
SAVING POOR CHILDREN, MAKING GOOD CHRISTIANS

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF CHURCH SCHOOLS
FOR CHILDREN OF MIGRANT WORKERS
IN SABAH (MALAYSIA)



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FOREWORD

Geneva – August 22, 2012

It is early afternoon on a beautiful sunny day and I am sitting at my desk. Summer is catching up after a hesitant start. The outside temperature is about 32 degrees Celsius, which reminds of my time in Sabah (Malaysia), last year, and the tropical conditions in which I did my fieldwork. I switch on my computer and decide to watch a few videos from that period.

The first one features an evening of music and dance that one of the schools I used to work in organized for fundraising purposes. A group of charismatic Presbyterian Christians composed of young adults and middle-aged women had come all the way from South Korea to showcase their talent as artists. My former students, all of them daughters and sons of migrant workers from Indonesia and the Philippines, had done their best to live up to the challenge: with the help of some of their teachers, and in only a few months' time, they had learned to play a piece on the ocarina, an instrument new to them.

On screen, they look a little clumsy and tense. Obviously, it is the first time they are performing in front of such a big audience (about 1000 people sit in the huge and stylish auditorium of the *Borneo Protestant Seminary*¹). Most of the spectators are Malaysians belonging to the Chinese ethnic community and members of one or the other Protestant church of Sabah. But the students gain confidence throughout their performance and, when the moment comes for them to leave the stage, they are smiling, proud as peacocks.

The Koreans take over. They are clearly not professionals but the quality of their show reveals long and intensive preparation. Drawing from traditional Korean arts as well as contemporary pop culture, they embark in danced accounts of the Genesis creation narrative and the Passion of Christ. Their fancy costumes, energetic choreographies, elaborate lighting and sound effects, and use of multi-media are something unique in a region where stage productions are rare, usually small-budget and lackluster.

A colleague and I had been chosen as "MCs" (masters of ceremony). She does all the

¹ All names mentioned in this thesis are pseudonyms.

talking in Malay and I translate into English.² At some point she says something that subsequently comes out of my mouth as: "Beloved brothers and sisters, let's applaud one more time, to our God,³ for this show has blessed us so much. All of this is the work of our great God, Allah!"⁴ It surprises me now that I sound almost as convincing as she does. Maybe I did, after all, contribute to raising funds on that evening...

Towards the end of the video, the young Koreans jump around in hip-hop style and chant (in English): "One way! One Name! Jesus: the only one that I could care for!" They urge the audience to stand up, clap hands and sing with them, but only a few spectators mirror their energetic enthusiasm. Most of them hesitate before standing up and clap hands in a rather reserved way, having quick looks around to see what the others are doing. My former students join the Koreans on stage. They mingle, dance together and the Koreans act as if they were the children's best friends – although both groups had met for the first time on the previous night. Then everybody switches to the classical church song in Malay *Saya Mahu Cinta Yesus Selamanya* ("I Want to Love Jesus Forever") and the evening ends with a collective prayer.

Not captured on the video, but still vivid in my mind, is the image of one of the Koreans, a young man, coming back to the stage after everybody had left, kneeling in front of it, stretching his arms to the side to grasp it and lowering his head. His position reminded me instantly of that of Jesus Christ carrying the cross on His back. He remained there for a while in silence and then burst out sobbing. Soon, his friends gathered around him and put their hands on his body while praying in tongues.⁵

Looking back at such events and at my experience in Sabah in general, I cannot help but have a feeling of strangeness. How is it that a nonbeliever such as myself found his way to the remote island of Borneo and to such an unfamiliar, religious setting? Ethnography, because it seeks to understand a particular culture or social setting through a "personal engagement with the subject" (Hobbs 2006:101), is always as much a scientific research method as the account of an encounter. Thus, before we go deeper into the topic of this

2 That day, except for a few international guests, everyone in the audience understood Malay but Chinese Malaysians tend to distance themselves from this language in order to assert their rights as an important ethnic minority, thus the simultaneous use of English – though Mandarin would have been even more appropriate.

3 In this thesis, all references to God and Jesus Christ bear a capital letter in concordance with emic usage.

4 In Malaysia, Christians and Muslims both use the word "Allah" to refer to their God.

5 Pentecostal-charismatic speaking in tongues, or glossolalia, is "a form of ritual utterance characterized by its lack of a semantic component. Hence, all syllables are 'nonsense syllables'. [...] glossolalia bears a global meaning as an inspired form of praise to God, and can also be called into play as an experientially profound prayer for divine intercession or guidance." (Csordas 1990:24)

thesis, it seems appropriate to say a few words here about the story of my fieldwork.

As a male Swiss citizen I would normally be obliged to "serve" in the Swiss army. But instead of doing this military service I chose to register in an alternative program implying social work. In 2009, the authorities in charge reminded me that I still had to accomplish another six months of "service". The prospect of interrupting my studies in order to do care or office work in Switzerland – the only jobs available for someone with my background – did not appeal to me. I therefore wrote applications to several organizations qualified to send people abroad in the framework of this national program for social work. One of them, an "evangelical mission" based in German-speaking Switzerland, answered favorably.

This organization has projects in many countries of Asia, Africa and South-America. It collaborates with churches and organizations related to churches by providing mainly "help for structural development". In summer 2010, I signed a contract with the organization and in November, I was on my way to Sabah, a Malaysian state located on Borneo. I would spend there the next 10 months working as an English teacher in two schools that had allegedly been "set up by a local evangelical church" for the children of migrant low-wage workers from Indonesia and the Philippines. Interestingly, the fact that I am not a practicing Christian, nor a believer, nor even baptized, for that matter, did not seem problematic for the people who hired me. They found it interesting that I had trained as an anthropologist and accepted to let me do some research during my stay.

And so I began to teach English and carry out fieldwork in two primary schools, the first one located in what, following Sabahan standards, could be described as a big city, the second one in a town of the interior. I refer to them here as City X and Town Y. Most of my ethnographic work took place in these schools as well as on sites linked with the people from these schools (for example, the church that my fellow teachers went to on Sundays or the neighborhoods where my students lived). During the last three months of my stay in Sabah, I volunteered in a third school in City X, also as an teacher but this time for teenagers and young adults taking evening classes in English. All of them were Filipina/o or descendants of Filipinas/os and many of them had already started to work. They came to the classes on a voluntary basis. My engagement in these three organizations allowed me to find out a lot about them, to be in constant contact with all the individuals who were, in one way or another, linked to them, to follow their evolution and to attend the important events that punctuated their existence. Parallel to this, I made occasional visits to other

"migrant schools" (*sekolah pendatang*)⁶. As we shall see,⁷ there are many of them in Sabah, each one having particular characteristics, affiliations and a unique history. Lastly, I visited a "government" primary school (*sekolah kerajaan* or SK), in order to compare schooling opportunities of youth of immigrant origin with those of young Malaysian citizens.

School holidays gave me some free time to travel in the region, especially to the provinces of origin of Indonesian migrants working in Sabah. On one occasion, I took the ferry bringing most of them back home and visited the villages of origin of my Toraja students as well as other places on the island of Sulawesi. On another trip, I went to Java where many Indonesians working in peninsular Malaysia come from. And on a third trip, I visited Maluku, a province well-known for its mixed Christian and Muslim population.⁸

Before landing in Sabah, I had decided to study the lives of children of migrant workers with respect to their access (or as the case may be, non-access) to formal education. Once there, my research progressively focused on "migrant schools". I tried to discover where schools for children of migrant workers were located; how they came into being; where their funds come from; who manages them; who studies and works in them; what objectives they set themselves, with what means and to what effects; how the different groups and individuals that compose them behave toward each other; which individuals play a prominent role; which external actors influence, support or endanger these schools; etc. It took me a considerable amount of time just to map the sector of education for migrants' children, understand its main characteristics and get an idea of the kind of lives children of migrant workers lead in Sabah. At a second stage, the bigger picture of how Sabahan *sekolah pendatang* fit into the local, national and regional political frameworks slowly emerged. Finally, through reading academic work that addresses similar phenomena, I realized how these organizations, while deeply embedded in their local context, can at the same time be considered as affected by, and resulting from, global

6 "Migrants' school" or *sekolah pendatang* is often used in Sabah to refer to schools designed especially for children of migrant workers. The expression appears in my text but only as an emic category, because it raises several problems. First, it suggests that the schools were set up by migrants themselves, which is definitely not always the case. Second, it labels students as migrants, thus misrepresenting the fact that the vast majority of them were born in Sabah and did not migrate themselves. For the same reason, in my view, the expressions "children of migrant workers" or "migrants' children" should be preferred to that of "migrant children". The former highlights the presence of an experience of migration in these children's lives – though not a direct one – while leaving open the question of their legal status and national belonging which, as we will see, is necessary in view of the complex Sabahan context. In accordance with these considerations, the expression "second generation migrants" is not used in this text.

7 See chapter "A Highly Diverse Sector", p. 33.

8 More sadly, Maluku became famous for clashes that claimed many lives in both religious communities between 1999 and 2002.

processes.

When I got down to analyzing my data, I noticed that it mainly covered the schools in which I had been working. In retrospect, this seems less the result of a deliberate choice on my part to favor one object of study over another than the natural consequence of concrete opportunities and obstacles of the field, combined with personal interests and competence. In the thesis, I therefore focus on these organizations and similar ones, which are grouped together here under the category of "church schools".⁹

After having worked in and on church schools for almost a year, I was happy to fly back to Switzerland and see my family and friends again. As I resumed my routine as a university student, Sabah progressively entered the realm of my past. Memories of my students and images of their bright faces gently faded away. Despite occasional, but limited, contacts through Facebook, my experience in this region of the world began to take on a dreamlike quality. Had I really been there? Then, why were some things so difficult to remember vividly? Fieldnotes helped, of course, but they too seemed at once familiar and distant.

But then, a question resurfaced and slowly began to echo in my mind. It was put to me shortly before my departure from Sabah by a Pentecostal pastor who had opened a school for children of migrant workers: "What are you going to do for them after you get back home?". At the time, the question had taken me aback, as I had the feeling of having done a lot already for these children. Why would I be obliged to commit myself further when I had already been striving to always teach them with enthusiasm, energy and generosity? I hesitated and then answered, albeit not especially convinced of my argument, that my work as an anthropologist might help to raise people's awareness of the situation these children live in and to improve it. And I promised to send some money once in a while, which I did.

Today, I have a different interpretation the pastor's question. It does not so much require more commitment from me as acceptance for the fact that these children have become an integral part of myself. I did not ask for it to happen – and a substantial aspect of my work for this thesis consisted in analyzing how such emotional bonds are established between teachers and their students – it did all the same. In that sense, to not take care of them in one way or another, be it only through remembrance, would account to a serious personal loss. Hence, to them I dedicate this work.

⁹ An explanation of this analytical category is provided on p. 49.

STUDYING CHURCH SCHOOLS IN SABAH

Studying schools for children of migrant workers in Sabah, more particularly those that have been opened by Christian organizations, requires asking a long series of questions. Who are the main protagonists? In which phenomena are they involved? With what implications, for whom? As in any research, it is essential to define the object one is working on and make one's approach explicit. This thesis abundantly refers to "migrant workers", "children", "schools", "Christians" and "Muslims", "missionaries", "churches", "state authorities", etc. – terms that all point to real people, networks of people or places, whose relations can be observed and commented on, but, at the same time, terms that are concepts, and hence not to be mistaken for reality. Likewise, categories like "religion", "education", "migration" or "development", which I – like most other social scientists – used in my work, do not have an existence of their own. They just serve as tools for grasping, making sense of, and explaining sets of practices and beliefs. As such, they should not be considered as having clearly delineated boundaries, a fixed meaning or a precise definition. Their consistency depends on people's interpretation of them – and that includes my own. I stress this because the idea of a socially constructed reality, which has become the main paradigm in the social sciences since the 1960s, informs much of what follows, including this chapter.

To begin with, my research concerns schools, more particularly church schools for children of migrant workers. I consider them as organizations, that is associations of people set up to structure their collaboration, which implies an attribution of roles to each member, a system of communication and a hierarchy that sets down power relations. In studying organizations, it is essential to analyze their rhetoric or "dispositif idéal" (Abélès 1995), in other words what they "think" (Douglas 1986). This amounts to asking oneself: In which terms is an organization described by its members? How are its existence, action, and shortcomings justified? What are the prevailing representations about its staff/management, clients/recipients, sponsors/supporters, and neighbors/competitors? And how do these representations influence the life of the organization and the people it involves?

My research also deals with children,¹ which raises specific questions. Scholars like Sharon Stephens have shown that "the child" is one of the most biologized and universalized categories used in public discourses, although it is, in fact, like other categories, a political and historical construction (Stephens N.d.; Malkki & Martin 2003). Based on this insight, I have sought to deconstruct the category of "migrant children" and identify the characteristics commonly attributed to these children in church schools. How do teachers and school managers think about these children? Which words and images do they use to describe them? On what basis do they consider education beneficial for them? My argument is that the way "migrant children" are constructed as a social category plays a crucial role in the definition and justification of these schools' "mission".

This, in turn, leads me to explore church schools' conception of education. What is its purpose? What results are expected from it? What consequences would a lack of education have on "migrant children", the migrant community and Malaysian society at large? Because (primary) education consists in forming children, it presupposes having an idea of what these children are to become, in a more or less distant future, in other words a model on which to base one's efforts. I therefore inquire into church schools' notion of the ideal subject. What are its characteristics? On what ideology is it based? How is it promoted in everyday practices and discourses? With what consequences?

Independently from how education is conceived, I also look at how it is practiced in the daily life of church schools and other similar organizations – the two may, but need not be coherent. What is taught to children, through what means and with what tools? How are programs shaped and activities organized? Under whose influence? And how are they implemented? Popular understandings of education tend to emphasize the transmission of intellectual knowledge as its main feature, but everyone with a first-hand experience in the field knows that education has a lot, perhaps even more, to do with the acquisition of emotions, dispositions, bodily habits, and so on. It is definitely not limited to the textual form we often associate it with. In other words, education promotes ways of being as well as ways of thinking. My thesis therefore embraces a large view of education as anything that can, and is supposed to, shape children's representation of, and relation to, their selves, other human beings, the world.

This is where education and religion intersect. The first is about learning and the latter

¹ I have decided, for practical reasons, to limit my research to children aged about six to fourteen years, that is people who attend, or could potentially attend, primary school.

has to be learned, or "culturally acquired" (Van der Veer 2011:236). Education is therefore often used to promote ideas, values and behaviors that can be labelled as religious. Setting apart the two domains strictly would be arbitrary; it would account to fallacious reasoning. Rather, one has to adopt a holistic approach, in which education and religion merge to form a nexus of practices and representations that pertain to both domains. As Amy Stambach argues:

Seeing religion and education as dialectically related – including in anthropological and social theory – opens up a conceptual locus for analyzing how the public realm is transformed and how governmental regimes emerge. (Stambach 2009:4)²

A particularly significant example of how religion and education can merge is the Fethullah Gülen Movement, which consists of a worldwide network of schools led by a well-known Turkish imam. Bekim Agai (2002), one of many scholars to have studied the movement, describes an ideological environment in which teaching in itself, regardless of the subject being taught, becomes a religious deed. Islam is absent from the curriculum of the movement's schools, but at the same time it lies at the very heart of their *raison d'être* and informs the whole enterprise of the Gülen Movement. In this example, educational and religious practice are one and the same thing – albeit seen from different angles.

With respect to Sabahan church schools, these considerations point to the necessity of paying attention not only to formal religious education – Bible classes, for example – but also to the ways religion informs teaching and learning that is not obviously, or even apparently, religious. In this line of thought, it is essential to ask ourselves, among other questions: How does religion inform practices like teaching and learning? What do people who claim to be doing "evangelism" mean by that? And what do they actually do? Latent in these questions is also that of what it means to be "Christian" and to belong to "Christianity". While doing research on Christian organizations, one should be cautious not to reify, essentialize or normalize these concepts, for they are under constant negotiation among social actors. I therefore inquire into the understandings that the different people and organizations involved in church schools have of "Christianity" and "Christians", asking myself, among other things, whose definitions prevails and what this

2 The author later reiterated her call (Stambach 2010:summary point no. 3) by urging scholars to broadly study and conceptualize education, see secular-modernity as not irreligious – even if it seems paradoxical – in order for clear distinctions between education and religion, and between schools and development, to fall away.

tells us in terms of power relations.

In many respects, church schools in Sabah can be considered as integrated in a wider system of relations, usually referred to as development aid. Here too, establishing a clear distinction between two domains, i.e. development and religion, or worse, opposing the two, leads to misconceptions and analytical blindness. It hides the numerous historical and ideological bridges that exist between them and the fact that religious actors are often at the forefront of development, nowadays (Kaag & Saint-Lary 2011). Among the many authors who have dealt with religious actors' recent involvement in development projects, also dubbed the "new visibility of religion" in development (Kaag & Saint-Lary 2011), Stambach (2009:42ff.) argues, for instance, that the phenomenon started out with a long-term and intensive lobbying of conservative groups in the United States, aimed at promoting domestic Christian organizations as worthy recipients of public funding. According to her, this lobbying had a profound influence on major development agencies, among which the World Bank, who decided in the 1990s to recognize faith-based organizations as potential partners in the provision of social services. Randall Cooper and Frederick Packard (1997) argue for their part that, from the outset, development has been based on evolutionism and modernism – interventions are expected to bring forth a new kind of human being: rational and not superstitious, preferring effective action to high status, etc. – paradigms which can be traced back, paradoxically, to Christian missions' enterprise of creating new subjects and a better society in the colonies. Treating religion and development within a common frame seems therefore necessary. It allows us to see and ultimately say something about the porosity between these two domains. Erica Bornstein's ethnography of the transnational nongovernmental organizations World Vision and Christian Care in Zimbabwe (Bornstein 2005) is a good illustration of what such an approach can yield. Her study reveals that economic development, a symbol of science, progress, and this-worldly material improvement, sometimes borrows heavily from other-worldly, in this case Christian, faith.³ Taking inspiration from her work, I examine how religion informs development in Sabah. In particular, with regard to church schools, I look at how Christian actors claim to be contributing to the project of modernity and what meaning they give to this project. I also explore their particular interests in participating, or claiming to participate, in development.

3 Similarly, Amity Doolittle (2006), writing on Malaysia, observes that nationalism, Islamic faith, and the modernizing of rural agriculturalists are entangled in the federal government's development projects in rural Sabah.

Christian organizations are by far not the only ones active in the sector of education for children of migrant workers. Many other organizations and individuals also operate schools for these children and state authorities quite obviously play a significant role as well. It is important to understand how all these actors form a system and how their respective actions combine to impact on the lives of migrant workers and their children, as well as on those of other foreigners and Malaysian citizens. In my sense, this issue can be most fruitfully handled as one of "governmentality", because the concept, developed originally by Michel Foucault, allows us to focus on the "link between government techniques and subject-making" (Blundo & Le Meur 2009:10), or the ways in which policies – all policies, not just the state's – are not only imposed on people but also integrated by them into their own norms of conduct. In this sense, governmentality "weave[s] domination and subjectivation into a common framework, while paying attention to the knowledgeability and capability [...] of all the actors involved" (11).

The rest of this thesis develops the reflexions initiated in this chapter but does not reflect the sequence in which they appear above. The first chapter deals with methodological aspects of my fieldwork in Sabah, among which the difficulty of working on clandestine people as a clandestine researcher. The second chapter provides the reader with important background information on Sabah. In the third chapter, entitled "A Highly Diverse Sector", I describe the sector of education for children of migrant workers in Sabah and show how state and non-state actors coexist, cooperate, compete with, or keep away from each other. The fourth chapter analyzes schooling in the three schools where I worked, with a particular attention for the influence of religion. The focus moves from children to adults and from a manifest to a latent function (Merton 1968) of church schools in the fifth chapter, "Doing God's Work", whose subject is these schools' rhetoric and its influence on staff motivation and control. "Education as Salvation", the final chapter, proposes an analysis of church schools' conception of education, compares it with common practices and argues that the interplay of individualistic and collectivistic tendencies is liable to produce one of the things Christian organization are looking for, namely a remodeling of children's allegiances.

REFLECTIONS ON METHODOLOGY

Anthropologists have a magic word to refer to their method for investigating and describing the world: ethnography. Even though some anthropologists assert, quite persuasively, that doing anthropology is not equivalent to doing ethnography (Ingold 2007), most of them see themselves foremost as ethnographers, and have done so since the very beginnings of the discipline. In keeping with this long tradition, I have resorted to ethnography to conduct my research in Sabah. But what does that mean concretely?

