrival:

I think we have to be responsible in doing what we were supposed to do. Here and there, ordered by the boss. Of course, I should like them [the orders]. Before my visa finishes, I want to learn as much as I can. I can learn how the business works and how to cook. I learned bit by bit by preparing ingredients like prawns and cooking a popular local noodle dish [*kolo mee*]. What if Indonesia doesn't have *kolo mee*? Although I started as a dishwasher, slowly I might be able to become a chef one day. The money that I earned here can be saved and make up my capital to start my own business in Indonesia. Just have to bear with it first.

Although Sidik gave a somewhat positive response to his new job as a dishwasher, it was done reluctantly and with some disappointment that he was not offered the job he was initially promised.

By contrast, Hartono had a more positive *merantau* experience prior to joining the canteen because he had been employed at a restaurant in another district of Brunei many years before:

I worked in that restaurant for one contract [two years] in 2013 and went back to the village to get married and then went back to that restaurant again for another contract. After about a year, my wife told me that she wanted to have a baby. So what could I do? I had to discontinue the contract and fly back to Indonesia in 2017. But I really liked the job in that restaurant. I stayed in Indonesia for three years and felt unsatisfied living there. My colleagues in that restaurant still wanted me to go back to work but it was too late because I had already signed up for work with the canteen. It was already on my visa. The work in the restaurant was very enjoyable because the pay was good, we got four days off a month, sometimes, within eight hours of work per day, we got to rest for one to two hours. We got a double salary during the Chinese New Year month.

We asked about his thoughts on working in the canteen. Hartono said:

Still okay. At least I get to fill my stomach [*laughs*]. The experience here is okay. I can learn to cook, with skills and experience, I can look for other jobs.

Hartono described his disappointment after joining the canteen, comparing the benefits that he received at the previous restaurant to his current position where days off, rest hours, bonuses and other perks were not guaranteed.

Other than being bound by their contracts and debts to the employer, the workers were resigned to the conditions offered. Johari said:

I have been working in the workshop since January 2013. Four years later, I went back to the village to get married and came back here in January 2020. My experience here is 'so far so good'. If you meant to say emotional, of course, there was a period of time when I was emotional about working here. The work is tough. But we have to be professional. We were pressed by the fact that we are here to look for money so we have to accept the job. Give the best you can do lah. I have a purpose here, I have a goal. If I cannot bear the work, I would not be deserving. Think of it this way: if I go back to Indonesia, what can I do there? Everything is difficult there. The income would be so little even if I continued to farm. Everything [income] is small. I would not earn enough. So I might as well motivate myself to do the work here. My parents are already old, I have a child and wife that I have to support. If not me, who else would it be?

Johari felt obliged to keep with his current employment because he could not risk going back to Indonesia and not earning enough to support his family between quitting the current job and finding a new one.



For her part, Suniarti appreciated the stability in the current workplace and the fact that her husband Yulianto was also working in the canteen. All the informants passively accepted the conditions imposed by the employer and whatever free time they had revolved around people in their workplace. Social and leisure activities of these migrant workers were limited to their immediate social network and the nearby compound of their workplace and living quarters.

### 12.6.2.2 Social Activities and Leisure Hours

In relation to social activities and the use of leisure time, Malisa, who joined the canteen as a waitress and eventually shifted to making beverages in 2018, said:

We usually go to an Indonesian restaurant that is beside the bus station in Bandar [town centre] to eat and chat when we used to have day off. Two days off in a month. I met many new Indonesian friends there. The Indonesian food here [Brunei] tastes too different from that in the village. The taste is stronger in my village. We usually go to this place in Bandar because we don't have a car. It is difficult to go anywhere in Brunei.

When the workers were no longer entitled to days off, they could only get free time late at night, but public transport in Brunei stops running by 7.00 p.m. and commercial areas close around 9.00 p.m. Sidik said:

I haven't been anywhere other than Bandar since arriving here because there is no day off for kitchen people in the canteen. I could only go out after work late at night and there would not be any public transport. I could have called an illegal taxi [*kereta sapu*] but everyone would already be sleeping or shops would already be closed. There are no people I could meet or place where I could go.

