Labour Recruitment, Circuits of Capital and Gendered Mobility: Reconceptualizing the Indonesian Migration Industry^{*1}

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Introduction

It is mid-morning in early June 2007 on the Indonesian island of Lombok. I am spending time at PT Semesta, a small labour recruitment agency that sends women to work as domestic servants in Malaysia and Singapore. I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork on the labour recruitment industry for several months and Semesta has become one of my main research sites. Strategically located in an alley off the main road leading out of the city of Mataram and towards the central and eastern parts of the island—critical sources of migrant labour—Semesta is, like most other recruitment agencies on Lombok, a gathering site for potential migrants and the informal labour recruiters who bring them there. On this particular day, Yati, a woman in her mid-twenties, comes into the reception area where I am sitting with Rina and Hannah, Semesta's office staff. I had interviewed Yati the day before and in two days' time she is scheduled to leave for Malaysia on a two-year contract as a domestic servant. Semesta has already paid for her airline ticket and all her paperwork is done. She has been to the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur on contracts before; you can tell from her style; she is not as reserved as the other migrants living in the office and is quite fashionably dressed.

As Yati walks in she proclaims that she is returning to her village in East Lombok and will be back at the office the following morning. In keeping

* Please refer to the introduction of this special issue for additional discussion of the analytical framework and theoretical background (Apichai Shipper, "Introduction: Politics of Citizenship and Transnational Gendered Migration in East and Southeast Asia," *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 83, no. 1, March 2010, pp. 11-29).

¹ I would like to thank Daromir Rudnyckj for his helpful reading and the two anonymous reviewers for their encouraging comments. Ongoing conversations with Rachel Silvey and Xiang Biao have been particularly important when writing this article. Thanks also to Apichai Shipper for inviting me to take part in this special issue and Hyung Gu Lynn and the staff at *Pacific Affairs* for their speed and focus. The research on which the article is based was funded by the Swedish Research Council and I am grateful for their generous support.

with Semesta's regulations Yati has been living on the second floor of the office since her airplane ticket was finalized the previous week. Hannah is taken aback and exclaims, "You can't go home, you have to stay here!" But Yati insists. She says that she wants to see her two children one last time before leaving. Rina turns to me and whispers that they are worried that she will get pregnant. A month earlier Semesta had sent a woman to Singapore, but upon arrival her medical examination revealed that she was pregnant and she was immediately sent back. "We lost a lot of money," Rina had told me. In fact, during the previous months Semesta had been having extensive problems with their recruits. Some had dropped out just before they were about to leave, others had become pregnant, while still others had disappeared from their employers only days upon arrival, particularly in Malaysia. This last group consisted of women who had previously worked abroad and Rina suggested that they were trying to escape from the debt that would be deducted from their salaries over a period of six months. In fact, some sources claim that 30,000 Indonesian maids in Malaysia run away each year.² For Semesta, the problem had become so serious that the owner of Semesta, Pak Iskander, a Chinese-Indonesian man from the Riau Archipelago just off the coast of Singapore, would be arriving the following week to handle the daily operations of the company indefinitely.

In light of this, it made sense for Hannah to turn to Yati and ask her directly if and what kind of contraceptive (KB, *keluarga berencana*, family planning) she was taking. Yati replied without hesitation that she was on "the shot" (*suntik*) and had taken her last one on May 15. Hannah repeated "May 15" and nodded, reluctantly agreeing that Yati could leave. After she walked out the door, Hannah turned to me and said, "Actually, she shouldn't be allowed to leave (*seharusnya tidak boleh*). It is too great a risk." A male labour recruiter who had been following the interaction from the other end of the room, raised his voice and said, "*kalau disuntik tidak apa apa*" ("If she has taken her shot it is no problem").

From Experience to Brokerage

In the growing corpus of commentary—academic, activist and otherwise—dealing with the transnational industry for domestic work, most of the attention has been paid to the plight of women in destination countries, as well as their relationships with family members, particularly children who remain behind.³ More generally, while much is known about why unskilled

² Raúl Hernández-Coss, Gillian Brown, Chitawati Buchori, Isaku Endo, Emiko Todoroki, Tita Naovalitha, Wameek Noor and Cynthia Mar, "The Malaysia-Indonesia Remittance Corridor: Making Formal Transfers the Best Options for Women and Undocumented Migrants," World Bank Working Paper no. 149 (2008), p. 21.

³ See, for instance, Nicole Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Filipina Workers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Children of Global Migration: Transnational*

migrants, both female and male, leave home and how they are treated upon arrival, much less is known about the actual process of labour recruitment. Even if the blurred boundaries between state and market and between documented and undocumented activities are widely acknowledged in labour recruitment, there is often limited ethnographic evidence of these processes. As Massey and his colleagues observed more than a decade ago,⁴ labour recruitment, and the migration industry more generally, has often been overlooked by researchers who have tended to focus attention on migrants, their families, and communities, rather than entrepreneurs and brokers. Arguably, this is still the case. However, if we are to grasp the changing structure of contemporary forms of transnational labour migration it is critical to consider the infrastructure, or “migrant institutions,” which allow people to move.⁵ This perspective suggests a shift of attention away from—without denying the importance of—the emotional experiences of migrants and the often predictable forms of injustice they face in destination countries to the brokerage systems that move them from one place to another. Phrased more strongly, this article contributes to the existing literature on labour migration by identifying the recruitment process as a critical empirical vantage point from which to reconceptualize gendered regimes of transnational migration.

