Female transnational migration, religion and subjectivity: The case of Indonesian domestic workers

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Abstract: Drawing on an analysis of in-depth interviews with returned migrant women from East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, this paper considers the links between migration, religious beliefs and subjectivity. Low-skilled migrant women, including domestic workers, have often been represented as marginalised. This paper argues that in the context of migration, women constantly move through trajectories of power using religion as a spiritual resource. Against the commonly patriarchal characteristics of their religion and community, the women employ cognitive strategies to face challenges in migration. In each stage of their transnational migration, the women’s experiences reveal the multitude of ways in which they continue to invest in their beliefs through everyday practices, rituals and networking. These experiences highlight the women’s strategies in accessing different forms of power. This study demonstrates the significance of focusing on these women’s experiences, including their everyday religious practices and their shifting sense of self, as a way of broadening the conceptual basis of our understanding of female migration.

Keywords: Eastern Indonesia, female migration, religion, subjectivity

Eastern Indonesian women’s mobility

Every day, hundreds of Indonesian women pass through cramped ports, stations and terminals. On buses, ferries and ships, women are on the move as part of a relatively recent stream of migrants seeking work and opportunity in places away from home. Recent increases in female migration in Indonesia reflect a general rise in population mobility, which is linked to rising incomes, education and better communication and transport services (Hill, 1996). Women’s mobility also positively correlates with their participation in the labour market, particularly in the fast-growing sectors of education and health services that provide sources of mass employment (Oey-Gardiner, 1997; Manning, 1998). Indonesia’s integration into the global economy provides a further context for women’s increased mobility. Globalisation accelerates flows of finance, goods and information as well as movements of people, including transnational migration. Since the early 1990s, contract migration has increased steadily to meet the rising demand for domestic helpers in Asian metropolitan areas such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur (Hugo, 2000). Remittances from domestic work also have increasing significance to both the government and the families of individual workers (Heyzer and Wee, 1994; Barbič and Miklavčič-Brezigar 1999), particularly in the aftermath of the financial crisis in 1998 in Indonesia. Remittances made by women working abroad help sustain the household purchasing power at home (Hugo, 2000). Following the crisis, more than one million Indonesian contract workers migrated abroad, with three quarters of them working as domestic helpers.

This paper focuses on the movement of women from one of the poorest and least developed regions in Indonesia: the province of East Nusa Tenggara. The province suffers from the combined effects of remoteness, inadequate infrastructure and limited natural resources (Corner, 1989). It is a diverse region of scattered
islands with hilly and mountainous topography, limited arable land, poor soils, aridity and a small dispersed population that occupies pockets of fertile land pursuing subsistence lifestyles. Difficulties in transport and communication create a sense of isolation (Jones and Raharjo, 1995). The region consists of 4.7 million hectares of land supporting 4.3 million inhabitants, 90% of whom are Christians (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2005). With less than 20% of the population living in urban areas, it is one of the least urbanised and poorest provinces in Indonesia with a low annual gross regional product per capita – Rp756 000 (real 2000 price) (UNDP, 2004). In 2000, I spent six months following some of the trails of Eastern Indonesian women as they moved by sea, from the islands of Flores and Timor in East Nusa Tenggara to the urban centres of Surabaya (East Java) and Makassar (Sulawesi). In 2007, I made two follow-up visits to Central and East Flores also Kupang where I conducted interviews with some of the returned migrants. The field research conducted in 2000 focused on the popular migration destinations established by census data, and also on the places of origin of the migrants and was conducted while travelling on boats in the region.1

During my very first fieldwork voyage in Eastern Indonesia, I met a young woman in a boat who graciously shared ‘her space’ on the lower deck with me. Not only did she literally give me a space on a wooden bench to sit on, but metaphorically she also created a space for me to start an ethnography of woman travellers, by readily sharing her stories as a migrant. The main purpose of her migration was to look for opportunity. In this, her aims were similar to those of many migrants who see migration as a search for a place where happiness may be found, ‘a utopian space of freedom, abundance and transparency’, that would constitute a break or ‘an inversion of everyday order’ where new opportunities and possibilities could emerge (Curtis and Pajaczkowska, 1994).