Most social activities were confined within or around the staff quarters. Azizah, who also started to work as a waitress in 2018, said that her off-work activities were mostly audio and video calls with her family members in her village. Smartphones and applications such as WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook were common tools that the workers used to communicate with family members. Suniarti said:

Usually, I would go to my cousin's place [workplace and hostel] or we would go to the Indonesian restaurant beside the bus station in Bandar. I don't usually make new friends there, only when new workers arrive here [at the canteen] to work. We eat and take selfies then upload them to Facebook and other platforms. I don't always go out. I only go when I have the time and mood. I usually only rest at the hostel.

For Johari:

There is no time [to meet with friends]. Why would there be time anyway? We're working in the workshop from 7.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. Sometimes we work overtime and would only finish between 6.00 p.m. and 9.00 p.m. Also, we don't have a car to move around. We might be able to go out if we had a car. At most, I would be eating and calling my wife only after work. I would like to have more quality time with my family. I don't usually go out on days off. Even if I go, the trip would be short, maybe going to a shopping centre, Bandar or to watch a film.

Johari's narrative was similar to the others who engaged in social activities only late at night after work. According to Hartono:

I still have the time to meet my friends now. But it has to be late at night, around 9.00 p.m., 8.00 p.m. I also have friends here in this workplace. We went out to eat somewhere nearby last night. We chat about things that are going on in the village and ate grilled fish. The food here doesn't [taste] so strong. I have met many friends here [canteen]. We usually hang around in the staff house, sitting over there at the front late at night, drinking coffee, smoking and chatting. My village neighbour who stays in a different place would come over frequently at night. He has a car. He came to pick me up to go to their hostel in Jerudong, you know the place where the fishermen usually stay. We don't go to other places, just stay in the hostel and chat. We talk in the same language because all of us came from West Java.

Sidik said:

We [canteen workers] only get days off during Chinese New Year. Other than that, I usually only hang around with Indonesian friends in the hostel. At most, we would only go out to fish. I know there is a village neighbour working in some other place, so I asked him to meet outside. For those people who work in [the] front [workshop], they get to go out twice every month [two days off]. At night, some of them would go to play table tennis too. I followed my friend to Bandar for the first time last night. It reminded me of the food in Indonesia. I cook some water spinach [*kangkong*] and fried rice whenever I miss food from home.

I would call random people who are outside the workplace, in the government, and my friends while enjoying the breeze inside my room, pretending it to be like an office. All I did was talk. For leisure, we would sing karaoke, play with electronics, find out what is wrong with it and fix it bit by bit. There is one device my friend got from a hair salon, but many of them could not be fixed. I just want to track [keep up with] electronics things only. I am fixing a broken laptop now, haven't complete it yet because I haven't found out what is broken inside. I already painted it anew as if it could be used but nothing is showing up on the screen yet.

When the workers do go out to eat or chat, it is more often with colleagues and to places that are run by Indonesians. A common place for gathering is either their living quarters or those of friends and relatives. Deriving from their persistent homesickness, audio and video calling with family members took up a large share of their time after work. An important topic of their conversations with their families was undoubtedly remittances.

### 12.6.2.3 Remittances

The workers remit part of their wages to their families in their villages. Although each informant sent remittances differently, there was a common pattern in the method used, the recipients and how the money was spent. Pribadi said:

I only send money back to my older sister if my mother asks for it. She would ask for a certain amount. After sending that amount, I would keep the remainder for myself. My sister has to be the receiver because our parents don't know how to work with the services at the bank. My parents only know that when they need the money they can take it from my older sister. They spend the money buying things needed for farming like seeds and fertilisers. They buy whatever they need or want in their daily life. For example, they spent money to

buy lamb and sometimes they need the money to see a doctor. They don't make savings for me. I do that myself. So I only send them money after they ask for it.