Ethnography as Basic Recipe

Drawing from a number of classical works, Dick Hobbs defines ethnography as

[a] research method located in the practice of both sociologists and anthropologists, and which should be regarded as the product of a cocktail of methodologies that share the assumption that personal engagement with the subject is the key to understanding a particular culture or social setting. Participant observation is the most common component of this cocktail, but interviews, conversational and discourse analysis, documentary analysis, film and photography, life histories all have their place in the ethnographer's repertoire. Description resides at the core of ethnography, and however that description is constructed it is the intense meaning of social life from the everyday perspective of group members that is sought. (Hobbs 2006)

Ethnography entails establishing close, trust-based relationships with people in the hope that this will lead to a finer understanding of these people's lived realities. It often requires sharing people's lives over a long period of time, not only to observe them as they engage in their daily activities, but also to participate in these activities. In my case, participant observation translated into my taking part in the daily life of the schools I worked in, teaching in them, living on or close to the school compounds together with my colleagues, playing and talking with students after class, attending teacher meetings, church services, prayer evenings, birthday parties, marriages, shopping sessions, school camps, and the like. All these events offered innumerable occasions for observation and informal conversations – most of them in *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay). That way, I could constantly compare what people say they do with what they actually do. This is crucial because

practices and discourses are not necessarily congruent; they shape, but also exceed, and sometimes even contradict, one another. Comparing them can therefore bring to light dimensions of social reality one had not expected until then.

Participant observation allowed me to gain first-hand insights into the lives of the people who were connected in one way or another to the schools I worked in. But there were also other people, whom I met only occasionally, as well as questions I could hardly raise in everyday conversations, or subjects in which I wanted to delve deeper. For the latter, interviews are often a more appropriate method. I thus organized 28 interviews, usually on a "one to one" formula, but sometimes also with several interlocutors at a time. In my research, some people or categories of people played a more important role than others. Adults, for instance, were by far my main interlocutors – despite the fact that I was constantly surrounded by children throughout my stay in Sabah. I must plead guilty to the charge of "adultocentrism", but this methodological choice was in large part dictated by difficulties I faced while trying to explain to students that I had two hats, one as a teacher, the other as a researcher. They somehow never really seemed to understand this uncommon situation. Not knowing what I was getting at when I questioned them individually, they felt visibly uncomfortable, their answers were laconic or unreliable and yielded little interesting information for me. I thus abandoned the method of interviewing children and devoted more time to playing and chatting with them in a relaxed atmosphere – an approach that has proven more fruitful. It now seems to me that my difficulties were not so much due to my double identity as to the hierarchical relationship that links adults and children everywhere in the world. Julie Delalande (2007) suggests some interesting methods to reduce the effects of this hierarchy, like using children themselves as investigators. But I became aware of them only after having left the field.

In addition to participant observation and interviews, my research relied to a large extent on secondary documents of different kinds: legal texts, press articles, television reports, websites of NGOs or state entities, Facebook profiles, etc. Facebook profiles, in particular, became increasingly important after I had left Sabah. I reactivated my account¹ and accepted many of my former colleagues and students as "friends". That way, I could keep track of their "posts" and, in a way, prolong my fieldwork at a distance. It thus allowed me to verify a few analytical insights and even record some complementary

1 The reason why I had deactivated my profile in the first place is that it features many pictures of me dancing the tango with different women. I was not quite sure how people in Sabah would interpret these pictures, especially in consideration of the fact that I was engaged with someone at that time.

information.

Teacher and/or Anthropologist?

All in all, my job as teacher was very beneficial for my fieldwork. It facilitated access to the field by fully legitimizing my presence on the school premises, even in the places where I was only a visitor, and spared me a good part of the difficult task of approaching people and getting them to accept being studied. Being a teacher not only brought me in direct contact with the people I wanted to do research on, but it also served as a kind of magic visiting card, giving me entry in the Sabahan world of schooling at large. On another level, working and volunteering in different schools led me to experience these organizations in a direct way. I could take myself as an object of study, since my involvement, like that of other members, elicited actions, reactions, thoughts and emotions which could be reflected upon. Anthropologists usually refer to this method as autoethnography (Maréchal 2010). In its "analytical" version, advocated by Leon Anderson (2006:375), it implies, as main criteria, a self-reflexive researcher who is at the same time a complete member of the group under study and "committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena".

The position of "complete member researcher" (CMR) is very convenient but also has major limitations or drawbacks.

Frequently, members' orientations and interpretations are significantly influenced by role expectations related to specific member roles. So, for instance, Gerardo Marti's (2005) research with a multiethnic religious congregation involved autoethnographic participation as a lay pastor in the congregation. This role was invaluable for understanding certain aspects of the congregation. However, the role created tension and role conflict between his proselytizing responsibilities as a pastor and his researcher role. Even more significantly for this discussion, his pastoral role gave him direct access to some values, beliefs, and experiences (those of the convert) but limited his access to others (such as those of the marginally committed congregation members). (Anderson 2006:381)

One of the major limitations, in my case, was the barrier that my status as teacher raised between the students' parents and myself. I found it very difficult to get in close contact with them and even more to persuade them to talk with me openly about their children or their lives in general. Our conversations were punctual, short and often marked by a

feeling of uneasiness. This may have been due to the fact that my colleagues usually only asked questions to parents when there was a problem with their child. The rest of the time the two groups rarely spoke to each other. As for myself, my considerable efforts to be pleasant to migrant parents somehow never successfully bridged the social distance between us. That is why I was not able to conduct interviews with migrant parents. To make up for it, though, I always asked informal questions to other migrant workers, who also had children and whom I met casually outside of school environments.

In my view, some of the mistakes I did as an ethnographer were also due to my position as teacher. For instance, I forgot to do basic tasks, like attend one of my colleagues' class in order to observe a session of teaching. Of course, I walked past every classroom several times a day, so I have an idea of what usually went on inside. But it is quite a different thing to sit in the room for a whole hour and take note of social interactions in a detailed way.

Lastly, my social positioning also represented a problem for me on a personal level. Being both the employee of a missionary organization and an anthropologist, I often faced dilemmas. As a teacher, I owed commitment to my organization's goals, among which the spread of Christianity figured prominently.² As an anthropologist, on the other hand, I felt it was my duty, for both methodological and ethical reasons, to abstain from influencing people's beliefs and practices – even though I knew full well that there is no such thing as a fully nonintrusive research. In my eyes, there was a conflict between these moral imperatives and I resolved to stick to what seemed to me, at the time of my fieldwork, to be a "neutral" stance. Looking back, though, I realize that my behavior was in fact quite the opposite. In showing no interest, sometimes even overt skepticism toward religious matters in a region where religion is often indissociable from everyday life, I adopted an attitude that was not only abnormal but also provocative and potentially offensive. It may have considerably interfered with the reality I was studying – thereby producing the very result I had tried to avoid. But could I really have acted otherwise, when, like so many of my peers (see Stambach 2009:28 and Bornstein 2005:27), I had a fundamentally negative attitude toward missionaries and evangelists, almost to the point of considering them as "enemies" (Stipe 1980:165)?

2 Swiss national law states that conscientious objectors who have been allowed to do social work instead of the military service are supposed to abstain from any form of proselytism (see art. 61 of the *Ordonnance sur le service civil* (11.09.2006), available online at <http://www.admin.ch/ch/f/rs/8/824.01.fr.pdf>, last consulted 16.07.2012). But, in practice, how is one to determine the threshold? When should a given activity be considered as proselytizing?

Anthropologists' Relationship to Missionaries

Anthropologists and missionaries often have similar cultural backgrounds and meet on the field while doing their work, but their relationship is not necessarily an easy one, especially for anthropologists. Claude E. Stipe has reflected on the latter's aversion of missionaries and suggests that it may ensue from two assumptions common among anthropologists: "that primitive cultures are characterized by an organic unity" and "that religious beliefs are essentially meaningless" (Stipe 1980:165). "Organic unity" implies viewing culture change, in particular when caused by contacts with external actors, as necessarily harmful to indigenous societies (166). Anthropologists who think this way are very likely to manifest a negative attitude toward missionaries (166*f.*). As for the view that religious beliefs are "essentially meaningless", Stipe notes that, in many cases, it derives from the anthropologist's own negative experience of Christianity (167*f.*). In his conclusion, Stipe recommends that:

Since the involvement of some anthropologists with missionaries will no doubt continue, we should be concerned with the bases of the negative attitude which many of us manifest and be candid in dealing with it. An unwillingness to do so may result in a failure to control for bias in field research. (Stipe 1980:168)

Sjaak van der Geest (1990) also proposes interesting arguments to explain the "ambiguous" relationships between anthropologists and missionaries. He claims that both groups have often been opposed through stereotypical representations – as converters vs conservers, knowers vs doubters, and preachers vs listeners – although they have striking similarities, but the latter have been "largely ignored, if not suppressed" by anthropologists. According to van der Geest, anthropologists like to think of missionaries as their opposites. Whereas they consider themselves relativists, they see missionaries as "imprisoned in their own religious worldview" (589) and therefore guilty of ethnocentrism, a major offense according to their code of conduct. However, if one looks at it more thoroughly, van der Geest argues, missionaries should not sit alone in the dock; anthropologists should join them, since their practice of translating and reinterpreting native beliefs and practices according to their own worldview and the concepts that make sense to them also amounts to ethnocentrism (591). Religion is a case in point: anthropologists' incapacity to take religious beliefs of natives seriously and their

propensity in explaining them through metaphors show that they are convinced of having better beliefs themselves (593). Van der Geest highlights other striking similarities, all of them "hidden" and unpleasant to anthropologists. He notes for instance that missionaries also do ethnography, sometimes even better than anthropologists themselves (594ff.).

Finally, van der Geest advances that the "mirror" of missionaries forces anthropologists to question their worldview and self-image.

Anthropologists recognize in the missionary the repressed consequences of their own theories [...] The missionary is a living example of the anthropological definition of 'human': producing meaning. It is characteristic of humans, according to anthropologists, that they have an ultimate, comprehensive explanation for their being, namely, a religion. Ironically, that description does not apply to the anthropologists themselves. In the mirror of the missionary, anthropologists see themselves as exceptions to their own definitions, as human anomalies. Their relativism presents itself as a poorly-reflected religion. (Van der Geest 1990:597)

Reflecting on my own case, I see much relevance in Stipe and van der Geest's arguments. They provide a cogent explanation for my difficulty in accepting the personalities and endeavors of missionaries, evangelists and other devout people I got acquainted with in Sabah. I did indeed disapprove of attempts to shape children's mental and emotional world because I considered it detrimental to them, maybe not in terms of culture loss but certainly of constraint to free will. I did also hold religious beliefs as meaningless, which may have to do with my personal upbringing in an agnostic-atheistic social milieu, and therefore had trouble taking devout people's beliefs seriously. Being held as Christian myself was acceptable; I got accustomed to it. But being referred to by others as a "missionary", which happened every now and then since I was working in schools operated by missionaries, always made me feel uncomfortable. It felt like being charged with an offense. At the time, missionaries and anthropologists belonged to two separate and opposite categories in my mind. I was not aware that the people they address often have good reasons for not making a clear distinction between them.

That being so, doing fieldwork in a religious environment was a challenge for me. But I am sure it led to beneficial reflections. Most of all, the absolutism of certain Christians pushed me even further toward relativism and reflexivity. It forced me to reconsider my self-image as a "professional doubter" – read anthropologist – and to accept that I too understand the world according to my own beliefs, which are not necessarily superior to

those of others. In turn, this revelation led me to a more flexible and open-minded attitude toward believers. Hopefully, it will also have a positive impact on my way of doing anthropology in the future.

Dealing with Clandestinity

Another difficulty I faced during my fieldwork is clandestinity, both my own and that of others. Since I was working in Sabah on a tourist visa, for unregistered schools, and possessed neither a work nor a research permit,³ any activity that involved getting in contact with state officials, for the purpose of interviewing them or visiting schools, for instance, would have put me at risk of being unmasked and interrogated, with potentially severe consequences for myself, but also for my employers, colleagues and students. Therefore, I had to be cautious and to avoid contact with Malaysian authorities. Of course, this is regrettable since they are key actors in the sector of education for children of migrant workers. It would have been particularly interesting to interview officials of the Sabah Education Department and the national Ministry of Education, among other state representatives. Ideally, I would have followed Ferguson & Gupta's (2002:994f.) advice to treat state and non-state governmentality within a common frame, in order to develop an "ethnography of encompassment [...] emphasizing similarities of technologies of government across domains". But my particular situation in the field forced me to give up on that idea and concentrate instead on what was feasible and safe. Thanks to special connections, I nevertheless managed to visit a public school and interview a few teachers working in the public system.

In addition to my own irregular status, I had to deal with the fact that many migrant workers in Sabah do not have proper documents and live clandestine lives. Caution was necessary in order not to draw the attention of state authorities on them, because migrants who are found to be "illegal" face arrest, detention and deportation. Surprisingly, the risk did not prevent many people from talking to me openly about their situation. But it did make it more complicated to get in touch with migrants and observe their everyday lives, since many of them live in secluded places, or even hide in the jungle, and keep as low a profile as possible.

3 My employer preferred to send me to Sabah as a tourist, claiming that applying for a work permit would require too much red tape and offer too few chances of success. As for the research permit, I discussed the matter with anthropologists who had already worked in Malaysia and, taking into account the subject of my research, figured I was very unlikely to get one, at least before the end of my stay.

The Predicament of Informed Consent

During my fieldwork, I became very conscious of the complexity of the ethical issue of consent. Theoretically, ethnographers are required to ask their interlocutors for permission to study them and provide sufficient and appropriate information for their decision to be based on a good knowledge of the different aspects of the research project (Swiss Ethnological Society 2010). The informed consent process is "dynamic and continuous"; it should "be initiated in the project design and continue through implementation by way of dialogue and negotiation with those studied" (American Anthropological Association 1998:section III.A.4). In order to respect these ethical guidelines, I began by asking my employer in Switzerland permission to do research in Sabah. The organization gave me the go-ahead, after having allegedly "checked with [their] local partners" to determine if they were also favorable to the project. But when I brought up the issue in Sabah, with the main "partner", i.e. the principal of both schools I was to work in, things turned out to be more complicated. The principal claimed that he was not aware of the existence of my research project. It surprised me much, but I explained it again, this time to him directly, and he agreed to let me proceed with it, under the condition that I keep a low profile. At my workplace, I asked all my colleagues whether they would accept to take part in my research. They seemed bemused by the idea, but not opposed to it. Neither were the students whom I later interviewed individually.

At first glance, one could say that everything went well, that I had done my job correctly, that my interlocutors – luckily for me – had nothing against being studied. But a closer look at the list of people given above reveals that they form a hierarchical chain. Each person may have been bound by the decision taken by the person over her. For instance, the principal may have not been in a position to oppose my research since one of the organizations sponsoring his school had already authorized it.⁴ Similarly, my colleagues may have been suspicious of my endeavor, but it would have been difficult for them to rebel against their employer's decision. Relations of power clearly limit the individual's room for maneuver. In my opinion, they also challenge the very notion of free consent.

At some point early during my stay I set about asking the school cook, an almost illiterate Indonesian woman in her fifties, if I could interview her. I could tell by the look in

⁴ Read under this light, his statement that he was not aware of my intention to do research seems like an attempt to discourage me from doing it. Was it really? I will very likely never know for sure.

her eyes and her corporal language that the more explanations I gave about my research the more afraid she became. Guarantees that her name would appear nowhere and that nobody would be able to identify her did not change much. When I finished setting out my research, she remained mute, transfixed. So I backtracked, told her that I would not interview her anyway and suggested she should relax. In the following days, I noticed she had become distant and it took months before we could chat and laugh together again, as we had become used to. After this incident I figured that I had not yet found the proper words to explain my research to migrant workers. A good part of these people have not finished primary school, are illiterate, and have no idea of what people concretely do at "university" (*universiti*), what a scientific "research" (*penyelidikan*) implies, much less what "social science" (*sains social/kemasyarakatan*) or "anthropology" (*antropologi*) is. Under these conditions, how is one to explain something that is totally absent from their world? Which words should be used? By repeatedly postponing the day where I would send a letter to my students' parents asking them for permission to conduct research with their children, I ended up not doing it at all. Today, I believe the reason behind this omission was my fear that migrant parents would misunderstand my intentions and react like the school cook, who imagined the worst scenario while I was only asking her to answer a few questions, something she had readily done until then.

What is the value of refusal to cooperate when it is visibly motivated by a fear of the unknown? And what is the value of consent when it derives from power relations? These are thorny questions, for which there are certainly no definite answers. Both pertain to the issue of "informed consent" and its applicability in ethnographic research. The Swiss Ethnological Society has produced an interesting working paper in which it addresses this and similar issues. The Society concludes that "l'éthique dans l'enquête ethnographique s'apparente à une sorte de pari, qui doit être impérativement lancé par le ou la chercheur·e, mais dont le succès n'est en soi jamais garanti." (Swiss Ethnological Society 2010:152) I would argue that I have played the game as well as I could, but it certainly has not proved entirely successful in my case.

BACKGROUND

Geography

The Federation of Malaysia is divided geographically into two regions, a western one, usually referred to as "peninsular Malaysia" or *semenanjung*, and an eastern one, comprising about one third of the surface area of the island of Borneo. Most of the "states" (*negeri*) of Malaysia are located on *semenanjung*, except for Sabah and Sarawak, which are on Borneo. Sabah has borders with Sarawak, Indonesia and Brunei (to the south and the west), as well as with the Philippines (to the east and the north).



Illustration 1: map of Malaysia¹

¹ http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-5QnHskxpJkY/TxA7jtuYg5I/AAAAAAAAA6o/F5y1ot2s3cI/s1600/sabah_map.gif (last consulted 3.08.2012)

History

First historical records indicate that Sabah belonged to the Sultan of Brunei. The monarch ceded the territory in 1658 to the Sultan of Sulu, who reigned in the southern part of what are now the Philippines. A century later, Sabah came into the hands of various colonial entrepreneurs until one of them founded the *British North Borneo Company* in 1881. In 1888 "North Borneo" became a protectorate of the United Kingdom and it remained so for more than 80 years, with the exception of three years of Japanese rule during World War II. In 1963, the territory became independent, reverted to its old name, Sabah, and joined the Federation of Malaya (independent from the British crown since 1957) to form the Federation of Malaysia together with two newly independent territories, Sarawak and Singapore.² Sabah set a number of conditions for its incorporation as a "state" into the new federation with a view to safeguarding the interests and rights of its people. Known as the "20-point agreement", the list of these conditions was partially incorporated into the new Constitution of Malaysia. Among other things, Sabah was to retain a certain level of autonomy in matters pertaining to religion, language, management of natural resources, immigration and education. Three decades later, the national government has clearly extended its authority and power over Sabah, to the point that some Sabahans denounce a violation of the (spirit of the) 20-point agreement. However, most people still consider Sabah as slightly different from the other Malaysian states on a political and bureaucratic level.³

Population

According to the last census (2010),⁴ the population of Sabah reached 3.2 million people, which makes it the third most populous state of Malaysia. Officially grouped together in a single category, non-Malaysian citizens account for 27.81% of the total population.⁵ Most of them are migrant workers from the neighboring countries, Indonesia and the Philippines. The other official categories are: Kadazan-Dusun (17.82%); Bajau

² Two years later, Singapore was expelled from the Federation of Malaysia.

³ This adds to other unique features of Sabah (a low population density, a substantial immigrant population, a low level of urbanization, etc.), in comparison to peninsular Malaysia, to give the feeling that Sabah is "a state of its own" within the federation.

⁴ Source: Department of Statistics, Malaysia
http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/population/05Jadual_Mukim_negeri/Mukim_Sabah.pdf (last consulted 13.06.2012)

⁵ Effective numbers of non-citizens in Sabah are higher than those given by official statistics, according to some Sabahans.

(14%); Malay (5.71%); Murut (3.22%); and numerous other indigenous groups found mostly or exclusively in Sabah (20.56%), all of which are referred to as *Bumiputra* (literally "sons of the earth") in contrast to Chinese (9.11%), Indians and others (1.5%). The latter are predominantly descendants from immigrants brought to the region as labor by the British colonial powers in the 19th and 20th century. They are citizens like any others, and many of them own prosperous businesses, but they lack the privileges of the *Bumiputra*, such as facilitated access to higher education, to jobs in the administration and to land property. Thus, the rights of people living in Sabah depend in large part on their ethnic identity and the attached legal status.

Movements of people across political boundaries is anything but a new phenomenon in the region. It started long before the British powers' import of labor from distant lands and went on through colonial times. Up until recently, people of varied origins peregrinated freely, facing few obstacles if they wanted to settle in Sabah.⁶ Boundaries became a lot less porous with the advent of independent nation-states and the enforcement of immigration policies, but migrant workers from neighboring countries still find ways to reach their destination. One of them consists in taking a boat trip on a river flowing between Sabah and neighboring Kalimantan (Indonesia) – referred to ironically by some Sabahans as a "jungle highway" – another in doing the same thing from an island of the Southern Philippines, some of which are located within eyesight of Sabah's eastern shores.

