

# The great value of poor migrants: State policies, Christian morality and primary education in Sabah, Malaysia

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## Abstract

Unskilled migrant workers and their families represent a crucial human resource in Sabah (Malaysia) as cheap labour, but also as religious believers. Christian organizations belonging to various denominations have started to cater to this community in recent years by providing educational services. Based on an ethnography of two schools led by charismatic South Korean missionaries and patronized by a Lutheran church with roots in Sabah, this article argues that ‘salvation’, as it is understood and practiced through education in these institutions, falls short of empowering migrants as a whole and rather contributes to reproducing their subordination as a community within Sabahan society.

## Keywords

Children, faith and evangelism, Malaysia, religious politics, schooling, unskilled migrants

Religious organizations figure prominently among social actors involved in development work (see e.g. Bornstein, 2005; Freeman, 2012; Kaag and Saint-Lary, 2011). Their interventions aimed at alleviating poverty are closely linked with, and affected by, state policies, and have an important impact in terms of subject-making. The present article investigates religious actors’ involvement in communities of unskilled migrant workers – people who face not only economic hardship but also structural inequalities and ostracism – through the study of two schools set up by a Malaysian Lutheran church in collaboration with South Korean evangelists from a charismatic Presbyterian congregation.

I carried out empirical research in 2011, while employed for one year as a teacher in both schools. A century-old ‘mission’ based in Switzerland hired me, despite my weak record as a

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Christian, and sent me to Sabah to teach English to children of migrant workers. This organization also granted me the permission to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in both schools.

My research involved studying people's attempts at fashioning other people's ideas, feelings and behaviours, regardless of the labels ('educational', 'religious') that can be affixed to them (see Stambach, 2009: 4). I looked at discourses and practices targeting both children and adults, whether they materialized during or outside teaching hours, inside or outside the classroom, and in the form of pedagogic lessons or in other ways, because processes of subject-making operate within institutions in a continuous and pervasive manner, cutting across such conceptual boundaries as categories of people, events or places (see Bénéï, 2008). This led me, among other things, to pay a great deal of attention to rituals, a type of tool that organizations make abundant use of to propagate their objectives, norms and values (see Wulf, 2005).

The present article fills a gap in the academic literature by addressing the Malaysian state's disengagement from the provision of educational services to children of unskilled migrant workers and the parallel emergence of churches as substitutes (see also Dilger and Schulz, 2013; Stambach, 2009, 2010). Available work (reviewed in the first and second sections of this article) deals mostly with Christian organizations' historical role in Malaysia; ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities' position within Malaysian society; and the evolution of the country's state-regulated education system. But studies on schools set up by Christian organizations since the privatization trend, on non-citizens' education and on institutions that elude state regulation and control are largely missing.

Among my main research findings is the fact that the pursuit of a strong religious faith can be congruent with that of 'success' (see also Freeman, 2012: 3 and 20; Retsikas, 2017). In the two schools I studied, a complex apparatus incited individuals to see themselves as members of a single, global Christian community and, at the same time, to maximize their performance at work, at school and in daily life. Education was valued for its double potential to save people's souls and bring about material success. The schools sought to trigger a 'change of mentality' among staff and pupils, which implied the acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as one's saviour and, not without paradox, the decision to take one's fate into one's own hands.

Some of these characteristics closely resemble the definition of neoliberal subjectivity, which emphasizes individual success, free choice and personal responsibility (Gordon, 1991: 43–44; Read, 2009: 36; Retsikas, 2017). Neoliberalism, as a technique of government, has been widely theorized and debated in academic circles. Some authors advance that policies with neoliberal characteristics can have a genuinely empowering effect for individuals (e.g. Ferguson, 2010: 180). Others highlight neoliberalism's depoliticizing effect and claim that the ideal of a fundamentally self-interested individual makes collective political action inconceivable, thereby curtailing it (e.g. Brown, 2005: 43).

The two effects are not necessarily contradictory and I advance that they both played an important role in the schools I studied. These institutions claimed to give their pupils the means to transcend their condition as children of disadvantaged migrant workers. Yet, by making these people responsible for their own fate, they simultaneously obscured the structural nature of this condition, notably the state's repressive immigration policies and Christian organizations' own avoidance of any form of advocacy in favour of migrants' rights.

This argument leads to a second one, namely that the interests of Malaysian state authorities largely overlap with those of local or foreign Christian organizations when it comes to the management of migrants in Sabah. A cursory glance makes the former appear as these people's oppressors and the latter as their emancipators – a dichotomy that fits well with prevailing

representations of these actors in Malaysia as having a conflictual relationship. However, a more thorough analysis ‘treat[ing] state and non-state governmentality within a common frame’ (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002: 994) reveals a strong interplay between their discourses and practices. In the sector of education, state policies such as the privatization of services to the migrant community find an unexpected echo in the promotion of success and personal responsibility by Christian organizations, especially those influenced by charismatic theology. Both contribute to what could be called a neoliberal mode of governing the migrant population, which guarantees their subordination and exploitability.

The first and second sections of this article provide background information on religious actors’ involvement in education in Malaysia as well as on migrant communities’ role and position within Malaysian society. In the third section, I focus on churches’ provision of educational services to children of migrant workers and use the two schools I worked in as a case study. The fourth and final section revolves around the collective government of migrants by both state and non-state actors.

