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Returning Urbanite

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Returning Urbanite

Abstract

Christian is not a typical returning urban-rural migrant. Unlike most men who come back to the Kelabit Highlands after living in town, he did not return having struggled to make a decent living, nor did he return expecting to get married and start a family. Christian had already done both, leaving behind a good job and returning with his wife and children. What he did not anticipate is how out of place and misunderstood he would be once back home. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Malaysia, Kelabit Highlands, Malaysian Borneo, urban-rural migrant, Indonesia

Disciplines

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antidevelopment persona. Besides being a lawbreaker, the squatter became increasingly judged as a serious impediment to the nation's collective progress and to aspirations to carve a hypermodern "world-class city" out of Kuala Lumpur. The recurring discourse of a "squatter-free" city has normalized this imagery not only to other city administrations in the country but also in the popular imagination.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there was thus a dramatic categorical transformation of the squatter. The debilitating effects of the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s slowed down this onslaught for several years before its resumption in more recent times. While many squatters chose to flee outside the city limits to escape punitive action, several thousands of those without financial means were also reconstituted vertically into blocks of high-rise, low-cost flats that were usually substandard in design and construction, had poor maintenance facilities, and suffered from high rates of vandalism. To detractors, many of these monoliths have approximated the material and psychological attributes of slums. Indeed, one can argue that while the legal category of *penduduk setinggan* may be a dying vernacular breed within the Kuala Lumpur city limits, it is now replaced by another less familiar kind of socio-spatial existence. Like so many others before him, Subramaniam does not relish the prospect of living in a high-rise, low-cost flat when his *kampung* is eventually demolished. In providing legal security of tenure, these modernist structures have also taken away much more in exchange.

Returning Urbanite

MATTHEW AMSTER

Christian is not a typical returning urban-rural migrant. Unlike most men who come back to the Kelabit Highlands after living in town, he did not return having struggled to make a decent living, nor did he return expecting to get married and start a family. Christian had already done both, leaving behind a good job and returning with his wife and children. What he did not anticipate is how out of place and misunderstood he would be once back home.

I first learned about Christian's return to the remote Kelabit Highlands of Malaysian Borneo in 2002. He had e-mailed me from the newly opened Internet kiosk near the airstrip at Bario—the unofficial center of the Kelabit rural community—asking if I knew anything about growing asparagus and whether I thought it was a good prospect as a new idea for a cash crop. The next year, when I came to do research about the Internet, I saw firsthand both Christian's ambitions and his difficulties as a return migrant.³⁶ In the 1990s, during my dissertation fieldwork, I knew Christian as a sophisticated town

dweller. As is typical of his generation of Kelabit, he first moved to town to complete his schooling and remained there to work. Among those few who do return to the rural homelands, almost all are young unmarried men who have found it difficult to achieve success in town. For these men, returning home is also linked to the opportunity to marry women from related indigenous communities across the adjacent international border in Indonesia.³⁷ Such men are categorized locally as “Form Five failures,” indicating their low level of educational achievement,³⁸ while their cross-border wives are known for their industriousness as rice farmers, work that few Kelabit women today will readily do. From the perspective of urban Kelabit, marriages between these marginalized young men and their economically poorer Indonesian wives are instrumental in keeping rural communities in the Kelabit Highlands alive.³⁹

So, what motivated Christian to move back? By all appearances he was doing well in town, working as an electrician in the oil and natural gas industry. He was happily married to a woman from a related indigenous group, and they had four children. When I had last visited the family in 1999, I was struck by Christian’s entrepreneurial spirit and his seemingly stable and well-adjusted middle-class life. He owned a modest house, a car (the ubiquitous Malaysian-made Proton Saga), and maintained a small plot of land outside town with gardens and fishponds—potential small-business ventures. The decision to return to the highlands took me by surprise. As Christian commented, “Most people talk about going back, but nobody actually does it.” He explained that his primary motivation to return was a strong desire to provide his children with a similar experience to that of his own childhood, which he looked back on nostalgically.

When he returned in 2000, he chose not to focus on growing rice, which he considered economically unviable—estimating that rice farmers earn only about fifty cents a day. Instead, he began planting elaborate gardens, growing asparagus, papayas, and bananas, and trying, unsuccessfully, to raise ducks. He still has plans to build fishponds for commercial fish production. All these endeavors have yet to pay off. Undaunted, Christian claims to have progressive ideas about how one can make a living in the highlands by being efficient and choosing the right high-yield crops. In the meantime, he spends most of his time doing paid construction work to maintain a basic income.

Sadly, Christian has struggled to be accepted by other men in the village, as he does not fit the common pattern of male migrants who return home to maintain the family farm. Nor, on the other hand, does he serve as a mediator to wider structures outside the village, a “model and a guide,” as Geertz once described urban-oriented elites in rural Java.⁴⁰ Christian’s presence simply seemed anomalous, caught in a marginalized space between highland and

lowland, the village and town. While the rural Kelabit people certainly rely on urban-based relatives to help mediate between the village and nation and to articulate and defend local interests, such urbanites are effective allies in part because they do not live in the village. Thus, urban-based Kelabit often act as important regional and global cultural brokers, spearheading projects like bringing the Internet and telephone service to the Kelabit Highlands and mediating between the local community and outsiders, such as tourists, researchers, and government officials.

One day I saw Christian coming back to the village on his motorbike, the engine straining under the weight of rice sacks. Watching as he weaved precariously to avoid potholes and muddy patches on the road, I realized that there was something odd about the scene; I had never seen sacks of rice moving *in this direction* along the road, since nearly everyone in the community grows their own rice. That night I asked Christian why he needed to buy rice outside the community. He explained that after three years he was still not accepted and nobody was comfortable selling him rice, not even close relatives. He believed, correctly, that people found his ideas too progressive and his way of expressing himself too direct. Rather than being embraced for his urban orientation, "a man able to comprehend both the village and the city,"⁴¹ he was shunned for trying to do things in new ways.

"It was not that easy to resign my job and come back here," Christian lamented, adding, in a somewhat patronizing way, that "people in the *kampung* (village) are not able to fully develop themselves, as they are too busy with everyday tasks." Meanwhile, Christian keeps a meticulous journal of his agricultural experiments, recording intricate details with the hope of increasing his yields. He acknowledges his awkward position in the village and hopes it improves, yet he is also pleased that his children can experience growing up immersed in Kelabit rural life. In the meantime, he continues to travel outside the village to buy his own rice.

Timber Entrepreneur (*Cukong Kayu*)

MICHAEL EILENBERG

One late afternoon in 2003, I was sitting with a few loggers at one of the small ramshackle coffee shops in Indonesian Borneo, along a gravel road near the border crossing to Malaysia. The degraded forest in the background and the hastily erected wooden houses and bustling sawmills that lined the road (all covered in a thick layer of dust stirred up by the continuous flow of logging trucks) created a certain frontier atmosphere. However, the scene abruptly changed when a brand new Toyota Land Cruiser with Malaysian license