Economy

Today, Sabah's economy depends upon exports of its major primary commodities: palm oil, cocoa, rubber, crude petroleum, sawn timber and plywood. Tourism and manufacturing are also developing fast and gaining increasing importance. Sabah's economic growth would be impossible without abundant and cheap labor from neighboring countries, i.e. Indonesia and the Philippines. Foreign unskilled workers are found everywhere: on construction sites, in plantations, private houses, restaurants, workshops, lorries, hairdressing salons – which often serve as windows for brothels – or between these places, where they peddle fake and smuggled goods. They have come to Sabah in the hope of improving their economic situation as well as that of their family back home. They accept jobs and working conditions in which even the poorest Sabahans show

⁶ For Malaysians and Indonesians from the region, moving around in order to look for work elsewhere is almost like a tradition. They even have a special word for this activity: *merantau*.

little interest and, accordingly, are the favorite labor of private entrepreneurs – much to the detriment of non-Malay *Bumiputra*, with whom they can be considered in socio-economical competition. Jealousy and hostility toward migrant workers is therefore quite common.

It must be noted here that many Sabahans do not benefit from the state's economic growth. A 2010 study of the World Bank found that the level of poverty was much higher in Sabah than in other Malaysian states.⁷ Rural populations, which consist predominantly in non-Malay *Bumiputra*, are especially affected. In contrast, the Chinese ethnic community, whose members often own their own business, and the Malay community, to whom many bureaucratic positions are reserved, seem relatively spared. The comparatively high level of poverty in Sabah has to do with the fact that much of the profits made in the state flow out toward the federal government and investors based in *semenanjung* or Singapore. This fuels resentment among many Sabahans, who feel not only ruled, but also robbed by Kuala Lumpur.⁸ Combined, high immigration numbers and capital flight contribute to a feeling, unevenly distributed among communities but firmly entrenched in some of them, that Sabahans are the have-nots of the economic growth of their territory.

Religion

Among Sabahan Christians, this resentment over economic and political matters is often aggravated by a feeling of injustice on religious grounds. In terms of numbers, Islam prevails at both national (61.3%) and state (63.7%) levels, but Christians make up an important religious community in Sabah, since they amount to 26.6% of the total population.⁹ Most of them are ethnic Chinese, non-Malay *Bumiputra* and immigrants from Indonesia and the Philippines. Christian signs and messages can be seen everywhere, especially in western Sabah: on buildings, necklaces, rear-view mirrors, bumper-stickers, etc. Like other religious minorities in the country (Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists and Confucianists), Christians consider themselves as discriminated and strongly resent their practices being restricted by the state and federal governments. Recent events that sparked

7 Available online at <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2010/04/15760391/malaysia-economic-monitor-growth-through-innovation> (last consulted 13.06.2012)

8 Some of them even actively promote secession. See <http://archive.freemalaysiatoday.com/fmt-english/politics/sabah-and-sarawak/4128-push-for-sabah-swak-independence-next-stop-un> (last consulted 20.08.2012)

9 Source: "Population and Housing Census 2010", Department of Statistics. Available online at http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/census2010/Taburan_Penduduk_dan_Ciri-ciri_Asas_Demografi.pdf (last consulted 22.08.2012)

outrage include the seizure of Bibles in the state of Sarawak and a nation-wide ban on the use of the word "Allah" by Christians. Hostility toward this religious group also comes from segments of the population, who have accused Christians of trying to convert Muslims. The firebombing of a church in 2010 in relation to these accusations, for instance, has heightened interreligious tensions and strengthened Christians' feeling of being victims of a "Christian-bashing".¹⁰

Hostility toward Christians may be contingent on the current political climate, but the preferential treatment of Islam by the state and the limitation of religious minorities' rights have deeper roots. The Federal Constitution includes an article that establishes Islam as the "religion of the Federation". This provision allows Malaysian states to subject Muslim citizens to their own Islamic laws and courts,¹¹ something most of them have done. In recent years, it has also been used by certain Muslim political groups to base their claim that Malaysia is an Islamic state – a topic of heated public debate, especially since the deputy prime minister publicly concurred with their view.¹² Another provision, which has also been widely enforced by states, entitles them to "control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among Muslims".¹³ Depending on whom it addresses, evangelism can therefore be an unlawful activity in Malaysia. The fundamental charter states further that all Malays are Muslims,¹⁴ thereby equating ethnic identity with religious identity. Since Malays are granted the *Bumiputra* status and its privileges, there is an incentive for non-Muslim Malaysians to become Malay (*masuk Melayu*) and this can be achieved simply by converting to Islam (*masuk Islam*). Finally, Islam enjoys a special status within the administration, which is manifest in the fact that the Muslim declaration of faith (*Syhadah*) is often read aloud during meetings and conferences involving state officials, to the exclusion of expressions of other faiths, and whether or not all participants are Muslims.

10 The term was used by the vice president of the Council of Churches of Malaysia. Source: The New York Times (12.12.2011). Available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/13/world/asia/for-malaysian-christians-an-anxious-holiday-season.html?pagewanted=all> (last consulted 22.08.2012)

11 Art. 3 Federal Constitution of Malaysia. Available online at [http://www.agc.gov.my/images/Personalisation/Buss/pdf/Federal%20Consti%20\(BI%20text\).pdf](http://www.agc.gov.my/images/Personalisation/Buss/pdf/Federal%20Consti%20(BI%20text).pdf) (last consulted 20.12.2012)

12 Declaration of Najib Tun Razak (July 17 2007), who subsequently became Prime Minister. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJ_fjQrob9Q (last consulted 22.08.2012)

13 Art. 11(4) Federal Constitution of Malaysia. The "International Religious Freedom Report 2010" of the US Department of State, among other sources, confirms that the Malaysian government "strictly prohibits religious groups from proselytizing Muslims" but notes at the same time that "proselytizing non-Muslims is allowed". Source: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010/148881.htm> (last consulted 18.05.2012)

14 Art. 160 Federal Constitution of Malaysia

From the above, it is clear that the Malaysian state apparatus plays an important role as a defender and promoter of Islam.¹⁵ Claims that Malaysia is a secular country must therefore be put back into their context: most Malaysian states have a department for Islamic affairs – but no other department for other faiths – so bureaucratic independence between religious and state authorities is limited.

Immigration

Sabah's immigrant population consists mainly in unskilled foreign workers from Indonesia and the Philippines. According to national law, these people are allowed to be employed in the country for a period of two years, which can be extended to a maximum of five years. Few of them manage to secure a "permanent resident" permit because immigration policies in Malaysia continue to be premised on temporary migration and the refusal to consider the integration of migrants (Asis 2004). Many migrant workers overstay their visa or even enter the country without proper authorization. The federal government is well aware of the sheer number of undocumented migrants living in Sabah, and in Malaysia in general. Despite their essential contribution to the national economy, it has engaged in a demonizing propaganda, referring to this category of the population as "illegal" immigrants,¹⁶ needed to be "flushed out" (cf. Operation *Nyah* I and II) of the country. Undocumented migrants have even been declared "public enemy number two"¹⁷ by the government. They are regularly arrested, detained in special prisons and deported, following a process now pervasive around the globe – even in rich Western countries like Switzerland – in which human rights only play a secondary role.¹⁸ However, the alternating "crackdowns" and "amnesties", combined with general laissez-faireism – at least in Sabah – and measures without enforcement arouse suspicion concerning the urgency of the alleged "fight" against that "problem". Some Sabahans sardonically remark that crackdowns only take place when discontent among the Malaysian citizens regarding the

15 See also Liow (2009).

16 For a discussion of the labels "illegal" and "undocumented" migrant, see Sigona & Hughes (2010). The authors note that only the latter can be used as an analytical category, provided it is considered as a "non-homogenous legal status". (5-6)

17 "Public enemy number one" being narcotics.

18 Amnesty International's 2010 report on the "exploitation of migrants in Malaysia" entails detailed information on state authorities' practices toward "illegal" migrants (available online at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA28/002/2010/en/114eba25-6af5-4975-9ea3-02c22f6bdc5a/asa280022010en.pdf>, last consulted 19.07.2012)

issue of foreign workers is judged to reach dangerous levels.¹⁹

The media, which is very much under government control in Malaysia, relays that propaganda by regularly producing accounts of foreign workers involved in major offenses as well as petty crimes. The representation of migrants as a threat to national security has profound repercussions on the way migrants in general, not only the undocumented, are perceived by the rest of the population (Hedman 2008). Wariness, or at least caution, is very much the prevalent feeling. It is therefore not surprising that, although they often live side by side in Sabah, migrants and Malaysians generally do not mingle.

Malaysia's migrants, even those with proper documents, experience severe restrictions of their freedom.²⁰ Immigration law, for instance, bans them from marrying or giving birth on Malaysian territory as well as bringing their "dependents" from abroad (Spaan et al. 2002:169). Nevertheless, many, if not most migrants living in Sabah disregard these rules. Whole families with 5 or 6 children are a common feature of the Sabahan migrant community (Pillai 1999).

Born in a country where their birth is considered an illegal act, non-Malaysian children are often denied official documents by Malaysian authorities. Many of them are stateless. But even the few who do possess a valid birth certificate, a passport from their parents' country of origin and a proper visa lack access to basic public services. Health care in Malaysian public hospitals is free only for Malaysian citizens and education in public schools (called "government schools" or *sekolah kerajaan*) also remains out of reach. Foreign children are not formally banned from the public education system since a special enrollment procedure (*pas pelajar*) allegedly gives them entry in government schools,²¹ but it involves so much red tape, so few chances of success, and such high costs that only a handful of migrant parents try their luck. Actually, most parents are not even aware of this possibility.²²

As a consequence, a high proportion of the school-aged children living in Sabah are not receiving any formal education. According to the consulate of Indonesia in Kota Kinabalu there are around 50,000 young Indonesians in Sabah alone who lack any form of schooling. This figure contrasts starkly with Malaysian official statistics claiming a national

19 For more detailed accounts of the Malaysian government's policy toward immigrants, see, among others, Spaan et al. (2002); Chin (2002; 2008); Kassim (2000; 2009); Pillai (1999)

20 See above Amnesty International's 2010 report.

21 See next chapter for more information on education regulation and its consequences for children of migrant workers.

22 This research focuses almost exclusively on primary schools, but children of foreign workers are excluded *de facto* from government schools both at primary and secondary level.

enrollment rate at primary level of 99.2% (boys and girls on par)²³ and the Malaysian government's efforts to ameliorate access to education in general. The Ministry of Education does acknowledge that some school-aged children of Malaysian citizens are still not attending school, mostly because they live in remote rural areas and therefore do not possess proper documents, and it apparently shows commitment in finding solutions for them, but children of migrant workers, whether documented or not, are very much the elephant in the room. Most important official documents issued by state authorities, like the 10th Malaysian 5-year-plan,²⁴ fully omit the issue.

²³ Source: UNICEF Education statistics: Malaysia. Available online at http://www.childinfo.org/files/EAPR_Malaysia.pdf (last consulted 20.12.2012)

²⁴ 10th Malaysia Plan (see education section). Available online at http://www.pmo.gov.my/dokumenattached/RMK/RMK10_Eds.pdf (last consulted 13.06.2012)

A HIGHLY DIVERSE SECTOR

As stated in the preceding chapter, children of migrant workers do not have access to Malaysian public schools ("government schools"). Admission in these schools is limited by law to children possessing a valid Malaysian identity card (commonly referred to as "IC" or *MyKad*). It seems that the strict enforcement of the corresponding provisions of the national *Education Act* (Act 550) only started in 2001. Before, children were accepted in public schools without much attention being paid to their legal status. The alleged rationale for refusing access to non-Malaysian children is a financial one: growing numbers of children of migrant workers in Sabah proved too heavy a burden for the education budget.¹ Hence, directors of government schools were ordered to expel and refuse to enroll these children. In theory, there should be a possibility for foreign children to enter public schools by applying for a "student pass" (*pas pelajar*). In practice, however, even regularly employed foreign university staff is put off by the complexity and the cost of the procedure.² Needless to say, then, that undocumented, unskilled workers, which make up the bulk of Sabah's migrant population, have no chance at all of obtaining this pass for their offspring.³

In spite of this restrictive regulation, a number of migrant parents succeed in placing their children in public schools. Some of them resort to corruption in order to purchase ICs for their children; others pay a Malaysian citizen to adopt their child, which automatically entitles him/her to citizenship; and some school directors accept, whether out of compassion or greed, to turn a blind eye to their presence in their institution.⁴ Enrollment in a public school is a preferred option for migrant parents, who value the quality of the education provided by the Malaysian state and the fact it is free of cost. At the same time, however, opting for it leads them on a risky path as their plan might be uncovered anytime, with serious consequences for them and their offspring. Many migrant parents therefore

1 *Daily Express*, 27.03.2011, available online at <http://www.dailyexpress.com.my/news.cfm?NewsID=77501> (last consulted 25.04.2012)

2 An Indonesian employee of a Malaysian university gives an account of his experience of the cumbersome application procedure leading to the obtention of the *pas pelajar* on his blog: <http://zfikri.blogspot.ch/2008/01/pas-pelajar-anak-ke-sekolah-rakyat.html> (last consulted 21.07.2012)

3 Actually, most children of migrant workers cannot even apply for the *pas pelajar* since they do not possess valid legal documents.

4 Rahman (2011:4) makes the same observation with regards to refugee children in Kuala Lumpur.

favor other solutions, which include: to abstain from or stop searching for an educational institution to care for their children – a solution which, most of the time, is tantamount to giving up all expectations of a formal education; to send or leave their children in their country of origin, where they can attend school like their peers; to hire a private teacher, often within the migrant community, who will give basic teaching to a group of children at their homes; to enroll the child in any other school (i.e. a non-public school) ready to accept her/him. Depending on where they live, how much they earn, what decision other parents around them have taken for their own children – among other factors – migrant parents will be driven to choose one of the above options rather than the others. Some remain rather theoretical: Malaysian private schools officially recognized by the Ministry of Education, in particular, are much too costly for the unskilled, low-earning migrant workers. But others, like the enrollment in one or the other dedicated "migrants' school" (*sekolah pendatang*) that have sprouted everywhere in Sabah in the last decade, are more realistic. These rarely cost more than 45 MYR (11 EUR) per month per child, a price that most migrants can afford.

The striking aspect about this category of schools is the diversity of actors involved. It ranges from a couple of non-professional teachers running a literacy course by themselves for a dozen students to a full-grown non-governmental organization (NGO) operating more than 100 schools for approximately 10,000 pupils. Some of these actors can be described as "faith-based" or "religious", others as "secular".⁵ Some operate with the approval of Malaysian authorities, others do so more or less clandestinely. The comparison between these various actors reveals a highly heterogeneous sector. But common characteristics can be observed as well: all schools are not-for-profit, open exclusively to non-Malaysian children, and have grown extensively in recent years.

It took me a considerable amount of time to map the landscape of "migrants' schools" during my fieldwork in Sabah and I have only been able to do so to a limited extent. Most of my interlocutors were aware of the existence of only a few schools apart from the one(s) they were linked to and, more often than not, rather by hearsay than for having seen them with their own eyes. They could rarely give me any detailed information on these schools,

⁵ Discriminating, as I do here, between "religious" and "secular" organizations and individuals active in the education of "migrant children" can lead to confusion in the Malaysian/Indonesian context of education, where most schools, even those under the state, offer some kind of religious teaching (Kraince 2009:139). I am conscious of this risk. However, it seems to me that such a discrimination holds some relevance because the networks in which these respective social actors take part look very different. Religious actors, for instance, tend to have close relations with other religious actors, and less, or none, with state entities or international aid organizations, whereas the opposite can be claimed about secular actors.

so I had to rely on my own explorations and fortunate encounters to discover them. In retrospect, it seems that this difficulty is, at least in part, symptomatic of the fragmented nature of a sector consisting mainly of independent networks and of which few people, if any, have a complete overview.⁶ As I am no exception to this, the present chapter should be considered as an attempt to convey a general impression rather than an exhaustive description of the sector.

Secular Actors

All of the social actors mentioned in this section have been grouped into the "secular" category on the grounds that: they do not declare themselves to be religious organizations; they are not linked to such organizations in any obvious way; and they do not mention religion as an prominent aspect of, or influence on, their work. Nevertheless these secular actors generally provide some kind of basic religious training to their students. In my opinion, this has to do with the fact that, in Malaysia, religious beliefs are commonly coupled to good morals. Inversely, many people associate atheism, agnosticism and the absence of religious practice with a lack of moral values, deemed harmful to both the individual and society. The regular emphasis, in public discourses, on "Belief in God" (*kepercayaan kepada Tuhan*), one of the five principles of the Malaysian nation (*rukun negara*),⁷ certainly contributes to making religion an essential part of any education worthy of the name.

To start with, the biggest provider of education to children of migrant workers, in terms of numbers of schools and students, is the Kinabalu Child Support Association. It describes itself as a non-governmental organization (NGO) that has been operating schools for children of migrant workers in the eastern part of Sabah for the last 20 years. Most of the more than 100 schools it has opened until now are located in plantations, often tens of kilometers away from the next human settlement. Kinabalu Child Support's growth owes a lot to the prosperity of the Malaysian palm oil industry in recent years. Growing and harvesting palm fruits is a labor-intensive activity and companies meet their needs in terms of staff by hiring unskilled migrant workers, mostly from Indonesia. Many of these companies have realized that opening schools in plantation "villages" helped ensuring the loyalty of their employees, who think twice about moving to another plantation to work for

⁶ This is especially true of "church schools" (see below).

⁷ The *Rukun Negara* were adopted in a move to restore social cohesion after the "race riots" that rocked the country in 1969.

a competitor. Schools are also likely to increase the palm oil producer's chances of being recognized as "sustainable", an important label in terms of marketing.⁸ For these reasons, companies are willing to provide a building and accommodation for the teachers, as well as to finance a good part of the costs related to the schools. Kinabalu Child Support gets the rest of its funding from (supra)governmental aid agencies, international organizations, and other aid-interested international donors. The NGO collaborates with the Sabah Education Department, which grants its schools a special license and allows them to follow the Malaysian curriculum. It also benefits from the overseas dispatch of Indonesian teachers by the Indonesian Ministry of Education.

The Indonesian authorities are actually quite actively involved in the issue of education in Sabah, that is, on a territory belonging to another nation-state, Malaysia. They have started their own public school in the capital, Kota Kinabalu (KK), which is run by the consulate and offers classes from primary 1 up to secondary 3 (age 16) to some 400 pupils. Unlike Indonesian government schools abroad, which came into being in order to provide education for the offspring of diplomatic staff and other "expatriates", the *Sekolah Nasional Sabah* (SNS) is meant primarily for children of Indonesian migrant workers. Were it not for the extra emphasis on nationalism and Indonesian-ness, this institution would seem to have been parachuted into Sabah: the school uniforms, lessons, rituals, everything looks and feels like in any big public school located in Indonesia.

In addition to running the SNS, the Indonesian consulate and Ministry of Education contribute to numerous projects initiated by Indonesian migrant parents throughout Sabah. These schools are called "Community Learning Centers" (*Pusat Kegiatan Belajar Masyarakat*, PKBM), a label originally used in Indonesia since the end of the 1990s to refer to small-scale institutions set up by communities to improve the living conditions of their members and help them face the rapid erosion of the economy in the post-Suharto era. In Indonesia, PKBMs' offer consists mainly in vocational training for adults, but in Sabah these centers focus on providing schooling to children. In general, Indonesian authorities do not back them with funding. They rather organize occasional training sessions for the teachers – who, in most cases, have never had the opportunity to learn their profession – and supply basic objects like books, desks and chairs. PKBMs can apply for a small state allowance for each of their pupils, but the money can only be spent on stationery for that very child. As a matter of fact, the Indonesian authorities' role in

8 On "sustainable palm oil", see <http://www.rspo.org/> (last consulted 21.07.2012)

supporting PKBMs in Sabah has less to do with financing or logistics than with advocacy and legitimization. The Indonesian and Malaysian education authorities have been in contact with each other for more than 14 years, since the signature of a "Memorandum of Understanding" aiming at enhancing their collaboration in 1998. Since the 2000s, they regularly discuss the issue of schooling for children of migrant workers living in Sabah. Their negotiations have led to bilateral agreements and some developments can be put to their credit, even though they remain limited in scope. Recently, for instance, the *Sabah Education Department* has agreed to declare PKBMs, as well as other schools working together with the Indonesian authorities, as "not illegal", thereby officially recognizing their existence, and, somehow, their right to exist as well. The move has not been publicized in Malaysia. It is not sure what its exact consequences will be, but, for the moment, PKBMs are still not subjected to Malaysian regulation on private schools.

Another actor collaborating with the Indonesian authorities is a New Zealand "education consultant" who has been married to a Malaysian, living in Sabah and working in the education branch for the last thirty-five years. This woman has created four schools for Indonesian children almost on her own. By insistence and appropriate argumentation, she managed to convince companies employing these children's parents of the necessity of such institutions. The companies now look after these schools, but most of the funding is raised through school fees paid by the parents.

Religious Actors

In the words of a famous Malaysian child rights activist, "[in Kuala Lumpur,] all denominations have their own school for migrant children".⁹ At first, the formulation might seem exaggerated, but in fact, my data on Sabah lends credit to this statement. Another one of my interlocutors, a pastor from Sabah, told me that he was aware of the existence of "many" schools for the children of migrant workers (though he was not able to provide me with much information on them) and that not only big denominations, but also many small independent churches, were active in this sector. My own research allowed me to identify sixteen distinct religious actors in Sabah, all of them Christian. Some are huge organizations, like the local branch of the Roman-Catholic Church, others are individuals working more or less independently. None has opened more than a few "migrants' schools"

9 Rahman (2011:8) also insists on the importance of Christian organizations as providers of education to refugee children based in Kuala Lumpur.