It has been widely noted that in the current global economy, capital moves more easily than labour.⁶ In this context, Xiang Biao has pointed out that “transplant” is a better metaphor than “flow” to describe the contemporary circulation of migrants in Asia.⁷ The case of Yati above is a case in point, as she ideally will be moved from one point to another before being returned again after her two-year contract has ended. The staff’s concern with her potential pregnancy further highlights the process of “transnational

Families and Gendered Woes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Dewi Anggraeni, *Dreamseekers: Indonesian Women as Domestic Workers in Asia* (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2006); Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Global Women: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (London: Granta Books, 2002); Human Rights Watch, “Swept Under the Rug: Abuses against Domestic Workers Around the World,” *Human Rights Watch*, vol. 18, no. 7 (C) (July 2006) pp. 1-93.

⁴ Douglas Massey, Joaquin Arango, Graeme Hugo, Ali Kouaouci, Adela Pellegrino and J. Edward Taylor, *Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 190.

⁵ See, for instance, Jon Goss and Bruce Lindquist, “Conceptualizing International Labour Migration: A Structuration Perspective,” *International Migration Review*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1995) pp. 317-351.

⁶ See, for instance, Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (New York: The Free Press, 1998).

⁷ Xiang Biao, “Transplanting Labour in East Asia,” in Yamashita Shinji, Makito Minami, David Haines and Jeremy Edes, eds., *Transnational Migration in East Asia: Japan in a Comparative Focus* (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, Senri Ethnological Reports 77, 2008), p. 175. See also Alan and Josephine Smart, who propose an alternative metaphor, “punctuation,” in order to reconceptualize migrant flows and stoppages at the border to Hong Kong. “Time-Space Punctuation: Hong Kong’s Border Regime and Limits on Mobility,” *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 81, no. 2 (2008), pp.175-193.

encapsulation”⁸ that characterizes contemporary unskilled labour mobility across Asia, as migrants become both valuable commodities to be controlled by agencies and employers and later workers to be regulated and citizens to be protected by state actors. It is with this increasingly generalized concern with the management of transnational mobility that migrant transplant gains its contemporary force.

More broadly, this should be understood in relation to two interrelated global economic and political contradictions further highlighted by Xiang:⁹ first, that between the “upward” concentration of capital and the “downward” outsourcing of labour, and, second, that between the dispersion and fragmentation of labour management and the centralization of migration control. In this context, a space is created—indeed made necessary—in which increasing numbers of labour recruitment agencies come to mediate flows of capital, facilitate bureaucratic process, and move the migrants themselves. Through this process, in which labour brokers must deliver migrants before they are paid in full, the bodies of migrants are quickly transformed into valuable commodities to be controlled and protected.

In this article, I am interested in investigating this interstitial space ethnographically, particularly with regard to the process of labour recruitment and the formalization of a post-crisis migration industry in Indonesia. In shifting perspective, and with a focus on the Indonesian island of Lombok, I consider the emergence of various forms of male and female migrant recruitment, thus shedding light on how mobility is achieved in an era when documented migration appears to be gaining ground throughout Asia at the expense of undocumented migration. In particular, I am interested in how gendered regimes of debt—directly structured by the global processes described above—affect the recruitment and transplant of men and women from Indonesia to countries such as Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. More generally, I argue that labour recruitment is an absolutely critical empirical starting point for conceptualizing transnational migration, since it is at this site that local, national and global processes most clearly intersect.

International Migration from Indonesia

In 2006 680,000 Indonesians travelled abroad as documented migrants and in total there are believed to be around 4.3 million Indonesian international migrants. Of those who left in 2006, 40 percent travelled to Malaysia and 45 percent to Saudi Arabia; 80 percent of the migrants were women, 88 percent of whom worked as domestic servants.¹⁰ In other words, the Indonesian female

⁸ Xiang Biao, “Transnational and International Rupture: Compulsory Return as a Means of Migration Control in East Asia” (unpublished ms, n.d.).

⁹ Xiang Biao, “Transplanting Labour,” p. 175.

¹⁰ Raúl Hernández-Coss et al., “The Malaysia-Indonesia Remittance Corridor,” p. 8.

domestic servant is by far the most common type of documented migrant and also the type of migrant that has been most widely discussed by researchers and in the Indonesian mass media.¹¹ Indonesian international migration has been increasing steadily since the 1980s and particularly since the 1997 Asian economic crisis. In fact—and largely as an effect of the crisis—the official number of migrants sent abroad between 1997 and 1999 was more than the total during the previous 25 years combined.¹²

One defining aspect of the broader Asia-Pacific migration system, compared to North America and Western Europe, for instance, is that governments have tended to promote and regulate international migration.¹³ In Indonesia, international labour migration has been a critical element of national development since the early 1980s, both expanding the labour market and creating access to foreign capital.¹⁴ This has been particularly obvious during the last 20 years with the expansion of female migration to countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan, as well as Hong Kong.¹⁵ Since 1983 the Indonesian government has permitted private Saudi agents to recruit labour in Indonesia through block visas that can be issued independently of the identities of the migrants who will eventually use them,¹⁶ which contrasts with migration within Asia, where employers and agents generally recruit migrants via job orders after which they apply for individual visas. During the Suharto era, which ended in 1998, labour recruitment agencies were heavily regulated and connected to systems of state-sponsored patronage. In other words, the labour recruitment market was extremely centralized during this period, which meant that the majority of migrants travelling to neighbouring Malaysia, particularly men, crossed the border illegally, as it was both faster and less expensive.¹⁷

¹¹ Rachel Silvey, "Transnational Domestication: State Power and Indonesian Migrant Women in Saudi Arabia," *Political Geography*, vol. 23 (2004), pp. 245-264; Michele Ford, "Beyond the Femina Fantasy: The Working-Class Woman in Indonesian Discourses of Women's Work," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2003), pp. 83-113.

