

Faith and uncertainty: migrants' journeys between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore

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BASTIDE, Lois. Faith and uncertainty: migrants' journeys between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. *Health, risk & society*, 2015, p. 1-20

DOI : 10.1080/13698575.2015.1071786

Available at:

<http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:75852>

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Short title: Faith and uncertainty

Keywords: Risk; uncertainty; rationality; agency; risk perception; culture; transnational migration

Acknowledgements: This paper draws on a research which has been funded by an “Aire Culturelle” grant from the French Ministry of Research and Education, and by a research grant from the National Center for Arts and Crafts, Paris.

Abstract

In Indonesia, transnational labour migrations have become a major source of foreign currency over the past twenty years. On migration routes and abroad, migrants are often subjected to abusive, sometimes violent or even deadly experiences. Yet, the ‘migration industry’ can count on increasing numbers of candidates. Drawing on 20-month multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2009 in Java (Indonesia), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) and Singapore, I explore how, under these circumstances, migrant workers relate to this risky adventure. As it appears, local conceptions of ‘fate’ help to overcome fear: as future is perceived in terms of destiny, and since destiny lies ultimately in the hands of God, dealing with potential risks is a matter of religious *faith*: Only by surrendering sincerely to Allah is the migrant able to secure his or her future in this dangerous milieu. In this cognitive framework, incidents are conceived of as *cobaan Tuhan* – godly trials - full of meanings, which are meant to test one’s faith in God. And bad experiences, rather than being seen as

contingent, are perceived as godly signs, which need to be interpreted in order to comply with God's will. I aim to show how this worldview formulates risk and/or uncertainty in terms of *nasib* and/or *takdir* (fate; destiny). This relation to risk, in turn, challenges Western-centered risk theories in adding nuance to the relationship between agency and risk, by tracing a singular conceptual tension between risk and *fate*.

Introduction

In this article I explore how labour migrants who undertake transnational journeys deal with the uncertainty and danger of their voyage. Drawing on data from an ethnographic study of Indonesian labour migrants, I examine the ways in which they deal with the numerous uncertainties they face while in migration. Besides practices developed in order to control risks materially, through the use of social capital or informal insurance practices, I show that migrant workers also engage religious faith as a means of managing these challenges. My focus, in this paper, is on this latter type of risk thinking. I thus examine how religious practices relate to the use of concepts such as risk, and what this religious ethos tells us about risk theories. In conclusion, I come back to the relationship between material and religious means of dealing with risks, by proposing that risk mitigation practices, in this context, can be conceptualized in terms of "mixed rationalities".

Risk and Migration

Risk and rationality

In Indonesia, transnational labour migrations have grown steadily over the past twenty years. In 2010, there were six and a half million Indonesian citizens officially working across a dozen countries, mostly in Pacific Asia and in the Middle East. If we add to the picture the flow of irregular workers, which by nature is impossible to account for precisely but is sizable

by every estimate¹, Indonesia counts among the five biggest labour exporters worldwide. These labour journeys are highly hazardous, as migrant workers are subjected to abusive, sometimes violent or even deadly experiences. In these senses, *dealing with risks* is thus a critical component of migration experiences. Yet, this aspect of migration tends to remain somewhat neglected and under-conceptualised within migration theories, or is considered only in peripheral ways.

Unsurprisingly due to the prominence of the concept of risk in economic theory, economists have tackled this intersection most explicitly by considering migration as a means of dealing with *risks to livelihood*, at the individual or at the household level (Massey et al. 1993; Amuedo-Dorantes and Pozo 2006; Agarwal and Horowitz 2002; Yang and Choi 2007).

Within this tradition, risks are thought to be dealt with by individuals in terms of a calculative balance between potential threats and benefits in the context of decision making processes related to migration projects; these decisions are analysed based on rather simplistic models of rationality (Williams and Baláž 2012).

In the fields of sociology and political science, however, the relationship between risk and migration has mainly been dealt with in more nebulous ways. Few studies have foregrounded risk as an explicit conceptual problem. Among those, some studies deal with risk pooling strategies in migrant social networks (Mazzucato 2009), while other research tackles the fact that taking risk provides positive identity attributes, as referred to for instance in the 'lifestyle migration' literature (O'Reilly and Benson 2009). Another strand of inquiry has focused on the government of migration, with many authors stressing the increasing framing of migration as a *security* issue (see for instance: Faist 2004; Bigo 2002; Huysmans 2000; Neal 2009; and for Indonesia: Arifianto 2009). Even if risk as a concept is not discussed in its own right, these analytical frameworks deal with the construction of migration as a *societal risk*.

In the context of Southeast Asia, researchers have drawn on the concept of governmentality to stress the unequal distribution of social vulnerabilities across the political body according to nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, and occupation (see for instance: Yeoh 2006; Kaur 2004; Piper 2008; Silvey 2006; Garcés-Mascareñas 2009; Ford 2006). For example, Aihwa Ong has identified the consolidation of ‘graduated citizenship’ (2006) and ‘variegated sovereignty’ regimes (2008) in Asian tiger economies, which organise the vulnerability of migrants across the region. A differentiated and unequal ‘risk landscape’ can therefore be inferred from these studies.

Besides this literature, some ethnographic studies have reversed the focus by looking at the various ways in which migrants *cope with* the threats faced while migrating across the region: by designing specific spatial practices (Yeoh et Huang 1998; Silvey 2004); by developing border crossing strategies (Lindquist 2009); or by using illegality as a means of avoiding exploitative labour relations (Killias 2010). All of these types of research deal indirectly with risks, yet they do not consider risk as a specific topic and they do not discuss it as a core conceptual issue.

Given these gaps, in this article I focus explicitly on risk as a conceptual problem by looking at risk mitigation practices in the context of regional migrations in Southeast Asia. I will examine how Indonesian migrant workers negotiate, individually and collectively, their relationship to the many uncertainties throughout their journeys. I will show that in this social setting individuals relate to impending threats in terms of *fate*. Rather than contingent, potential harm is perceived as pertaining to destiny. And this belief in destiny raises an important issue: given this conception, can we speak of *risks* considering that ‘(a)s long as the future is interpreted as either predetermined or independent of human activities, the term “risk” makes no sense at all.’ (Renn, 1992: 56)?