(*sekolah pendatang*) in Sabah, but the striking aspect is that so many of them have opened at least one.¹⁰

Historically, Christian organizations were the first to provide schooling in Sabah. Mission schools, together with those set up by the colonial administration, remained the only source of formal education until independence in 1963. Missions were especially active in remote areas (until some 30 years ago, most of the territory of Sabah could be considered remote since it mainly consisted of rain forest). Traces of this past are obvious in the Christian names born by many public schools, now operating under the Education Department, but still formally linked with or owned by churches. The main denominations remain very much involved in the education of youngsters nowadays by running private schools and organizing "Bible Camps" and "Sunday Schools" for Malaysian children (a type of activities that falls outside the scope of the national education system). In addition to this, many, if not most, churches have recently set up or started to support schools for the children of migrant workers.

Financially, almost all "church schools"¹¹ rely on fees paid by the parents. But these usually cover only part of the running costs. In order to function properly and to grow – as do all church schools in Sabah – additional funding is required. Donations from Christian individuals and organizations make up the bulk of it and personal offerings collected during religious services in Sabahan churches represent a welcome complement. Some of the donors are Malaysian, for instance private entrepreneurs and their families (very often of Chinese descent) and the churches they belong to. Others are based in South Korea, the United States, Australia, Switzerland, etc. In particular, support from Korean churches and their members, channeled through Korean missionaries working in Sabah, guarantees a large part of the budget of several schools. This has to do with South-Korea's proselytizing fervor; it is the second most important missionary-sending country in the world after the United States. In 2006, some 14,905 South-Korean missionaries worked for 174 agencies in 168 countries, most of them in Asia (47.3%), and more and more in the "Islamic bloc".

10 To get an idea of the importance of Christian life in western Sabah, Town Y, a relatively small urban center in a rural district of approximately 172,000 inhabitants, hosts thirteen Christian denominations, "all of them thriving", according to one of my interlocutors. Source of population statistics: *Population and Housing Census of Malaysia 2010*, available online at http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/BPD/Laporan_Kiraan_Permulaan2010.pdf (last consulted 17.08.2012)

11 See p. 49, for a more detailed justification of the terminology. Unless stated otherwise, the expression "church schools" used in this document refers exclusively to schools set up by Christian organizations and/or individuals belonging to these organizations for the purpose of providing schooling to children of migrant workers.

About 9.2% of them take care of "education ministries", the third most important occupation after "church planting" (39.1%) and "discipleship training" (21.5%) (Moon 2008:1-5).

In the two church schools I worked in, for instance, South Korean missionaries' financial contribution amounts to more than half of the total budget and Koreans fully subsidize the construction of new, bigger and qualitatively better buildings. But the South-Korean's role in these schools is not limited to financial support. They are also the effective managers on a daily basis, even though these schools are officially affiliated to a Sabahan evangelical church, which also employs the teachers.¹² South-Korean missionaries take most important decisions and occasionally make so-called "suggestions" – actually give orders – to teachers, who work in an autonomous way the rest of the time. The Sabahan pastor who serves as a principal to both schools is rarely to be met on the school sites. He keeps track of their evolution from a distance but has no first-hand information on them and is not involved in most decision-making processes.

A total of four Protestant organizations, one local, the others foreign-based, pool resources in order to run the two schools I worked in: a South-Korean missionary organization, a local church, an American church, and a Swiss missionary organization. Each take on different responsibilities to guarantee the safety, management, funding and extension of the schools. All of them also contribute by providing staff. Lesley Bartlett (2003:186f.) uses an expression which may be useful for us here when she refers to "educational projects", defined as "configurations of social actors, institutions, financial sources, discourses, philosophies and pedagogies". Her aim is to draw attention to the variety of endeavors that make up the sector of education in any given country and thus counter the "homogenizing" view expressed by world culture theorists. But her argument can be extended in order to stress the differences in ideologies and social actors involved within each single school. Competing notions of schooling and its uses mark not only the various educational projects but also, to some degree, the various educational entities within these projects. In that regard, talking about "configurations" instead of "organizations" makes all the difference, because it leads us to conceive of, and study, each institution as a heterogeneous entity, infused with different sets of ideas and values as well as power relations. A good part of Sabahan church schools can be described as educational

¹² It is justified to consider that the Koreans form two teams instead of one, although they collaborate closely and are often seen together, because they belong to separate churches and denominations (see chapter "Schooling in Church Schools").

projects in the above sense. Foreign missionaries, in particular South-Koreans, are involved in many schools alongside Malaysians, in spite of important differences between the two groups.

In contrast, migrant parents' role in church schools is extremely limited. None of the schools I studied or became aware of has any parents' association.¹³ Where I worked, parents never entered the school compound. At the end of the day, they were always waiting outside, in front of the main entrance, to collect their children. Even when the school explicitly asked them to come and pick up their children's report, some parents hesitated before entering the school building. Their behavior may be explained by a certain shyness toward teachers, who are more educated than they are. But it could also very well be the result of a tacit policy on the part of the management and teachers not to let parents play any active role in their school.

The Absence of Islamic Actors

My research indicates that Islamic organizations and individuals are absent from the sector of education for migrant workers' children. This finding may come as a surprise considering that Islam is the "official religion" of the country according to the Federal Constitution. Moreover, more than 60% of the total population is Muslim. But several of my interlocutors have confirmed the information: Islamic organizations are not involved with migrant workers in Sabah.¹⁴ In a contribution on Islamic education in Malaysia, Richard Kraince (2009) observes that the sector of independent Islamic schools (*Sekolah Agama Rakyat*) has lost much of its importance following efforts of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)-led government to shut them down. The rationale behind this political move was that they belonged to the opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and were seen as ineffective, except in producing a terrorism-prone generation. In recent years, according to Kraince, public schools have therefore replaced these independent Islamic schools and become the main, if not the only, vehicle of Islamic teaching (111).¹⁵ In itself, the near vanishing of PAS schools does not explain why no

13 Rahman (2011) makes a similar observation with respect to schools for children of refugees located in Kuala Lumpur (see part 4, Educational Context).

14 Shortly before flying back home someone told me about a madrasah in Kota Kinabalu in which Filipino and Pakistani Muslim boys allegedly learn the Koran . Unfortunately, it was too late for me to see for myself and I cannot substantiate this person's statement.

15 In Malaysia, Islam is taught both in public Islamic schools, of which there are five types, and public non-Islamic schools. As their name suggests, the former put more emphasis on religious teaching than the latter.

Islamic actors are active in the education of migrant workers' children, since other Islamic actors than PAS could have started projects in this sector. But it does provide an interesting lead: the much-studied phenomenon of state "Islamization" in Malaysia (Lee 2010; Liow 2009), with its concurrent "bureaucratization" of Islam (Mohamad 2009), may reduce the number of Malaysian Islamic organizations and individuals liable to act outside the legal and political framework set by the state, or limit their capacity to do so. When state and Islam are knitted together, it becomes difficult to help the first's "enemy number two" in the name of the latter. The fact that, in Sabah, Muslim migrants keep away from mosques and other Islamic structures, which are often run by the Sabah State Islamic Religious Affairs Department, and prefer to practice their religion in their own small mosques (*surau*) confirms this interpretation.

Migrants' Schools: An Open Secret

It seems that Malaysian authorities are well aware of the existence of "migrants' schools", whether religious or not, and that they do not necessarily oppose them. The Sabah Education Department, as well as the local police, district and immigration officers all know about the schools located on the territory under their jurisdiction, but they rarely interfere. In the case of schools working in collaboration with the Indonesian authorities, this can easily be understood for they all enjoy recognition by the Sabah Education Department – albeit to a varying degree and some only since recently. Even before PKBMs were officially declared "not illegal" the New Zealand education consultant met a senior official of the Department, who told her that he was unable to officially grant her permission to open one of her schools but guaranteed at the same time that she would not be troubled. "Please keep on doing what you are doing", he said. "I am aware of nothing at all."¹⁶

Concerning other "migrants' schools", however, the situation is more complex. Religious actors avoid using the word "school" publicly to refer to the institutions they have created. Instead, they call them "education center" (*pusat pendidikan*) or "vision center" and describe them as "welfare" (*kebajikan*) activities. Actually, nothing distinguishes these institutions from regular schools, but openly labeling them as such would automatically put them under the scope of the *Education Act* and the jurisdiction of the Private Education Division of the Ministry of Education. All schools are very reluctant

¹⁶ This man even said that he himself considered opening a school for migrant children upon his retirement.

to accept the consequences such a control would have. In particular, schools having 15 Muslim students or more would be required to hire a Muslim teacher, a so-called *ustaz* (male) or *ustazah* (female), and offer Islamic courses. None of the principals I met is ready to even consider doing so. As a result, church schools operate in Sabah in a semi-clandestine manner. On the one hand, they try to maintain as low a profile as possible. Their buildings, for instance, are usually located away from the main roads and in the periphery of towns and villages. Some of them are even well hidden.¹⁷ No signboard indicates their presence, nor the nature of their activities; no information on them can be found on the internet. On the other hand, most of these schools have already had the unexpected "visit" of state authorities (usually the Sabah Education Department) at least once. It is therefore fair to consider their existence an open secret. In one case, I discovered that the husband of a teacher working in a church school with many undocumented children was employed by the local immigration office to deter "illegal immigration". Interestingly, this Christian man even sat in the school council!

State authorities do not seem interested in shutting down church schools. The lightning "visits" they organize, even though they can be quite stressful for everyone, usually only lead to a few simple warnings and orders: to better conform to the regulation on school buildings; not to hire foreign teachers; not to teach anything but literacy (i.e. read, write and count, known in Sabah as the "3M": *membaca, menulis* and *mengira*); etc. As soon as officials have left, things go back to the way they were before. It is important to note that Malaysian authorities' monitoring is unofficial and inconspicuous, because this allows them to keep track of the situation and, at the same time, appear as unconnected with the issue of education for children of migrant workers. By neither officially recognizing church schools' existence nor banning them, the Malaysian administration pretends to be unaware of the issue, which automatically plays it down.

Informal Outsourcing

State authorities' approach to "migrants' schools" in general reveals a determination to let other actors do most of the work – setting up these schools, running and financing them – and at the same time to maintain some form of control over them. In a case that found considerable echo in the media, the Ministry of Education "collaborated" with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Malaysian Teacher's Foundation and the

¹⁷ See pictures, p. 116 and 117.

Federal Special Task Force (Sabah/Labuan) on "illegal" immigrants in opening a school in *Kampung Numbak*, not far from Kota Kinabalu, for some 300 undocumented children. These children are descendants of Filipino refugees, who have been living in the area since the 1970s. However, their lack of documents bars them from the public school system. UNICEF guaranteed the funding of the project. In the press, it was presented by officials as an application of the policy of "alternative education", according to which: "the Ministry [of Education] acts as a coordinating agency, while other organisations and government agencies like the Education Department, private sector and non-governmental organisations are allowed to implement the alternative education by complying with certain requirements set by the Ministry."¹⁸ The Deputy Minister of Education further commented that "any form of assistance from non-governmental organisations like UNICEF and the private sector is very much needed and welcomed."¹⁹ This statement is indicative of Malaysian authorities' intention to privatize the sector of education for children of migrant workers.

At the same time, however, Malaysian authorities do not want to be seen as abandoning unfortunate children to their fate. In a promotional video by UNICEF, the Deputy Minister of Education declared "we are very committed to providing education for [these children]."²⁰ In a related press article,²¹ the director of the Task Force on "illegal" immigrants claimed that his agency "supervised 14 alternative education centres in 33 traditional villages" in Sabah. The article does not provide any detailed information on which "villages" and "centres" he was referring to, neither does it say who runs these "centres", who studies in them and what the Task Force's "supervision" consists in. To my knowledge, the Task Force has very limited capacities and no particular competences in the field of education. But this did not prevent its director from taking much credit for the enterprise by stating: "*we* provide free basic education for children with no documents and incomplete documents irrespective of their gender, race and age" and "*our* education centres provide alternative education [...] in an effort to eradicate illiteracy among the children" (emphasis added). Quite disturbingly, the article deals with "undocumented children" but does not mention the origin of these children and their parents. The words "Indonesia/Indonesian", "Philippines/Filipino" and "immigration/immigrant" appear

18 *Daily Express*, 27.03.2011, available online at <http://www.dailyexpress.com.my/news.cfm?NewsID=77501> (last consulted 25.04.2012)

19 *Ibid.*

20 Available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUbWEx8tLgs> (last consulted 25.04.2012)

21 *Daily Express*, 28.03.2011

nowhere in the article.²² Of course, it could be a coincidence. But in the Malaysian context of repression and prejudice against migrants, it definitely pays more in terms of public image to claim to be helping out-of-school children and remain vague about their identity than to admit to be supporting the offspring of the infamous *pendatang* (immigrants).

"Nobody Understands the Government's Policy"

The example given above reveals some of the tensions at play in decision-making processes of state entities with regard to migrant workers and their children. After years of restrictive immigration policy and aggressive propaganda, Malaysian authorities can hardly back up, at least not in the present political configuration.²³ They are compelled to adopt a non-compromising stance on migrants, especially undocumented ones. At the same time, however, successive Malaysian governments have invested a lot in the promotion of education, which they saw as one of the major growth factors capable of lifting the country into the select club of "First World Nations". Furthermore, Malaysia has ratified the Convention of the Child (CRC) in 1995 and participated in international conferences on education. It has therefore taken part in the general push for an "Education for All".²⁴ Such commitments call for compliance and concrete implementation. They make it hard to fully retreat from the education of migrant workers' children without simultaneously losing credibility or running the risk of being accused of human rights violations.

One expression of these tensions lies in the differing objectives and methods of the various ministries, departments and offices concerned by the issue. The Malaysian Immigration Department and the Ministry of Education, in particular, coordinate their action to some extent, but their respective agendas are not always compatible. At another level, the specific challenges faced by the federal and state governments are not identical. The number of immigrants being much higher in Sabah than in other states, it has an important impact on local politics, which decisions taken in Kuala Lumpur do not

²² There are also undocumented children of Malaysian descent in Sabah, especially in remote rural areas, but the majority of them are undeniably sons and daughters of immigrants.

²³ In Malaysia, the same political alliance, the National Front, (*Barisan Nasional*) has been in office since the country's independence. It lost some of its popularity in recent years but still held the majority in parliament after the 2008 general elections. The next federal government should be elected before June 2013.

²⁴ It should be noted, however, that Malaysia has ratified the CRC with a reservation on certain provisions that "shall be applicable only if they are in conformity with the Constitution, national laws and national policies". The list of these provisions includes art. 28 par. 1 (a) which guarantees that primary education should be "compulsory" and "available free to all".

necessarily take into account. In view of all these factors, it is not surprising that Malaysian policy toward migrant workers' children may seem inconsistent at times. To quote one of my Sabahan interlocutors:

Nobody understands the government's policy. Actually there isn't only one policy, there are several. And there isn't only one government, there's the federal government and the local government. When the first one says 'We should do something to solve the problem of the immigrants', the second goes on saying 'Yes, let's throw them all out'.

Transnational Governmentality in Sabah

As we have seen, schooling for children of migrant workers living in Sabah appears as a highly heterogeneous sector, comprising a variety of actors: state entities, NGOs, international organizations, aid agencies, local religious organization, foreign mission teams, local philanthropists and volunteers, etc. This reality is not only characteristic of Sabah but of the "Global South"²⁵ in general. Indeed, many authors have pointed to the recent rise of "non-governmental organizations" or "non-state actors"²⁶ as providers of public services, especially in Africa. In the sector of education, social scientists refer to the said phenomenon as a "differentiation of forms of organization and actors" (Bierschenk 2007:269)²⁷ or a "diversification of the field of schooling" (Lange 2003:150). Marie-France Lange notes, for instance a

processus du retrait de l'État, constaté par l'apparition ou le développement rapide à côté des écoles publiques (souvent très majoritaires, voire exclusives au début des années 1990, selon les pays) de nouveaux types d'école (écoles privées laïques ou confessionnelles, écoles communautaires ou associatives...) et la reconnaissance juridique de ces nouvelles écoles. (Lange 2003:150, footnote 8)²⁸

²⁵ As Jean and John Comaroff (2012) argue, "the 'Global South' cannot be defined, a priori, in substantive terms, [...] it bespeaks a relation [to the Global North], not a thing in or for itself [...] it always points to an "ex-centric" location, an elsewhere to mainstream Euro-America, an outside to its hegemonic centers, real or imagined." Accordingly, the expression refers to a fluctuant list of countries, which may, or may not, have common characteristics.

²⁶ Other terms include "civil society" and the "third sector".

²⁷ Thomas Bierschenk (2007:269) advises not to refer to this evolution in terms of "privatization" in order to avoid the pitfalls related to this concept: "Il serait trop simple d'interpréter cela comme la privatisation d'un bien autrefois public, ou une contradiction public/privé en matière d'école et de stratégie éducative: ces deux grandes catégories sont depuis longtemps hétérogènes et on trouve, depuis toujours, des éléments du privé dans le secteur dit "public", et vice versa."

²⁸ See also Bierschenk (2007); Chelpi-den Hamer et al. (2010); Jean-Yves Martin (2003); Petit & Comhaire (2010); and Stambach (2010).

Experts note that the involvement of "civil society"²⁹ in education is called for by in policy-making circles at the the international level, who regularly herald it as the ideal solution for a number of issues, including the universalization of primary education.³⁰

In Sabah, diversity not only describes the types of actors providing educational services to children of migrant workers but also these actors' programs, objectives and teaching methods, and even the careers of teachers and students. In this domain, there are no standards to abide by and coordination between schools is lacking.³¹ Different schools are subject to different norms, standards and constraints, some stricter than others. Church schools, in particular, seem to enjoy a great deal of freedom. National regulation on education only applies to them in an indirect way, through occasional pressures on the part of the Sabah Education Department.

The configuration of Sabah's education sector for immigrant-origin youth is a good illustration of what James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2002) have described as "transnational governmentality".³²

claims of verticality that have historically been monopolized by the state (claims of superior spatial scope, supremacy in a hierarchy of power, and greater generality of interest and moral purpose) are being challenged and undermined by a transnational "local" that fuses the grassroots and the global [...]. For increasingly, state claims of encompassment are met and

29 For a critique of this notion and its inherent assumptions, see Pierre Petit and Daniel Comhaire (2010:26-27): "la notion de société civile apparaît comme un 'signifiant flottant' d'autant plus usité, sur le plan de la rhétorique, qu'il peut qualifier des réalités diverses, dans des contextes variés, tout en conservant a priori un contenu moral positif: [...] La représentation de la société civile développée dans les documents de référence reprend donc un lieu commun amalgamant proximité, participation et solidarité en ignorant les lignes de fracture, les hiérarchies et les rapports de force qui traversent ces sociétés et ces institutions." In a similar vein, see also Sangeeta Kamat (2004).

30 The Dakar Framework for Action adopted in 2000 by the World Education Forum calls for a "broadening of policy dialogue" between governments, civil society and other EFA [Education For All] partners and recommends to "ensure the engagement and participation of civil society in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of strategies for educational development". <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121147e.pdf> (last consulted 10.07.2012) "Education for All" (EFA) is one of the United Nations' eight "Millennium Development Goals" to be reached by 2015. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/> (last consulted 10.07.2012)

31 This statement applies to the sector as a whole. Some schools, however, belong to a common network and, hence, follow the same rules. This is the case, for instance, with schools operating under the NGO Kinabalu Child Support.

32 The authors borrowed and extended the idea of "governmentality", first introduced by Michel Foucault (2001). In his work, the French philosopher kept on developing the concept of "governmentality" according to his theoretical needs and gave it different definitions, the broadest one being the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault in Gordon 1991:48). For Ferguson and Gupta, the concept means "the myriad of ways in which human conduct is directed by calculated means". In other words governmentality covers "mechanisms of government", both "within state institutions and outside them" (Ferguson & Gupta 2002:989).

countered by globally networked and globally imagined organizations and movements – manifestations of 'the local' that may claim [...] a wider rather than a narrower spatial and moral purview than that of the merely national state. (Ferguson & Gupta 2002:995)³³

According to these anthropologists, the "transnational apparatus" does not abolish the "older" system of nation-states but "overlays and coexists with" it, often producing "competing claims to universalism" (994f.).

In Sabah, Malaysian state authorities claim control on education in general. They make important rhetorical efforts to appear as providers of education not only for Malaysian citizens but also for undocumented children. In Ferguson and Gupta's vocabulary, this translates as "the state's claims of verticality" or "encompassment". In reality, states authorities' role in the sector of education for children of migrant workers seems very limited; more than providers, they function as supervisors or facilitators, but only in a few cases. Everything indicates that they have widely relinquished their competence – which explains how Christian organizations were able to rush in and fill the void.