¹² Graeme Hugo, "Women's International Labour Migration," in Kathryn Robinson and Sharon Bessell, eds., *Women in Indonesia: Gender, Equity and Development* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), pp. 158-159.

¹³ Douglas Massey et al., *Worlds in Motion*, p. 191; Jon Goss and Bruce Lindquist, "Placing Movers: An Overview of the Asian-Pacific Migration System," *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 12, no. 12 (2000), p. 394; Robyn Rodriguez, "The Labor Brokerage State and the Globalization of Filipina Care Workers," *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society*, vol. 33 (2008), pp. 794-800.

¹⁴ Rachel Silvey, "Unequal Borders: Indonesian Transnational Migrants at Immigration Control," *Geopolitics*, vol. 12 (2007), p. 270.

¹⁵ Christine Chin, *In Service and Servitude: Foreign Female Domestic Workers and the Malaysian "Modernity" Project* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Pei-Chia Lan, *Global Cinderellas: Migrant Domesticity and Newly Rich Employers in Taiwan* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Rachel Silvey, "Transnational Domestication," p. 250; Jon Goss and Bruce Lindquist, "Placing Movers," p. 394.

¹⁷ Most accounts claim that Indonesian men working on Malaysian construction sites and palm oil plantations during the 1990s were generally undocumented. See, for instance, Ida Bagoes Mantra, "Illegal Indonesian Labour Migration from Lombok to Malaysia," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, vol. 40, no. 1 (1999), p. 64; Graeme Hugo, "Women's International Labour Migration," p. 159.

Although the World Bank states that migrant flows to Malaysia are primarily undocumented,¹⁸ my field research in 2007 and 2009 suggests that in recent years there has been a drop in undocumented and a rise in documented migration from Indonesia to Malaysia, particularly in the context of the exclusively male palm oil and construction industries. During this period, Indonesian government agencies and international organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) have increasingly engaged in campaigns, using brochures, posters, and billboards to inform migrants about the importance of travelling abroad legally. On the island of Lombok, one of the main sending areas for male migrants to Malaysia, this shift has been particularly obvious. Between 2000 and 2005 the number of migrant passports issued nearly tripled, and during the preceding five-year period the increase was certainly far more dramatic.¹⁹ During fieldwork it was in fact nearly impossible to find any recruiters or migrants who were interested in sending or being sent to Malaysia without a passport. It is important to note, however, that various forms of “illegal” practices continue to be an integral part of “legal” recruitment processes, as *aspal* (*asli tetapi palsu*, authentic but false) documents are omnipresent, while many migrants travel abroad on tourist visas before working illegally.

The 1997 crisis was a watershed in migration to Malaysia, as recurring deportation campaigns and the emergence of a state-sponsored civil volunteer corps, with the right to detain undocumented migrants in exchange for cash rewards, gained increasing support in tandem with a facilitated work visa process.²⁰ Memorandums of understanding between the Indonesian and Malaysian governments attempt to regulate the mobility of migrants between the countries.²¹ Furthermore, the deregulation of the labour recruitment market in Indonesia following the dismantling of monopolies after the fall of Suharto led to a dramatic increase in the number of labour recruitment agencies in Indonesia. These PPTKIS (Perlaksana Penempatan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia Swasta) control the market for documented migration across the country. As of November 2007 there were 498 registered agencies of varying

¹⁸ Raúl Hernández-Coss et al., *The Malaysia-Indonesia Remittance Corridor*, p. 57.

¹⁹ I was only able to access the data from 2000 until 2007. Even this data was considered sensitive by the officials in charge and I was only given the figures on a handwritten note. The reason for this unease is certainly that the government office that issues passports is widely known as a *gudang uang*, a “money warehouse.”

²⁰ RELA is an acronym for Ikatan Relawan Rakyat Malaysia, or Volunteers of the Malaysian People. See, for instance, Diana Wong, “The Rumor of Trafficking: Border Controls, Illegal Migration, and the Sovereignty of the Nation-State,” in Willem van Schendel and Itty Abraham, eds., *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders, and the Other Side of Globalization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Christine Chin, “‘Diversification’ and ‘Privatisation’: Securing Insecurities in the Receiving Country of Malaysia,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2008), pp. 285-303.

²¹ See the MOU “Regarding the Recruitment and Placement of Indonesian Domestic Workers,” signed on 13 May 2006, and the MOU “Regarding the Recruitment of Workers,” which was signed on 10 May 2004.

size and stability in the country; 281 had offices in West Nusa Tenggara Province, 157 on Lombok and 124 on Sumbawa, with the former being a major sending area to Malaysian palm oil plantations and the latter of domestic servants to Saudi Arabia.