## Religion and education in Malaysia

Historically, Christian organizations played a key role as providers of social services and agents of social change in South East Asia (Goh, 2005: 1–19). In colonial times, they established ‘mission schools’ and dispensaries that catered chiefly to disadvantaged, marginalized and peripheral people (Keyes, 1996: 284; Roxborough, 2006: 439 and 442). In the territories under British rule that would later make up the Federation of Malaysia, they were the first to introduce formal education on a relatively large scale (Keyes, 1996: 292). Mission schools quickly grew in number and were highly instrumental in spreading the Christian faith among indigenous tribes and communities of labourers who had immigrated from China and India (Cooke, 1966; Goh, 2005: 47–56; Roxborough, 1986). In British North Borneo and the Kingdom of Sarawak (i.e. present-day Sabah and Sarawak), missions set up schools throughout the territory in the early 20th century and ran them independently until at least the 1960s (Goh, 2005: 54). In those days, the biggest part of the territory was hardly accessible because of the dense vegetation and lack of roads, nevertheless Christianity penetrated the interior and managed to establish a stronghold, in large part thanks to mission schools (Bin Mat Kib, 2004: 59). Given British colonial authorities’ *laissez-faire* approach to missionary endeavour, Christian organizations enjoyed considerable leeway for extending their influence in the region. Roxborough writes that the ‘post-war years saw a steady stream of converts from tribespeople in what amounted to a mass-conversion movement’ (Roxborough, 1986). The success of churches is still apparent today in the religious composition of the population: some 32% of Sabahans and 44% of Sarawakians are Christians – compared to between 0.2% and 5% in states located on the peninsula,<sup>1</sup> where Islam’s roots run deeper.

After independence, however, mission schools were gradually integrated into the public education system and churches all but lost control over them (Goh, 2005: 54; Roxborough, 1986). The imperative of building a new nation required the creation of a state-run schooling system based on a standardized and unified national curriculum. Thus, religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities – which largely overlap in Malaysia – were forced to hand the schools that they had set up over

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1. Malaysian Department of Statistics. Available at: [http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download\\_Population/files/census2010/Taburan\\_Penduduk\\_dan\\_Ciri-ciri\\_Asas\\_Demografi.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/census2010/Taburan_Penduduk_dan_Ciri-ciri_Asas_Demografi.pdf) (accessed 3 January 2014).

to the government and accept the latter's role as the main supplier of educational services (Lee, 1997: 29).

The post-colonial era was marked by intense debates in the field of education, which reflected the larger conundrum that Malaysia faced as a multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-religious country (see Brown, 2007; Loke and Hoon, 2011; Samuel and Tee, 2013): how to unify and inculcate a sense of nationhood in the population, on the one hand, and make allowance for the particular characteristics and needs of each of its constitutive communities, on the other. The pre-eminence given to Malay-Muslims, first in the federal constitution and later through affirmative action policies designed by the Malay-dominated ruling coalition, gave rise to a number of contentious issues with regard to schooling, the most prominent of which is perhaps the primary language of instruction (Brown, 2007: 320–321; Lee, 1997: 33). Ethnic tensions arose quickly (Lee, 1997: 31; Tan, 2012: 6–10) and worsened with the advent of Islamic resurgence in the 1970s and 1980s (see Muzaffar, 1987).

In reaction to Islam's growing influence on public and private life in Malaysia, the federal government increased state control over independent Islamic actors and embarked on a programme of Islamization of state institutions (Tan, 2012: 10–12; see also Liow, 2009: 192). In the field of schooling, this resulted in the shutdown of private Islamic schools and their replacement by public schools (referred to in Malaysia as *sekolah kerajaan* or 'government schools') as the main vehicle of Islamic teaching (Kraince, 2009: 111). It also led to the spread throughout the national curriculum of moral values inspired by Islam. For non-Muslim pupils, who could hardly be forced to join the classes in Islam (*Pendidikan Islam*) given to their Muslim peers, a new discipline called 'moral education' (*pendidikan moral*) was introduced in 1983 with a view to teach them Islam-compatible, so-called 'universal' values (Balakrishnan, 2010). To this day, all students belonging to a religious minority must follow this course at all levels and in all institutions. Contrary to Muslim students, they do not receive teaching in their own religion within public schools.

In short, primary and secondary schools founded by both Christian and Muslim independent organizations were assimilated into the public education system over the last half-century, but only Islam made its way into the curriculum. This is in line with the fact that the discrimination of minorities in Malaysia does not follow only ethnic and linguistic lines but religious ones as well. In Sabah, where almost 90 per cent of the population are not Malay and some 40 per cent are not Muslim,<sup>2</sup> this situation causes a widespread feeling of injustice, resentment and mistrust towards state institutions. In particular, many locals denounce ex-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's 'Project IC', a policy by which the federal government altered Sabah's religious and political balance by surreptitiously offering citizenship to Muslims from Indonesia and the Philippines (see Chin, 2012: 116–117).

In the early 1990s, the federal government reformed the education sector in the framework of Vision 2020, a massive development programme. It laid great emphasis on education as a factor of national unity, social cohesion and economic growth (Lee, 1999: 87). Non-state actors were encouraged to play a more active part in the provision of educational services, especially at the pre-school and post-secondary levels, and to take over part of the 'production' of education from the state (Lee, 1999: 95). Christian organizations recently resumed their involvement in formal

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2. 'Population and housing census of Malaysia, 2010 (Sabah)', *Malaysian Department of Statistics*. Available at: [http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download\\_Population/files/population/05Jadual\\_Mukim\\_negeri/Mukim\\_Sabah.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/population/05Jadual_Mukim_negeri/Mukim_Sabah.pdf) (accessed 3 January 2014).

education in Malaysia in this context of increased demand for education and phenomenal growth of non-state actors (Lee, 1997: 35).

The next section addresses the role and position within Malaysian society of unskilled migrant workers and their families, as well as religious actors' involvement in their communities.