Johari said:

I send back money every two weeks. Like this, we work, the company [gives] the salary, they give it twice a month [every fourteenth and twenty-eighth day of the month]. I cannot wait for the next half, so I would send this half right after I got it. I only leave a bit of the salary for myself to buy food. I send the rest to my wife. She is much better at saving money. She bought a piece of land after working in Taiwan for nine years. So I trust her to control our money. We have some targets; this year, we want to improve our house to make it prettier and happy. We want to make it look nicer. Add tiling. My kid is still very young, so I don't want him to get scratched from falling on a rough cemented floor. I use the remittance [service] provided by my cousin to send money back to my wife. I give the money to my cousin, then my cousin tells his wife in Indonesia to send money to this number, like this. He charges me BND10–12 for each transaction. Many of my friends who are working here use that too. I didn't use my cousin's service when I used to have the time to go shopping. I did both the shopping and the remittance at one go. I use my cousin's service because I got lazier now. BND10 would not be enough if I do the shopping and remittance outside. I would spend more money than otherwise. I spent less after I got married. I think it is wise to give all my money to my wife. I want to give my son a good place to stay, a large place to stay and to farm.

Here, Johari described an alternative and informal method to remit his money to his wife in Indonesia (Fig. 12.2). This service had been available since he arrived in Brunei in 2013. It was usually provided by colleagues, friends, friends of friends or relatives in Brunei. After inquiring why he decided to switch from method 1 (licensed provider) to method 2 (informal provider), Johari answered that although both methods charged the same fee, method 1 would eventually cost him more money and time because he needed to travel a fair distance from the workplace to where the licensed remittance service provider was located. Method 2 appeared to be more convenient, saved on costs and was a straightforward way to send money to his wife. The informal method was used by all the migrant workers we interviewed. In most cases, they pooled all their remittance money together and had the informal service provider send it to one recipient in Indonesia in one transaction. The recipient, a family member of one of the workers, then transferred specific amounts from the pooled remittance to other senders' family bank accounts. The fee charged in Brunei was shared.

The remittance recipient and purpose changed after some of the informants got married. Suniarti said:

I send most of my salary back to my mother in the village every month because I would finish all the money to do shopping if I kept it here. Difficult to control. After getting married, I passed all my money to my husband [Yulianto] to send to his mother in the village because she would use the money to pay for our own house. We started construction of the house about a year ago.

Hartono dealt with his remittance in a similar manner:

I sent my money back to my mother before I got married because my mother is good at holding the money. As in the money that she holds would not 'go out'. If I send this amount,

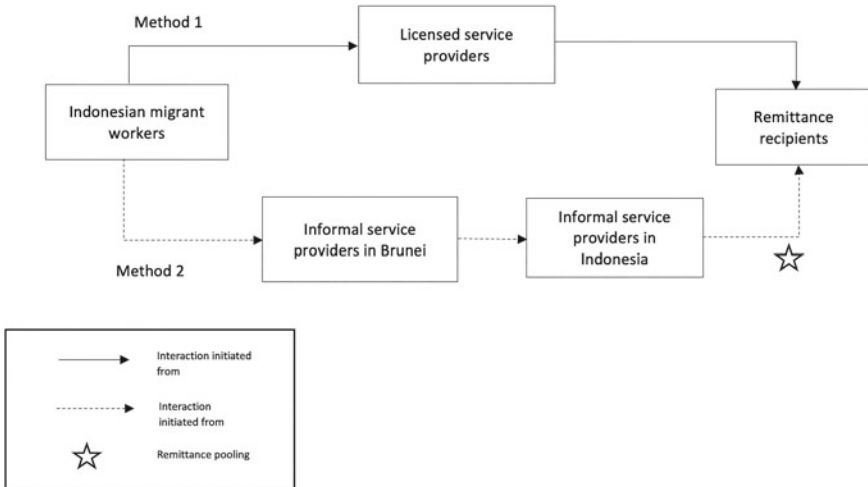


Fig. 12.2 Flow of Indonesian migrant workers’ remittances

it would stay this amount. She would not use it unless I say okay. For example, my pay used to be BND500, and previously I would send BND400 to my mother and hold the remaining BND100 myself. BND100 is enough because we get to eat for free while working in the restaurant. I only spend the money on my phone credit, cigarettes and some clothes. I told them to take the money, say, BND400 would become IDR4 million there, I told her to take some of the money like BND30 and distribute it to the young children of my siblings, neighbours and relatives. Part of the money is also used to pay for my younger sister’s school fees. I had also asked my mother to spend some money renovating her house because it looked worn out. Most of the money was spent on my wedding and buying a new motorcycle. They also spent on the baby’s expenses and the rest followed their own wishes. I only gave a small amount of money to the children of my neighbours, cousins and friends before I had my own child. Back in the village, many people are facing difficulties, no fortune or blessing [*rezeki*]. Since I found my good fortune, I should give them some money to buy sweets. On Hari Raya, I would give them money in a packet [*angpao*].