Despite this shift to documented forms of labour recruitment, however, it is important to keep in mind that since the 1970s most forms of migration from Indonesia, and throughout the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East, have been characterized by contract-labour migration, which traces its origins to the contract coolie system of the colonial era.²² In other words, despite the changes in the migration system it is important to remain attentive to the “significant continuities in the formation of the global labour reserve.”²³ More specifically, it is critical to consider how the dual processes of centralization and fragmentation, as discussed by Xiang,²⁴ take shape in relation to historical continuities in labour recruitment that utilize already existing forms of social relations at the village level around Indonesia.²⁵

International Migration from Lombok

Lombok is part of West Nusa Tenggara province together with Sumbawa and a series of smaller islands. Approximately 4700 squared kilometers in size and with a predominantly Muslim population of around three million—concentrated from east to west along the main road that cuts through the island—irrigated rice cultivation dominates Lombok’s economy, but capital-intensive cash crops such as tobacco are increasingly common. The island is located at the Wallace Line that divides the lush and greener parts of Indonesia from the dryer and often poorer areas. While the western parts of the island resemble Bali, its western neighbour, the eastern and southern parts of the island are similar to the more arid Sumbawa. The effects of this are obvious, as many parts of central and western Lombok have up to three harvests of rice per year while the dryer parts often only have one. These latter areas are also much poorer and have in recent years become the main source of migrant labour to Malaysia and Saudi Arabia.

The 1997 crisis had devastating effects on Lombok’s poorest peasants, who depend primarily on temporary wage labour, rapidly pushing those who could access capital to migrate abroad, as the Indonesian rupiah dropped dramatically in value in relation to foreign currencies.²⁶ Moreover, the anti-

²² Douglas Massey et al., *Worlds in Motion*, p. 181.

²³ Jon Goss and Bruce Lindquist, “Placing Movers,” p. 386.

²⁴ Xiang Biao, “Transnational and International Rupture.”

²⁵ Ernst Spaan, “*Taikongs* and *Calos*: The Role of Middlemen and Brokers in Javanese International Migration,” *International Migration Review*, vol. 28, no. 1 (1994), pp. 93-113.

²⁶ John MacDougall, “Criminality and the Political Economy of Security in Lombok, in Henk Schulte Nordholt and Gerry van Klinken, eds., *Renegotiating Boundaries: Local Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2007), p. 287.

Christian riots of 2000 and the Bali bombs crippled a promising tourist industry,²⁷ creating yet another group of workers who moved towards the rapidly expanding migration industry, either by becoming labour recruiters or migrants themselves. One sign of the importance of the contemporary migration is that remittances to West Nusa Tenggara province have quickly become greater than total local income.²⁸ The shift in the regional economy is all the more striking if one considers that in much of the ethnographic work on Lombok in the 1970s and 1980s migration was rarely mentioned, except briefly in relation to transmigration projects in which farmers were relocated to less densely populated areas of Indonesia. Even through the 1990s, migration appears to have had limited impact on village life across the island. By 2004, however, 14,000 migrants were officially leaving Lombok each year, while this figure steadily increased to over 41,000 by 2008, of those almost 30,000 travelled to Malaysia—the great majority of whom were men going to palm oil plantations—and more than 11,000 to Saudi Arabia. Annual departures to Saudi Arabia, the great majority of whom are women working as domestic servants, has increased by 15 times since 2004.²⁹ These changes reflect broader trends throughout Indonesia, as migration to Saudi Arabia steadily increased during this period.³⁰ In fact, however, the figures from Lombok account for far from all international migration, as many migrants are officially recruited in other parts of the country, while others travel abroad outside of formal channels.

Women on Lombok have not only tended to marry at a young age, often in their early teens, but the island also has among the highest divorce rates in Indonesia and Southeast Asia.³¹ Marriage and divorce have often been understood in relation to economic cycles. While a common saying in the 1970s was that “people get married after harvest when the rice-barn is filled and divorce some months later when the rice is finished,”³² by the late 1990s it was claimed that couples marry when the man returns from Malaysia and divorce when the money is gone and he once again leaves for the palm oil plantations abroad.³³ The widely used term *jamal*, short for *janda Malaysia*, or “Malaysian widow,” suggests the gendered form of migration that developed from Lombok and other islands further east since the 1980s. Migration continues to follow economic and cultural cycles, as many return

²⁷ Leena Avonius, “Reforming Wetu Telu: Islam, Adat, and the Promises of Regionalism in Post-New Order Lombok” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Leiden, 2004), ch. 2.

²⁸ Raúl Hernández-Coss et al., 2008, *The Malaysia-Indonesia Remittance Corridor*, p. xiii.

²⁹ BP3TKI Mataram, “BP3TKI Dalam Angka” (Mataram, Lombok, Balai Pelayanan Penempatan dan Perlindungan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia, 2009).

³⁰ Raúl Hernández-Coss et al., *The Malaysia-Indonesia Remittance Corridor*, p. 9.

³¹ See Gavin Jones, *Marriage and Divorce in Islamic South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994).

³² Sven Cederroth, *The Spell of the Ancestors and the Power of Mekkah: A Sasak Community on Lombok* (Gothenburg Studies in Social Anthropology, 1981), p. 167.

³³ Leena Avonius, “Reforming Wetu Telu,” p. 204.

before Idul Fitri, the celebration that marks the end of Ramadan, before leaving shortly thereafter, while departures remain low during the tobacco season, when temporary wage labour is readily available.