## **Migrant workers and churches in Sabah**

### *A precious workforce and a stigmatized community*

The state of Sabah has a substantial immigrant population. According to the last national census (2010),<sup>3</sup> close to 30 per cent of Sabah's 3.2 million inhabitants are 'non-Malaysian citizens' (*bukan warganegara*). But this official figure very likely underestimates the actual number of foreigners (*pendatang asing*), especially that of irregular or undocumented migrants, who make up a large part of the population and are, by essence, hard to monitor (Battistella, 2002: 358–359; see also Wong and Afrizal Teuku Anwar, 2003). Human mobility and multi-ethnicity have a long history in the region (Wong, 2007: 273), and border crossing, with or without the necessary travel documents, goes on largely unabated today (Battistella, 2002: 356–360).

In Sabah, much like in the rest of Malaysia, economic growth is powered by an abundance of cheap, unskilled labour. The main sectors of the economy (i.e. exports of primary commodities, tourism and manufacturing) all rely on this workforce. Menial, low-paying jobs such as construction, factory or plantation worker, waiter/waitress, logger, housemaid, etc. are filled with people who come from neighbouring countries, i.e. Indonesia and the Philippines, and who readily accept working conditions and wages in which even the poorest Sabahans show little interest. These people are considered more hardworking than the latter and are therefore favoured by private employers, especially ethnic Chinese. In many cases, their decision to emigrate arose out of necessity: they have left very poor regions, where paid labour is scarce and the population relies on subsistence farming.

Despite their importance for the country, however, unskilled migrant workers are treated as a disposable, temporary workforce in Malaysia and denied many rights (Nah, 2012: 498–501). They face restrictive immigration and labour laws as well as unfair treatment from employers and state representatives (Spaan et al., 2002: 167). Residence permits, for instance, are limited to a relatively short period of time and tied to a given position. Workers lose them if they decide to quit their job – even if only in order to escape exploitation and abuse, which occur frequently (Amnesty International, 2010). They are also forbidden to marry or give birth on Malaysian territory, or to bring relatives from abroad (Spaan et al., 2002: 169). In other words, they have no choice but to lead clandestine lives if they want to protect themselves, manage their professional activity in a relatively autonomous way or have a family – and many of them do. Having an uncertain legal status directly affects migrants' living conditions, forcing them, for instance, to reside in shacks and makeshift homes in areas of Sabah that are either peripheral or unsafe, and to fear constantly for their safety, freedom and livelihood (*Al Jazeera*, 2015).

In Malaysia, undocumented foreigners (*pendatang tanpa izin*) are also referred to as 'illegal immigrants' (*pendatang haram*), considered as criminals and treated accordingly. Armed

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3. 'Population and housing census of Malaysia, 2010 (Sabah)', *Malaysian Department of Statistics*. Available at: [http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download\\_Population/files/population/05Jadual\\_Mu\\_kim\\_negeri/Mukim\\_Sabah.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/population/05Jadual_Mu_kim_negeri/Mukim_Sabah.pdf) (accessed 3 January 2014).

operations have taken place in the past to drive these people out of the country (Operations *Nyah I* and II). Such crackdowns alternate with amnesties and widespread laissez-faireism, at least in Sabah, which arouses suspicion as to state authorities' commitment to solve the 'problem'. In 2011, some of my Malaysian interlocutors sardonically remarked that measures are only enforced when discontent among the 'local' population is judged to have reached dangerous levels.

Nevertheless, the demonizing propaganda against 'illegal' immigrants finds a strong echo in the public's opinion and stigmatizes the migrant community as a whole (Chin, 2002; Kassim, 2009). Media coverage tends to focus on crimes perpetrated by foreign workers and portrays them as a threat to national security. In our conversations, 'locals' repeatedly told me to 'beware of Indonesians and Filipinos'.

### *Church growth and out-of-school youth*

Contrasting with the prevalent wariness towards migrant workers and their families, Sabahan churches have progressively opened their doors to these people, which has led to the development of large congregations of foreign Christians. Migrants represent a unique opportunity for church growth in Sabah, for a number of reasons. First, there are only a few remaining Animists on the territory, the remainder having already converted to Christianity or Islam. Second, proselytizing Muslims in Malaysia is either illegal or risky. Art. 11 par. 4 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia allows federal states to 'control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam'. Sabah and a few other states have not done so. Nevertheless, Christian evangelists active in Sabah are cautious and abstain from openly proselytizing Muslims. Third, many Christian migrants have no choice but to change their religious affiliation upon arriving in Sabah because their former church is not represented there.

Nearly all of Sabah's main Christian denominations have set up schools for migrant workers' offspring. The official reason is that these children are excluded from the public education system and would remain without education if the churches did not attend to them. Indeed, according to the wording of Malaysia's law on education, only citizens are required to register their offspring in primary schools operated by the government. About 10 years ago, this provision began to be interpreted as excluding non-citizen children,<sup>4</sup> even though the vast majority of them were born in Sabah and have spent their whole life there. Some migrant parents found ways to circumvent the ban (buying fake identity documents, for instance), but a high proportion of school-aged children living in Sabah are not receiving any formal education because of it.

Thus, by opening special schools for them since the mid-2000s, Christian organizations have at once provided an answer to a serious societal problem and taken advantage of a regulatory framework to approach new potential members. Given the near demise of their educational activities among natives in the last half-century, it should not surprise that churches enthusiastically took advantage of the opportunity arising in connection with out-of-school children of Filipino and Indonesian migrant workers. It allowed them to establish links with the same types of communities they had targeted in the past in Malaysia, and who had represented a fertile ground for institutional growth, namely ethnic minorities and destitute working-class people.

Churches are by far not the only ones to provide schooling to children of migrants in Sabah. While doing fieldwork, I have come across a great variety of actors, ranging from an NGO catering

4. See art. 29A Malaysian Education Act (1996). Malaysia ratified the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1995, but with a reservation on art. 28 par. 1 (a) that guarantees compulsory and free education for all.

to more than 12,000 pupils to groups of Indonesian parents who run single schools for their own children. This diversity tallies with the Ministry of Education's 'alternative education' policy, which consists in outsourcing non-citizens' education to the private sector (see *Daily Express*, 2011).