Her story drew my attention to how contemporary Eastern Indonesian women’s migration reflects the joint appeal of movement and of leaving home. Langgar laut, literally meaning ‘crossing the ocean’, also means ‘crossing the threshold of home’. This threshold is both cultural and geographical, separating home and away, and self and other. The movement of migration is more than a physical act of shifting between one geographical location or cultural experience and another. Through migration, a woman crosses from a space of familiarity to the unknown, heightening her sense of self. She is no longer confined to her gendered identity at home as a mother, sister or daughter. Moving physically in space as a transnational migrant provides women with an opportunity to imaginatively redefine themselves and adopt new subject positions as a waged worker, an urban resident and commuter, a consumer, someone with admittedly limited free time. Migration stimulates ‘the self-conscious recognition’ of one’s position and a move beyond it (Blunt and Rose, 1994: 16).

Liberating and exciting though it may be, this shift in sense of self or subjectivity is not easy. Young women’s mobility in East Nusa Tenggara is viewed differently from men’s. The gender division of labour and space assigns women to home (Vatter, 1932; Tule, 2004). Therefore, travel and autonomous migration are mainly a man’s entitlement. Women’s mobility is usually associated with family migration; hence, a single woman who chooses to migrate is an exception. Her mobility may be viewed as a disruption, containing tensions and contradictions that require legitimation. As a head of kin and household, a man is institutionalised in adat (customary law) to control women’s mobility by his power over decision-making. Male kinfolk assume responsibility for young women’s protection and reputation (Tule, 2004). My concern in this paper is how women from relatively protected backgrounds negotiate the radical shift in subjectivity that is part of the migration process. I focus on how women use religion to achieve their goals to obtain a degree of comfort and security throughout the difficult stages of transnational migration.

Local tradition in Eastern Indonesia naturalises the notion of a woman carrying out her gendered roles and duties with love and devotion, as mother, sister, daughter and member of the clan and local community. Particularly for Lio (Flores) women, the self-sacrifice model is magnified in the legend of the Rice Maiden (Ine Mbu) who was prepared to die – to transform herself into rice – to feed others so they might live (Orinbao, 1992). Christianity reinforces
local tradition in serving others by ‘following God’s will’. As evident in the everyday ritual when they pray ‘Our Father . . ., Thy will be done . . .’, local women resort to religion to legitimise their leaving home and seeking opportunity abroad. I reflect here on the stages of migration and the role that religion plays in the experience of migrating and moving into contested spaces (Tsing, 1993).

Religion, migration and women

Despite the diversity and prominence of religious beliefs and practices among migrants, most contemporary international migration theories pay attention to the political and economic reasons of the transnational flows (Massey et al. 1994; Hagan and Ebaugh, 2003). Hagan and Ebaugh point out that:

By relying on economic considerations in driving the decision to migrate and social explanations for sustaining the process, theories of international migration have overlooked the cultural context of migration. More specifically, they have not addressed the role of religion in the migration process, especially the spiritual resources it provides for some immigrant populations in the decision to migrate and the psychological effects of this on migrants’ commitment to endure the hardship of the migration. (1146)

Certainly, the significant role of religion in migrants’ lives, particularly in their daily lives in the new place of destination, has been recognised since the 1950s in the classic writing of Handlin (1973) about America’s migration experience. While he documents the importance of religion in immigrant communities at the place of destination, he does not address the equally important role of religious networks as part of the social infrastructure that supports the act of migration. More recently, the centrality of religion in the process of transnational migration has been analysed in the migration studies in the context of the USA (see Levitt, 1998a,b; Yang and Ebaugh, 2001; Hagan and Ebaugh, 2003). The analytical emphasis on religion in migration enables insights into the ways migrants access different forms of power by drawing on spiritual resources.