Using this social-constructionist view of risk as a starting point (Zinn 2008a; Lupton 1999) is interesting because it allows a more fine-grained definition of the term: rather than taking the existence of risks for granted it supposes that risk is a specific way to frame reality. Thus, in order to talk about risks, several criteria have to be met: First, the future must at least be seen as partly undetermined, otherwise risk turns into fate. Second, it must be perceived in terms of threats and possibilities. Last, these threats and possibilities must necessarily be correlated with human activities, otherwise no risk can be attributed to any course of action. It is only when these three conditions are met that we can think of a social subject that undertakes risk-calculation to frame practical engagements.

This conceptual framework is useful since it breaks down the concept into several sub-components and opens up the possibility of distinguishing between different strains of risk-thinking according to the specific articulations between these three criteria. It means that we need to look at actual practices in order to unravel the kind of relations they express regarding the future, what modes of framing threats they reveal, and whether or not these threats are dealt with using specific strategies. In this respect, by locating risk in a social setting where the future is perceived in religious terms, the case of Indonesian migrant workers raises several interesting issues.

As David Le Breton (1995) phrases it, ‘The notion of risk involves distancing from an existential metaphysics and refraining from seeing behind events the mark of a divinity rather than the play of circumstances’ (my translation, Le Breton, 1995: e1). This highlights a central assumption of risk theories: that ‘risk thinking’ is a type of rationality which draws a clear line between incompatible ways of representing the future. Accepting this assumption means that the traditional world of superstitious or religious practices and conceptualisations is termed irrational. In this *episteme*, future is not apprehended as a space opened to human agency and action but as fate; as a consequence, the future is met with passivity. On the other

hand, we would have modernity (often equated with ‘Western civilisation’) with its forms of calculative rationality, where risk participates in the ‘colonisation of the future’ as Giddens asserted: ‘The notion of risk becomes central in a society which is taking leave of the past, of traditional ways of doing things, and which is opening itself up to a problematic future’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 111). In this historical process, the future is seen as a partial outcome of human praxis and it is considered amenable to human action through various individual and collective forms of prudential practices, giving rise to the ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992).

As with every clear-cut conception, this neat analytical distinction between risk and destiny, rationality and tradition, should raise a healthy dose of suspicion for any empirically minded social scientist. Having said that, my hypothesis is that in the context of my fieldwork and social scientific approaches to risk, we face ‘mixed forms’ of rationality that do not match this binary divide. If risk is related to a certain conception of the future as amenable to human action, there we find *another form* of risk thinking that needs to be qualified.

Migration routes: Manufactured uncertainties and lived experiences of vulnerability

Since the late 1960s in Singapore and since the 1980s in Malaysia, transnational labour has been mobilised on an increasing scale and through increasingly formalised channels (Kaur, 2007). Foreign workers have been used by successive governments in both countries to establish a position and secure a position within globalising economic geographies. In the two ‘developmental states’ (Castells, 1992; Low, 2001; Olds and Yeung, 2004), it was a way of securing economic growth and promoting the fast development of a middle class that was to form core political clienteles for so-called ‘semi-authoritarian’ regimes (Ong, 1999). This government-driven social mobility resulted in labour shortages in the lower segments of labour markets, as nationals moved toward more qualified jobs. At the same time, shortages of reproductive labour in the domestic sphere also became pervasive, as policies were developed to increase the enrollment of women citizens in labour markets. Last, and more

broadly perhaps, discrepancies between economic and demographic growth contributed widely to the need for labour imports (Drabble, 2000). In both countries, the influx of migrant labour was used by the state to ease these tensions: 'guest workers' have thus been used to supply those segments of labour markets abandoned by nationals and have been mobilised as a market-oriented solution to a new demand for labor in the domestic sphere. As a whole, this transnational labour force has enabled Malaysia to retain its niche position within the 'archipelago economy' (Veltz, 1996) by providing cheap labour for offshore production.

As this development model was established over the past 30 years, Malaysia and Singapore's dependence upon transnational labour has grown steadily; in 2011, estimates put the total number of foreign workers in Malaysia at anywhere between 2 and 4 million, or between 18 to 30 per cent of the total employed labour force of 12 million. In Singapore, 544,700 transnational workers were recruited to feed low-skilled jobs, out of a total workforce of 3,443,700 (17%) in 2013. Thus, migrant labour has gradually become a centerpiece of governmental policies, as it has allowed the lowering of tensions between the social costs of neoliberal economic policies aimed at integrating global economic circuits, partly by attracting transnational corporations, and the fostering of national populations. In this context, migrant workers have absorbed most of the damaging effects of Singapore and Malaysia's developmental strategies, as they constitute the segment of the population most immediately exposed to neoliberal discipline – highly exploitative labour relations – and, as non-citizens, to the harshest effects of the biopolitical ordering of the national body² – as the 'foreign other' of consolidating national identities. In this position, guest workers are subject to cross-cutting sets of contingent practices, somewhat self-consciously designed by governments, which intersect and result in their confinement within segregated physical, social and political spaces.

Conversely, in Indonesia, labour exports have become a major source of foreign currency and a sizable economic sector with total remittances of up to 7.4 billion US dollars in 2013, a figure that does not take into account the recruitment and placement business, which is a highly lucrative economic sector involving recruiters, financial institutions and transport (Bastide, 2015a). Overall, labour exports have thus become a critical economic sector, backed currently by a comprehensive institutional environment. They are now promoted as an important part of the country's export policies and are being integrated in bilateral trade agreement negotiations through commercial attachés in Indonesian embassies. In other words, migrant workers have been politically "manufactured" as commodity exports. Moreover, related policies have tended to subordinate the organization of their safety and protection to this economic role.