In summary, it can be seen that female members of the family—mothers, sisters, wives—tended to be the only recipients of remittances because they were trusted in organising and using the money responsibly. Usually, the money was used for house renovations, school fees, family expenses and to help with the worker’s own wedding plans or house in the future.

### 12.6.2.4 Religion

Because all our interviewees were Muslims working in and eating food prepared from a non-halal canteen, how they managed their Islamic faith was an interesting question.

Sidik said:

Working here [in the canteen] means if I accidentally committed the offence [by eating pork], people may ask. ‘You could always go to other places to work, why do you still want to stay here?’, but I have been locked [*dikuncikan*] to the boss and this company. So instead of cancelling everything and going back to Indonesia, I should continue to work as long as I don’t willingly commit an offence.

Sidik learned to deal with non-halal food by opting to avoid it. In cases of eating non-halal food accidentally, Sidik replied that this was the most important reason he would pray every time before eating. Other than that, if he found out that he did consume non-halal food, he would perform longer prayers in his room to confess his guilt.

We asked the respondents about going to the mosque after noticing that there was no mosque located within walking distance of the canteen and workshop. Johari said:

I rarely go to the mosque here but I would go to the mosque every Friday back in Indonesia. The mosque is too far away from here [workshop]. At least it is not close enough to walk there. There is no prayer room [*surau*] here. I could only go when I carpool in someone’s car. I calculated the time of leaving and coming back here, the trip would take one and a half hours. It would leave me a very little time for a break. What about having to continue work again later? I would feel shameful to go the mosque because I spent my time earning money all day. God gave me the money but I didn’t go to the mosque for such a long time.

In addition, Hartono said:

I could not go although I have the intention to go. I have not yet seen the big mosque whose dome is covered in gold. The work shift here makes it difficult for me. I come in at 8.00 a.m., rest at 2.00 p.m., then come back to work again at 6.00 p.m., then finish at 10.00 p.m.

The ability of Sidik, Johari and Hartono to perform their religious faith while working in Brunei is restricted, particularly in relation to food prohibitions and in going to the mosques on a daily basis.

These narratives have thus far highlighted that our informants’ lives were built around *merantau*. The lack of opportunities in Indonesia made them think of an alternative solution. The long history of *merantau* and the presence of social actors such as former migrants, middlemen and labour agencies all served as a consistent point of reference to migrate. The stability of the income they could earn from working in Brunei and the pressure to support their families in Indonesia have compelled them to stay despite the hardships and emotional challenges. The constant contact with family, dreams of a better and attainable future, and what little social time spent with other Indonesian colleagues and friends had kept these migrant workers motivated. In our everyday conversations with the male workers about phones, gadgets, speakers, music, the lottery, football, cigarettes, Joko Widodo (Jokowi), Java and family, none of our discussions mentioned their work. Nor were they happy or excited to talk about it.

A few of the respondents talked enthusiastically about the petty trades they did outside of their employment. Hartono was involved in trading secondhand smart-phones. Sidik bought, fixed and then sold broken karaoke sets and speakers. Yulianto

took up side work as a middleman for lottery bookings and debt collecting from other migrant workers in the compound. On another occasion, Suniarti and Malisa asked the first author to help drive them to buy contact lenses and backpacks. They said that although they did not have the time or means to meet with friends, they would be more prepared to dress up and go out whenever an opportunity arose. Dressing up was important because they took photos and shared them on their social media accounts. When asked how they learned about contact lenses and how to wear them, Malisa replied that she saw her friends wearing them and that they looked nice on social media so she wanted to try them too.