In a nation that is predominantly Muslim, the province of East Nusa Tenggara stands out for its predominantly Christian population. In my research, I observed the importance of religion in their daily lives. Some migrants referred to following God’s will as a way of normalising their marginalised social and economic position in the community – as a woman, with low economic status and a member of a religious minority. Women told stories of how throughout the process of migration they drew strength from their religious belief as a way of coping and enduring any hardships. For them, their faith provided a support through the transformative process of migration and stepping beyond the purview of their domestic supports and constraints. The way that women’s agency emerges through this process and the shifting sense of self that it entails (Gibson, 2001; Gibson-Graham, 2006) must be taken into account in increasing our conceptual understanding of female international migration.

Feminist scholars offer insights into understanding the complex influences on female migration. They look to variables such as gender, class and race as determinants of female mobility (see for example Pratt, 1992; Laws, 1997; Bondi and Domosh, 1998; Lawson, 1998; Duncan and Gregory, 1999; McDowell, 1999; Yeoh and Huang, 1999a,b). Women’s mobility in these approaches is connected with a gendered space of home (Yeoh and Huang, 1999a,b). Women as a homemaker occupy a marginalised private space that lacks economic and social status. When women migrate to work, they move from one marginalised position to a different marginalised position relative to their host community and employers. A woman’s marginalised position is an issue of power relations, whether and to what degree one is being included or excluded in the network of relations existing in that particular space. Feminist and post-colonial theorists problematise a simplistic take on migrant identities as marginal and analyse their ways of negotiating and inhabiting multiple subject positions (Kofman and England, 1997; McDowell, 1999; Gibson et al., 2001). Migration offers a contested space for women to widen their subject positions and shift their subjectivities. As women define themselves in relation to others, when their networks expand, so
do their subjectivities (Tsing, 1993; Blunt and Rose, 1994). Given the relational context of women’s subject positions, Gilligan (1993) suggests that women develop a conception of morality that emphasises care and connection. In contrast, men’s subject positions most likely emphasise independence and objectivity. This moral framework that shadows female relationships provides insights into how women perceive connection, responsibility with others and their relationship with God (Gilligan, 1993; Ozorak, 1996). Within this framework, women commonly pay more attention to personal relationships with a loving God and with others in the community of believers, while men are more likely to emphasise God’s judgement and personal spirituality (Ozorak, 1996).

I now move on to explore the complexities of women’s transnational migration and transforming subjectivities through the stories of women I interviewed on my fieldwork. I have been particularly interested in the ‘creative ways in which migrants use the institution of religion and its beliefs and practices to organise the entire migration process’ (Hagan and Ebaugh, 2003: 1147). Scholars of religion argue that even though many religions are characterised by patriarchal practices, women still invest in their faith because of the potential rewards of comfort, security, a sense of belonging and growth (Ozorak, 1996: 17). Most women in my study confirmed this assertion in the ways their religious faith empowered them and gave them a sense of belonging to negotiate their marginalised positions. Drawing in particular on the stories of three women, Maria, Netti and Liana, I show that religion plays a central role in each stage of the migration process, from the initial decision to migrate, to the journey and the arrival abroad.

Stages of migration

Deciding to migrate: ‘Following God’s will’

Maria, Netti and Liana are from communities in Central Flores that are predominantly Catholic. Bishops, priests, male community group leaders, heads of clans and fathers commonly make decisions regarding public life. An implied cultural assumption in this patriarchal society is that women do not make significant life-changing decisions, including about migration. While young men are encouraged to migrate to seek knowledge and economic opportunity, women in the region traditionally travel as part of the family, so women’s autonomous mobility can still create a sense of social unease.

When I talked to local parents regarding young women migrating abroad as domestic workers, they typically indicated their disapproval or reluctance to let their daughters go. An important aspect of a father’s role is guardianship of his daughter’s virtue. He assumes responsibility for the consequences of his daughter’s migration abroad as a single woman. Fathers in Flores give formal permission and sign the required forms initiating the process of transnational migration but often do this reluctantly as unskilled women migrants (Tenaga Kerja Wanita/TKW) are unfortunately associated with prostitution and abuse. From my discussions with local priests, I sense that they were not comfortable with single women migrating as domestic workers because of the possibility of becoming ‘impure’. Given the social mores of the region, migration is condoned only for economic reasons, and religious beliefs are often called upon to further legitimise the decision.