During the previous decade, with the increasing demand for domestic servants across Asia and the Middle East, the gendered bias of migration has rapidly shifted, and today women are increasingly leaving Lombok and nearby Sumbawa to work abroad. Despite the fact that many people, including labour recruiters themselves, claim that female migration is *haram* (forbidden) in Islamic terms, this trend is intensifying. For commoner women on Lombok, who have historically become sources of labour during periods of economic scarcity or raised by gentry families in exchange for domestic service,³⁴ the move towards transnational migration does not appear to represent a radical shift. For divorced women, migration also offers the possibility of supporting children and parents, as the burden of income shifts from the man to the woman. Furthermore, going abroad is seen by many young rural women as a possibility of at least temporarily escaping from a circumscribed and patriarchal village life,³⁵ while, more generally, international migration has quickly become a rite of passage and part of a broader nationalized moral economy of migration that has developed in Indonesia in recent decades.³⁶ Travelling to Saudi Arabia in particular offers the possibility of making the pilgrimage to Mecca with one's employers, while the material effects of remittances are obvious across the island, as new houses with tile floors are easily identified as *rumah Saudi* or *rumah Malaysia*, Saudi or Malaysian houses, and hundreds of mosques are in the process of being constructed. Others have noted the possibly detrimental effects of migration on children, however, as in many households both mothers and fathers remain abroad for years at a time.³⁷

Situating the Migration Industry

Since the 1970s the use of labour recruitment agencies in international migration has grown steadily across Asia and in the Middle East,³⁸ agencies that have come to control the export of migrants in contemporary Indonesia. Of the more than 150 labour recruitment agencies holding government permits on Lombok, only eight are main offices, while the rest are branches

³⁴ Mary Judd, "The Sociology of Poverty in Rural Lombok, Indonesia" (Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1980), p. 151.

³⁵ Harriot Beazley, "The Malaysian Orphans of Lombok: Children's Livelihood Responses to Out-Migration in Eastern Indonesia," in R. Panelli, R. Punch and E. Robson, eds., *Young Rural Lives: Global Perspectives on Rural Childhood and Youth* (London: Routledge, 2007).

³⁶ Johan Lindquist, *The Anxieties of Mobility: Development and Migration in the Indonesian Borderlands* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

³⁷ Harriot Beazley, "The Malaysian Orphans of Lombok."

³⁸ Douglas Massey et al., *Worlds in Motion*, p. 153.

to main offices located in other cities, most commonly major cities such as Jakarta or Surabaya. While main offices are only allowed to begin operations with significant amounts of capital, branch offices open and close easily.³⁹ Formally, only main offices have the right to send migrants directly abroad, but branches are allowed to do so if they have a letter of permission from the main office. In the case of Saudi Arabia, all migrants depart from Jakarta and all main offices must be located there, where the passport also is issued.

On Lombok, there is great variation between different agencies. The largest send up to 3,000 male migrants each year, with a particular focus on Malaysian palm oil plantations, and often have contacts with high-ranking government officials that offer access to contracts with the largest Malaysian state-owned company, Felda. The majority of the branch offices only have a few staff and are dependant on the flow of capital from their main office. Even minimal disturbances in terms of migrant or capital flows between the two can lead to the closure of a branch. These offices, which frequently double as residences, tend to be located in the main towns on Lombok, Mataram in the west, Praya in the centre and Selong in the east. To add to the complexity, many informal labour recruiters, who often live in the island's rural areas, have large agency banners hanging in front of their houses, although they in fact deliver migrants to multiple agencies, since they do not have contracts and are paid for each recruit delivered. In turn, these labour recruiters collaborate with large numbers of sub-recruiters, thus creating an incredibly complicated and unstable network that involves thousands of people across the island.

With the increasing shift towards documented labour migration—among men to Malaysia in particular—there has been a formalization of process in bureaucratic terms, as growing numbers of documents have become compulsory in order to acquire a passport and work visa, including a birth certificate, a “family card” (*kartu keluarga*), and, for women, a letter of permission from either the husband or father. These documents are issued by the office of the village head (*kepala desa*) in the individual's place of residence. With these in hand it becomes possible to apply for an identity card and thereafter to approach a recruitment agency. In principle, each adult Indonesian citizen is supposed to have these documents (except the letter of permission) even before he or she considers migration, but in reality this is rarely the case. For instance, on Lombok in 2007 there was a government campaign aimed at distributing birth certificates to residents free of charge. In fact, however, many residents do not know their date of birth and often lists of migrants being sent from agencies state that the majority were born on the same date, 31 December.

³⁹ To open a recruitment company, proof of assets worth three billion rupiah, or \$300,000 US, are required, one billion of which must be deposited into an account controlled by the Ministry of Manpower.

The migrant is in principle free to choose between different agencies and the various job orders that each offers, for instance to a particular palm oil company or to a particular city to work as a domestic servant. In this process, there is, on the one hand, a distinction between agencies that have the right to recruit to the Middle East and Asia-Pacific and, on the other hand, a legal distinction—which in effect is gendered—between the “informal” and “formal” sector, with the former meaning domestic servants, and the latter including all other forms of labour. Migrants within the informal sector must be at least 21 while those in the formal sector only need to be 18, with the maximum age being 45.⁴⁰ Ideally, the potential migrant presents the necessary documents before the agency handles the rest of the paperwork together with the migrant.

After interviews and registration, the agency facilitates a medical examination at a clinic, a letter of recommendation from the Department of Manpower on the regency level (which allows for the right to issue a migrant passport), transportation and, prior to departure, a letter of exemption for the exit tax that citizens and residents must pay upon leaving Indonesia. Most of these documents are necessary in the process of acquiring a special migrant passport, which is 24 pages instead of the typical 48 pages, and then a work visa from the destination country.⁴¹ Before departure the migrant is required to take part in a government-regulated training that prepares the migrant for work abroad. Furthermore, domestic servants engage in a one- to three-month long training program—which varies according to the destination country—usually involving language, cooking, childcare, and cleaning skills.