The latter challenge the state's authority; they circumvent its regulation and control in order to operate on their own. They act on a small scale, in projects of local scope, but also in collaboration with partners based in remote countries, thanks to networks that extend far beyond national boundaries. In that sense, they escape the national framework. Furthermore, Christian organizations provide a type of services (education) usually associated with the state but to people who have been marginalized or even, in many cases, "illegalized" by the same state. They therefore defy the logic of the nation-state, supposed to exercise complete control over a bounded territory and the population living on it.

Church schools are part of a wider *dispositif*³⁴ which developed within Christian organizations in Sabah and serves to address migrant workers and their families. The general message they convey is that Jesus Christ cares about everyone, migrants included. Sabahan churches and their partners allegedly support these people, giving them love and hope. Such a message can be particularly attractive on the backdrop of a discriminating state and society, because it serves as a counter-narrative and offers migrants an

33 Ferguson and Gupta's argument relates initially to Africa, but it obviously applies to other parts of the world as well.

34 In the social sciences, the notion of *dispositif* is usually presented as a legacy of Michel Foucault, who understood it as a "network" or "ensemble résolument hétérogène, comportant des discours, des institutions, des aménagements architecturaux, des décisions réglementaires, des lois, des mesures administratives, des énoncés scientifiques, des propositions philosophiques, morales, philanthropiques, bref : du dit, aussi bien que du non-dit" (Foucault 2001:299).

alternative, a way to overcome their condition: instead of being stuck in the role of abandoned and persecuted people in Malaysia, they have the opportunity to join the globe-spanning Christian community as members in their own rights.³⁵ It is hard to say if Christian organizations' message is effective and how many migrant workers are convinced by it. But that may not be the point. Christian organizations' *dispositif* is interesting in itself, because it produces "claims to universalism" which compete with the state's (Ferguson & Gupta 2002:995).

In the following chapters, I look at church schools as a particular part of this *dispositif*, with a view to determine its effects on people's lives – or the lack thereof. This remains a question of governmentality in the Foucauldian sense, since what we are interested in are the "organized practices (mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) through which subjects are governed" (Mayhew 2010) and govern themselves. From that perspective, particular focus should be placed on the ways in which the provision of a collective service like education is organized on a daily basis, as well as on its effects in terms of subject making (Blundo & LeMeur 2009).

³⁵ Nina Glick-Schiller and Evangelos Karagiannis (2006) come to a same conclusion in their paper on African asylum seekers who joined Pentecostal churches in former East-Germany.

SCHOOLING IN CHURCH SCHOOLS

This chapter presents the three "church schools" I have been able to study in depth. I worked in two of them for almost a year as an English teacher sent by a Swiss missionary organization and taught in the third one on a voluntary basis for a few months. These schools have many common characteristics, but they are also different in important ways. By comparing them, one can get an idea of what church schools in general may look like in Sabah and what kind of education they provide. It should be stressed, however, that these three schools are presented here as illustrative examples, not as ideal-types. Every church school I had the opportunity to study has its own attributes and workings. It seems appropriate to group them together in a single category for the purpose of facilitating comprehension, but one should be careful not to generalize about these institutions.

Before we get into more details, let us first reflect on the terminology used here. Why choose the term "church schools" and not, for instance, "religious schools" or "Christian schools"? Admittedly, the latter two expressions would not be fully inappropriate, but they evoke a reality slightly different from that of schools run by Christian organizations in Sabah. Upon reading "religious schools", in the Malaysian context, one immediately has in mind images of children studying the Bible or the Koran as a main activity. As we shall see, however, religious teaching in the strict sense – when included at all in the program – only takes a few hours in most of these schools' schedules and never relates to Islam. As for "Christian schools", the term is ambiguous. It can be interpreted as "schools of Christians", in which case it would be appropriate to use it here, but also "schools for Christians", a misnomer since many of these institutions are populated with a majority of Muslim, not Christian, students. The term "church schools" arguably has limitations as well. It alludes to a religious organization,¹ seen as founder or at least supporting entity, whereas in reality many schools exist and function chiefly thanks to individuals, without the church formally endorsing them. Nevertheless, these individuals are always members of one church or another and they often manage to hire their teaching staff within their religious community, as well as get funding from other members. Their ability to act depends in large part on networks in which religion plays a major role. It seems therefore justified to

¹ The word "church" is used here in its broad definition as a Christian organization.

insist on that aspect by referring to these schools as "church schools". The term is unambiguous about the Christian nature of these institutions and, as it happens, the equivalent in Malay (*sekolah gereja*) is also the emic category my interlocutors used the most frequently.

What follows is a portrayal of three church schools, the Love & Compassion Centre, the Shepherd's Home and Light of Hope, focusing on their respective histories, structures and workings, as well as the people involved in them, i.e. students, teachers and their superiors, but also cooks, "visitors" and "friends" who occasionally drop by. Particular attention has been paid to the way schooling is organized in these schools as well as to the role of religion in that regard. We shall see that the question of whether, and how, these schools promote Christian faith and values does not allow for a cut and dried answer. Discourses relating to evangelism, in particular, take different meanings according to the interlocutors. Religion does not figure prominently in school programs, but it informs the way education is conceived and practiced in these institutions.² At the Love & Compassion Center and the Shepherd's Home, with which this chapter deals more thoroughly, rituals, interindividual relations, and emotions play a key role in shaping children's senses of self and belonging.

Love & Compassion Centre

Outline of the School's History

According to the official version of the Sabah Evangelical Church, the Love & Compassion Centre was opened in 2005 by *Pendeta* (Pdt., or Reverend) Thomas, a local pastor of the said church, as an extension of its "Sunday school" (*sekolah minggu*). Until then, the school provided only basic religious education once a week.³ Pdt. Thomas' congregation consisted of many Indonesians from Tana Toraja (Central Sulawesi)⁴ and he allegedly opened the Love & Compassion Center on their request, to provide literacy courses for their children. At first, lessons took place in the church building, but soon the Love & Compassion Center became very popular and it was forced to move and rent a bigger space in a commercial area, next to shops and offices. In 2006, there were three

² See also chapter "Education as Salvation", p. 95.

³ The evolution from a simple one hour, once a week "Sunday school" to an institution offering several classes a day several days a week is a common feature of church schools in Sabah.

⁴ Almost 90% of the Toraja are Christians (70% Protestants). Source: www.torajakab.go.id (unavailable on 3.05.2012)

classes, called Joy, Love and Hope, and approximately 45 students per class. The school had four classrooms and the schedule included two short sessions, one in the morning, the other in the afternoon.

During the first years, Pdt. Thomas served as the school's principal. His son-in-law Pdt. Laurence, who is now head of the Malay-speaking synod of the Sabah Evangelical Church,⁵ subsequently stepped in to replace him. From the very beginning, South-Korean missionaries were involved in the Love & Compassion Center. In the first promotional video they made in order to present the school to (potential) sponsors, we can see one of them, Dorothy, teaching young students. Her husband, Paul,⁶ appears in subsequent videos, close to Pdt. Thomas. However, these Korean missionaries are rarely mentioned in "official" versions of the Love & Compassion Center's history, and, when this is the case, only referred to as "friends" who "support" the school. An elderly Sabahan belonging to the Chinese ethnic community has been teaching English as a volunteer on a part-time basis from the very beginning. Up to this day, she is the only member of the staff ever to have worked in other schools and received training as a professional teacher. In the videos, however, her name is never mentioned.

In 2008, the Love & Compassion Center moved again, this time closer to the city center, to a parcel where it is still located today. It had become quite popular among migrant parents and therefore needed more space to cater for a higher number of students. Of the four buildings located on the current site, the first one serves as a school, with 6 classrooms and an office; the second one as a small library; the third one as toilets for the students; and the fourth one as "teachers' quarters". The latter is a sturdy two-story building that was bought along with the parcel by the Korean missionaries, Dorothy and Paul. The other buildings are made of wooden planks and were added later on, also thanks to funding from Korea. As the name indicates, the "teachers' quarters" is where teachers

5 Originally, the Sabah Evangelical Church only had a Chinese and an English synod. In the 1970s, however, the church started welcoming new members from within the "indigenous" communities of Sabah and a Malay-speaking synod was created for them. Nowadays, Indonesian migrant workers living in Sabah are also affiliated with the Malay synod of the Sabah Evangelical Church. These people attend services in Malay together with the indigenous people, while Chinese Sabahans are to be found in those in English or Chinese. Thus the Sabah Evangelical Church appears as an ethnically diverse, and at the same time compartmented, church.

6 Dorothy and Paul are not these people's real names. The use of Christian names as substitutes in this thesis is deliberate. It reflects the fact that, in Sabah, all Korean missionaries use their Korean names only among themselves and prefer to be addressed by their Christian name. Dorothy and Paul's real names are both taken from the Bible. The first one refers to a woman who introduced someone to Christianity, the second one to a missionary. Their symbolicalness can hardly be a coincidence. Paul has changed name twice: the first time before coming to Malaysia and then a second time when he was blacklisted by immigration authorities, forced to leave the country and decided to re-enter with a new passport.

live. What is less obvious is that they share the building with Korean missionaries not directly involved in the school. Together, these people lead a communal life, eating at the same table and sleeping in dormitories, except when their respective schedules require them to do otherwise.

The Presence of South-Korean Missionaries

In fact, Korean missionaries use the Love & Compassion Centre as an operating base for their activities in the region. From the school's office, they manage their numerous projects located throughout Sabah, among which the Center itself. Koreans are active in the sector of education, but also in other sectors like health, rural development, agriculture and, obviously, religion (church building and strengthening, discipleship training, etc.). They address mostly poor populations, like migrant workers and rural Sabahans. Dorothy and Paul come to the Love & Compassion Centre at least several times a week. There, they meet with Paul's personal assistant, a young Korean woman who lives in the teachers' quarters and works in the Centre's office but mostly on issues unrelated to the school. These people do not interact much with the students. Other Korean missionaries and family members often drop by in the framework of prayer meetings and other types of gatherings, which take place outside teaching hours.

Paul and Dorothy play a crucial role within the Love & Compassion Center. They take most managerial decisions on their own, without consulting Pdt. Laurence of the Sabah Evangelical Church, although he is the school's officially appointed principal. Since Pdt. Laurence rarely visits the school site, he is not aware of the latest happenings, except through occasional communication with the teachers, who are formally his employees. He and the Korean missionaries only get in contact with each other directly when they deem it indispensable. Pdt. Laurence visibly does not appreciate the Korean couple. When possible, he avoids them or at least being seen in their company. This may have to do with the fact that Paul and Dorothy belong to a Presbyterian charismatic movement,⁷ whereas Pdt. Laurence declares himself to be a Lutheran. Their respective theological backgrounds and understandings of the Christian faith differ in important ways. In particular, Pdt. Laurence seems to disapprove of Paul and Dorothy's liturgy and preaching style. He

⁷ According to Joel Robbins (2004:121), "the term charismatic Christian has come to refer to members of non-Pentecostal denominations who believe the gifts of the Spirit [eg: speaking in tongues] are available to contemporary believers."

warned me once that "these people do all kinds of strange things" when praying.⁸ And the only time he ever gave me a direct order in his quality as my superior in Sabah, it consisted in not helping the Koreans with one of their projects in the northern part of the state. Thus, collaboration between Pdt. Laurence and the Koreans is at once necessary – for they both have duties in connection with the school – and limited. As for the Swiss organization that hired me, it has absolutely no contact with Korean missionaries.

In addition to running the school, Paul and Dorothy provide money to cover more than half of the Love & Compassion Center's costs, which amount to a total of 30,000 MYR (10,000 CHF) per month. They have secured funding contracts with two churches based in South-Korea, which accepted to guarantee regular payments over three and six years, respectively. The rest of the school's costs is borne by a well-off congregation of the Sabah Evangelical Church's Chinese synod, school fees paid by the students' parents (40 MYR or 12 CHF per month per child) and occasional donations from individuals. In comparison to other church schools located in Sabah, the Love & Compassion Center is relatively well-off.

Paul and Dorothy are also behind the school's plans for the future. The Koreans have bought yet another parcel of land, located further away from the city center (but still within reach of most students' houses) on which construction work has started recently. The Love & Compassion Centre is expected to settle there in the coming months, for what will be the fourth moving in less than 7 years. The parcel is vast and completely isolated, surrounded only by trees and hills – an important feature for a semi-clandestine institution.⁹ The new site will have many more facilities than the current one, for example a science lab, a music room and a dedicated building for praying sessions. It will also allow the Love & Compassion Centre to take in a greater number of students.

Student and Staff Population

For the moment, the school has approximately 190 students, distributed into eight classes (i.e. between 20 and 30 students per class), six at primary and two at secondary level and roughly the same number of girls and boy. About 75% of the children are Christians, belonging to many different denominations, the rest of them are Muslims. The majority descend from people who came to Sabah from Tana Toraja and Timur,¹⁰ but other

8 Pdt. Laurence was certainly referring here, among other practices, to that of glossolalia or "speaking in tongues", which, indeed, belongs to the praying repertoire of Paul and his team of missionaries.

9 See picture, p. 117.

10 In Sabah, the term *Timur* refers to the Indonesian Province that occupies the western part of the island of Timor.

ethnic groups found in Indonesia (Bugis, Bajau, Jawa, etc.) are also represented.¹¹ Descendants of migrant workers from the Philippines (Suluk, Visaya) are a minority.¹² Age is the only condition for the enrollment of new students in first grade. The Love & Compassion Centre does not accept illiterate children older than nine or ten years of age. Admission at this level takes place on a "first come first served" basis several months before each school term. Religious belonging, in particular, is not a criteria of selection. According to one of the teachers, "there is no limit to the number of Muslim students the Love & Compassion Centre is ready to accept".

The current teaching team is composed of nine people: two men and seven women, most of them Malaysians hired by the Sabah Evangelical Church. They belong either to one of the main indigenous "races" (*bangsa*) of Sabah or to the Chinese ethnic community.¹³ The only exceptions are the art teacher, a South-Korean lady married to a missionary, the actual English teacher, a young American woman from Texas who volunteered and was sent to Sabah by her church, and the previous one, me. All of the six teachers working full-time are young people, aged less than 30 years, who have been made aware of the school's existence and encouraged to apply by other members of the Sabah Evangelical Church. They live together in the teachers' quarters and go back to their hometowns and villages once in a while, mostly on weekends. On average, their workload includes more than 6 hours of teaching a day, in addition to many administrative tasks, among which promotion and accounting. Teachers even take care of the school's shopping and do maintenance work. Thus working days are often long and, because they live right next to the school, it is not rare for them to work on week-ends as well. Their salaries vary between 800 (240) and 1200 (360) MYR (CHF) per month, which is not considered much in Sabah.¹⁴

11 These statements are based on the name lists used in the Love & Compassion Centre. Interestingly, these lists are conceived in a way that does not allow for the recording of multiethnic belonging. Thus, children born of mixed marriages are assumed to belong to the ethnic group of the father, "unless the father is Filipino and the mother Indonesian", in which case the child will also be considered Indonesian. The reason for this exception is that "Indonesians enjoy a better reputation in Sabah", according to one of the teachers.

12 In Sabah, the religious belonging of a child cannot be inferred from her/his national belonging, as Filipinas/os and Indonesians can both be either Christians or Muslims.

13 Both of the teachers who have mixed origins emphasize their link with the Chinese community.

14 During the time I lived together with my colleagues in the teachers' quarters, my own working schedule resembled theirs, apart from the administrative part, from which I was spared. But moving out allowed me to keep my evenings and week-ends entirely for myself. I also earned a lot more than my colleagues, since the organization I was working for paid me a decent Swiss salary almost throughout my stay.

The Shepherd's Home

Outline of the School's History

There are several versions of the history of the Shepherd's Home. Accounts differ significantly depending on who they originate from.¹⁵ According to teachers and the official principal, Pdt. Laurence, the person responsible for opening the school is the then pastor of the Sabah Evangelical Church's local congregation, Pdt. FuSun. One day, in 2004, the pastor allegedly saw a 6-year-old Filipino boy in rags rummaging through rubbish in search of his livelihood. He asked the boy to lead him to his parents' house, so he could talk to them and offer his help. Once there, the pastor found dozens of other school-age children doing nothing, some of them already 10 or 12 years old and totally illiterate. Appalled by this sight, Pdt. FuSun decided to open a school in that village. The story goes on about the evolution of the school from that point on and does not mention any other name in particular. It is also anchored in an official document of the Sabah Evangelical Church. But in the words of Paul, the Korean missionary who long supported the Shepherd's Home along with the Love & Compassion Centre, things sound quite different: Pdt. FuSun supposedly called him right after he had stumbled upon the Filipino boy and they set off together to the boy's village. Once there, the head of the village begged Paul – not Pdt. FuSun – to open a school, even weeping of despair and clinging onto his clothes. The Korean missionary – and not the Malaysian pastor – took the decision to open a school and did so with his own money.

The Presence of South-Korean Missionaries

I do not know much about Pdt. Paul's role at the Shepherd's Home in the past, because another Korean missionary, Pdt. Kim, stepped in upon my arrival in Sabah to become the new person in charge of the school – from the Korean side, because the Sabah Evangelical Church only recognizes Pdt. Laurence as manager. Unfortunately, I can also only speculate on the reason that motivated this hand-over. Pdt. Paul, who tends to many different "ministries" at the same time, might have reached personal or financial limits and, therefore, looked for outside help in the form of someone who could replace him in that particular project. Like Paul, Kim is a Presbyterian. But the two men are not affiliated to

¹⁵ The same actually holds true of the Love & Compassion Centre, but, in that case, I have chosen to relay only the version of the Sabah Evangelical Church, in order to shorten the description.

the same Korean church; Paul is a charismatic Presbyterian, whereas Kim belongs to a more classical current of Presbyterianism.¹⁶ Nevertheless, they work closely together, despite their different affiliations. Paul has helped Kim a great deal while he and his family settled down and tried to find their way in Sabah.

As soon as Kim had arrived, i.e. at the beginning of 2011, he set out to fund and organize the construction of a bigger and better school. The new buildings are made of concrete and thus contrast starkly with the surrounding wooden houses in which the students live with their families. They are a sign of South-Koreans' generosity... and wealth.

Sources of Funding

Based on information available for the first semester of 2011, the Shepherd's Home has two main sources of funding: school fees paid by the parents (45% of the total budget) and "gifts" from Korea (55%). The latter includes donations from Pdt. Kim's church: some 200 out of its 2000 members "sponsor a student" of the Shepherd's Home. The Sabah Evangelical Church, on the other hand, does not financially support the school, even though it officially presents it as one of its "welfare activities". Members of the church's local congregation allegedly make donations on occasions, but there were none during the first semester of 2011.

Student and Staff Population

The Shepherd's Home started out with approximately 200 students, three classes and three teachers. Six years later, upon my arrival there to work as an English teacher, the number of students had not changed much, but there were six classes and four full-time teachers. The school's student population is composed of an equal number of boys and girls. According to name lists used by the teachers, all students are Christians. Yet, I discovered that eight (4%) of them are in fact Muslims. Most children are descendants from people who emigrated from Tana Toraja (Indonesia)¹⁷ or the Visayas (Philippines).

¹⁶ Presbyterianism in Korea is characterized by a great number of different denominations. The information platform "Reformiert Online" estimates that there are more than a hundred. http://www.reformiert-online.net/weltweit/75_eng.php (last consulted 21.08.2012)

¹⁷ On a trip to Tana Toraja, I accidentally met an Indonesian couple in a small town, not far from my destination, who recognized me at once and reminded me that we had attended the same Sunday service at the Sabah Evangelical Church of Town Y two months ago. I had just travelled an hour by plane, two days by boat and half a day by bus and was therefore very surprised to meet familiar faces in a place so far away from Sabah. This anecdote makes obvious the transnational life most Toraja people living in Sabah – and migrants in the region in general – lead.

Very few have parents of other geographic or ethnic origins. In every class there are at least a few children originating from mixed Indonesian–Filipino/a marriages. Religious affiliation is extremely varied, with at least ten different denominations. Unlike Toraja students, who live in the school's surroundings, Visaya boys and girls have to take a public minibus to get to school everyday.

Most teachers at the Shepherd's Home are Malaysian women belonging to one or the other "indigenous" community. I was an exception (at the time I worked there), just like the young American man who replaced me when I left. He was sent to Sabah in the framework of the same program for young missionaries than that joined by the American woman working at the Love & Compassion Centre. At the Shepherd's Home, teachers work in an autonomous way most of the time. None of them has received any training as a professional teacher. The only degree they hold is the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) or Malaysian Certificate of Education, which certifies that they have successfully completed high school, but does not yet entitle them to enter university. Since Pdt. Kim arrived only recently, has no previous experience in education, and does not speak Malay fluently, he does not interfere in pedagogical matters for the moment. But this should change in the future, as he has already announced his intention of leading collective prayer sessions and teaching "Bible study" all by himself. Malaysian teachers at the Shepherd's Home have to get by with a salary similar to that of their colleagues at the Love & Compassion Centre, i.e. around 1000 (300) MYR (CHF) per month. By comparison, trained teachers employed in the public sector make twice to three times as much.

All the Malaysian teachers of the Shepherd's Home are actively involved in the life of the Sabah Evangelical Church's local congregation. They often take part in services and teach in Sunday schools. The school cook, a Toraja woman in her late forties, is very involved in local church activities as well. She organizes and participates in numerous prayer meetings with fellow Toraja who have also become members of the Sabah Evangelical Church.