Maria, Netti and Liana went to Hong Kong as contract domestic workers. All were still single and, according to the local custom, needed their male kin to give permission to migrate. Netti could not secure a job in the public service after graduating from high school. An earthquake in Ende in 1992 triggered her decision to migrate to escape her family’s impoverished way of life as farmers:

My intention to travel started when there was an earthquake in 1992, and our house was destroyed. I wanted to go and earn money. We would have liked to start building the house straight away, but we didn’t have any money. . . . (Fieldwork, 2000)

The timing of the earthquake was taken as a sign from God for Netti to move on. She played the role of the ‘dutiful daughter’ who would go and earn money to help rebuild the family home. Netti and others were quite sure that it was God’s will that they found this opportunity to
migrate at ‘the right time’, emphasising that ‘my
time’ is not necessarily ‘God’s time’, but ‘God’s
time is always the right time’.

Krause (2004) argues that women’s prayer is a
complex, multidimensional phenomenon that
affects their well-being, particularly when they
feel that they acquire what they want. They hold
beliefs about their prayers being answered and
about the timing and the ways prayers are
answered. ‘When people pray, they have certain
beliefs or expectations about the nature of the
response they hope to receive’ (Krause, 2004:
395). Liana’s prayer was answered when an
opportunity for migration abroad came up at a
time when she was very disillusioned with her
boyfriend. When her relationship ended, she
avoided meeting people in her local community
in case they questioned her about her failed
marriage plan. Her accidental and rare meeting
with a distant relative who had just returned
from Hong Kong as a domestic worker met her
need for a new direction. She needed no further
couragement to migrate abroad. For her, the
timing was perfect; it was ‘God’s right time’.
Liana referred to her migration as ‘God’s will’,
alluding to her belief and the centrality of reli-
gion in the early stage of the migration decision-
making process. Others mentioned that their
prayers were answered during an unemploy-
ment period, when they were able to link into
domestic workers’ networks and hence were
provided with information to migrate. Local
social networks are significant in providing
information and assisting migration from the
initial decision to migrate to the arrival in the
place of destination (Hugo, 1999a,b, 2000).

When an opportunity to go abroad arose,
these women grabbed it with both hands, giving
the reason of ‘following God’s will’. The positive
effect of this belief strengthened their resolve to
go through the complicated process of transna-
tional migration. This reasoning underlies a
belief that ‘God provides’, which is quite a
strong conviction in their everyday life as they
mentioned it often. Various scholars have iden-
tified how prayers are responsible for producing
beneficial effects on well-being, including with
ways of dealing with stress (Krause, 2004;
Kwilecki, 2004). Daughters in the region resort
to prayers when faced with the first stressful
period of migration – their decision to migrate.
In addition to promising to help with the family
income, young women use their beliefs and
faith to persuade fathers to let them go. They
convince the family that God will look after
them as they follow God’s will to help the
family.

The journey: ‘I felt brave because I had
my strong faith . . .’

The next step of a domestic worker’s journey
before leaving the country is going to Java. This
in-transit period is also a time when the women
are subjected to a series of physical and social
examinations. These include a medical check-
up, to make sure that they are physically healthy
and not pregnant, and a character investigation,
through criminal records held by the police, to
guarantee that they have not committed any
crime. They are also required to undergo an
intensive training course that accustoms them to
domestic tasks, such as cooking, cleaning and
simple sewing. There is no fixed training period
because it depends on how quickly the poten-
tial domestic worker can be placed in employ-
ment. Often the women are videoed, so that
potential employers can appraise their physical
appearance. Many of the women whom I inter-
viewed were away from their family for the first
time and felt exposed without the protection of
their male kinfolk and they felt very anxious
because they had to wait in the dormitory for
between three to seven months. All of them
talked about their sense of frustration while in
transit.