In their everyday conversations between work, the respondents readily shared their thoughts and feelings about what mattered to them, knowing that they would shortly have to go back to work again. Several found the work routine repetitive, meaningless, unpromising and exploitative. Malisa and Sidik went back to Indonesia in 2020 while Sidik undertook *merantau* again to work in Sarawak. Suniarti, Yulianto and Johari found the work satisfying. They had been working in the same company in Brunei for more than five years. They planned to stay as long as they were required by the company. For all of our informants—those who had left and those who remained—it was uncertain when the cycle of migration would end before they could finally return and settle down in their villages, their homes. Meanwhile, it appears that *merantau* as a worldview and praxis will continue to be an important part of their lives.

## 12.7 Conclusion

For the informants who so readily and generously shared their lives and experiences with us, migration is an existential condition. It was a state of mind that began not when they arrived in the country of destination, Brunei, but when they took their first steps as working adults back in the village looking for a better life, mostly in the rural and semi-rural parts of Cilacap, Central Java. The economic livelihoods of their parents revolved around cash crop cultivation, cottage industries and petty retailing. The uncertainty and insecurity of the livelihoods of their parents, so tied to external economic fluctuations, were passed on to our informants as they sought to establish a secure future when they moved to Jakarta, only to return to the village shortly afterwards because of a downturn. While resigned to a carefree but hopeless lifestyle when they came back, they were aware that the only way out was to move from the village and go overseas. In the village, there was no shortage of stories and information from friends, friends of friends and relatives who had temporarily migrated for work. These social connections are enmeshed in a well-established migration network of sub-agents and agents linked to labour agencies in Jakarta and individual brokers overseas, including Brunei. The agents and middlemen promoted and embellished the attractions and rewards of work opportunities, taking advantage of the vulnerability of prospective young Javanese eager to seek their fortune. Usually based on incomplete and misleading information, they took the plunge to go overseas, moving onto the next stage of the migration process. In short, *merantau* has been

normalised for and expected of these young migrant workers. It is a way of life for young Javanese seeking to improve themselves.

In this chapter we have deliberately drawn on extended excerpts from the interviews and conversations to let the nine Javanese migrants in Brunei speak for themselves, to give voice to them so that they could articulate their hopes, anxieties and resignations as they navigated their way around the obstacles, insecurities and misfortunes that inevitably accompany *merantau*. The existential uncertainty of being a migrant stemmed from several sources. Although they were legal migrants they had minimal rights and even less room to negotiate their grievances. They were at the mercy of the employer who held their passports to prevent them from absconding. They had no legal means to seek better employment in other places. On arrival, they were given jobs they did not expect and varied from those promised to them by the agents. The work they did at the canteen kitchen was repetitive, boring and did not always allow them to acquire new skills. Those who worked at the furniture workshop were able to improve themselves to a greater extent. However, as the company they worked for is a large one, they were given housing in dormitories and their wages were paid regularly. For these they were thankful in comparison to the experiences of other migrant workers.

Between the routine compulsion of wage labour, they found moments of reprieve in visiting friends and village neighbours after work, stopped at the nearest cafe to have a smoke or coffee, sing karaoke, connect with their loved ones from their villages back home through social media, and even sought out opportunities to make some extra cash from fixing used electronic equipment to sell. Remitting money to Java to take care of family expenses such as the school fees of siblings and looking forward to the possibilities of achieving a better living or changing their fate were timely reminders of why they were in Brunei and why they should stick it out.

*Merantau* is the worldview of Javanese migrant workers. It encapsulates all these elements discussed above, from the time they decide to seek a livelihood outside the village to landing and working in Brunei. It informs their everyday lives, motivates them and sustains them in their coming of age. In the praxis of migration they feel empowered. And when they finally return to their villages, they hope to find the home they left and the certainty they yearned for. Johari's answer to our question about his dreams is a fitting conclusion to the narratives of these Javanese migrants in Brunei:

I can't push myself to reach my dreams. I could not pursue my degree to improve my life because I needed to support my three younger brothers. [My dream is] to own my house, especially to protect my family. I think money is not everything but everything needs money [laughs].

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