Private Islamic organizations, for their part, are just about absent from the scene. This is certainly connected to the disappearance of independent Islamic schools in recent years (Kraince, 2009: 111), but also to the intertwining of Islamic and state structures in Malaysia more generally. For migrants, frequenting these structures implies exposing oneself to state monitoring, which most of them avoid doing. In my experience, at least, foreign Muslims living in Sabah tend to practice religion in their own small mosques (*surau*) rather than in the bigger ones (*masjid*) run by the Sabah State Islamic Religious Affairs Department.

In the next section, we take a close look at the two schools I worked in and explore the forms and meanings some Christian organizations give to formal education.

## **Case study: Two Christian schools**

### *Semi-clandestine joint ventures*

Like many other educational projects for children of migrants in Sabah, the two schools I used to work in are best conceived as joint ventures. Officially, the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre belonged to the Church of Christ in Sabah (CCS),<sup>5</sup> a local Lutheran church founded by Chinese immigrants at the beginning of the 20th century that opened its doors to Sabahan *Bumiputra* and non-Malaysian citizens in the 1970s. Pastor Laurence, the head of the CCS' Malay-speaking synod, nominally served as principal but rarely set foot on school grounds. The most important decisions were taken by Pastor Paul and his wife Dorothea, two South Korean evangelists who belonged to a Presbyterian denomination and practised a type of Christianity commonly labelled as charismatic or neo-Pentecostal. The couple spent several days a week at the Agape Centre, attending not only to school affairs but also to their other projects for Sabah's poor in the fields of health, agriculture and 'discipleship training'. At the time of my fieldwork, in 2011, they could look back on a highly productive 12-year stay in Sabah, despite the illicit nature of their presence and activities on Malaysian territory. Pastor Paul, in particular, had been expelled from Malaysia but later returned under a new identity. Paul and Dorothea were instrumental in helping a number of other South Korean missionaries settle down in Sabah and launch their own projects. They were the centre of a loosely knit but dynamic network.

Koreans provided most of the funding for the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre. They covered roughly half of the total running costs and regularly came up with the money required to buy or build new infrastructures. At the Agape Centre, donations from members of a parish affiliated with the Chinese-speaking synod of the CCS made up the largest part of the remaining necessary funds, whereas the Shepherd's Home relied more on fees paid by students' parents (approximately 40 MYR per month per child, or 3 to 10 per cent of a migrant worker's average salary in 2011). Interestingly, the same category of Malaysians who headed churches and financed schools for children of migrants in Sabah, namely the ethnic Chinese, owned a large part of local private businesses and employed many of these children's parents. Supporting schools was

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5. Names have been changed.

certainly a way for them to attract and retain a workforce, even though they preferred to emphasize the accomplishment of their duty as Christians.

Koreans and Malaysians tended to downplay each other's roles. Both claimed to have founded the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre in 2004 and 2005 respectively. Members of the CCS turned a blind eye to the Presbyterian missionaries' generous contribution and long-term involvement by referring to them as 'friends' who offered mere 'support'. In turn, Koreans conveniently ignored the – limited but nevertheless vital – legitimacy and protection the schools enjoyed as 'welfare activities' (*kebajikan*) of a well-established, century-old and state-registered church like the CCS. In all likelihood, however, the schools would have ceased to exist if one party had pulled out.

The Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre were not registered with Sabah's Education Department, and several measures were taken in order to evade control by state authorities. For instance, everyone referred to the institutions as 'education centres' (*pusat pendidikan*) instead of 'schools' (*sekolah*); teachers did not use material from official textbooks of the state curriculum directly but photocopied it instead; school premises were located in places where they would not easily be seen; lastly, the schools abstained from advertising their services (no signboard, flyers or website), except in the form of short videos sent to (potential) donors in South Korea. It was hoped that these measures would hinder the application of the Education Act, in particular the provisions requiring that all private schools offer moral – not religious – education to non-Muslim students and teaching in Islam to Muslim ones. For Pastors Paul and Laurence, this was simply not an option. Indeed, except for fasting during Ramadan and canteen menus devoid of pork, Muslim symbols and practices were forbidden at the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre.

The purpose of these measures was not so much to hide but rather to maintain as low a profile as possible. Sabah's education, immigration and police authorities knew about the existence of most schools for children of migrant workers, as well as their teaching methods and whereabouts. On occasions, they even paid them an impromptu visit. This happened twice during my year of fieldwork: state officials took a walk around the facilities and reminded teachers, with a menacing attitude, of the unlawful nature of their activities and the possibility that the schools would be shut down. But life went on as usual immediately thereafter. During my stay, at least, the threat did not materialize. This kind of undercover monitoring allowed state authorities to keep track of the situation and, at the same time, appear to be unconnected with existing, but unlawful educational projects.

### *Demography and discipline*

In terms of student population, the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre reflected a general pattern observable throughout similar schools in Sabah. Admission allegedly took place on a 'first come first served' basis and regardless of applicants' religious belonging. The Agape Centre catered to 190 students divided into roughly 50 per cent girls and 50 per cent boys; 75 per cent Christians, belonging to a wide array of denominations, and 25 per cent Muslims; a majority of Indonesians (ethnically categorized in class lists as *Tana Toraja*, *Timur*, *Bugis*, *Jawa*, etc.), a minority of Filipinos (*Suluk*, *Bajau*, *Visaya*, etc.) and a few mixed-race children. Compared to class lists at the Agape Centre, those at the Shepherd's Home revealed only one major difference: Muslim students accounted for only eight individuals (4 per cent) and, for some unexplained reason, all of them had been registered as Christians. In a couple of similar schools located in other



areas of Sabah, Muslim students were a majority (around 75 per cent) and Christians a minority (around 25 per cent).