On leaving the protected space of home,
most of the women were aware of the hardship
as well as the temptations of living as a domes-
tic helper in middle-class homes in urban areas.
The nature of domestic services would involve
being alone with their employers without their
male kin’s protection. Like other migrants, the
women from Ende (Flores) use religious rituals,
including prayers and worship services, in order
to survive the migration process (Kwilecki,
2004). Although not all coping mechanisms
are fully conscious, they represent proactive
decision-making and awareness in facing
a challenging situation (Pargament, 1997;
Kwilecki, 2004).

While in transit in Surabaya, waiting for
placement overseas, Maria experienced the
physical hardship of living in a crowded dormi-
tory shelter and, worse still, sexual harassment during the job training in a middle-class home. The challenge for Maria and others in the transit period is the mere uncertainty of future employment, including relationships with future employers. In order for a woman to confront harassment, she must first perceive it. Maria understood that she was being harassed when her male employer made sexual innuendos. She felt vulnerable both when she stayed in the shelter and when she worked at the employer’s home. Yet Maria managed to maintain control over the situation, to ‘stay brave’ (masih berani).

In Surabaya the employer I had for on-the-job training was a young unmarried man. I was only there for one day at his house when he came to me. I was asleep in my room when he tried to open the door to come in, but I had locked it. Then after two weeks he tried again. One day after coming home from work, he asked me to come to his room. He asked me to give him a body massage . . . I felt brave because I had my strong faith. I cried in front of him so that he would come to his senses. Perhaps he thought that I had not been aware of where that would lead to, because I was not used to a big city such as Surabaya. But I kept on praying and praying very hard, and finally he gave up and nothing happened between us . . . (Fieldnote, 2000)

The risk of sexual harassment was a real fear for all these women when they worked at their employers’ homes. One reason for this group travelling together from their village was to minimise this risk. However, it was almost impossible for these women to have the same job placement with one employer. Obviously, Maria did not welcome her employer’s sexual advances. Maria’s moral ideals and her relationship to family, kin, community and the Church gave her a responsibility to uphold the notion of ‘a good woman’ or wanita baik-baik. (Gilligan, 1993; Ozorak, 1996). The multidimensional effects of Maria’s religious beliefs are apparent when considering that, on one hand, she is actually placed under the Church’s and also male kinfolk’s subjection as a weak person, but, on the other hand, her belief also keeps her strong. This means that through particular practices of one’s belief such as remaining in control of her behaviour and sexuality as expected of a good single woman and a daughter, although she is under a patriarchal subjection, her belief heightens a sense of self that emits power. Paradoxically, her tears, symbolically a sign of helplessness, were strategically used to escape her employer’s harassment. This episode reveals Maria’s coping strategy that empowered her through her belief and expectation that God protects her. Women’s faith experience and cognitive strategies are known to be used to empower themselves in challenging situations (Ozorak, 1996). Women interpret their situation in the context of their religious belief and practices as strategies of self-empowerment while struggling for everyday survival. Maria mounted her defence by being aware of her situation and found strength and power from her belief in God. She reinforced her belief through her daily routine of prayers.

The arrival: A community of faith

For most contract domestic workers, the culmination of the transnational migration involved arriving and working in the houses of their foreign employers. For Maria, Liana, Netti and the others, this was the destination of their travel where all their future economic expectations lay. Distance from home allowed this group of women the opportunity to transform themselves and to achieve the financial independence of their dreams. Their personal transformation was reflected in their physical appearance – short hair, trendy T-shirts and jeans and a pair of sneakers. Maria, Liana and Netti showed me their photos after arriving in Hong Kong. They portrayed images of carefree young women with sophisticated urban landscapes as backgrounds. Despite these physical transformations, their belief and practices of religion remained strong as shown in the following story.