As these specific needs and uses in the three countries were increasingly institutionally entrenched, Indonesian workers became an important piece of an aggregating transnational political economy. As Malaysia and Singapore relied increasingly on these migration flows, it was important to secure both their influxes and the specific qualities of this labour: its price and servility. Obviously, none of these 'qualities' are natural to these circulating populations, even though they are often represented as such in destination countries: that is, they need to be 'manufactured'. Additionally, migration routes – understood as specific social spaces – have played a critical role in this respect. Without entering into too much detail, two important points need to be made about the organisation of these labour flows: first, these transnational circuits articulate different places that display characteristics of 'disciplinary institutions' (Foucault, 1975) – spatial confinement; spatial and temporal partitioning (*quadrillage*); and policing. Second, they are the outcome of complex linkages between official, unofficial, and criminal networks.

When migrant workers enter migration routes, they are thus ‘circulated’ between different ‘transit houses’ – *penampungan* - where they wait for a calling visa or to be transferred to another ‘labour broker’; training centres, where they receive a minimal education for their future job; their workplaces in destination countries; and, sometimes, immigration detention centers. In all these locations, they usually undergo harsh disciplinary practices – bodily constraints such as mandatory haircuts for women, the inculcation of specific postures and attitudes, or, in the worst cases, sexual abuses; the imposition of rigid spatial and temporal grids; compulsory confinement; and other such practices. This results in workers being subjected to derogatory regimes of citizenship on migration routes and to disciplinary processes that would not be conceivable under the umbrella of full citizenship entitlements in all three countries. In addition, these disciplinary processes often end up in heightened forms of violence in the workplace in destination countries.

Regarding the second point, the intricacy between official, unofficial and criminalised migration routes make them highly *unpredictable* for migrant workers. Migration routes are made of regular, irregular or criminal segments, which can be articulated in long chains (Bastide, 2015a). Migrant workers can thus be traded between different business partners, and there is little room for these workers to guarantee their final status in destination countries: opting for the legal process, in Indonesia, is by no means a guarantee that one will end up in a regular situation in Malaysia and Singapore. Conversely, choosing an unofficial route can end up in a regular situation as a documented worker. More fundamental to the discussion perhaps, whatever their final status as workers, migrants are often subject to more – in Malaysia – or less – in Singapore – drastic forms of institutional and interpersonal violence.

When we combine these characteristics, two things become apparent: first, that migrant workers are often exposed to diverse forms of moral and physical, and institutional and interpersonal violence, which make migration a fateful journey. Widespread moral and

sometimes physical violence unfold in transit houses as in the workplace. Cases of migrant workers – especially transnational domestic workers, an exclusively feminine job – subjected to deadly violence by their employer are commonplace stories in the Indonesian press. Workers are also subject to institutional and social violence. In Malaysia, national and municipal police forces, immigration officers and state-sponsored militiamen repress migrants' presences and visibility in public spaces (Bastide, 2014; Garcés-Mascreñas, 2010; Wong and Anwar, 2003). In both countries, degrading stereotypes ascribed to migrant workers among national citizens deploy other forms of symbolic violence, causing moral wounds. For women, migration routes sometimes end up in 'karaoke bars' or in brothels along Indonesian frontiers (Ford and Lyons, 2006; Lindquist, 2010), in Malaysia or in the City-State. Furthermore, risks related to migration do not only lie in destination countries. Potential mishaps also plague a possible return to home societies: long stays abroad threaten the integrity of marital relations; they often irremediably impact affective relations among family members; and more broadly, transnational journeys threaten one's position within the community, as social and cultural expectations toward returning migrants reshape their social position in their home places (Bastide, 2013): In short, transnational routes form a very dangerous or 'risky' milieu.

The second point is that migrants are usually fully aware of these traps and dangers. However, again – and this is critical to the discussion – many of them have little means of controlling these threats; that is, their fate in this complex social milieu is ridden with a deep, barely reducible *uncertainty*. Therefore it makes sense to examine these migrations in terms of an analysis of risk and related approaches for coping with uncertainty (Zinn 2008a).

Methodology

In this article I draw on data from an ethnographic study of migration in South East Asia. The backbone of my investigative methods was the practice of a multi-sited ethnography (Falzon,

2009b). Between 2006 and 2009, I conducted fieldwork in a village in Central Java (Indonesia), where I spent more than a year; in Singapore, where I spent two months, following migrants in their daily life, and working in several NGO settings; I did the same in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), where I stayed for six months. Following migrants across different locations and in different social settings and activities enable me to capture of migration experiences *as they unfolded*, by observing practices rather than by relying only on retrospective verbal accounts of life in home communities (if doing ethnography in destination countries) or in migration (if locating fieldwork exclusively in the region of origin). It also allowed me to analyse transnational practices, experiences and social ties in their different 'local settings'.

On a more epistemological tone, engaging in a multi-sited strategy is justified by two important assumptions:

That the pertinent social context of these migrations is *transnational* by nature. Indeed, if we take seriously the epistemological axiom that space is both a product of, and a context for, social practices (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005), then the proper contexts for analysing transnational migration are necessarily *transnational spaces* (Bauböck and Faist, 2010; Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt, 1999; Vertovec, 2009). More broadly speaking it is also true that if we are to 'follow [actual] practices' (Marcus, 1995), then we end up acknowledging that *all* social practices have varied spatial ramifications, that exceed the local contexts of their effectuation. Doing multi-sited ethnography is a way of acknowledging this property of the social which does not only concern the specialised domain of migration: even if it does not forbid the development of 'uni-sited' research strategies (Candea, 2009), this important consideration prevents looking at societies as sets of socially and spatially self-contained 'social worlds'. Multi-sited ethnography, in this perspective is thus a way of avoiding 'methodological holism' (Falzon, 2009a) by returning to a radical

pragmatist perspective on social practices and experiences (Dodier and Baszanger, 1997) that illuminates their many spatial ramifications.

By sticking again to a pragmatist epistemology, I was able to examine the ways in which practices (including discursive practices) and cognition were embedded in specific social settings: in the ethnomethodological vocabulary, they are radically *indexical* (Garfinkel, 1967). Thus, the way social subjects relate to their social experiences are highly context-sensitive. So that what is captured through the observation of actual practices (including discursive practices, again) is highly dependent on the location of the ethnographies: what we collect, while getting people to speak of their migration experiences back home, for instance, is not only a proxy of actual experiences abroad. It is largely, perhaps, an objectivation of how people relate to their past according to the necessities of their *current* social experience, *back home*, which is very different (Bastide, 2015a).