In fact, however, labour recruitment does not follow this process. Migrants almost never approach the agency directly. Instead, an informal labour recruiter, a *petugas lapangan* or PL, meaning field agent,⁴² also called a *sponsor*, approaches—or is approached by—the migrant directly, either in the area where he or she lives or through other forms of social relations, such as friends, family or a local figure of authority. The historically critical role of middlemen in the Asian migration industry has been noted, as it has often been the middlemen rather than migrants themselves who have had strong networks on both sides of the border leading back to the migrant-sending villages.⁴³

⁴⁰ “Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia, nomor 39, 2004, Tentang Penempatan dan Perlindungan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia di Luar Negeri” (Law of the Republic of Indonesia number 39, 2004, Regarding the Departure and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers Abroad).

⁴¹ The aim of the migrant passport is to make the migration process less expensive. In fact, however, with the costs of corruption the two passports are comparable in price.

⁴² *Petugas* literally means “a subordinate who is given an order or task,” while *lapangan* means “field.” Although “field agent” is not an ideal translation, arguably it is preferable to “field operative” or “field worker,” since the word “agent” highlights to a greater degree the form of brokering that the *petugas lapangan* engages in.

⁴³ Douglas Massey et al., *Worlds in Motion*, pp. 188-90; Ernst Spaan, “*Taikongs and Calos*.”

It is clear that there has been a dramatic growth in sponsors on Lombok and across Indonesia. While the 1980s and 1990s was the era of the *taikong*, or migrant smuggler, particularly to Malaysia, with the formalization of labour recruitment the last decade has come to be dominated by the sponsor or PL. This suggests a process of bureaucratization and domestication. Indeed, in the current recruitment regime, elementary school teachers, former migrants and even a grandmother who previously worked in a village office are examples of sponsors that I have met on Lombok. Unlike the *taikong*, who was often—though not always—a shadowy figure,⁴⁴ *kepercayaan* (trust) rather than *keberanian* (bravery) has become the most important expressed quality in contemporary recruitment. One sponsor explained the source of his expertise: “recruiting migrants is exactly the same as selling carpets in the market. In both cases you have to be clever at bargaining.” But in the next breath, when I asked him what the most important quality was for a PL, he repeated the broker mantra, *harus jujur*, “you have to be honest.”

Recruitment and Economies of Debt

It is mid-morning at Semesta, the time of day when new recruiters from around Lombok begin to show up with potential migrants. Two women enter the office; one is in her early forties and obviously a sponsor, while the other is much younger and clearly a recruit. They are from Tanjung in the northeast part of the island, one of the main areas on Lombok for the recruitment of female domestic workers. Rina greets them, picks up a new folder and forms and asks the young woman to sit down across from her, while the sponsor—who comes to the office weekly—sits turned towards them at the next desk over. Rina asks if she has an identity card and if she can read and write. She tells her to read the top part of the form before asking about her education. It turns out that she has graduated from junior high school. Rina asks if she has a letter of permission from her parents, and the young woman answers “yes,” and if she has ever been to Saudi Arabia or Malaysia, to which she answers “no.” All of her responses are either “yes” or “no.” The woman has previously worked on Bali for a year as a maid, where she made 200,000 rupiah (about \$20 US) per month, and six months in Mataram on Lombok, where she made 175,000 rupiah per month. Rina shakes her head and says she understands why she wants to go to Malaysia.

The PL laughs, and says, “In Malaysia you can make a lot of money.” The woman’s father is a fisherman and her mother a housewife. Rina asks how old they are, but she doesn’t know. The PL says that her father is in his forties and the mother is about 35. She is the oldest of four children. Rina says, “You have a lot of responsibility” (*bertanggungjawabnya besar*). The girl nods.

⁴⁴ Ernst Spaan, “*Taikongs and Calos*.”

She is then interviewed about what kinds of work she can do, and only uncertain about one question, if she can take care of a baby. After looking towards the PL, who nods, she agrees that she can, but with some hesitation. Afterwards she is left alone for a while before the photo shoot and the trip to the medical centre. I go up and try to talk to her, but do not get much of a response. She is 21.

A critical difference between the recruitment of men and women, or more specifically between the formal and informal sector, is that men must generally pay a fee prior to departure, while women do not pay at all. This distinction has become increasingly marked during the last few years, as competition for female domestic servants has intensified across Asia and the Middle East. For instance, between 2007 and 2009 the fee to Indonesian recruitment companies from labour agencies in Saudi Arabia reportedly increased from around \$800 to \$1,400-1,500 US, with similar changes in other markets such as Malaysia. In effect, this has meant that fees to local sponsors has increased dramatically, from around one and a half million (\$150 US) to over five million rupiah, thus generating intense competition for female migrants among labour recruiters across Indonesia. In practice, the main office generally controls funds until the migrant has been successfully recruited, while the branch office on Lombok pays out an initial fee to the sponsor, which is spent on the recruitment process, such as transportation costs, basic documents, a medical check-up and gifts to the migrant. Once the migrant has arrived safely in Jakarta and is ready to depart, the full fee of around six million rupiah, or \$600 US, is paid to the local office, which in turn pays the sponsor, who in turn pays a number of sub-sponsors. The local branch generally receives a fee of a few hundred thousand rupiah, around \$30 US, from the main office once the migrant has departed, which is often the actual profit. If a sponsor does well, he or she can make a profit of around three million rupiah, or \$300 US per migrant.

