

# Anthropology Book Forum

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Review Title: Moving to Serve

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Book Reviewed: *Follow the Maid. Domestic Worker Migration in and from Indonesia*. Olivia Killias, 2018. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

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In her recently published ethnography, *Follow the Maid*, Olivia Killias takes the title literally: the reader gets to follow the migratory pathways of young women from the uplands of Central Java, Indonesia, setting out to become domestic workers in middle-class households in Malaysia, much as Killias herself has done in her long-term, ethnographic fieldwork on which the book is based. In writing this book, Killias sets out to provide an understanding of the intersection of moral, economic and legal processes in making rural Javanese women into maids for households in Malaysia and the particular struggles and negotiations that arise at various points in this transformation (8). Accordingly, the book is structured to correspond to the various moments or steps in this process, with each chapter focusing on one particular moment: from social and economic conditions in the women's villages of origins (chapter 2), the brokers and agencies recruiting women for overseas domestic work (chapter 3), the training camps in Indonesian cities that prepare women for their work abroad (chapter 4), their workplaces in Malaysia (chapter 5), and their eventual return to Indonesia (chapter 6). This allows at once for a coherent and intimate ethnographic thread, closely connecting the various theoretical discussions offered in

these chapters and engaging the reader at every step, and the continued logical development of the book's theoretical argument.

Killias skillfully highlights the productive intersection of normative discourses, legal frameworks and social and economic structures that defines every stage of this movement and thereby not just enables but creates a particular form of temporary labor migration. Normative discourses in both Indonesia and Malaysia construct Indonesian women as docile and caring, and thus particularly suitable for working in the domestic sector, while in need of protection, and represent women's labor migration as an essential contribution to the economic and social development of the Indonesian nation (113, 146-147). Economic structures provide the need for women to seek employment abroad and create a migratory regime that ties women to the brokers, agencies and employers through contractual and debt obligation, effectively reproducing older forms of labor bondage (37). Finally, legal frameworks in both the sending and receiving countries enable this specific form of labor migration, while illegalizing alternative modes of migration and limiting women's bargaining power vis-à-vis both employers and agents by tying their legal status to their employment and closely circumscribing the conditions for legality (41, 163, 176). Bringing together these different elements and showing the productive dynamics that ensue from their intersection and crucially define contemporary labor migration is the great merit of Killias' book. All too often, these aspects are being kept separate in the literature on labor migration with studies focusing on one aspect while bracketing out the others, even though they are, as this study shows, mutually constituted.

Chapter 4, in which Killias discusses the women migrants' stay at camps run by the recruitment agencies in the main cities of Indonesia, is particularly strong. Such camps serve the dual purpose of, on the one hand, providing the migrants with the necessary training for turning them into desirable domestic workers, teaching them language skills, acceptable behavior and the

required forms of carrying out their daily housekeeping tasks. And, on the other hand, keeping the women from failing to honor the contractual obligations they have agreed to in the recruitment process by preventing any movement outside the tightly controlled space of the camp – in short, by incarcerating them. Thus, bound up with the contractual and debt mechanism structure of this migratory regime, these camps are characterized by Killias as Goffmanian *total institutions* attuned to reshaping crucial aspects of the migrant women's being, from their looks to their behavior and their very thinking about what their labor is about and for. This presents a crucial moment in the process of turning young rural women into maids, whereby de-personifying, if not dehumanizing, disciplining practices transform these women into the maids that middle-class Malaysians desire. Killias' ethnography provides a unique, intimate and hugely important glimpse into this space control and disciplining, and draws attention to an aspect of contemporary labor migration that is seldom made a subject in the current literature on transnational labor migration, not least since few researchers ever gain such thorough access to these transitory disciplining spaces as Killias has. At the same time, as in much of the book, the theoretical framework through which she seeks to make sense of her ethnographic material is well fitting, accessible and carefully elaborated.

Throughout the book, Killias pays close attention to the particularly gendered nature of this form of labor migration. She shows how the migrants' gender and age is negotiated in the economic and legal structures that frame their migration and particularly in the normative discourses that are mobilized in relation to women's labor migration and domestic work in Malaysia as well as in Indonesia, both on the national and on the local level. This includes specific local notions such as taking responsibility (*tanggung jawab*; 73) for the migrants or seeking experience through migrating (*cari pengalaman*; 71), which Killias interlocutors in the Javanese sending village used in discussing migration experiences. In this context, a more detailed and expanded discussion of these concepts' historical and cultural construction would have been

interesting, in particular for scholars of Indonesian labor migration, though the lack thereof does not detract the general argument of the book.

More generally, Killias offers clear and concise discussions of key concepts of the field of labor migration, as with her discussion of indentured labor and debt bondage in chapter two (34), thereby helping her readers find their way through the more dense, theoretical parts of the text. This is no small feat, making it accessible to students only just approaching the study of labor migration. As such, the book promises to be an invaluable source for teaching issues of labor migration on undergraduate and graduate levels alike, especially when considering these clear theoretical discussions in conjunction with the book's lively and engaging ethnographic parts. This is complemented by Killias' choice to include an exceptionally detailed and intimate discussion of her long-term, multi-sited ethnographic research, its logistics, the challenges it presented and the connections it allowed her to make (13-21). Uncommon as it may be, such a long and detailed discussion of the daily logistics of research nonetheless offers a valuable and certainly inspiring insight into the work that underpins this study. All in all, Killias' ethnography offers an admirable and refreshing contribution to the vast academic literature on contemporary labor migration and will be an important read not only for scholars of Southeast Asia, but for those of labor migration in general as well.

**Jonathan Kraemer** is currently a PhD student in the Department of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University. His research concerns transnational labor migration of Indonesian workers to the palm oil fields in Malaysia, with a particular focus on migrant politics, migratory networks and the intersection of exploitation and racialization in the contemporary plantation economy in Southeast Asia. He holds a Master's degree from Heidelberg University and a Bachelor's degree from the University of Toronto.



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