My first line of ethnographic inquiry was then combined with in-depth biographic interviews with migrant workers: understanding migration experiences requires the recovery of their many, interlaced, temporalities, since migration means dealing with varied *time-spaces* (Tarrus, 2010). These interviews were used in order to develop this diachronic perspective through the reconstruction of migration ‘careers’ (Becker, 1963; Glaser & Strauss, 1971; Goffman, 1971). I thus conducted 28 interviews in Indonesia ; 18 in Malaysia ; 14 in Singapore. In doing so, I faced two main challenges:

In these social contexts, individuals are not used to considering themselves as individuals abstracted from the collective – a pre-requisite of many biographic sociological techniques, where a subject is asked to reflect on his or her *individual* experiences and expectations, as a discrete subjectivity (Bastide, 2015). Due to vernacular forms of individuation, personal stories are always told as narratives of collective trajectories – involving collective goals, expectations, and experiences. Individuals are thus displayed as *participants* in a common

project rather than *subjects* of an individual life. In order to overcome this bias biographic interviews were thus shaped as ‘practices narratives’ (Bertaux, 2005), which do not require the institution of an individual subject of an individual story but asks for more neutral practical descriptions.

Furthermore interviews raise the issue of the ‘attitudinal fallacy’ (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014), understood as the inadequacy between information released in the context of an interview and real practices. Accept this criticism means acknowledging that discursive contents produced in this context are, at least in part, outcomes of the condition of the interview as a specific social setting: this auto-referring bias casts doubts on the ability to draw factual elements from this method. In order to try to control this limitation, I conducted interviews within the social networks which I investigated through ethnographic practices. This triangulation of methods (Apostolidis, 2007) had several consequences:

It allowed the framing of interviews according to previously collected biographic information gathered in the course of less formal ethnographic relations. I was thus able to rely on ‘thick’ social relations, developed with interviewees in the course of multiple interactions. Common experiences in different social settings had brought us to know each other through different social identities (Goffman, 2005) and roles (Hughes, 1984), in more or less formal settings, from NGOs to karaoke bars. By developing, diversifying, aligning and deepening common knowledge and expectations, these ongoing relations broadened the scope of interview situations from often too narrow social contexts, as they were linked to many common experiences located in other spaces and times.

Combining ethnographic practices and interviews provided a cross-perspective on individual trajectories (Bastide, 2011): through more or less formal speech acts, such as chats in the course of shared situations or interviews; through the variety of observed practices; through the collection of a variety of reciprocal knowledge circulating within social networks. In the

village, for instance, individual narratives were thus put in perspective according to different accounts from friends and relatives.

On a more theoretical level it is also useful to stress that that it is important not to presume on the adequacy between discourses and practices, but it is also difficult to assert the absence of relationship between the two. The real difficulty is that discourses do not refer transparently to the practices they narrate. As sense-making devices, they always have a temporal bias (Weick et al., 2005) as they read past events according to the current necessity of action. They always operate under an imperative of accountability (Garfinkel, 1967). Thus both dimensions make these discourses highly sensitive to current circumstances (hence the attitudinal fallacy criticism). A critical methodological problem is thus the issue of *referentiality*: discourses do not faithfully stage the practices they describe. Rather they *make sense* of practices, according to current circumstances, in order to *prepare for action* (Weick et al., 2005).

Given these observations I will start the consideration of my data by orienting my analysis to one fundamental consideration: the risk-taking practices of migrant workers who leave in spite of the highly uncertain outcomes of their journey and their risk-taking behaviour *in migration*, as they repeatedly take very uncertain bets on their well-being. I will then look at the ways individuals *make sense* of these attitudes by analysing associated discourses on risks. I will finally return to practices in order to show that, depending on the uncertainties of specific situations, discourses on risk are related to different types of actions and, more specifically, to different forms of risk mitigation practices.

But prior to this discussion, a last point must be made about the discursive material which I will draw upon: its apparent gender bias. Indeed, the paper draws mostly on quotes taken from interviews with women. That is because women have always proved more willing to speak in an interview setting. I do not have time to dig into this issue, however this fact is easily explained (see Bastide 2014, 2015). For one thing, they thus provided more articulate insights

in terms of “risk thinking”. Moreover, there is a gender bias in terms of an individual’s exposure to risks. Due to their involvement in certain sectors of labour markets (such as domestic work), due also to gender inequalities and stereotypes in Indonesia as in destination countries, women do indeed face a *riskier* journey than their male counterparts. In this sense, they are more expert at dealing with risks. However, I am confident that religious attitudes towards risks were similar across genders.

Findings

Migration and religious response to danger and uncertainty

Considering migrants’ experiences of commodification and violence as well as the hazardous nature of the migration routes, it is clear that migrants are undertaking a major gamble when they decide to migrate. Of course, the strength of their impetus to venture abroad is hard to deny and is based on various economic and social reasons; some comparable only to the extent that they combine to set actors into motion. However entrance onto migration routes, as a social process, is far from exhausted by these incentives: the relationship to an uncertain future and the potential threats which are thereby revealed, are also salient. More specifically, fundamental questions are put forward by the sheer number of actors willing to opt for this dangerous journey *in spite of* obvious threats – for movement and *risk* rather than a conservative but safe immobility.

Many migrants start on the migration routes, whether under-age, using fake identities and/or through notoriously dangerous channels such as irregular placement companies or informal placement networks, with little or no guarantee for their safety. Many also keep on repeating hazardous decisions even though past individual or collective experiences have proved these to be dangerous. Decision making processes thus appear to proceed without proper risk

assessments based on established knowledge from their own experience, from family members or community memories. However at the same time migration also gives place to a broad set of prudential practices developed to reduce possible hardships, showing those involved are well aware of the risks they face and that they do try to reduce them *to an extent*. Contrary to what could be suggested by the apparent absence of a relationship between available information on potential threats and decision making processes, these practices show that we cannot reject bluntly the idea that we are faced with a *particular form* of risk thinking. These practices take different forms.