An Effective, Albeit Unacknowledged, Collaboration

As we can see, the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home have a lot in common. The two schools were created at about the same time and they are affiliated with the same local church, the Sabah Evangelical Church. A single pastor, Pdt. Laurence, officially serves as a principal in both of them, but he is neither active in the Love &

Compassion Centre nor in the Shepherd's Home. Instead, Malaysian teachers work in an autonomous way most of the time and occasionally get orders from Korean missionaries. The latter are not only involved in the management of these schools, but they also provide funding and, most importantly, act as agents of expansion by building new, bigger and better equipped spaces and pushing for "excellence" (*kecemerlangan*) or an improvement of the "academic level" (*lebih akademik*). They therefore play an essential role in both schools.

The unexplicit distribution of tasks and competences between the Sabah Evangelical Church and the Koreans is sometimes problematic for the teachers. At times, it translates into loyalty dilemmas. Teachers might receive an order from one of the Korean missionaries and not be sure whether their official superior, Pdt. Laurence, would approve it or not. They could call and ask him, but they often hesitate to disturb such a "busy" (*sibuk*) man. As one of my colleagues at the Shepherd's Home put it: "We never know for sure whom to obey." As for the students, they have little direct contact with the Koreans. The younger ones among them do not really realize that Koreans are involved in their school.

Members of the Sabah Evangelical Church, including the teachers, have a tendency to hide or minimize the Koreans' contribution and emphasize that of their church. My Swiss employer also downplays the Koreans' involvement and power. And the reverse is true as well. Videos made each year by the Koreans to illustrate the evolution of the schools and find financial support make the Sabah Evangelical Church quite invisible, which automatically brings their own actions to the forefront. This mix of collaboration and unacknowledgment reveals the interplay between religious organizations whose interests do not fully overlap but which cannot achieve their respective goals without joining forces. Each one puts forward its own achievements, in the hope of drawing attention on them. They all strive for an increased visibility and credibility with their members, as well as with partner organizations and individuals, and even outsiders, because their capacity to act and their future growth depend very much from the resources the latter will be willing to put at their disposal.

Light of Hope

The profile of the third school of interest to us here, Light of Hope, presents many differences with that of the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home.

Outline of the School's History

The founder, Susanna, is an elderly lady who left her native Australia and came to Sabah forty-five years ago to work as a missionary with an indigenous population. She belongs to one of the major Christian denominations, which happens to be very active in the sector of education in Sabah. After having spent thirty years somewhere "deep in the jungle", Susanna decided to settle down in a city in western Sabah and started to work for a theological seminary. At some point, she bought a house in a residential area, next to a luxury housing development site. As the construction work on this site lasted for years, the employees started to assemble plywood shacks next to the plot and brought their families from abroad.¹⁸ These people immigrated from the Sulu archipelago, a region in the southern Philippines "sadly renowned for its terrorist Islamic group", according to Susanna. Most of them, especially women and children, have no proper documents. As their neighbor, the elderly lady got to know them well. She helped out when some of them had health or administrative problems. In 2003, rumors started to circulate that Susanna was going to open a school for the many illiterate children idling in the shanty village. According to her, these rumors were unfounded. One day, however, a mother asked her to do so and Susanna, who initially replied with a firm "no!", changed her mind a few days later, "after having seen so much sadness in the woman's eyes". To her, it was a call from God.

The Australian missionary answered this call by setting up Light of Hope, which she did almost on her own. Her pastor acquaintances offered her funding on several occasions thereafter, but she declined, arguing that the school receives enough money through "Australian friends" and other donations, and rather needs volunteers. Few Sabahans are inclined to work with children of migrant workers and Susanna cannot afford to hire professionals, that is why she relies on volunteers. In recent years, Susanna has also been looking for someone to take over her school and thus alleviate her physical and mental fatigue. It seems that no one has shown interest until now. According to Susanna, her own church, in particular, is put off by the fact that almost all the school's students are Muslims. As a result, the school remains unaffiliated with any local church.

Light of Hope started out in Susanna's living room, as a basic literacy course for a few students. Since then, their number has grown steadily, reaching 90 at the end of the first semester 2011. After having moved to her garage, then her backyard and then her garden

¹⁸ See picture, p. 116.

– where the children studied "open air" – the school is now located in an extension of Susanna's house, built especially for that use with funding from Australia.

School Features and Staff

Light of Hope offers lessons free of charge to young children three full days a week and an English night course once a week to teenagers and young adults. An equal number of girls and boys follow these classes. The staff, a team of fifteen volunteers, is made up of "Indian, Batak, English, Australian, Kadazan, Iban, Chinese, Suluk and American"¹⁹ people of all ages", according to Susanna. Most of them are women and only two of them have previously trained as teachers. Nevertheless the general level of education of the staff is higher in Light of Hope than in most church schools because Susanna manages to involve students from a local theological seminary as voluntary teachers. Four teenage alumni, all of them girls "of the same race as the pupils", have become "teachers' aides". Interestingly, one of the Malay teachers is not a native speaker but a young American woman, who has been living in Sabah for the last 7 years, together with her husband, an American missionary, and their two children.

Different Schools in Many Ways

To be sure, there are many similarities between the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home, on the one hand, and Light of Hope, on the other. But these are mostly common features of church schools in general which, for a big part, have already been described in the previous chapter.²⁰ It is therefore more interesting to focus here on the differences that oppose these institutions. As stated above, Light of Hope is not formally attached to any church. It came into being as an individual enterprise and remained so until now. As the school founder, manager, principal and main fundraiser, Susanna enjoys considerable freedom in making plans and carrying them out – even though staff meetings occasionally take place during which important decisions are open to debate. She does not have to deal with a double bureaucratic structure similar to that of the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home. Susanna also maintains a closer relationship to the migrant community her pupils belong to. She is often invited in homes and also frequently visits the shack dwellings spontaneously. Staff of the Love & Compassion Centre and the

¹⁹ As is common in Sabah, the *bangsa* referred to here is determined either according to the criteria of nationality, or ethnicity, or even "culture".

²⁰ See p. 37-40.

Shepherd's Home, in contrast, do not have regular contact with the students' parents, whom they virtually never meet outside of the school or church – but even there, they rarely exchange more than a few words. Light of Hope's student population is much more homogenous and made up almost exclusively of Muslims with origins in Sulu, whereas the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home have a majority of Christians and members of many different ethnic groups. The composition of Light of Hope's staff, on the other hand, is more heterogeneous than in both other schools. Malaysians account for half of the teachers, but they are not all from Sabah. Some come from Sarawak, others from the peninsula. Finally, Light of Hope relies on volunteers, who work part-time, whereas the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home pay most of their teachers and employ them full-time.

More importantly, however, these schools provide different types of education. As we will see in the rest of the chapter, schooling at the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home borrows a lot from the Malaysian public system. Schedules, programs, and materials are, or closely resemble, those of government schools. Great emphasis is laid on students' discipline, notably through the use of school rules, uniforms and special rituals. In comparison, Light of Hope feels like homemade schooling.

Another major difference concerns the role of religion in the education provided by these schools. At the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home, Christianity is an important part of students' everyday lives. At Light of Hope, by contrast, it is barely noticeable. At first sight, the school seems almost secular, even though it is run by a missionary.

School Program at Light of Hope

The education provided by Light of Hope is devoid of any reference to Islam – which is quite understandable for a school managed by a former Christian missionary – but it also shows surprisingly few explicit links with Christianity. Its program is more secular than that of any other church school for children of migrant workers I have studied – and even more so than that of most public schools, where, for instance, all Muslims have to follow courses in Islam.

A Focus on Literacy

In Light of Hope, literacy is stressed as the fundamental component of education.

Susanna describes the school as a "literacy center" and her ambition for the pupils does not go beyond mastering reading, writing, calculating, and having notions of English. She insists a lot on basic skills. Hence, drawing classes for the younger ones are seen as "a way for them to get acquainted with instruments which they will need later in order to write" rather than a step toward mastering drawing skills or developing the child's creativity. Likewise, a "computer room" will soon open, but Susanna does not expect the pupils to become IT-specialists: "I just want them to know how to start a computer, so they won't be afraid of it in the future."

Light of Hope does not follow any standard syllabus. Susanna once said she would be interested to use official textbooks from the Philippines, especially for English, because she believes her students, once grown-up, should "go back" there "for their own good". But this idea has not been implemented yet. For the moment, Light of Hope's teachers concoct their own materials creatively, using the multiple sources available to them: second-hand textbooks in English or Malay, materials on sale in local bookshops, the internet, etc.

The Absence of Religious Teaching

Religion is not part of the school program at Light of Hope. Susanna justifies the absence of religious classes and activities by the fact that she "do[es] not believe in proselytism". She is not alone in arguing that education can and should be provided in itself, with no strings attached. A Sabahan Pentecostal pastor whom I met later, Pdt. Simon, holds a similar view. During our interview, he explained to me that the school he had opened with his wife in City X was "purely about education, not mixed up with religion". He started by presenting this clearly drawn boundary between education and religion as part of their conception of schooling, but eventually acknowledged that they had relinquished religious courses a few years after the school was founded, at a time when the student population had become predominantly Muslim. "We did it in order to avoid offending Muslim parents and being prosecuted" by state authorities, because, he said, "proselytism toward Muslims is forbidden under Malaysian law". The pastor acknowledged that he and his wife were "panicked" by the thought of a denouncement and its potential consequences.

The absence of formal Christian teaching is a common feature of church schools hosting a majority of Muslim children and it distinguishes them from those hosting more Christians, where religion usually plays a prominent role. Fear of state sanctions is

certainly part of the explanation for many school principals' decision not to provide formal teaching in Christianity. But Malaysian Christians also remember vividly the recent bomb attack on a church in relation to the nation-wide polemic linking Christian charity groups to covert conversions of Muslims.²¹ Such expressions of hostility may have prompted Christian organizations working closely with Muslims – immigrants included – to be (more) cautious.

In Susanna's case, however, fear and caution certainly do not fully explain her position with respect to the education of children of migrant workers.

Evangelism Without Proselytism

At first sight, Susanna's statement that she "do[es] not believe in proselytism" stands in stark contrast with her past as a missionary. How are we to reconcile the two aspects? She has long been involved in the evangelization of a remote, and at that time animist, part of Sabah. Even today, spreading the word to people of other faiths is still an important part of her ambition as a Christian. The report she recently wrote to sponsors of Light of Hope clearly testifies to it: "Pray for [...] an awareness [within church] of unreached people groups that CAN be reached with the good news" (capitals in the original).²²

My way of interpreting this seemingly contradictory position of Susanna is that she has different understandings of evangelism, on the one hand, and proselytism, on the other. For me, this is evident in the fact that she fully endorses the former, whereas she disapproves of the latter. Evangelism, in Susanna's view, seem to consist in "a believing, celebrating, loving Christian fellowship, fully involved in the life of the wider community and sharing its burdens and sorrows" (Newbigin 2006). It implies talking about Jesus Christ at some point, but not necessarily in the framework of religious classes or events. Proselytism, on the other hand must be, for her, more akin to manipulation, the exploiting of a weakness or the use of coercion.

Despite the absence of religious classes in Light of Hope and Susanna's allegedly non-proselytizing stance, discourses and practices with a distinct religious character can often be observed in the school environment.²³ They are often linked with special events. For

21 Source: The Malaysian Insider (06.08.2011). Available online at <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/christian-charity-conversion-report-a-conspiracy-say-pas-mp-priest/> (last consulted, 24.05.2012)

22 Most evangelistic organizations refer to Muslims as "unreached people". See, for example, <http://www.joshuaproject.net/> (last consulted, 24.05.2012)

23 While it is mostly absent from the classroom, religion plays an important role as a motivation for people who work for and support Light of Hope (see chapter "Doing God's Work", p. 84).

example, main Christian holy days (i.e. Christmas and Easter) are celebrated and explained to the students. Susanna justifies this by the necessity for all inhabitants of Malaysia, "as they live in a multireligious country", to have at least basic notions of the meaning of other religions' holy days.²⁴ This is the way students at Light of Hope are made aware of the main tenets of Christianity.²⁵

Sometimes, teachers at Light of Hope also spontaneously talk about their faith. One day, for instance, a teenage girl saw a wedding ring on the finger of a young American guest teacher and asked her whether she was married. By inquiring into the private life of this woman, who had just arrived to Sabah, the girl had certainly meant to be polite more than anything else. She must have expected a simple yes-no answer, maybe some developments about a beloved man, not much else. However, the American volunteer replied that she was "not married to any man", but that "[her] heart belong[ed] to Jesus Christ" and that the ring symbolized her engagement with Him. She interrupted her English course for a while to explain what "God's Love" meant to her and all students listened carefully. Judging by her enthusiastic behavior, she was pleased with the question. It definitely offered her an opportunity to share her faith, which she had taken without hesitating.²⁶ Evangelism at Light of Hope often takes the form of spontaneous and digressing exchanges of the kind described above. Many Christians in Sabah conceive of it as providing an answer to people's questions. For them, "people are curious about Jesus", "they want to know". Hence, it seems only fair to let them know, to share with them the "message of God".

In a school like Light of Hope, evangelism remains invisible unless one pays attention to special and interstitial moments, like celebrations, confidences, class breaks, etc. It is only then that this message finds expression. The rest of the time, it remains latent, in the background of teachers' minds.

The Aim of Converting Muslims

Very few school principals or church leaders acknowledge the conversion of their

²⁴ She also regularly walks her talk by participating in Hari Raya Puasa (Eid ul-Fitr) and other Muslim celebrations in the shack settlement where her students and their parents live.

²⁵ To my knowledge, however, they do not study the meaning of Buddhist or Hindu celebrations.

²⁶ At the end of this woman's English lesson, I tried to learn more about the reasons of her stay in Sabah, but her answers remained very evasive: she works as a primary teacher in Arkansas and was "on holidays in Sabah" where she was "teaching English in various schools" and "assessing the possibility of coming back later for a longer period of time". Since she was staying at the other American teacher and her missionary husband's place, it seems reasonable to assume that she intends on soon serving as a missionary herself.

Muslim students to the Christian faith as one of their aims. Susanna never mentions it. Her stance on the subject seems close to the one expressed by the "missionary theologian" Lesslie Newbigin:

the conversion of a human mind and will to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior is strictly a work of the sovereign Holy Spirit of God, a mystery always beyond our full comprehension, for which our words and deeds may be by the grace of God – the occasions but never the sufficient causes. (Newbigin 2006)

But another pastor, and leader in the Sabahan branch of the same denomination Susanna belongs to,²⁷ declared to me: "I believe, if we want to convert the Muslims and the Buddhists and the... We have to work through education, early enough." South-Korean missionaries expressed a similar view. It is still not clear for me exactly how important the conversion of Muslim students is for the different church members I have interviewed. Perhaps they all have different approaches to the question.

What is clear, however, is that church schools address children, i.e. people between six and twelve years of age (on average), who do not yet lead a life of their own. For the moment, their parents take most important decisions for them, in religious as in other matters. A change of faith could potentially occur later in their life – although nothing could be less certain – but not now.²⁸

In addition, overt conversions are unlikely to take place given the current Malaysian legal context, because Shari'a (*Syariah*) law makes repudiating Islam almost impossible in practice. According to the United States Department of State:

"Muslims who seek to convert to another religion must first obtain approval from a Shari'a court to declare themselves 'apostates'. This effectively prohibits the conversion of Muslims, since Shari'a courts seldom grant such requests and can impose penalties on apostates."²⁹

But does this also apply to Muslim immigrants? And how satisfying would covert conversions be for Christian evangelists? My data unfortunately does not allow me to answer such questions.

²⁷ Susan remained affiliated with the Australian branch of her denomination, although she has spent the last forty-five years in Sabah.

²⁸ The eldest generation of alumni is now entering their late teens, since church schools have started to open in Sabah around 2004-2005. It would be interesting to return to the field in a few years and try to find out about their individual life paths.

²⁹ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010/148881.htm> (last consulted 18.05.2012)

School Program at the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home

In contrast to Light of Hope, the majority of church schools in Sabah provide an "education based on Christian teachings and world view".³⁰ At the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home, for instance, religion is the object of formal teaching: for two hours a week children study the Bible. Not only that but life in these institutions goes with the rhythm of a number of religious practices and rituals. Everyday, several times a day, students pray in their classrooms and once a week, as well as on special occasion, they are grouped together for collective events marked by Christian messages and songs.

The Public System as a Standard

Like the programs of other church schools for children of migrant workers, those of the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home are very much inspired by the public school system. The education provided by the state serves as a model for shaping lessons. As in government schools, the main subjects are Malay (*Bahasa Malaysia*), English, Mathematics and Science. Moral Education (*Pendidikan Moral*) is found both in the church schools and in government schools, but the latter assign it only to non-Muslim students, whereas the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home compel all students, irrespective of their faith, to follow this course.³¹ Likewise, religious teaching in church schools resembles that of the public system in that it concerns only one religion – albeit a different one in each case – to the exclusion of all others. The Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home only provide classes in Christianity and prove quite hermetic to anything Islamic.³² Government schools, on the other hand, teach Islam to Muslim students – instead of Moral Education – but, in general, do not provide classes in Christianity.³³ The difference between these two types of schools lies in the fact that church schools impose Bible study on non-Christian students, whereas non-Muslim students are not obliged to study Islam in government schools.

At the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home, teachers use official

³⁰ Those are the words a pastor belonging to a major denomination used to describe his own church's schools for "migrant children".

³¹ Courses in Moral Education present "Belief in God" (*Kepercayaan Kepada Tuhan*) as the highest moral value, but they do not provide information on any particular religion.

³² Church schools are generally devoid of Islamic signs and practices. Within the compound, Muslim girls, whatever their age, do not wear the veil (*hijab*), nobody prays in the Islamic fashion and I have never seen a copy of the Koran. At the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home, children fasting during Ramadan were not forced to eat, and pork was never on the menu of the canteen, but that is about the only space Muslim practices and beliefs were allowed to occupy.

textbooks of the "Integrated Primary School Curriculum" or KBSR (*Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah*) as main teaching tool and source of inspiration. At the same time, they avoid implementing too strictly the national syllabus these books are based on, because it could have negative consequences for the schools: both the Shepherd's Home and the Love & Compassion Centre have been warned by the Sabah Education Department, during its "surprise visits", not to use KBSR material or else "sanctions would be applied". According to several principals of church schools, following the national syllabus could provoke the state into "interfering" (*campur tangan*) in their activities, something they are obviously trying to prevent from happening. Thus, teachers confine themselves to photocopying parts of KBSR books and altering them or mixing them with parts of other textbooks, in order to produce a mixed national-improvised curriculum.

In putting together the school's program as well as their own lessons, teachers draw a lot from their knowledge and personal experience of government schools and the public education system. At the same time, though, they have to be creative and resourceful, especially when it comes to teaching subjects that are absent from the KBSR. For Bible Studies, in particular, teachers often resort to the internet, where a multitude of short slide shows, films, and stories on Christianity are available for free use. For instance, the film *Jesus*, a two-hour "docudrama" about the life of Jesus Christ, can easily be accessed online thanks to a dedicated website, and streamed free of costs. Teachers of both the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home have shown it to their students.³⁴ My former colleagues also look for information on the internet before teaching subjects in which they have little, if any, knowledge – a situation that happens quite often. One of them once gave a special history class on the early days of the Republic of Indonesia and spoke repeatedly of a certain "Seokarno". Never before had she heard of the country's founding father, which explains how she could mispronounce his name throughout the whole lesson.³⁵

33 National legislation on government schools actually gives Christian students the possibility to request that classes in Christianity be provided by their school. According to a Sabahan pastor, however, students and their families rarely are aware of this possibility because government schools never draw their attention on it. Where requests have been made, despite this general lack of awareness, the school management often proved so ineffective in answering them that the applicants eventually gave up. However, it must be noted that this behavior does not prevent Christians from studying their religion, since all churches in Sabah operate "Sunday School".

34 The film has been translated into 1,135 languages, viewed 6 billion times worldwide since its initial release in 1979, and described by mission experts as "the greatest evangelistic success stories of all time". (www.jesusfilm.org, last consulted 21.05.2012)

35 The name Sukarno is still written "Soekarno" in Indonesia, following the Dutch orthography. This teacher only mistakingly inverted the "e" and the "o", thus producing a completely different, and wrong, pronunciation.

Bible Study's Limited Success

Of all subjects taught at the Love & Compassion Centre, Bible study is the least popular among students. Teachers see it as a "problem" and regularly discuss possible solutions. One of my former colleagues claimed that they were "doing [their] best", but, "somehow, students don't like these classes as much as the others". At the same time, teachers acknowledge that passages of the Bible can "sometimes be a little complicated for children" and emphasize their lack of training in theology. In parallel to frequent declarations presenting Bible study as a potentially fun subject, there seems to be a contradicting and tacit consensus among teachers on the inherent tediousness of these classes. They themselves feel insufficiently prepared to give them and therefore consider them, more than other classes, as a chore. They therefore prefer to introduce students to Christianity and communicate their faith through rituals (which are dealt with in the next section).