It is striking to compare this with the wages that migrants make abroad. Women who become domestic workers in Malaysia make approximately 600 ringgit, or \$175 US per month, with six months' salary deducted for fees from each two-year contract, while in Saudi Arabia women make 800 riyal, about \$215 US per month, with no deductions for fees. Domestic servants can make far higher salaries in Hong Kong and Taiwan, but there is a longer language training process, and women with an elementary school education are rarely recruited for these jobs. Most women also prefer destinations that are predominantly Muslim. Men working as drivers in Saudi Arabia make about 1,000 riyal, or \$270 US, while in the palm oil plantations men can make around 800 ringgit, or \$235 US, each month. This can be compared with temporary wage labour in Lombok's tobacco fields, which pays around \$2 US per day.

While capital flows “down” in the recruitment of women, for the recruitment of men capital flows “up,” from the migrant to the sponsor and the Indonesian recruitment agency. For instance, a man wanting to work as a driver in Saudi Arabia must pay around 10 million rupiah, around \$1,000 US, while the fee for construction in Malaysia is around 5.5 million rupiah, and for palm oil plantations in Peninsular Malaysia around four million rupiah. Generally, the agency has a fixed but informal fee that each migrant pays to the agency via a sponsor. As of July 2009, the fee for working on a Malaysian palm oil plantation hovered around 2.3 million rupiah, or \$230 US, while the added 1.7 million rupiah comes from the fee that the sponsor accesses from the migrant. Agencies that attempt to charge higher fees are quickly abandoned by sponsors, as a relatively stable market has developed. The sponsor’s fee is thus dependant on the amount of money that he or she can extract from the migrant, a sum that typically varies by around three hundred thousand rupiah, or \$30 US. Potential migrants are, however, increasingly well-versed in costs and salaries abroad, and also this part of the market has become increasingly stable. As with the recruitment of women, the sponsor is responsible for basic documents and a medical examination, but also the cost of the passport. After transportation and cell phone costs, gifts and the payment of sub-sponsors, a sponsor is left with perhaps 400-500,000 rupiah, about \$40-50 US, for each migrant that he or she successfully delivers.

The critical problem in the recruitment of men is precisely the migrant’s ability to access capital. Returning migrants may control capital, but generally men will borrow from informal moneylenders at 100 percent interest. The migrant often repays the debt through incremental installments over time—usually between six months and two years—once he has arrived abroad. In a pious Muslim area such as Lombok, people do not speak easily about usury, but this form of lending is generally legitimized in terms “business” (*usaha*), meaning that those who control capital locally can easily generate comparable profits by investing, for instance, in tobacco planting rather than money lending. Often this lending is informal and based on trust between neighbours, but contracts are sometimes drawn up on a local level and witnessed by the village head, with the migrant’s parents or other relatives being held responsible if the debt is not repaid in time. In these contracts it is never stated how much has been borrowed, only the sum that is due to be repaid. Here it is possible to see how local state and market actors collaborate in order to hold the borrower responsible through the production of debt in the context of already intimate social relationships. If the migrant’s family owns land or a house, this is often used as collateral. In this process, it is frequently the sponsor himself (rarely her) who lends part or all of the money necessary in order to speed up the process. It is thus the relationship between the sponsor and migrant that is critical in the “upward” flow of capital to the recruitment agency.

The recruitment of women has a similar structure but capital flows in the

opposite direction. Usually the woman's husband and parents must be convinced and a letter of permission is required from either of them, particularly if she has not yet married but even if she is divorced. Formally, this is the case for male migrants as well, but is rarely implemented. Increasingly, the woman or her parents are offered up to one million rupiah, or \$100 US, in "shopping money" (*uang belanja*) in the initial stage of recruitment. For the sponsor, and often the labour agency that pays the sponsor an initial fee for this purpose, this entails a risk, since there are many other competing sponsors offering similar incentives. In the case of men, but particularly in the recruitment of women, it is critical for the sponsor, if he is not part of the extended family or known in the village, to use sub-sponsors in order to generate relationships of trust. With the recruitment of women, a female sponsor is usually involved, preferably one who has already worked in the destination country and can explain what the migration process holds in store.

Once the female migrant has agreed to depart, and a bus or airline ticket has been purchased, there is increasing concern about her backing out. In contrast to male migrants, at this stage women are frequently moved to the actual recruitment agency—as in the case described in the beginning of this article—where they sleep and engage in "training," which basically means offering free labour to the agency through cooking and cleaning. The further along in the process the migrant is the more valuable she is to the sponsor and the agency that has recruited her. The main threats to the transplant of the woman to the destination country are generally an illness such as hepatitis B, pregnancy, or that she or a family member will change their mind regarding her departure. Encapsulation is used to protect the migrant from these threats. The head of one Jakarta-based labour agency sending migrants to the Middle East told me that the "most common type of disease (*penyakit yang paling biasa*)" for female migrants is pregnancy, particularly since it generally takes at least several weeks after conception before it is possible to test with any certainty. I have witnessed several cases of women who are about to depart for Jakarta from Lombok being sent to a local clinic to receive a final contraceptive shot. The case of Yati, which I opened this article with, clearly illuminates the way that labour recruitment agencies and sponsors deal with this issue.

In the case of women travelling to Malaysia, particularly those who have been there on contracts before, cell phones and Malaysian phone numbers are generally confiscated, as sponsors or agents will search women's bags prior to departure in order to prevent contact with boyfriends or family members who may help them run away and thus escape the debt that is repaid during a period of months. In the cases that a woman does actually run away, the Indonesian agency and sponsor are held accountable by the Malaysian labour agent and are forced to pay back the fee if they do not want to be blacklisted.