In Banyu Putih – the Javanese village where the Indonesian fieldwork was located³ - as in other places in Indonesia where no previous culture of migration existed, domesticating the uncertainties related to migration has involved cultural innovations, developed in order to make sense of these new social experiences. Thus traditional propitiatory practices have been repurposed to counter pending threats and to summon good fate upon migrants. Among other instances, Javanese ritual meals – *slametan* – are now routinely organised before departures to try and ensure migrants' safety. By re-affirming and strengthening the traditional collective order in front of these new, disruptive transnational experiences (Bastide, 2015b), this ritual aims at safeguarding the harmony of the orderly village – *desa diatur* (Bertrand, 2003, p. 297) – in a time of tremendous changes. The dominant perception in the community is that participating in the meals is a way of acknowledging their allegiance to the universe of traditions and engaging benevolent forces to take care of the migrants on their journey. These innovations not only involved Javanese magical practices – known as *kejawen* - but also reinvestments of religious beliefs⁴: under certain conditions, the *act of leaving* has come to be considered as an efficient way of securing transnational trajectories, as the courage it involves, being conscious of related risks, is perceived as a display of religious faith. As they shape discourses and subjectivities these cultural innovations provide insight into practices

that on initial consideration would appear to be risk-blind. Nita, a young women in her early twenties who worked as a domestic worker in Singapore, shed light on this point in the following way:

I was brave enough to leave [to migrate] because I surrendered my fate to the Almighty. It strengthened my will. Finding a job, working, life and death, I entrusted everything to the Almighty.

This logic of justifications frames most of migrants' narratives. The trope of a delegation of responsibility to God – *Tuhan*; *Yang Kuasa*; *Allah* – to which migrants surrendered their fate – *pasrah* – played a critical role in shaping and fulfilling the will to leave. Through this course of action (the act of leaving) individuals did indeed comply with a central religious tenet, as their boldness was read as an act of *faith*: entrusting one's life and death in God's hands, by taking this dangerous journey, was a powerful way of proving the depth of their religious commitment.

In turn, this relation between the act of leaving, as a risk-taking behaviour, and religious faith, can only be established through a certain cultural relationship to the future, understood as *fate* or *destiny*. As Ari, a 26 years old domestic workers in Singapore said⁵

Many people leave Indonesia... from my village to work abroad. Many are working abroad. In fact... I looked for information first: Which life do we live there? You see? People say that it depends on fate. On Allah. If your fate is good, you will end up in a good situation, you will be successful. But otherwise... you have to accept. What else can we do? Success... success depends on fate. Going there means being dependent on fate. So everything depends on fate... on Allah. Some get a good employer, some end up with a bad one. Some... before... images of employers having raped their employee... rapes, tortures... we often saw that

on TV, in papers, you see? I left full of fear. But when I recalled life in the village, what else could I have done?⁶

As this quotation makes clear, this understanding is linked to the framing of the future as the domain of God. Future does not unfold out of pure chance or through the concatenation of mundane determinants, but as a *fatum*, which is the expression of Allah's will. As a result, the uncertainties of migration experiences are not conceived of as related to a contingent nature of events, but to the opacity of God's intentionality. It is only when this conceptual context – the relationship to existence as fate and to fate as an attribute of God – has been established that the act of leaving, as a display of religious faith, can be analysed.

The sociological dynamics operating here can be clarified using Goffman's concept of 'character' (Goffman, 2005). Indeed, given the fact that the decision to leave is *problematic*, since it represents a jump into '*something not yet determined but about to be*', and since it bears potentially very serious consequences, because life is at stake, it can be understood as a 'fateful situation', in Goffman's term (2005, p. 153). Goffman shows that fateful situations are where one's *character* can be assessed according to one's composure in facing risk, except that here character attributions are not the product of an interaction between an actor and a mundane public assessing his or her action: it lies in the relation between a religious subject and God. Therefore, what is assessed is not character as a social, but rather as a *religious* quality: the valued religious subject is the one able to surrender to the Almighty in a context where he or she takes conscious risks, thus proving the depth of her faith. And this act of embracing one's destiny retains its own normativity since its quality is evaluated according to the *sincerity – keikhlasan* – of one's surrendering, which should be void of afterthoughts. Through this *sincere surrendering*, expressed in the act of leaving, a religious subject recognizes the future as God's domain. Nika, a 27 years old domestic worker, in Singapore, illuminates this point:

I went to Jakarta, to Bandung. She [her friend] told me: ‘little sister, do you want to enroll in the PT [recruitment agency]? Let’s go to Saudi.’ ‘Where is Saudi?’ I told her. ‘Ah! We are going to make a lot of money in Saudi.’ ‘But I am... afraid! I told her. ‘What am I going to become?’ ‘Just entrust yourself – *pasrah* – in God’s hands. Then you will be looked after’.

Sincerity of religious commitment was thus perceived as a display of religious character and a means, through this display, of summoning God’s benevolence upon oneself by demonstrating one’s compliance with religious precepts, thereby securing one’s future. Quite paradoxically, taking risks was thus perceived as a means of avoiding risks; proving one’s fate in the Almighty was understood as a way of seeking God’s shelter.

The mobilisation of religious resources allowed social actors to restore – or safeguard – a sense of their own agency. Indeed, religiosity involved a broad range of possible attitudes and practices that allowed migrants to perceive themselves as *active* rather than passive beings in confronting potential threats. It was nevertheless also the case that the practical usefulness of religious resources could be legitimately challenged from the perspective of more familiar risk-mitigation practices. Putting oneself in the hands of God, it can be argued, actually pushes migrants to take unconsidered risks such that, rather than preventing potential threats, it has the opposite effect of *increasing* risks and risk-taking behaviours.