Yet, it is not thinkable for teachers to do away with the subject. In their opinion, all Christians have the duty to study and teach the Bible. Students and teachers of the Love & Compassion Centre therefore both have to go through it, whether they like it or not.

The Importance of Rituals

The fact that students take little pleasure in learning from the "sacred book" could potentially be considered alarming in a church school. However it did not become a major issue at the Love & Compassion Centre, certainly because many other religious practices also put students in contact with Christianity.³⁶ To some protagonists, these practices even take precedence over Bible study. South-Korean missionaries, in particular, have repeatedly stated that they would leave the schools if the ritual known as "chapel" (see below) were to be abandoned – whereas they did not seem too preoccupied with Bible study's lack of success.

As the following section shows, students of the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home – and their teachers – are induced, through rituals, to feel as members of a single community, whether it be that of the school or, more broadly, the "imagined" worldwide community (Anderson B. 2006) of Christians, which includes people of all nationalities and all walks of life. Moreover these rituals provide a cognitive and emotional framework that pushes participants to make sense of their selves and the reality that surrounds them in Christian terms, i.e. through the use of values, ideas and feelings

³⁶ All of these religious practices, which are exposed below, are also found at the Shepherd's Home.

promoted by Christianity and its advocates. Thus, rituals can be a powerful device in shaping individual subjectivities.

On Rituals at the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home

Collective Prayers

The most common type of ritual found at the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home is collective prayers. They take place in every class everyday, several times a day. During prayers, students have to stand behind their seats, eyes closed, hands clasped together and repeat what the teacher says. Most prayers last less than a minute, with the teacher and students addressing God (*Tuhan*) or Jesus (*Tuhan Yesus*) in a direct way. They express their gratitude for what God has given them on that day ("*terima kasih Tuhan karena...*"), ask Him for protection, good health, success, etc., and claim their desire to study ("*kami mahu belajar*"). Often, the teacher will ask a student to lead the prayer instead of her/him. As a non-religious person, I, for instance, did it systematically – as a result, my students eventually realized that their English teacher was not particularly devout. Sometimes, I also intentionally skipped the preliminary prayer and started my lesson right away, which generally prompted some students to interrupt me and remind me of the procedure ("Teacher, teacher, pray!"), while others tried to hush them.

Chapels

"Chapels" are another particularly obvious example of rituals taking place at the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home. These events last about an hour and are generally organized once a week as well as on special occasions (Easter, for example, or Saint-Valentine's Day). All students (i.e. about 180 children) are gathered into one long room and made to sit in rows: two rows per class, lower classes at the front and higher classes at the back of the room. Students start by singing religious songs and dance predefined choreographies, following the teachers' lead. The melodies, lyrics and movements are entertaining and easy to remember. Younger students, in particular, seem to enjoy this part of the event. Later, a teacher comes to the podium and delivers a speech, which is usually based on a biblical story. One of her/his colleagues carries on with a reminder of school rules, always uttered in a lecturing tone. Miscellaneous announcements are then made about practical matters, and, eventually, the event draws to a close with a

group prayer, lead by yet another teacher. To leave the room, students first have to wait for the signal of a teacher, then proceed to the exit in single file. A teacher (always the same one: a tall and stout man with a low voice) awaits them there and checks that each student's appearance conforms with school rules: i.e. nails or hair must have the proper length,³⁷ sandals, shorts and skirts are forbidden, and clothes in general must be kept clean at all times.

The Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home's chapels adhere to a precise program, determined in advance by teachers under the supervision of Korean missionaries. Repetition is a crucial aspect. Week after week, the same scenes are reproduced, in the same order, with very little variation in the structure of the event. Music is chosen from a limited repertoire, consisting of a dozen songs at most. Thus, even newly arrived students know them all by heart after only a few weeks.³⁸ Likewise, the teacher in charge of the speech usually punctuates it with recurring questions like "Who wants to be Jesus's friend?", to which students know exactly what to answer. In general, chapels are predictable events, where individuals stick to much-rehearsed roles. The only moment where students are allowed to express themselves relatively freely is at the end of the speech, when the teacher asks them to react to the biblical story she/he has just told. But even then, her/his questions set a frame from which it would be inopportune to stray.

As a participant, I myself have experienced the lasting impression chapels make. After each attendance, earworms³⁹ gnawed at me for several days and, since chapel took place every week, I was basically humming Christian songs non-stop during the first months of my stay in Sabah. The analysis of this autoethnographical observation (Anderson L. 2006) hints at the potential of chapels as a way of anchoring Christian values, notions and feelings deeply in the minds and bodies of participants. One does not have to like them in order to be affected. In fact, I developed an aversion for chapels and stopped attending after a few months, but I can still sing chapel songs today. Likewise, some teenage students find chapels repetitive and boring,⁴⁰ they are marked, nevertheless, by the new abilities, categories and desires these events instill in them.

37 At the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home, boys are not allowed to have hair over their ears and necks and girls must have hair reaching at least below the jaw. Nails of both boys and girls must be cut short and kept clean.

38 A few songs are in English and most students have only a very vague idea of what the lyrics mean, but they sing them well all the same.

39 An "earworm" is a piece of music that sticks in one's mind so that one seems to hear it, even when it is not being played.

40 See vignette, p. 74.

Much of the scientific literature on rituals emphasizes this bodily dimension of rituals (e.g. Lindhardt 2011:9ff.). British sociologist Linda Woodhead, for instance, makes it a fundamental element of her definition of rituals:

"[...] orchestrated and formalized social performances, serving to coordinate bodily movements in synchronized and harmonious ways which may have the effect of reinforcing and intensifying certain emotions and commitments and banishing others." (Woodhead 2011:132)

Elaborated on the basis of previous scholarly work, this definition underscores the central role of the body as an interface between the outside world and individual consciousness. Through the body, individuals' intellectual and emotional worlds can be reached and influenced. Institutions have always understood this and make abundant use of rituals to reproduce and promote their objectives, values and social norms (Wulf 2005). Drawing on Talal Asad's (1993) work, Stambach suggests that embodiment is key not only to rituals but to the process of learning in general. She writes

"Asad [...] suggested that learning is embodied, that it does not only, or primarily, involve the cognitive grasping of information [...]. Instead, learning involves the habituation of bodily practices and a certain disciplinarity of souls." (Stambach 2010:372)

Rituals therefore have a great potential in education, where they can serve as highly efficient teaching tools, for they produce meaning (Wulf 2005:9) and "inscribe" it in the bodies of participants.

This certainly explains why stakeholders of the Love & Compassion Center and the Shepherd's Home are so attached to chapels. Paul, the South-Korean missionary, insists on these rituals taking place every week. For him, they greatly facilitate the diffusion of Christian values and messages, the strengthening of faith among the Christian staff and students and the "revelation of Christ's Word" to Muslim students. Very often, it is during chapels that children are taught to differentiate between "good" (*baik/bagus*) and bad (*jahat/tidak bagus*) attitudes, values, people, etc., and to identify the good ones with Christianity. Chapels also play an important role in the eyes of Pdt. Kim, the South-Korean missionary "helping" the Shepherd's Home. He wants to start leading them himself as soon as his level in Malay will be good enough. As for Pdt. Laurence, the schools' official

principal, he does not come unless either a chapel or a "short mission trip" is taking place,⁴¹ which hints that he values these rituals more than everyday classes.

The YWAM Influence

Similar rituals are also popular in many other church schools in Sabah, where they bear different names⁴² but closely resemble chapels. They all involve music, dance, the telling of biblical stories and moral speeches reminding the students of school rules or teaching them other moral norms. The same songs, in particular, can be heard in schools belonging to different churches, even to different denominations. Yannick Fer refers to this phenomenon as the "standardization" (*uniformisation*) of styles of contemporary songs of praise (Fer 2010:60) and puts it down to the historical influence of the evangelical missionary network *Youth With a Mission* (YWAM).

Ce qui était au départ une forme de contre-culture évangélique est désormais devenu la culture dominante, une culture évangélique globale dont les standards [...] sont chantés dans les Eglises protestantes de toutes tendances et sur tous les continents. (Fer 2010:60)

According to Fer, YWAM not only revolutionized the style and use of music in Christian communities throughout the world, but also introduced choreography, or rather gestures, as an "even more universal form of communication, immediately comprehensible by audiences of any language, any culture" (60).

Like a multitude of other Protestant organizations throughout the world, Sabahan Protestant church schools are fully immersed in the "global evangelical culture" described by Fer.⁴³ As we shall see below, standardized songs and melodies as well as culturally non-specific performances contribute to linking their staff and students with Christians worldwide. Because they are shared by people of different creeds, origins, languages, etc., they create a sense of group membership across boundaries. And they facilitate the work of missionaries.

Short Mission Trips

Apart from chapels, another important type of rituals found in Sabahan church schools

⁴¹ See below.

⁴² For instance, "morning praise and worship" in a school where the ritual takes place on a daily basis.

⁴³ Most of Sabah's church schools for immigrant-origin youth are Protestant. There are also Catholic schools, but I have not been able to study any of them. Thus I cannot say if they have also been influenced by YWAM cultural styles.

– and one that exemplifies Fer's description of contemporary Christian shows – are performances given regularly in these schools by groups of foreign missionaries.⁴⁴ These usually take place in the framework of "short mission trips", i.e. organized tours lasting about a week, undertaken by members of a foreign church (from South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the United States or Germany, for example) in order to "visit" a local church and its different "welfare projects".⁴⁵ As far as the Sabah Evangelical Church is concerned, a group of "visitors" stops at the Love & Compassion Centre and/or the Shepherd's Home every three weeks or so on average. They stay for a couple of hours and put on a show for, and sometimes with, the students.⁴⁶ "Dances and mimes with transparent meanings" of the type described by Fer and presented in his book as originally "*made in YWAM*" are widely used by the visitors. They are a way of overcoming the language barrier in order to communicate directly with the students, since the two groups often do not speak any common language. The method can be quite effective: sometimes students are mesmerized by the shows and fully grasp their meaning. When this is the case, they go on for days, singing the melodies and mimicking the gestures they learned from the visitors.

The Complementarity of Chapels and Short Mission Trips

Chapels and short mission trips should be considered in relation to each other, for they form a whole. The first kind of ritual, with its strong disciplinary character, produces "aptitudes" (Asad 1993) and automatisms in individuals that are necessary for the smooth progress of the latter. Students know how to behave during the sporadic short mission trips because they have regularly attended chapels and both rituals have many similarities. Music, dance, biblical stories and collective prayer, for instance, are central in both chapels and short mission trips. The messages visitors strive to convey to students during short mission trips also belong to the same register as those that teachers relay at chapels: they celebrate Jesus Christ's Love for humans (*manusia*), the fact that He sacrificed Himself for their redemption, the power of faith in God as a means to cope with the hardships of life, etc. The other way around, short mission trips break the monotony of chapels, which could potentially be harmful to the students' receptivity in the long run. Here, the distinctness of the two rituals is at play. Short mission trips differ from chapels in various ways: they

44 The show described in the prologue of this thesis can be considered as a magnified version of smaller shows that missionaries regularly put on in church schools.

45 The Sabah Evangelical Church is not the only church to organize this type of tour for foreign guests. Other Sabahan churches do it as well and often plan a few stops at tourist attractions along the way.

46 See picture, p. 120.

occur on an irregular, sometimes last-minute, basis; they involve outsiders who usually come only once and are never seen again; they are not repetitive, each mission trip follows a unique program; they always involve either games, sports or magic, in a joyful atmosphere with a lot of enthusiasm and good spirits among participants; they never lead to punishments or reprimands; during short mission trips visitors offer gifts to the students, whereas at the end of each chapel the latter are asked to make small donations in money. In that sense, chapels and short mission trip represent complementary forms of religious sociability.

But beyond similarities and differences, the interplay between both types of rituals strengthens their common effect on individuals. It grounds the "message of God" in a lived experience and thus makes it part of the real world. Students, for instance, who have been told about Jesus's deeds a thousand times at chapel, see it unfold before their eyes in the form of an enjoyable encounter with caring strangers (the visitors) during short mission trips. This way, the existence and strength of Jesus's love is not only affirmed but also proven. Religion cannot be perceived as an empty discourse; it imposes itself to participants as a pertinent explanation for something that really happens and affects their lives.

INDIVIDUALS' AGENCY

The effectiveness of chapels and short mission trips in imposing certain types of behaviors and shaping subjectivities should not be overestimated. However powerful these rituals may be, they do not fully determine the actions and thoughts of individuals (Giddens 1984), whose resources in terms of agency always allow them some form of freedom.

At the Love and Compassion Center, for instance, some of my older students looked – or pretended to look – quite bored during chapels. They clapped their hands apathetically, took ages to stand up or sit down and only moved their lips when it came to singing. They had to take part in these events, and so they did, but at the same time they knew one could hardly force them to be proactive and enthusiastic.

Another student, a Muslim boy, acted in a very recalcitrant way when asked to say the daily morning prayer. He once refused to do it, but his fellow students put pressure on him, or rather on me to force him, by yelling "He must!" (Dia mesti!). We all waited on the boy, who eventually delivered such a messy prayer it could only be intentional and even laughed after pronouncing the concluding "Amen". In the same situation, but on another occasion, the boy just fooled around, pretending he did not know how to give thanks – which is rather hard to believe given the thousands of prayers he had heard during the last three years. When he finally complied, it was with his hands on his face, in the way Muslims hold them, instead of clasped together in front of his chest, like Christians do.

"It's All About Jesus's Love"

The title of this section is taken from a promotional video presenting the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home to (potential) sponsors and supporters. It sums up what these schools are about according to the South-Korean missionaries and teachers involved in them. We have seen above the importance of the message of Jesus's love in rituals such as chapels and short mission trips, where it is both repeatedly stated, or professed, and experienced through social relations. But there are many more moments where individuals feel closer to Jesus/God by virtue of their everyday interactions with each other. Students and teachers at the Love & Compassion Centre, in particular, cultivate a close and caring relationship that is supposed to mirror "God's Love" for humans and prove its existence. Their mutual attachment, in spite of cultural and socio-economic differences as well as a general context largely hostile toward migrants, appears as a this-

worldly expression of the non-discriminating and all-encompassing love of the Christian God.

According to teachers, mutual love is the main aspect that distinguishes the Love & Compassion Centre from Malaysian government schools. At the Center, teachers regularly organize extracurricular activities with small groups of pupils. They take them to the movies, invite them to spend the weekend or to celebrate important events with their families, play football with them in their free time, or simply hang out and chat with them after class.⁴⁷ Physical contact between teachers and students, like walking arm in arm, hugging or holding hands, is common and not considered inappropriate.⁴⁸ All of the teachers have a "favorite student", of whom they speak often, with pride and pleasure. Some even pay this child's school fees as a "love gift". During my time at the Love & Compassion Centre, two students invited the teachers to their birthday parties and another one – a Muslim – to the wedding reception of her older sister. Students also regularly give small gifts or write "love letters" to their teachers.⁴⁹ As a result, the school office is full of gadgets, handwritten notes and self-made drawings. Students sometimes act on their own initiative, at other times they follow a teacher's suggestion to "be thankful" for what someone has done for them. In any case, the practice of giving gifts to others is very much encouraged and valued by teachers, who even organize gift-swapping sessions among students of each class. Gifts and letters are also seen as tokens of gratitude for teachers' efforts.

Other church schools for migrant children also focus on the relationship between teachers and students. Pdt. Simon, the Sabahan Pentecostal pastor mentioned above, for instance, stated his staff should always "stay as close to the children as possible", a method he refers to as "relational teaching". Within his school's walls like in the outside world, the goal of life is to "let your heart fill up with God's Love".

Love and Discipline

Mutual signs of affection at the Love & Compassion Centre counterbalance the authoritative relationship that is enforced during classes, in other words for the biggest part of the day. They allow for a more balanced relationship between both groups.

⁴⁷ See pictures, p. 118.

⁴⁸ One of my former colleagues even told me once: "If you feel tired, you can ask your students to massage your back. They like to do it and some of them are pretty good at it."

⁴⁹ See picture, p. 118.

Students, for instance, are subject to a strict discipline, both at the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home. They must abide by an important set of school rules, which are sometimes enforced severely by teachers. Physical punishment, in the form of strenuous "exercises" or, exceptionally, caning, happens. It is allowed by school rules and held for necessary by the teachers. "You cannot be too soft on them, otherwise they'll take advantage of you", argued one of my colleagues. But despite harsh treatments, students do not seem to feel fear or resentment. Teachers, on the other hand, often look like they are fed up with students' behavior and their "inability to concentrate and stay calm", but at the same time they claim to be unable to quit their job because they would miss their pupils too much.

A Mutually Beneficial Relationship

But the affectionate relationship between students and teachers has more important consequences for both groups. It gives meaning and value to teachers' work, which generally takes place in difficult conditions (long hours, low wages). Their efforts are not vain since they contribute to help people they care for and who know how to show their appreciation. Moreover, the close relationship with students provides teachers an opportunity to feel and be considered as good Christians, because they prove capable of loving even the underdogs. This came out very clearly on various occasions, when teachers compared themselves with Biblical figures who had sacrificed their wealth, social environment, etc., for the sake of helping underprivileged or desperate people. Teachers' love of "migrant children" differentiates them from the rest of Malaysians. It makes them morally better than others Christians, who, in comparison, appear not to live by the precepts of their religion, and better than Muslims too, who are thought not to show compassion for the fate of migrants or, at least, not to help them concretely.

For students, on the other hand, the intimate relationship with teachers creates a space of inclusion in (a section of) Malaysian society. Like their parents, these children live among themselves, often in secluded places. They share the same cautiousness, sometimes fear, as other migrants, sentiments that are linked to their often irregular status and the general attitude of Malaysians toward them. They only have little contact with Malaysians, except in the framework of professional relations, where they are always in a subordinate position and often ill-treated. The fact of studying at the Love & Compassion Centre or at the Shepherd's Home therefore represents a unique opportunity for these children to

interact with Malaysians (i.e. their teachers) on an everyday basis, without taking any risk. They can enter their world and feel welcome in it. For example, all students who have an internet connection and know how to use a computer or a smart phone are "friends" on Facebook with their teachers. Since the latter "post" a lot, students have access to a considerable part of their private life and can even link up with other Malaysians through that channel.

Creating Love

The loving relationship is far from being evident. On the contrary, it needs to be built and constantly sustained. In the following passages, ThenSong, one of the teachers recounts his first days at the Love & Compassion Centre:

At first, I didn't like the *kids*, because of their very low status. For me, they were like *maids*. But then I realized that they were not only *maids*. I started to love them the day a group came to the office to *hug* me and thank me for teaching them.⁵⁰

ThenSong: After my first day [of work at the Love & Compassion Centre] I want to quit. I'm so disgusted with these kids from Indonesia and Philippine, because they smell... strong... too different from me, like dirty. They like black and me white. I know that's racist. Now I'm ashamed. But kids show their love to me, they hug me, they don't care I belong to the race of... Yvan, how you say "*majikan*" [here in reference to the Chinese Malaysians, who own a lot of private businesses and hire migrants, since ThenSong claims to be Chinese]?

Yvan: Employers.

ThenSong: Employers. So I decide to be patient, I stay at Love and Compassion Center. Now I do my best to love them also.⁵¹

As these accounts reveal, ThenSong has had to fight against his prejudices and his initial feeling of repulsion – he could not bear the children's "smell" – in order to be able to "love" them. It was not an easy task and the change did not happen overnight, but ThenSong eventually became very fond of his students and inversely, they of him.

The South-Korean Pentecostal missionary Paul and his wife Dorothy insist a lot on the necessity to love students. In the days following the start of the school year at the Love & Compassion Centre, Paul organized a "teachers' retreat" and held a speech in which he

⁵⁰ Excerpt from an interview, translated from Malay except for words in italics.

⁵¹ Untranslated excerpt from an improvised live presentation of the Love & Compassion Centre to American "visitors".

declared that "the most important thing for us is to love these children". During this meeting he also said that I had already "fallen in love" (*jatuh cinta*) with students, whereas I had just arrived in Sabah and did not yet feel any attachment whatsoever to these children. My first encounter with them rather took me aback because they remained very shy and passive. But the real nature of my feelings did not matter much to Paul, who was clearly seeking to influence them by indicating, right from the start, the direction in which my relationship to the students ought to evolve.

While Paul ensures that teachers become attached to students, teachers themselves see to it that students develop a liking for them. For instance, they sometimes organize popularity competitions during chapels, in which students have to yell in order to support "their favorite teacher" (the one that gets the loudest noise wins). Teachers also regularly stress their own devotion and tell students they should "be grateful" (*bersyukur*, which also means "to thank God") for what is done for them and "love back [the people] who give them so much". Two weeks before leaving Sabah, I myself – quite unintentionally – caused my popularity quote to soar and became the students' "favorite teacher". This occurred after I took three classes of the Love & Compassion Centre bowling, as a kind of farewell party. None of the almost eighty students who participated in the trip had ever set foot in a bowling hall prior to that day, so they spent two hours there in an ecstatic state. Reaching fame among a group of children was not my goal, but by organizing this activity I definitely increased the students' liking in me, and thus unconsciously complied to the injunction of developing a privileged relationship with them. In the following days, an avalanche of thanks broke out from the students, which, indeed, made them more dear to me, and me more proud of myself as a teacher, but also overwhelmed me.