As capital incrementally flows down, the female migrant is thus transformed into a commodity that must be protected by the recruitment agency and the sponsor. This is especially the case in migration to the Asia-Pacific, where placement fees are deducted from the salaries of domestic servants, sometimes for a period of up to seven months. Commodification begins on Lombok and continues with the escort of migrants to Jakarta or other cities where they are trained at the main office prior to departure. In contrast, for men debt becomes localized through social relationships in the village, thus binding him to fellow villagers and family members, rather than the sponsor or labour recruitment agency. If the migrant chooses to back out, the agency never loses money, since relations of debt remain centred on moneylenders and sponsors who lend money to potential migrants.

Conclusion: The Gender of Labour Recruitment

Through the above description it becomes important to ask why the contemporary recruitment of men and women has taken different forms on Lombok and across Indonesia, and, more specifically, why men must borrow to finance migration, while women are offered money to travel abroad. Responses to this question can be situated in relation to a series of overlapping processes. In global terms, there is growing competition for female domestic servants across Asia and the Middle East, which has led to increasing capital flows to local labour recruiters. In contrast, the market for male palm oil workers is limited primarily to Malaysia and competition between estates has not led to higher fees and thus greater flexibility for local recruiters. Whenever I have posed the question of gendered difference directly to agents and sponsors, most have claimed that since female domestic servants are bound to particular households that they are rarely allowed to leave, they are easier to control than male migrants, who usually have greater freedom of mobility. These claims can be further considered in relation to stereotypical discourses concerning the global feminization of electronics factories, in which women have generally been viewed as more docile and less likely than men to disrupt the labour process.⁴⁵

On the national level, the centralization and bureaucratization of migration control has led to an increasing concern with the protection (*perlindungan*) and regulation of female migrants. As I write, the sending of female domestic servants to Malaysia has been stopped after a widely publicized case of abuse that has led to demands for revision of the 2006 MOU between Indonesia and Malaysia,⁴⁶ while separate migrant arrival terminals are being constructed

⁴⁵ Aihwa Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 151-153; Leslie Salzinger, *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 9-10.

⁴⁶ *The Jakarta Post*, 7 July 2009.

at airports around Indonesia in order to protect returning migrants.⁴⁷ In other words, state and market actors, as well as nongovernmental organizations that focus on migrant rights, are increasingly concerned with the regulation and transnational encapsulation of female migrants, thus reinforcing channels of mobility.⁴⁸

Finally, in villages across rural Lombok and other parts of Indonesia that are key sources of migrant labour, women's migration abroad remains a sensitive issue compared to the much greater freedom that young men have both inside and outside of the household. In Lombok's current economy, it is men rather than women who borrow money to move forward in life, thus creating a situation in which capital must flow towards women, rather than away from them, and that guarantees are offered to family members and local communities regarding their protection from abuse abroad.

Yet clearly migrant women (or men) are not passive victims in these processes. The fact that 30,000 domestic servants reportedly run away from their employers in Malaysia each year in order to escape debt, or that Yati—in the story that opened this article—returned home rather than remaining at the recruitment agency, suggests that over time migrant women are developing strategies within the current migration regime and in relation to their increasingly transnational lives—both at home and abroad. As increasing numbers of migrants return home after two-year contracts abroad, and as the prevalence of cell phones facilitates long-distance communication, knowledge *about* migration has become pervasive across Lombok. In this process—as migrants, capital, and knowledge come to circulate between local, national, and global scales—a migration system is taking shape which is not easily summarized in terms of power relations, gendered or otherwise.⁴⁹

In order to begin to conceptualize this system, I have argued for a renewed focus on the “migration industry.” This ethnographic space allows me to carefully highlight the relationship between labour recruitment and capital flows in a complicated market in which state and market actors work together on various levels. Moving beyond contemporary debates in migration studies, this creates a vantage point from which to consider not only how migration

⁴⁷ See, Rachel Silvey, “Unequal Borders,” for an account of the migrant terminal in Jakarta. A smaller version, modeled on the one in Jakarta, opened on Lombok in 2009.

⁴⁸ Daromir Rudnyckyj, “Technologies of Servitude: Governmentality and Indonesian Transnational Labor Migration,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 3 (2004), pp. 407-434.

⁴⁹ The work of feminist migration scholars such as Doreen Massey and, more recently in the context of Indonesia, Rachel Silvey, suggests that my study offers important material for considering relationships between gender, power and space—particularly in a transnational perspective. I hope to address these discussions more directly in forthcoming publications, but in this article I have chosen a different mode of analysis, which highlights the transformation of the contemporary migration industry rather than gender per se. See Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1994), Rachel Silvey, “Power, Difference and Mobility: Feminist Advances in Migration Studies,” *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 28, no. 4 (2004), pp. 490-506.

is gendered, but more forcefully, how gender actually shapes transnational migration regimes. As the documented labour recruitment market has become increasingly decentralized and fragmented during the last decade, informal sponsors have become key interstitial brokers in historically specific environments at the boundaries between formal recruitment agencies, bureaucracies, and villages, where the relations of trust, power, and debt that organize life throughout Indonesia are in play and must be taken into account.

In government offices involved in international migration there are large signs that warn migrants against using *calos*, or brokers, a slightly derogatory term that refers to sponsors. In fact, however, because of the complicated bureaucratic procedures and endemic forms of small-scale corruption that can either slow down or speed up the process, it is nearly impossible for a migrant not to use a sponsor. It is at points such as these that the centralization of migration control and the fragmentation of labour management come to intersect, as the expansion of an informal brokerage system is both vilified and absolutely necessary in the creation of a migration industry that merges capitalism, state power and local economies of trust. It is at this very intersection that the actual mobility of transnational migrants becomes possible and which should be considered more carefully in future research.

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