As regards teachers, the general profile was: young, female, Christian, Malaysian and belonging to one of Sabah's numerous 'indigenous' communities. Their monthly salaries varied between 800 and 1200 MYR, which corresponds to one third of what professionally qualified teachers were paid in the public sector. My colleagues lacked pedagogical training and had only completed high school, but they faced a heavier workload than public teachers because they had to teach several subjects and take care of administrative and logistical tasks.

Their heavy burden was made bearable by the belief that God had entrusted them with a 'mission' (*missi*) and that they were accomplishing His will by helping poor people. For them, teaching meant 'serving God' (*melayani Tuhan*) and not simply attending to work (*bekerja*) (see Agai, 2002: 37–40). Pastor Paul regularly motivated teachers by calling them 'extraordinary' (*luar biasa*) people, or 'the chosen ones', and convinced them to 'sacrifice' (*berkorban*), arguing that God would repay their efforts in the future. Teachers rarely complained, although they looked exhausted at times. When not able to keep up or do better, they generally blamed themselves, rarely the management. As Bornstein observes, faith can be used as a 'controlling discourse of institutional power' to put pressure on employees to perform (Bornstein, 2005: 65). But the turnover was high among 'local' staff. One teacher, in particular, quit the job shortly after I left Sabah in what looked like a desperate move to avoid vexation and exhaustion.

Pupils' mothers and fathers were absent from daily life at the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre. They were not allowed to access school premises and there was no parents' association. Only on graduation day could they enter classrooms, enquire about their sons' and daughters' progress and partake in the institutional decision-making process concerning their offspring's educational careers. There was a distance and weak communication between teachers and parents. My attempts to enquire about the latter's opinion of our schools failed. Parents replied with polite and reassuring words, which gave me the impression that they wanted to avoid offending me as a staff member. We can infer from the fact that many more parents tried to register a child than there were places available that, on the whole, they valued the schools' services. But whether or not parents were dissatisfied with certain aspects, and which particular ones, remains a mystery. In any case, keeping parents away on both physical and organizational levels gave the staff and management more freedom in defining the schools' educational objectives and methods.

### *Curriculum, rituals and Jesus' love*

The Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre could hardly be described as religious schools if this implies a major focus on the study of religious texts. Yet, Christianity played a prominent role in these institutions. In every classroom, a poster stating 'Jesus, we love You!' or a small cross were hanging on the wall. In the office, teachers played English, Malay and Korean pop songs celebrating God, and posted declarations of faith or passages of the Bible on Facebook. On the other hand, Bible study took up only two hours a week, the rest of the schedule being dedicated mainly to *Bahasa Malaysia*, English, mathematics and science. Other schools operated by churches with a majority of Christian students had similar schedules, but in those hosting more Muslims, formal teaching in Christianity was left out, most likely for fear of state repression or attacks from Muslim groups. Indeed, Malaysian Christians who cater to Muslims have often been accused in recent years of seeking to divert them from Islam and in some cases accusations were accompanied by acts of violence.

Apart from Bible study, the way religion manifested itself most obviously in everyday life in these schools was through a number of rituals. Students prayed in their classrooms several times a day as well as once a week, during 'chapel', when they gathered in a big hall, sang songs of praise and listened to sermons. Younger boys and girls enjoyed these lively events and seemed quite receptive. They learned the words of prayers, the lyrics of songs, the moves of choreographies and the answers to preachers' pitches in no time, thanks in large part to the simplicity and repetitiveness of them. Teenagers participated in a less active and enthusiastic way. Some of them looked bored, clapped their hands apathetically and only moved their lips instead of singing. Perhaps they had grown weary of these routines. In any case, chapels and prayers were considered to be more fun than Bible study, which teachers painstakingly tried to make attractive to students. They were also undoubtedly more effective in diffusing and anchoring Christian messages, values and attitudes. Indeed, as rituals, they involved participants' bodies, which serve as an interface between the outside world and individual consciousness (see Woodhead, 2011: 132), and therefore gave access to participants' intellectual and emotional worlds, thereby enabling particularly effective learning and teaching. Pastor Paul seemed well aware of these rituals' potential to strengthen the faith of Christian staff and pupils, and 'reveal Jesus' message of love' to Muslims, for he insisted on chapel and prayers taking place regularly (see Lindhardt, 2011).

In addition to chapel, similar events took place when foreign Christians visited the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre in the framework of 'short mission trips' (see Chaisinthop, this volume; Howell, 2012). These 'friends' from faraway places (e.g. Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, the United States) organized fun and emotive activities that always carried a distinctly Christian message. They made great efforts to develop a special relationship with children within the few hours at their disposal and therefore did not hesitate to spontaneously cuddle or tease them. Such intimate behaviours served to demonstrate that Christians care for each other even when they are complete strangers and do not share a common tongue.

Everyone at the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre was supposed to take part in rituals. Not everyone, however, did so willingly. Some individuals tried to avoid being involved, which exposed them to pressure from others. Several Muslim students, for instance, acted in a recalcitrant way when asked to lead prayers. In one of my classes, a boy systematically refused to comply. One day his comrades started yelling: 'He must [do it]!' (*Dia mesti!*). Eventually, the boy delivered an incredibly messy prayer and concluded with a chuckle after the final 'amen'. In a similar situation, another Muslim boy pretended he did not know how to give thanks and then mumbled something while covering his face with both hands – a gesture resembling the Islamic, not the Christian way of praying. These acts of resistance revealed individuals' agency and the limits of the institution's influence over them. However, they were isolated incidents, which did not really cause any disruption in the ordinary course of events.