Most domestic workers in my study including Maria, Liana and Netti were conscious of the constraints imposed by employers and had the expectation to work hard. They learnt this through the informal networks of friends and ex-workers even before arrival. As they were to be paid good money for their domestic services, they were ready to work hard. When Netti arrived at her employers’ home, she depicted herself as being in ‘top gear’. She recollected

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her arrival, wearing her work uniform provided by the employment agency, her hair was cut short; no lipstick, other make-up or nail polish was used. She described her first day working abroad as 'siap berjuang', which literally means ‘ready for the battle!’ This metaphor reflects the state officials’ perspective that migrant women are economic soldiers deployed to battle against the country’s economic crisis (Chin, 1997: 366). The similarity of Netti’s arrival and background, stage of life, and particularly her faith, created a bond with other domestic workers from Flores. They formed into a small community that, in some ways like other similar communities, was also characterised by a range of oppressions (Kong, 2001). In this time of transformation and under some forms of oppression, Netti spoke about how her faith kept her steady – a centring force in the midst of turbulence.

In mentioning the employers’ constraints imposed upon them, Netti and her friends began to uncover their strengths. A common theme was the women’s awareness of what was expected of them. They seemed confident in their ability to meet any rules imposed upon them regarding physical appearance and codes of behaviour. This opinion was widely shared by the other ex-migrants whom I talked to, reflecting a knowledge of the uneven negotiation of class, race/ethnic and gender boundaries. A number of domestic workers attributed their success in dealing with their employer to ‘an awareness of knowing one’s place’ and ‘how to conduct oneself’ as strategies in relation to employers (Williams, 2005).

Arriving as minority Catholics in Hong Kong and in their employers’ houses, the women negotiated their positions using their faith to empower them. In terms of their relations with the Chinese employers in Hong Kong who were not Christian, the women believed that their own faith was positively good. They alluded to this feeling while discussing their faith and felt ‘right’ in their Catholic belief and rituals as shown by their regular attendance at Catholic mass on Sundays. One very timid woman whom I interviewed said she did not hesitate to remind the employer of her Sunday work off because of her need to worship. Mass on Sundays was celebrated by an Indonesian priest who also acted as their chaplain and spiritual guide. The migrants’ participation in the faith were emotional, social and spiritual acts as they needed to be part of the community of faith. The women agreed that they drew affirmation through the religious rituals and social activities together and described them as strengthening their bonds as ‘a family’. They seemed to obtain comfort, security and a sense of belonging (Ozorak, 1996) and often referred to each other as ‘sisters’. The spiritual bonds or connections include reaching out to spiritual friends and the notion that the connections are not coincidental but reflect Divine provision (Kong, 2001). The sense of connection as a family among the women and the bond of following God’s will to help the family back home (particularly for the first-time migrants) were recurrent themes of the women’s religious expressions in relationship with others.

Examining relationships between migration and religion is critical for understanding the ways multidimensional power and meanings of travel are attached to various scales of place (Olson and Silvey, 2006). When I asked a group of returned migrants in Flores, where all of us would meet one weekend, the leader of the group without hesitation suggested a place of pilgrimage. By this time, I had become acquainted with the returned domestic workers as I had on a number occasions met them either individually or as a small group for interviews or participated in their social activities. We arranged for a minivan to take the six of us to the place of Marian pilgrimage about one-and-half-hour journey from Ende, our base. We started early in the morning, brought our picnic lunch, candles and prayer books. We lit our candles as soon as we arrived, sang hymns and said the rosary in front of the statue of Mary. Later, we also did the ritual of the Stations of the Cross. The choice of place nor the activities that we would do there did not surprise me as, by that time, I had realised the centrality of the Catholic religion in the women’s lives. The social and spiritual pilgrimage, the ‘poetics’ of the religious place and the sacred space became the focus of meaningful activities, apart from ordinary space (Kong, 2001). The women openly shared out loud prayers of thanksgiving for a successful journey, for their families and for some friends who were left working in Hong Kong. Their attachment to the community of faith reached
across distance. This episode highlights how religious and spiritual beliefs and practices provide continuity, permeating women’s lives from the decision to migrate, during the migration process and upon returning home.