Risk, agency, responsibility

Whatever the actual outcome of these practices in terms of an actual exposure to risk, it is worth stressing that they indicate a belief in the possibility of affecting the future, as one’s action, because it is submitted to godly judgement and has effects on the later unfolding of a destiny. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the vocabulary of migrants who consider

leaving home a way of *challenging their destiny - mengadu nasib*: fate is not a given and should not be met passively. It is something one has to actively engage in, in order to fulfill its full virtualities. As Appadurai noted risk is a cultural way of framing the future - the future being a *cultural fact* - (Appadurai, 2013), and after the implication of Zinn's observation that 'the concept of risk is tied to the possibility that the future can be altered – or at least perceived as such – by human activities' (Zinn, 2008a, p. 4), then the migrants in this study are engaged in a particular form of risk thinking. As I have shown, the main difference with this way of framing risk compared to the usual framing in sociological studies is that the *source* of uncertainty does not lie in the contingent nature of a mundane world deprived of intentionality, but originates in the opacity of God's will. If we recognise this common concern with risk, it is important to consider as well the very distinctive theoretical and practical forms this concern takes, in the context of this vernacular conceptualisation of uncertainty.

On a practical level, this understanding of existence as destiny and of destiny as a prerogative of God affects the relationship between a subject and his or her future, not so much because it drives migrants into thinking that they will be spared the misfortunes of migration, by putting themselves in God's hands, but rather because they accept that they should confront the traps dispersed on migration routes as a religious necessity - the unavoidable product of a *fatum* that an individual has to embrace as Allah's mark upon their life. Moreover, with destiny being acknowledged as the domain of God, its forms were conceived of as an expression of his intentionality. For a religious subject, the proper behavior thus brings an individual to embrace their fate as a testimony of their faith but also as a *meaningful trial*: putting oneself sincerely in God's hands is a means of recognising, ensuring and clarifying that all the difficulties one will have to face are not a form of divine punishment, but rather a fruitful engagement with God's will, a lesson, a path for improving one's quality as a religious

subject. As for Lidia, a 26-year-old runaway maid in Singapore, for many migrants these conceptions sustain attitudes of acceptance, underpinned by religious beliefs:

Now let's hope if God allows me to... I mean... My goal now, let's hope that the Almighty allows me to... that I can move on without obstacles... move on... move on. Maybe all that is just a trial for me. I must be patient, patient, patient [laughs]. And because we keep this patience in our hearts... In order to obtain what we seek we have to pray, to keep on praying to God. And always be patient.

This attitude of acceptance also raises the issue of the relationship between the individual and her capacity to act, as Lidia seemed to defer action by entrusting her future with God. This issue was made even more acute by Nami, a 28-year-old domestic worker in Singapore:

When someone asks me 'what is your goal? What are you looking for?' I mean...why don't I rebel against my life? My answer is always the same: 'I only follow the stream'. Like water. If we follow the stream we will be happier. If we oppose it becomes more difficult. The stream, if we follow, at some point...between the deep forests it will stop, and maybe we will find the right place. Thus I do not rebel. I... I accept everything.

As with Lidia, Nami recognized and clarified the necessity to comply with fate (captured in the metaphor of the *stream*). What was at stake, as a result, was the attribution of agency in a context where Nami seemed to relinquish her own intentionality. This attribution is important because the possibility for a subject to conceive the possibility to act upon the future is a *sine qua non* condition of a risk culture: if we assume that it is characterised by a prudential relation to the future, it supposes the existence of an individual *responsible for* her own action and able to organise it so as to reduce risks. One's moral qualities as a responsible individual can then be assessed or debated according to the practices one develops to modulate one's

exposure to future threats. However, such responsibility only makes sense if, and only if, we consider the individual as an autonomous source of action. This piece of speech – as in the case of Lidia’s - can create the impression of a passive being, whose action, or lack of, is determined by heteronomous forces. It thus suggests an important question: if one’s actions are determined by a transcendental volition that one has to comply with, are we still in the presence of a *subject* capable of autonomous action? Additionally, if God is considered the genuine source of action, are we still in the domain of risk thinking at all? Interestingly, however, Nami adds:

[With] People it is different. If we do not oppose, they trample us [laughs].

People, we have to oppose. What I cannot oppose is my fate. I never oppose. I

follow the motion. Against people yes! I often oppose! [laughs]

Taken together, these quotes sketch a ‘moral economy’ (Fassin, 2009) of action where acting seems to be expected on the part of the individual, yet under particular conditions and modalities that need to be specified. Importantly, it shows that it is important not to conclude that, in this particular context, the responsibility of the individual in relation to his or her action is diminished: rather, it is displaced. In this high risk context, this responsibility is not assessed so much through the evaluation of an individual’s practices developed to control materially the conditions of their exposure to risks. Certainly, *‘following the stream’*, as Nami put it, can be considered in itself a certain type of individual agency, which requires a good dose of composure and equanimity and, more broadly, of personal engagement when facing difficult situations. However, it should not be confused with any form of classical risk calculation. This attitude does not rely on the undertaking of a ‘reasonable’ trade-off between risks and potential benefits, which would allow distinguishing recklessness from boldness. Rather it entails accepting a given situation as a necessity, whatever the risk it imposes on the individual. Recklessness is not seen as a failure to evaluate risks but rather as a failure to

sincerely entrust one's existence to God. Yet it is important to stress that this way of coping with the neutralisation of individual and collective capacity of action regarding the threats of migration does not dissolve individual and collective agency. Rather, it frames it in a different way.

Destiny and sense-making

As I have pointed out, the deliberation that precedes the decision to leave does not start the future migrant questioning him or herself in a mundane meditation over his or her own future; rather it puts him or her in the position of facing a divine will, expressed in the lines of a destiny. Complying with this will implies a range of related attitudes, expressing compliance by accepting the circumstances that Allah imposes upon oneself, which one should not fight but accept - *nrima*: the vagaries of existence are conceived of as godly trials - *cobaan Tuhan* - that should not be avoided nor met with revolt, rebellion, or even reluctance. Rather, they require patience - *kesabaran* - both *nrima* and *kesabaran* being highly valued personal qualities in Java. The responsibility of the religious subject, in this context, is to *understand* the meaning of these trials, conceived of as clues that need to be decrypted to engage in the *right course of action* that is thus suggested in the mundane world by a transcendental will. Mariam, a young woman then in her mid-twenties, had worked as a domestic worker in Kuala Lumpur. At the time I met her, she was sheltered by an NGO after she had fled her employer. In itself, the following excerpt is interesting: it shows that she relates to the hardship she went through as godly signs, which call both for acceptance and a search for meaning.