Beyond obviously religious rituals such as prayers and chapel, the experience of Christianity at the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre was conveyed through everyday interactions between children and adults. Pastor Paul regularly told teachers that 'the most important thing is to love these children'. My colleagues complied by dedicating a good part of their free time to chatting or playing sports with their pupils, taking them on excursions or introducing them to their families. They did their best to grow fond of them, which was not necessarily an easy task, for they were initially as prejudiced against Indonesians and Filipinos as many of their compatriots. One teacher, for instance, admitted he was 'repelled by the smell' of these children upon his arrival at the Agape Centre. He found them dirty and loud, and felt like they belonged to a different world altogether: 'they were like . . . black, and me white'. But he soon learned to get over such feelings so as to

establish a good and close rapport with them. Students were also strongly encouraged to show their attachment in conspicuous ways. They did so by being tactile, offering presents, making nice comments and writing sweet messages to their teachers.

This intimate and caring mutual relationship not only counterbalanced the strict discipline enforced during classes, it also stood as a proof of Jesus' love and its capacity to change the world. It turned indifferent or hostile Malaysians into people capable of caring for the underdogs and thus improved their morals – I was often reminded of the contrast between Christians' demonstrations of affection towards children of migrant workers and Malay-Muslims' aloofness. At the same time, this close relationship between teachers and students provided a warm and safe space within Malaysian society where the marginalized migrants could feel welcome and respected. Therefore, 'Jesus' message of love' could hardly come across as an empty discourse or a broken promise. Quite to the contrary, it imposed itself as a relevant explanation for something that really happened and affected people's lives.

### *Salvation and success*

At the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre, children of migrant workers were considered as the have-nots par excellence. Staff and management regularly portrayed them as disadvantaged, poor, uprooted, victims of their fate, abandoned by their families, excluded from society at large, etc. Children were also deemed to lack basic moral values. One of my colleagues explained for instance that students at the Agape Centre were 'unable to differentiate between good and evil' upon enrolling, but that they acquired this skill at school. Like other adults around her, she assumed that, when left to themselves, children of migrants turned into paupers, sinners or criminals, even though there was little empirical evidence to support her belief. Prevalent representations are perhaps best summarized by Pastor Paul's motivational speeches to the staff, in which he kept talking of 'wandering children', who need 'protection' and could pose a 'threat to society' if not taken care of properly (see Stephens (n.d.: 1–2) quoted in Malkki and Martin, 2003).

In turn, education allegedly: 1) pulled children of migrants out of a desperate material situation and gave them better prospects in life; 2) made them decent, 'useful and God-fearing people' (*orang yang begun dan takut kepada Tuhan*), thereby rescuing their souls; and 3) contributed to building tomorrow's 'peaceful and well-ordered society' (*masyarakat yang tenteram dan teratur baik*) by producing the necessary subjects.<sup>6</sup> In other words, education saved these children, both materially and spiritually, and, by doing so, simultaneously saved society as a whole.

This seeming miracle relied on a 'transformation of [students'] mindset', a process Pastor Paul deemed essential. As a born-again Christian, he had gone through it himself and seen his life take a radically different course. In telling the story of his life, Paul stressed that cancer had almost killed him, but that he was cured instantly and his life received a new meaning when he accepted to 'follow Jesus all the way through'.

The desired change of mentality was to occur on both spiritual and material levels. At the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre, as we have seen above, a wide range of rituals and a particular kind of interpersonal relationship were deployed to bring students to a similar turning point as the one experienced by Paul, i.e. the acknowledgement of Jesus' love and the acceptance of His role as saviour. These efforts did not trigger any conversion from Muslim students during my stay in Sabah – conversions of students were not aimed at them directly anyway, because that

6. Excerpts from the Agape Centre's statutes.

could make the schools appear as obvious centres for proselytism – but they did impact on Christian students' general level of religious awareness, if we are to judge from the numerous declarations of faith they published on Facebook, for instance.

In parallel, students' 'transformation of mindset' implied adopting new conceptions with regard to one's worldly life. Paul explained for instance that 'we try to help them get rid of their feeling of being victimized all the time and their feeling of self-worthlessness. [...] If we manage to pull them out of their mentality of inferiority, they will be successful.' The de facto principal and his staff attributed migrants' living conditions to a number of negative ideas, feelings and behaviours prevalent in their community. As a replacement, they advocated the notion of 'success' (*berjaya*) and the necessity to strive for it. They saw no contradiction, here, with the acknowledgement of Jesus' love. On the contrary, a genuine metamorphosis of the self could only happen at the interface between the divine and the mundane.

'Success' was promoted at the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre through a regime of value with three recognizable neoliberal characteristics. First, these schools exhorted children to adopt a proactive attitude in life. For instance, they were systematically asked to 'volunteer'. The system worked quite well: boys and girls enthusiastically raised their hands, even when it came to solving exercises on the blackboard or doing dirty jobs like cleaning the toilets. Students were also supposed to step forward at some point in their educational career to become 'supervisors' (*pengawas*) for a year. The job involved maintaining order and enforcing school rules, and *pengawas* were expected to act on their own initiative, without receiving orders. This worked less well since teachers had to regularly organize briefing sessions, even a yearly 'leadership' (*kemimpinan*) camp (including a harsh 'healing' session) in order to set things right.

Second, students were pushed to be competitive. The Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre laid great emphasis on 'excellence' (*kecemerlangan*). The concept figured prominently in article 1 of the schools' statutes, next to 'success'. In every class, 'best students' were selected, received presents and public praise. Bad ones, in contrast, were admonished and punished, often in humiliating ways. Teachers strove to 'cure' students of their 'laziness' and repeatedly told them not to idle ('*Jangan malas-malas!*'). Paul pushed everyone to outperform public schools, thereby ignoring two facts, namely that the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre had comparatively lower resources, and that some children had a family background of illiteracy. The emphasis on excellence guaranteed a higher general level in both schools than in similar institutions, which gave them a comparatively good reputation. It also led a few gifted students to surpass themselves and deliver impressive performances. But weaker ones, who made up the majority, had difficulties keeping up with the rhythm and, perhaps for this reason, lack of self-confidence was a serious issue in both schools.