Conclusion: Mobile subjectivities, religion and migration

The practice of negotiating the stages of migration (the decision to migrate, the in-transit period and at the destination) was also a journey of shifting subjectivities for the women. Maria’s journey brought forth new subject positions and awareness that her race, class and gender may hold against her. Hence, when Maria cried in front of her employer, she was attentive to the multiplicities within herself and invested in as many dimensions of her roles and positions as possible to gain an advantage (Ferguson, 1993). Drawing strength from her religious belief, she also showed self-confidence in confronting the sexual approach of her male employer. Her presence in the urban space had to be negotiated with the idea of ‘a good woman’ who will not compromise on any sexual practice outside marriage. While her Catholic beliefs help her to remain true to her convictions, Maria was also located in relation to constantly moving trajectories of power. Ferguson (1993: 161) claims ‘Mobile subjectivities are too concrete and dirty to claim innocence, too much in-process to claim closure, too interdependent to claim fixed boundaries’. Maria’s ways of handling the sexual harassment show evidence of a mobile subjectivity, which produces provisional identities and opens up an unpredictable possibility (Ferguson, 1993) that generates power.

Maria, Liana and Netti’s awareness of their religious belief and shifting subjectivities aided them in moving from the subject position of protected daughters with almost with no voice to that of autonomous single women working and negotiating life in metropolitan households. Liana was able to convince her father to let her migrate, arguing that God’s timing was perfect. She escaped a failed relationship and achieved her goal of migration. Netti’s way of coping with constraints, rules and forms of oppressions shows her drawing strength and power from religious beliefs while facing challenging situations. Her responses to gender and class inequality reflect her using religion as ‘cognitive strategies for reducing discomfort’ (Ozorak, 1996). The timid migrant untypically negotiated her Sundays-off for weekly rituals. The sense that their faith was a constant and positive presence in their lives helped the women to reconcile themselves with the negative aspects of their social situations under a range of dominations. The women’s subjectivity and religious belief and practices were in motion to generate a specific form of power.

The ways the women drew strength from their religious beliefs indicate a crucial force in their lives that sustained them throughout the migration process. They seemed thus able to reconcile a paradox of being placed under the Church’s and also male kinfolk’s subjection as a weak person, yet maintaining their beliefs as a centring force, which keep them brave (berani) and strong in the midst of transformation. While in transit and working abroad, the networks of relation, particularly the community of faith, enable women to keep the support of an imagined family, which in their view is bonded by God’s care. The ways women use religious belief while in migration resemble cognitive strategies that can be used for reducing discomfort. Women are also able to exploit the fluidity and multiplicity of roles and identities in their changing spaces of migration, enabling shifting subjectivities. Through their religious beliefs, practices and rituals, women often have certain expectations of positive outcomes, which might be quite empowering. By considering the various effects of female migrants’ religion in their transnational migration, we are also able to access the significance of relational contexts in female migration, providing insights into the motives, processes and determinants of transnational migration.

Acknowledgements

The paper greatly benefitted from the insightful comments of Katherine Gibson, Katharine McKinnon and Linda Malam. Many thanks to them. A previous version of the paper was presented to the Session: Critical Geographies and Agrarian Change in Asia-Pacific at the International Geographical Union Congress in Brisbane in 2006. Thank you to all the session
participants for their lively discussions. My gratitude to the referees for useful comments and special thanks also to Sandra Davenport for her help through the final stage.

Notes

1 This research reported here is part of a larger study on contemporary Eastern Indonesian women’s travel through three routes: inter-islands, urban centres and overseas destinations (Williams, 2007).
2 However, the women’s religious affiliation coincides with a particular socioeconomic profile of the majority of domestic workers from the Philippines, which may marginalise their overall position in the host society. Nevertheless, in terms of the host society’s relative familiarity with Christianity, they are in a better position to receive understanding from employers of their rituals than, for example, other domestic workers from Java, who mainly were Muslim.

References