Researcher: You were deported from the country. But then how about the money you had saved in Malaysia?

Mariam: Yes, it was lost.

Researcher: Where did you keep it?

Mariam At home. In my home. I put it in clothes. Ok! It is my friend who took it, a thousand or two thousands [ringgits]. If I count... Yes, it would be about 12 millions in Indonesian money. But forget it. Maybe because... because I had gained this money this way... yes... maybe... maybe I did not have the right to use this money. Maybe I had had enough like this.

Researcher: You took it as a twist of fate?

Mariam: Yes. It is fate.

She added:

Finally... my life was made of ups and downs. We were responsible together for our love [speaking of an old boyfriend]. But a lot of my difficulties related to... When life was good, he would make problems. He was like that. Finally when he hit me I accepted. Maybe it was my fate. And maybe it was a clue for me... about the meaning of my life.

In a context where the *right* principles of a *good* action, understood in religious terms, are conceived of as external to the individual, Mariam allows us to see the other side of the coin: this apparent passivity combines with an *active* interpretation of situations: complying with God's will requires an hermeneutic engagement on the part of the individual, which seeks to decipher meaning in the flux of his or her experience by elucidating the signs through which it is expressed. We are thus obviously dealing with an ethic of action, stripped from personal intentionality. To this extent, it echoes strongly the 'moral economy of volition' outlined by Bertrand (2003, p. 285), who shows that, in Java, subjectivation does not involve the affirmation of a subject *through* the manifestation of a personal will; it rather relies on a

dissolution of personal intentionality and the opening of *ego* to the forces of an ‘invisible world’ – *dunia kang samar* – through ascetic practices.

However, at this point, it should be clear that this depersonalisation and this de-centering of intentionality does not imply a cultural representation of the individual as a passive being. It is true that the individuals perceive themselves as being dominated by destiny. However, they experience their power of action elsewhere: through their capacity of attention and their aptitude to decipher and decrypt the signs disseminated on their path, but also in their ability to take advantage of the elusive openings of a destiny according to these clues. What emerges then is this somehow uncanny situation where submission to destiny needs to be perceived as an *active practice*, which requires a continuous engagement. This oscillation or tension between individual action and its transcendental determinants outlines vernacular concepts of the individual. As Puspa, a 19-year-old young woman whom I met in a shelter for runaway maids in Singapore commented:

[Speaking about migrant women as a whole] From my point of view... Yes... as I said: it depends of fate. If their fate is good, they can succeed. If it is not good... just like me. It depends on fate... Yes... It depends on them alone actually! It depends on themselves, it depends on fate. Fate without struggling it cannot work.

Puspa provided another analytical step: she showed that there was room for both individual agency and an overarching transcendental will. More importantly, she showed that fate is not a given. To have a good life, one has to be up to the trials God imposes upon oneself, thus displaying one’s quality as a religious subject. For one to be able to prove this religious quality, there has to be an autonomous sphere of action where one can express and show one’s *own value*. Andi, a 31 years old irregular mason in Kula Lumpur could thus say:

Andi: Today it is true that many among the young do not have jobs. Like my friend... some do not know how to do but... They want to create a business, but what business he doesn't know. He is just sort of waiting... I don't know if he waits for destiny to fall down on him from the sky... For many it's like that.

Researcher: They wait for wealth to fall from the sky...

Andi: They wait but nothing comes.

Andi perceived destiny as relying both on a transcendental will and on the possibility of an autonomous sphere of practices, where a subject has to *take responsibility* for his or her own actions. Moreover when someone *is given* the opportunity to engage in material risk-mitigation practices, his or her responsibility is to do so since this chance is not seen as contingent, but as a meaningful opening. In this conceptual framework, future is thus constructed as being *partly amenable* to individual action. It is perceived as only weakly pre-determined because it is thought that the personal qualities (or lack thereof) expressed through one's actions when facing godly trials will affect the latter unfolding of one's destiny – God rewarding a rightful action. Destiny, as a particular framing of the future, is thus best conceived of as a semi-open space for individual agency.

In this context, proving a genuine religious faith is understood as a way of mitigating risks. As I have shown, it involves three different levels of action: it takes the form of a display of religious character, a sincere surrendering. Furthermore, individual agency is displaced on the double level of a sense-making practice; it is expressed in the search for hidden signs in the unfolding of one's mundane experience as well as in the ability to trigger courses of action according to this interpretive work, in the context of a world represented as *consubstantial* to God's will. Destiny, as a cultural way of relating to the future, is thus obviously very different from mundane understandings of the future as a contingent space, stripped from

transcendental volition. It is true also that the nature and definitions of risks vary greatly in these two different *epistemes*, physical risks being subordinated to religious risk in the Javanese context. However, both cases illustrate a sustaining of a sense of uncertainty, the giving way to conceptions of the future as partly amenable to individual action, and the making of room for practices aimed at reducing one's exposure to *risks*.

Conclusion: risk and mixed rationalities

Fate should not, therefore, be seen as opposed to risk; rather, it is understood as a specific space, the limits of which cannot be expanded, but within which individual agency can unfold and impact on the future of the individual. In a context where migrants are widely deprived of material possibilities of control over their becoming in transnational spaces, faith is then perceived as the only means of securing existences. Sincerity of surrendering – *ikhlas, pasrah*, patience in facing obstacles – *sabar*, being alert to signs, hermeneutic practices and the ability to catch opportunities to engage in proper courses of action are the type of practices that aim to comply with God's will, by struggling to living up to one's destiny. More critically, these are ways of preempting the future by means of one's own actions. Having said that, there is a very real risk of falling back into an old-fashioned culturalism. I would like to conclude by offering a few more empirical clues on how to steer clear of this pitfall.