Third and finally, students were taught to desire upward social mobility and material possessions. A good illustration is the fact that teachers tended to devalue jobs typically taken by unskilled foreigners in Malaysia while concurrently making prestigious ones appear to be within students' reach. This is not to say that my colleagues sincerely believed that their pupils would one day become clerks, civil servants or doctors – 'You can't expect too much of these children', they sometimes told me – but they nevertheless made any path in life seem possible. 'Hope', a central virtue within Christianity, was often invoked and became synonymous with boundless ambition. Under adults' influence, children themselves professed 'We have a dream!' and talked about going to university in South Korea or becoming famous pop singers.

According to the institutional discourse, there was no doubt that schooling at the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre empowered students. The expressions 'to give these children a

chance', 'a unique opportunity' or 'the choice' could be heard over and over, especially in presentations to donors. But did schooling at the Shepherd's Home or Agape Centre really make a fundamental difference to individual careers after school? How did it affect students' lives in the long run? To answer these questions properly, one would have had to follow up on students' evolution over a number of years and interview a number of alumni. I was unable to do so, however, because my research was limited to one year and the schools had not been operating for long enough to produce more than a handful of alumni, several of whom had relocated far away. These practical constraints led me to focus on the process of leaving school after graduation. At that stage in students' careers, at least, the empowering effect of schooling was not striking at all. At the Shepherd's Home, almost half of the sixth-graders had no particular plans for the near future. No one had taken any decision for them and they were still trying to cope with a new situation. The other half could be divided into two groups. In the first one, teenagers were going to stay in Sabah and work. The jobs awaiting them resembled those of their parents and the latter had often helped in securing them: several girls had found a position as a waitress or maid; two boys were to become, respectively, a mechanic and a logger. In the second group, students were going to depart for Indonesia or the Philippines and continue their studies there. The decision had been taken by their parents for either financial, logistical/familial or educational reasons. The idea of leaving Sabah, the place where they had grown up, made them sad or anxious. It meant saying goodbye to friends and (nuclear) family, and starting a new life in a country they barely knew. Nevertheless, they understood their parents' motives and were willing to comply with their choice. In short, nothing indicated an increased faculty of individuals to decide for themselves, choose a different path or to do so with any more confidence. At the Agape Centre, all sixth-graders entered the school's secondary level, which had been created a year earlier. There, they would begin to receive 'vocational training' in computer skills, mechanics and cooking. Judging from this curriculum, the school prepared older students for a rapid entry into the labour market as low-skilled workers rather than anything else.

The more striking effect of empowerment, in my view, was that it obscured the conditions responsible for children of migrants' situation in Sabah (see also Freire, 1996: 55; Kamat, 2004: 169). By constantly promoting neoliberal values, the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre led students to believe that their fate rested entirely on their own shoulders. It was up to them to accept Jesus and 'make it' (as the expression goes) . . . or fail. In other words, failure (which amounted here to an unchanged social status) was as much a matter of personal responsibility and faith as was success. This automatically made irrelevant the numerous disadvantages that affect children of migrants in comparison to those of 'locals' in the field of education: services that have to be paid for, fewer and less accessible schools, fewer hours of class, untrained and overworked staff, lack of facilities, etc. More generally, it masked the state's responsibility in setting up a normative framework leading to huge structural inequalities between Malaysians and foreigners.

When asked to talk about these inequalities, the eldest among my students – i.e. those likely to display a nascent political awareness – could point to one or another, but they never raised the issue themselves. They did not seem to be scandalized by the situation of migrants in Sabah or to find that it required any form of mobilization or intervention. Rather, they took it as a given, a starting point from which everyone had to 'do [one's] best'. Not once did I hear them blame the Malaysian government – or the Indonesian or Filipino governments, for that matter – for obstacles that migrants face in their daily lives. The Agape Centre and Shepherd's Home trained them to 'be grateful' (*bersyukur*) (to God, the teachers, the church), and grateful they were, at least in my experience.

Not surprisingly, the issue of migrants' rights was scarcely ever brought up at the Shepherd's Home and the Agape Centre, at least never in front of students. When discussions among adults did revolve around the topic, no one actively questioned immigration policies. Teachers resented their discrimination as Christians in a predominantly Muslim country, and regularly reaffirmed their right to equal treatment, but they did not convey this feeling of injustice to students. Pastor Laurence himself (euphemistically) admitted that the CCS had 'very limited activities in terms of advocacy'. Paul and his team did not have any either. The church and missionaries sought to help migrants in coping with their daily lives but not to change the conditions affecting these lives, especially if it required confronting state authorities. This stance was representative of all Christian organizations I encountered in Sabah. It may seem apolitical, in the sense that these actors avoid taking a stand on an issue of central significance to society. However, we should not let ourselves be blinded by an understanding of political action that equates it with activism and intervention in the public sphere. As I argue in the next section of this article, Christian organizations are playing a thoroughly political role in Sabah, even though they seem to refrain from doing so.

### **Governing Sabah's migrant population**

At first glance, the involvement of Christian organizations with migrants contrasts starkly with state authorities' treatment of these people. The latter are known for their discriminatory and repressive policies, whereas the former enjoy a reputation as emancipators of the oppressed. This dichotomy fits well with the general representation of Malaysian state authorities and churches as distant actors increasingly at odds with one another. In recent years, in particular, a series of scandals linked with the growing importance of Islamism in national politics has placed Christian groups in opposition to state representatives.

