

**Vilashini Somiah, *Irregular Migrants and the Sea at the Borders of Sabah, Malaysia: Pelagic Alliance*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 174 pp. ISBN: 978-3-030-90417-3.**

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A telling revelation for the youthful irregular migrants of Sabah’s eastern coast, growing up in the relative absence of stability, is that the local stories of demons and ghosts are also personal ones: “these stories of monsters were about them” (Somiah 121). But stories, as Viet Thanh Nguyen (146) reminds us, “are another set of experiences as valid as historical ones”, which exert a tremendous influence not just over these youths, but also their broader community.

Somiah uses the term “irregular migrants” here to specifically refer to those whom we conventionally think of as having roots in the southern Philippines, having crossed international boundaries to Malaysia outside the established legal process. What becomes clear is that her ethnography is not just human-centric, but also involves a “pelagic alliance” (or a “migrant-sea nexus”) where “[t]he sea and the community live in symbiosis” (Somiah 6). While aware of fixed territorial conceptions and their ostensible “illegality”, these migrants resolutely insist that they are “*urang sini*” (37). While this term may roughly translate to “locals”, their conception of “*sini*” (here) is not bounded by the arbitrarily imposed parameters of the nation-state: rather, the sea itself can be conceptualised as a *persekutuan*—a country or ally (3)—and is *not* necessarily an extension of dry land. Perhaps parallels can be drawn with the conceptions of “Nusantara” or “Nanyang”—in this sense, “*sini*” encompasses the entirety of Somiah’s “wet borderlands”. For them, it’s not so much a case of leaving home, but having home cleaved between two competing entities.

Given the thesis’s relative novelty, the introductory chapter largely describes its theoretical framework and scope of research. Since Clifford Geertz’s influential reading of Balinese cockfights as a symbolic representation of societal dynamics—i.e., culture as a text—contemporary ethnography has been receptive towards apparently unorthodox approaches. The second to fifth chapters are standalone case studies centred on different themes: i.e., space and belonging, the “left behind” women, return journeys to Sabah following repatriation, and youthful experiences, respectively. In each, the sea plays a significant role in shaping identities

and behaviours, particularly in the fourth chapter with its focus on dangerous seagoing routes. The pelagic alliance is again stressed in the sixth and final chapter. In this way, even as disciplines become more specialised, thus taking C.P. Snow's 1959 problematisation of the divide between the sciences and the arts (i.e., the "two cultures") to extremes, studies such as Somiah's bridge political, social, cultural and geographical considerations. Literary theory (perhaps narratology in particular) may even lend itself to such evolving fields of study. Recalling Parthiban Muniandy's fieldwork on the "ghost lives" of migrants and refugees locally, by giving space to the narratives of present-day "Othered" communities, Somiah's book reveals a different conception of space to that espoused by the nation-states which have demarcated the Sulu Sea. But while there is already a significant discourse on migrant experiences in Malaysia, ecological relationships are peripheral to them (if even mentioned at all) in comparison with institutions, urban environments, or activists and exploiters.

To Somiah's migrants, the sea is less a passive resource or backdrop, but directly plays a dynamic role in facilitating the continued and long-lived process of migration. In many ways, her migrants constitute a spectral presence, as the abovementioned ghost stories imply: some make their way back along dangerous seaborne navigations post-deportation or purchase the birth certificates of deceased children of citizens for their own youths. All this time they are cognisant of the power of the Sulu Sea despite their Muslim and Christian beliefs, with its "unique powers and capabilities beyond that of human beings" (105), aided by the wind and celestial bodies. It is this relationship to the sea that sets Somiah's book apart from other texts on Malaysia's migrant condition, integrating ecology seamlessly into the human experience.<sup>1</sup>

The sea, however, is a contested space. The Malaysian-Philippine littoral zone is subject to policing under the Eastern Sabah Security Command, legally contested from Beijing to Manila, harbouring extremist organisations and seeing skirmishes such as the brief occupation of Lahad Datu. In this discourse, it is easy to miss the human struggles that emerge through Somiah's fieldwork. The collected interviews from marketplaces and villages, in the relative privacy of home or in grim urban centres, reveal the struggles of the left-behind wives whose husbands are deported or detained; the schoolchildren wary of repeating history and accepting a destiny as permanent foreigners; dark swims from the boats of sympathetic smuggler-fishermen to the coast; escapes from police roadblocks with the connivance of *bengbeng* van drivers; the subtle sympathy of detention-centre officers on visiting day. Transcribed and translated, they range from the prosaic to the poetic—an elderly participant casually shrugs off the possibility of being caught by declaring: "Whatever it is we're fated for, water is the hardest to grasp. I'll just be water" (41).

Such stories run in stark contrast to the conceptions of locals, which one Sabahan respondent generally surmises as follows: “Many friends and family of mine who are anti-terrorist, tend to also dislike the Filipinos [i.e., irregular migrants]. People assume all Filipinos are terrorists” (130). Local educators of migrant children argue how they are “of a violent race”, where salvation through education means that “the children will not be terrorists” (130). At the core of the Malaysian discourse of race and identity is the persistence of fixed ideas of nations, citizens, and foreigners, elements linked in turn to Benedict Anderson’s treatise on the formation of “imagined communities”. Territory-based in orientation, their sense of a common language and discourse enhanced by print-capitalism, nations are constructed entities whose inherent inclusivity may sometimes harden along fixed lines. Transposed onto the Sulu Sea, where notions of identity are not necessarily understood in the same way, traditional conceptions of community-formation are destabilised. Indeed, the classification of “irregular migrants” is based on an ethnocentric, land-based paradigm of the imagined community, which Somiah’s study seeks to challenge.

Returning to the importance of water to the migrants, far from being a speculative approach, the nexus between water and discourses of home and identity is saliently argued here. Thus, rather than focusing only on the Sulu Sea’s geopolitical and economic ramifications, water is also studied here in terms of how it functions as “a site of reflection” (148), where “memory synchronises with the rise and fall of the tides”, which in turn can be “important markers of progress” (85). This psychological and phenomenological aspect of water is a key area for further research, especially given how it functions in Somiah’s study as a “central theoretical element”, from which the participants “compose their narratives and represent them” (18). Of particular interest is water’s intimate relationship to memory and identity, and whether analogous linkages exist elsewhere among other littoral communities. Even deportation from Sabah “goes against the currents and is inimical to the will of the sea” (158), in a metaphorical sense. What this suggests is a need for a broader study of Sabah’s—and by extension the region’s—relationship to water.

In conclusion, we can consider a question posed by Gayatri Spivak, whose scholarly work straddles literature, history, and politics: can the subaltern truly speak? If all knowledge produced is epistemically compromised, ultimately serving the interests of dominant powers—perhaps institutional knowledge or the Malaysian authorities here—how then can otherwise voiceless subjects be empowered? Ethnographic work, such as Somiah’s, suggests a possible framework for doing so. By constructing frameworks *from* the oral narratives of her respondents, more nuanced understandings of their realities and notions of *persekutuan* can eventually emerge,

thus revealing the complexity of the different conceptions of space at the borderlands of the nation-state, and how people view their place within its boundaries—or transcend them altogether.

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<sup>1</sup> Even for land-based Sabahans, the centrality of the sea is striking. David Lim (29) inadvertently highlights the degree to which Kota Kinabalu's urban life was once connected with water—for instance, underwater “replacement blocks of ‘land’” were made available to urban settlers.

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