As I have already noted, few social, economic or political devices are available for migrants to take and retain control over their transnational trajectories. In this context, the practices and conceptualisations that I have outlined must be understood as the *only available means* for many migrants to restore a sense of agency in facing serious threats to their health and well-being. In a context where current economic conditions and emerging moral economies render migration increasingly necessary, facing risk is less of a choice than a necessity. And this

creative use of cultural resources allows making this relation between threat and necessity morally bearable when there is little choice but to engage in migration routes, regardless of the risk.

However, it is worth noting that more conventional risk-regulation practices (for risk theory) can also be observed among those few workers endowed with more resources, or benefiting from more favorable circumstances. Indeed, experienced migrants in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore are sometimes able to negotiate their whole trip without ever entering the migration industry; this can include the search for their own employer and can involve the negotiation of their work contract. Some migrants develop an *actuarial* relation to migration: in this case, making sure that one is always ready for a further round on migration routes is a way of dealing with unforeseen risks, by offsetting potential costs with the possibility of a new period of work abroad. In Kuala Lumpur, undocumented migrants secure their presence in the city by leveraging resources in their social networks in order to stay hidden or, for instance, to be informed about police raids. Recognizing these mundane forms of risk mitigation practices is important; however, it should not bring us to reduce the importance of more immaterial risk-management patterns, by considering it a second-best option, because if more skilled migrants develop other means of controlling their trajectories, they nevertheless also refer to and follow these religious prescriptions. What I want to suggest is that these two forms of engagement with risk are not exclusive – related to a magical or religious *ethos*, on one hand, and to risk mitigation practices closer to more mundane forms of practical rationalities, on the other hand. They rather co-exist, as migrants tend to develop *all available means* to secure their existences. As soon as circumstances, resources or skills allow it, individuals thus develop *both* material and religious means of controlling risks, as taking advantage of the opportunity of developing material risk-mitigation practices is also seen as a way of complying with God's will.

Given this, reflecting on the articulation between discourses on risks and actual contexts of action is critical: it shows that practices are at least as much determined by situational constraints than by ingrained interpretative schemes. And when migrants have the opportunity to engage in material risk mitigation practices, it is interesting to see that material prudential attitudes develop. It is true nevertheless that this cultural relation to potential threats has powerful practical effects if we consider that it makes people much more prone to risk-taking behaviours. In highly uncertain situations where material risk-mitigation practices are not available, faith helps people engaging in high-risk courses of action, while retaining a sense of agency. In this context prudential practices are thus inscribed in a wider conception of reality where natural and supra-natural forces are seen as composing a unified world, under the overarching gaze of God, and where religious, magical and material means of controlling risk are conceived as efficient.

It seems highly plausible that similar forms of ‘mixed rationalities’ (rather than the all too usual irrational vs. rational analytical pattern) related to risks exist in ‘Western’ countries (Zinn 2008b). In the case of France, Favret-Saada (1977), for instance, has shown the persistence of magical practices. Numerous surveys also show the pervasiveness of beliefs in supra-natural forces and a widespread engagement in propitiatory practices, including avoidance of certain situations (like thirteen people around the table) or uses of lucky charms. More broadly, faith in the future, even in a secularized perspective, is not an uncommon motive in the context of decision making. On a more theoretical level, Zinn (2008a) notes that ‘(...) in [the] perspective of everyday life, risk is often calculated by intuitive or pre-rational techniques’⁷. Considering this, there is a need to depart from formal and normative definitions of risk-thinking, as a type of rationality in its ‘pure’ or ideal form, to dig into the complexities of actual individual and collective practices aimed at gaining a degree of control over the future.

In doing that, one may well discover that ‘mixed rationalities’ are not only bound to ‘traditional societies’ (as opposed to ‘modernity’). Rather they are a widespread means of dealing with risks in everyday life *as soon as life becomes uncertain* to the point that it neutralises the efficacy of material risk-mitigation practices. Starting amidst practices, one could well discover also that risk thinking, as it is often referred to in the literature as a purely calculative and utilitarian relation to the future, could be understood at best, with a sympathetic state of mind, as a Weberian ideal type rather than a good descriptor of actual practices. In a more critical spirit, it can be perceived also as a normative concept that is too theoretically abstract to account for actual practices beyond the calculative rationalities of institutions – insurance or the ‘precautionary principle’ (Ewald, 1996), for example. By restoring the thickness of these ‘mixed rationalities’, there is a chance we can devise a more anthropological description of risk as a *cultural fact*.

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¹ In 2010, in Malaysia, the estimated number of irregular workers matched the official flows.

² In both countries, the constitution and consolidation of a national "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) is a source of concern for political elites, in recent countries. These processes of "nation building" have relied and resulted, albeit under different guises, in the ethnicization of national societies in Malaysia and Singapore. In these contexts, foreign labor causes deep social anxieties in the two countries. This is perhaps especially true of

Indonesian workers, who are often of the same ethnic stocks as Malaysian and Singaporean Malays (for an extensive account, see: Bastide 2014, 2015).

³ Banyu Putih is a small municipality located in the Special Territory of Yogyakarta, Java, in Indonesia. Home to about 2000 people, between 80 to 90% of all households have or have had one of their members working abroad.

⁴ As with many anthropologists, I agree that we should distinguish between the magical and the religious: in short, I understand magical practices are a form of practical logic (as opposed to theoretical logic) linked to a religious worldview (Keck, 2002).

⁵ All names are pseudonyms.

⁶ The last sentence of this quotation, where she expresses an imperative to migrate, should be interpreted with caution. In a context where migration is difficult to justify on the ground of individual motives, especially for women, narratives of the decision to leave are constructed conventionally in the terms of a necessity, usually referring to the livelihood needs of the family (Bastide 2015a). However, when the discussion is *oriented towards* the reasons behind a departure, these conventional justifications often fade off behind more intimate motives. Ari indeed is among those women whose decision to migrate, even if she had to justify it by arguing the will to improve her family's economy, was motivated by a refusal to conform to social expectations and available social roles, back in her village. Leaving was a way to open up new possibilities.

⁷ However, I hope to have shown that the risk mitigation practices I have described are, in fact, perfectly rational in the cognitive reality they inhabit.