However, the ethnography developed above reveals a more complex picture, in which these entities' respective discourses and practices combine to shape the fate of unskilled migrant workers and their families. Without unequal treatment, indifference and repression from state authorities, the Church's message of egalitarianism, concern and salvation would lose much of its meaning and attractiveness; the first is needed as a backdrop against which the latter stands out. Conversely, the Church's 'welfare activities' attenuate the hardships endured by migrants as a result of discriminatory state policies. Together with those provided by other charitable organizations, they make Sabah a more welcoming place, which encourages migrants to accept settling or remaining, and working there (see Bornstein, 2005: 117 and 171, referring to Simmel, 1965). Malaysian officials are well aware of this, which explains why they do not shut down Church facilities, even though they could do so in many cases by invoking a violation of the law.

This kind of overlap is not without historical precedent. In colonial times, missionaries and British administrators often found common ground: the institutionalized import of labour for the plantations gave missionaries the opportunity to trigger the growth of congregations from within communities of migrant workers, while dispensaries and mission schools reduced the cost of health and education for the British colonial state, thereby helping build up and retain these communities (Roxborough, 1986). Both parties took advantage of each other's policies and, by and large, abstained from questioning them.

Thus, it seems more appropriate to conceive the management of Sabah's migrant community as resulting from the articulation of various political agendas, in particular those of private businesses, state authorities and Christian organizations. Looking at things in this light allows us to see the close fit between certain state programmes and certain forms of Christian morality. As I have

observed in the case of education, charismatic organizations promote a regime of value with neoliberal characteristics, which shifts responsibility to the individual and thereby hinders collective action. By doing so, they ensure children of migrants' docility and their acceptance of the discrimination they and their parents face. Though churches in Sabah generally claim to empower young non-Malaysians through education, what stood out among those I studied was rather that they reproduced the latter's social subordination and thus guaranteed their exploitability.

The position of migrants as subordinate, poor and ostracized is what makes them valuable to a wide range of actors. The government needs an abundant and cheap workforce to support the economy. Private businesses are looking for exploitable and servile labour to increase their profit margins. And churches and missionaries rely on the existence of a class of outcasts for the propagation of their message of 'love' and 'hope' – among both these people and their proclaimed benefactors – and the growth of Christianity within as well as beyond Sabah. It is therefore not surprising that, for the time being at least, none of these entities, Christian organizations included, is genuinely seeking to improve the fate of the migrant community as a whole.

One could argue that churches are trying to make the best of a bad situation. In a context of political and religious tensions, and given their relatively weak position, doing advocacy work in favour of the migrant community would be tricky and could expose them and their members to negative repercussions. Persecution against Christians in Malaysia is a real threat and must be acknowledged as such, even if it does not quite reach the same levels as in other countries. It may well explain foreign missionaries' prudence and efforts to operate below the radar. But several elements suggest that it plays only a secondary role in the passive stance of Malaysian churches on the issue of migrants' rights. More importantly, advocacy does not appear to them as a sound strategy. Given that the majority of migrants are of Muslim backgrounds, their recognition as members of Malaysian society in their own right would generate an increased number of Muslims who have a say in public and political life. That might alter the balance of power between religions and make Islam even more prominent, which obviously would not be in the interest of Malaysian churches. My Christian interlocutors in Sabah were well aware of the manner in which Project IC had changed the electoral voting patterns by reshuffling Sabah's ethnic composition, and they counted among the project's staunchest and most vocal critics. They were ready to treat migrants as equals in the realm of Christianity, to sit next to them in church, if necessary, but not to turn them into citizens. Asked to explain why the Agape Centre, a school catering exclusively to non-Malaysian citizens and stateless children, had a large Malaysian flag, one teacher replied: 'True, [Malaysia]'s not [the students'] country, but they are here anyway, at least for now, so they might as well love it'.

## Conclusion

This article has shown how Christian organizations participate through charitable interventions in the management of a disadvantaged segment of the population in Sabah, i.e. that of unskilled foreign workers and their families. It started out with a historical account of churches' involvement in education in Malaysia. Then, it described migrants' living conditions and their relationship to state authorities, private businesses and non-state religious actors such as churches and missionaries. In a third part, the focus moved on to two specific schools led by charismatic Christians. I analyzed the education provided by these schools and observed that it had a remarkable dual character as religious and neoliberal: the salvation they aimed at was as much about faith in Jesus Christ as it was about worldly success. These two teaching institutions also emphasized the

responsibility of individuals for their fate and, by doing so, I argued, made students oblivious to their discrimination as non-Malaysians. Thus, some Christian organizations in Sabah are contributing to the exploitation of the valuable human resource that migrant communities constitute, even though their institutional discourse is rather one of empowerment.

At first glance, such a finding could be considered to contrast with scholarly work portraying Christian development interventions, and in particular Pentecostal-charismatic ones, as effective agents of social change (see e.g. Freeman, 2012: 15 and 26). But the schools I studied did alter Sabah's social landscape in fundamental ways: they brought forth a network of Christians reaching beyond denominational differences, national boundaries and ethnic belonging, and they largely succeeded in anchoring a global Christian habitus deep in the hearts, minds and bodies of children and adults who came from various, not necessarily pious, backgrounds. What the protagonists of Christian charity in Sabah avoided doing was to meddle in state and business affairs and that is why they may seem almost unconnected with immigration and labour policies and practices. But we should not be deceived by such an apparently neutral stance. Religious engagements with the poor are always political in nature, whether they imply speaking out against the structural conditions conducive to poverty and exclusion, like movements inspired by the theology of liberation do (Cooper, 2013), or remaining silent and contributing to the reproduction of these conditions. In Sabah, under the influence of Pentecostal-charismatic theology, charitable interventions borrowed from a prevalent neoliberal regime of value and translated it into the spiritual realm. In doing so, they shaped new subjectivities, albeit in ways consistent with the interests of powerful institutional actors – hence their legitimacy and effectiveness.

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