In order to bring students to like them and appreciate their work, teachers sometimes resort to methods resembling psychological manipulation. An important event, in that regard, was last year's two-days "Supervisor Leadership Camp" (*Kem Kemimpinan Pengawas*). The camp takes place each year in both the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home and is organized with the aim of disciplining a special category of students, called "supervisors" or "monitors" (*pengawas*), who have the task of supervising their peers. In the course of the camp, teachers stage what they call a "healing".⁵² The description given below relates to the healing that took place at the Love & Compassion

⁵² Since the healing takes place every year, and each student becomes a *pengawas* at some point during their school career, all of them go through it at least once.

Center during the 2011 edition of the *Kem*. It shows how this school uses students' emotions to strengthen their relationship with teachers.

The "MC" (master of ceremony, in this case a female teacher) began by preaching at the *pengawas*. She then isolated a few of them, placed them in a line and detailed, at length and in front of everyone else, each person's wrongdoings and the trouble she/he had caused. Some of the children started to cry. She then constituted a second group of *pengawas*, lectured them and accused them of being "lazy" (*malas*) and of not having done their job dutifully during the last year. She declared that the students had not been sufficiently grateful to the teachers, who "sacrifice" (*berkorban*) themselves for them, nor to the school cook, who feeds them everyday and loves them. This harangue made the students very sensitive and gave them bad conscience: heads bowed and eyes became glassy. Suddenly, the teacher declared that she and her colleagues were ready to forgive the students, because they "love[d] them in spite of everything". The other teachers then brought buckets filled with water, towels and six chairs into the room. The MC told students to sit on the chairs and the teachers, including me, started to wash their feet.

I was assigned a thirteen year old boy, who was already shedding tears when he sat down. He first refused to let me touch his feet: each time I tried to grab his leg in order to plunge his feet into the bucket he pushed my hand away. After a while, he stopped resisting. But as soon as I was done washing one of his feet, he took it out of the water and opposed the same resistance for the other. This boy's back was bent and he held his face in his hands. He was crying non-stop and I heard him utter several weak "No!". The other students were watching and weeping while waiting for their turn. Those who had not yet burst out crying did so when a teacher grabbed their feet. Next to me, one of my colleagues started to cry too. After their foot bath, many students thrust themselves in the teachers' arms, squeezed them tightly and asked them for forgiveness.

Later, the MC told everyone to switch roles. A dozen students obediently queued in front of each teacher and took turns in washing her/his feet. Some of them did so relentlessly: they would not let go of the feet and insisted on scrubbing every inch and wiping every drop. Others looked less enthusiastic. But all students were determined to do the job carefully. When the MC allowed them to stop, they went to teachers whose feet they had not had time to wash, embraced them, apologized (*minta maaf*), and even begged them for forgiveness. Finally the MC ordered all students to stand in line and she hugged them one after the other, which triggered another outburst of sobs. The "healing" ended with a collective prayer, led by another teacher.

While we were all walking to the school canteen to receive a light meal, a girl student took me by the hand and smiled at me, much to my surprise. After what had happened, I would have expected students to avoid contact with teachers. But the exact opposite happened: both groups

were interacting a lot and enjoying it. Everyone chatted with everyone else in a cheerful way, some were even laughing. The dramatic tension of the healing had vanished without a trace and teachers and students now acted like the best friends on earth.⁵³

This passage highlights the way the healing works. Students are first made to feel guilty and, then, given what they long for, namely forgiveness. They are subsequently put in an inverted hierarchical position, above the teachers, who are physically placed below them and touch a part of their body considered unclean (i.e. their feet), something they experience as embarrassing, even shameful. When allowed to reinvert the hierarchy (by taking over the washers' role), students carry out their task with great zeal, because it allows them to get rid of these burdensome feelings. In short, the healing's mechanism is twofold: it induces negative emotions in children only to make room for positive ones, which therefore appear to them as liberating.

As the name "healing" suggests, teachers see this ritual as a curative process that sets things right with regard to students' inclinations. What happened in the school canteen after the healing proper, when teachers and students became very close to each other, somehow proves them right. The healing clearly relies on emotional manipulation. At first, it appeared to me as a somewhat cruel ritual, since it brings children to tears. But teachers do not seem to consider this kind of technique as potentially harmful to students. On the contrary, they are convinced that their action serves the students' own good. In teachers' view, the fact that students cry during the healing has to do with the painful process of confessing one's sins, of becoming aware of God's love, and of feeling it inside oneself and accepting it, rather than with psychological coercion. It is the sign of a salutary second birth.⁵⁴ This explains why teachers look forward to the healing and are proud of it. My colleague ThenSong, for instance, announced to me a few days before the *Kem* that "[the students were] gonna cry".⁵⁵

From a symbolic point of view, the healing stands for pure love. It reenacts a biblical scene following the Last Supper, when Jesus Christ washes the feet of His apostles and

53 This description is a reworked excerpt from my fieldnotes. See pictures, p. 119-120.

54 Spiritual rebirth is one of the key features of Evangelical Christianity, whose followers typically claim to have been "born again".

55 Two teachers, one working at the Love & Compassion Centre, the other at the Shepherd's Home, referred to techniques like the healing as "brainwashing". It would have been interesting to further inquire into the emic use of this term. Does it indicate that teachers are conscious of the manipulative and indoctrinating character of their techniques or do they consider "brainwashing", like feet-washing, as a form of purification? Unfortunately, my data does not allow me to answer that question.

gives them the commandment "to love one another as I have loved you".⁵⁶ Jesus's gesture is considered as the paragon of love in Christian theology. Thus, similarly, when teachers and students of the Love & Compassion Centre wash each other's feet during the healing they supposedly express their mutual affection in the most powerful possible way for humans. Christ's commandment further establishes an equivalence between human and godly love, which, transposed to the healing and to the "love"-relationship in general, implies that teachers and students commune with God when communing with each other.

At times, I was struck by the artificiality of the love-relationship. Teachers' and students' behavior seemed insincere, too rehearsed to be true. Shortly before I left Sabah, for instance, students I did not know well pretended to be very affected by my departure and refused to let me leave. It surprised me, because I had taught their class only once a week and personally did not feel particularly close to them. But I was even more taken aback later, when three boys of that class visited me at my apartment late at night, a few hours before my flight, and told me they were already missing me so much that they had to see me one last time and insisted on hugging me repeatedly. Their behavior seemed exaggerate – even in view of the fact that to display sadness and express regrets when taking leave of someone is considered polite in Sabah. I did not understand how they possibly could feel so attached to me and thus suspected the teacher who had accompanied them by car to have set up the meeting.

To summarize, teachers and students at the Love & Compassion Center enjoy a caring relationship, allegedly based on Christian "love". It implies strong social ties and a mutual attachment, which, at times, need to be built from scratch, and/or kicked off by an external agent, and always have to be nurtured, developed, if needed by the manipulation of individuals' emotional states. This relationship also entails mutual obligations: one of generosity, for teachers, and one of gratefulness, for students, basically. But the benefits justify the cost, or so it seems to me, for it is thanks to this relationship that students have a privileged access to Malaysian society and teachers an opportunity to prove their moral quality as Christians.

Creating a Sense of Community

Combined, teacher-student love-relationships and rituals like chapels and short mission trips contribute to producing in students a sense of belonging to the community of

⁵⁶ New Testament, Gospel of John 15:12

Christians in general. They bind students to their teachers, who are mostly Christians from Sabah, sometimes Christians from abroad, and to other Christians worldwide. Thus, by studying at the Love & Compassion Center or the Shepherd's Home, children of migrant workers – irrespective of their actual religious belonging – enter Christianity and take part in it.

The way this happens, namely through unforgettable events and powerful feelings, reveals the great influence of Pentecostal-charismatic (P-c) Christianity in these two schools. Indeed, many authors highlight P-c Christianity's character as an "experience-centered" religion (Lindhardt 2011:8), with a strong "focus on emotions" (Willaime 1999).

Conclusion

This chapter highlights a number of aspects of the schooling systems set up by three Sabahan church schools. As we have seen, the emphasis put on religion differs from one school to the other. Light of Hope does not promote religion openly. It focuses on literacy in order to "give a chance to these children". The Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home, on the other hand, insist on religion by teaching the Bible, regularly organizing religious rituals and shaping interindividual relations according to a Christian model of "love". Evangelism plays an important role in all these schools but what is meant by this word in practice varies a lot from one school to the other. The conversion of Muslim students, in particular, represents a major aim for some social actors, whereas others seem to make no efforts in this direction – which does not mean, however, that they would not welcome conversions, should the occasion arise.

Church schools for the children of migrant workers can be considered as a means for Christian organizations active in Sabah to reach migrants in general and draw them to Christianity and/or their denomination. What makes these schools particularly attractive – apart from the kind of service they provide (education), which migrants have difficulties in obtaining – is the fact that they create a welcoming space, allegedly infused with "love" and "hope", which stands in stark contrast with restrictive immigration policies, stigmatizing public discourses on migrant workers and widespread hostility toward them. Church schools thus appear as a remedy to the exclusion of these people from Malaysian society.

But, at the same time, church schools depend on the exclusion of migrant workers and their children. Without it, these educational projects would make no sense anymore,

because they would cease to be attractive as ways out of social isolation. As a result, Christian organizations running them would also lose interest. Pdt. Laurence once admitted that, "should the government schools reaccept migrant children, we would close our schools". In my opinion, he was not so much considering the important loss of students that could result from such a reversal of policy as a radical change of situation that would automatically make these schools superfluous for the Sabah Evangelical Church. It should therefore come as no surprise that Christian organizations active in Sabah have almost no activities in terms of advocacy for migrants' rights. It just does not correspond to their interests, for they need migrant workers and their children as they are at present, i.e. discriminated, excluded of Malaysian society at large. Only then can the integrative "message of God" find attentive ears.

Until now, we have looked at Sabahan church schools with a main focus on the education they provide to students. But schools, in general, do not only train children, they also bring adults together, who work in them, manage them, sponsor them, etc. Whether or not these adults interact with children, they also have a world of their own. In the next chapter, I therefore look at another dimension of church schools, that of workplace for staff. Among other aspects, I address employees', volunteers' and managers' representations of their work, the conditions in which this work takes place and the sources from which they draw their motivation.

"DOING GOD'S WORK"

All organizations give meaning to their action through the use of a certain rhetoric. Church schools, for instance, present themselves as created by God and serving His will. They insist on their divine character of their foundation and action, which differentiates them from other schools. This rhetoric has effects on people; it induces certain types of representations, values and practices, as this chapter makes clear. Church schools' rhetoric is analyzed here with a focus on its effects on staff. I look at how it is passed on to employees, and used as a mechanism of control, but also reappropriated by them for their own benefit.¹

God as Initiating and Driving Force

The existence of Sabahan church schools for children of migrant workers is often considered to be of divine origin. God appears as the initiator of the whole endeavor. He is the one who demands that something be done – even though humans often act as His messengers. Good Christians are supposed to hear His call and answer it by finding a solution. "We need to respond to God and help in the welfare of these children", says the 2011 half-year report of a church school affiliated with a major Christian denomination. Susanna, a member of the same denomination, claims that she initially had no intention of opening Light of Hope, but God left her no choice. He gave her a "clear sign" by sending a migrant mother, whose sadness broke her heart. From that point on, it was obvious for Susanna that she had to act.

In many schools, especially those under Pentecostal-charismatic influence, God is not only seen as the initiating but also as the driving force. He supports these schools and ensures that everything runs smoothly. For Paul, God is a constant support, He is behind every positive event, every success – but failures and obstacles are generally deemed of human origin. During the "teachers' retreat" that took place at the Love & Compassion Centre, Paul told an illustrative anecdote. He had gone to the bank on a Friday afternoon

¹ It would have been interesting as well to trace back the origins of this rhetoric and determine what people influencing staff are themselves influenced by, or inquire into its effects on donors or outsiders. But my data is too thin on these aspects.

to ask for an urgent loan which would allow him to buy new land for the school and, because he had arrived only a couple of minutes before the closing time, security agents forbade him to enter the building. Paul was about to leave disappointed when someone suddenly called him from inside the bank and told the agents to let him in. It was the deputy director himself, who granted him the loan at once. The way Paul told this story made it appear as highly unlikely. He strived to convey his amazement at the last-minute turnaround of the situation, which, according to him, had nothing to do with good luck or coincidence. It was rather a miracle. God had intervened, once again, since "He brings the right people at the right time".

The collaboration with God must be sustained by regular and devout praying. "Pray to God, two times a day", said Mark to teachers of the Shepherd's Home at their half-year meeting. Prayer is considered an effective, if not the most effective, way to get things done. At the Shepherd's Home and the Love & Compassion Centre, weekly reports include a section called "pray request" (*sic*) or *bahan doa* ("things to pray for"), which teachers tend to fill in with important things, that they may have previously tried and failed to achieve on their own. Paul mentions prayer as his main method for raising funds to cover the Love & Compassion Centre's costs, which amount to a monthly sum of 30,000 MYR (10,000 CHF). He claims that he never had to do much fundraising. "I just pray and God gives", he explains. But prayers sometimes prove insufficient: Paul asked me at some point to help him get funding from multinational companies like Samsung, Toyota and Bill Gates/Microsoft. "They have a lot of money but they don't know where to give", he argued.²

In some church schools, divine intervention takes precedence over human action. At the Shepherd's Home, South-Korean missionary Kim insists that "our work is not the work of humans [*manusia*], it is the work of God" and teachers agree. The same discourse has been described by Stambach (2009:58) and Erica Bornstein (2005:51) in their respective studies on non-denominational Christian missionaries and evangelists in East Africa and transnational protestant NGOs in Zimbabwe. Both anthropologists interviewed people who consider themselves to be doing "God's work".

² When asked whether he intended to mention the Love & Compassion Centre as a faith-based organization, Paul said he would think about it. He eventually suggested that we make two separate applications, one mentioning it, the other not.

UNNAMEABLE MONEY

Terms that evoke money too clearly are often banned from the vocabulary used in church schools for children of migrant workers. At the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home, for instance, teachers' salaries are referred to as "love gifts" and funds provided by donors as "gifts", "support", "offerings", or simply "generosity". Similarly, school fees paid by parents in two other church schools become "offerings to God" and "commitment".

I became particularly aware of the need to resort to metaphorical terms and expressions for financial matters after the fundraising concert described at the beginning of this thesis. At that time, Paul thanked me for my role as "MC" and said I had done a great job, but added straight away that money should not be mentioned the way I did, i.e. by pronouncing the word "money". With visible unease, he suggested a few acceptable synonyms.

The coded vocabulary used to refer to money in Sabahan church schools extends to the wider context of Christian communities in Sabah, and even seems to be fit for use with communities abroad. In videos promoting the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home to actual and potential donors (many of whom live in South-Korea) there is not a single explicit reference to these schools' financial needs and spendings. These are made clear in an implicit way, by showing images of children's poor living conditions and recent school developments. Viewers are explicitly asked to "pray" for the schools, but the incentive to donate must be inferred from sentences like: "Join us in God's new vision for these children."

"Teaching Is Not a Job"

In several church schools I have studied, employees are represented as unique people and their activity as nobler than "work". According to Paul, teachers of the Love & Compassion Centre are "extraordinary" (*luar biasa*) and should feel that way. Teachers themselves consider that they are "the chosen ones", whom God has trusted with the fulfillment of His will. Their "mission" (*misi*) implies a great "responsibility" (*tanggungjawab*), which may be hard to assume, but at the same time provides them with an opportunity to prove their virtue as good Christians. Paul regularly pushes teachers to "sacrifice" (*berkorban*) and tells them that God will repay their efforts in the future. At the

Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home, teaching is not considered as "work" (*kerja*). Teachers rarely speak of their activities in terms of work, even though they have signed a contract, are occupied full time and receive a monthly salary. As one of them put it: "Teaching is not a job, it's a service." They are convinced of obeying God by attending to humans and use the same verb (*melayani*, "to serve") for both. Tellingly, the Love & Compassion Centre teachers have called the webpage they use to communicate on their work "Everything I Am for Your Kingdom's Cause". Teachers see themselves, and are seen by others, as "volunteers" (*sukarela*), which emphasizes their devotion and selflessness, and masks the fact that they are also, simply, employees.

The organizational rhetoric described here is not exclusive to church schools. It can be found in a similar form in other Sabahan schools for children of migrant workers, where employees are also portrayed as dedicated "volunteers" solely interested in the well-being of others. In fact, this portrayal seems to be recurrent in organizations involved with development and the "grassroots", even in those that are not faith-based. In an article on NGO workers in Bangladesh, Malin Arvidson (2009) writes that:

"The staff refer to themselves as 'professional volunteers'. [...] The label 'volunteer' signals a type of commitment that is special for this workforce, which incorporates solidarity with the poor and personal moral standing. They are ready to offer something for free (or for less than what they could get in other jobs) for the benefit of others, putting their own personal interests aside. Choosing to work for an NGO is like a vocation, a call, a commitment, to put the welfare of many before personal comfort and security." (Arvidson 2009:224)

Staff Motivation

Drawing from Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott's concept of "identity regulation" (2001),³ Arvidson argues that organizational rhetoric has an important impact on employees' values and concrete actions.

"In the process of defining the staff and defining others, and in the specific vocabulary used by the NGOs, certain morals and values are emphasised - solidarity, commitment, honesty - which continuously guide the employee towards an ideal that involves both personal values and professional behaviour." (Arvidsson 2009:224)

³ Alvesson and Willmott (2001:24) use the concept of "identity regulation" as an "analytical device intended to bring some degree of clarity to complex and pervasive processes of organisational control".

At the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home, organizational rhetoric guides employees toward the ideal of being devoted instruments of God's will. The belief that they are contributing to a great, since divine, enterprise gives them a rewarding image of themselves as well as the strength and motivation necessary to face often difficult working conditions: a heavy work burden, constant availability, low salaries, limited facilities, etc. Their efforts cannot be unavailing, even when positive results are long to show up, because they answer God's call anyway. The conviction of being instrumental to God's plans also helps teachers to better function as a team, because it fosters mutual help and keeps interpersonal disagreements and conflicts at bay, or minimizes their effects, by placing them on the background of something much more important: the "mission".⁴ Accordingly, teachers refer to each other as "friend" and to their group as a "family". Bornstein has observed a very similar reality while studying protestant NGOs in Zimbabwe:

For many employees of Christian Care and World Vision, faith was a motivating force and a force that brought people together. [...] In Harare offices, faith provided a work environment that many compared to a caring family. (Bornstein 2005:65)

Staff Control

As Bornstein rightly notes, the organizational rhetoric – here encapsulated in the word "faith" – also allows for control over staff:

At the same time [...] faith was a disciplinary force used to monitor employee performance. [...] Faith was used in development as [...] a controlling discourse of institutional power [...] (Bornstein 2005:65)

Because they are supposedly recipients of a divine mission, employees of the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home can hardly complain to their superiors about their harsh working conditions or refuse to accomplish a certain task. It would automatically give the impression that they are unworthy of God's trust, not up to His great task. Paul uses and abuses the so-called willingness of teachers to "sacrifice" in order to boost their performance and silence potential demands which would not tally with his

4 Carol Greenhouse (1989) makes the same argument in her work on a Southern Baptist community in the United States. The American anthropologist claims that conflicts or potential conflicts are overcome or avoided entirely by invoking religious doctrine.

interests. As a result, his authority is impressive: he can ask for just about anything and faces little resistance or opposition. Similarly, Pdt. Simon says of him and his staff: "We do not complain because we love [the children]." This may very well be true, but coming from a hierarchical superior, such a statement certainly does not leave much room for potential complaints on the part of employees to emerge.

Presenting both church schools as "God's work" and teachers as God's agents has a considerable disempowering effect. It makes comparison with other schools unthinkable or indefensible – I am thinking here mostly of the public education system, where working and studying conditions are deemed better. Potential claims based on this comparison, whether on the part of teachers, parents, students or any other people involved, are both unlikely to emerge and, if they do, easy to reject. When asked explicitly in interviews to compare their working conditions with those prevailing in government schools, some of my colleagues at the Love & Compassion Center and the Shepherd's Home expressed envy at the higher salaries and lighter workload and dissatisfaction with their own, but, as far as I know, they did not raise the issue on their own with the Koreans.

Limits To Organizational Control

There are limits to the control a given organization can exercise on its staff and members. Sometimes individual interests are not compatible with those of the organization and employees may choose to give priority to the first at the expense of the latter. Teachers of the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home may be devoted "servants of God" but they are also young people who have just started their professional careers and try to make the most out of their lives. With one exception, none of them has the intention to spend much time in these schools. For them, working there is only a temporary solution. They took a position as teacher either because of a lack of other opportunity or because they needed time and money to realize other plans in the future – which are not necessarily linked to teaching or doing social work with the Sabah Evangelical Church.

The turnover is high at the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home: one to two people on average quit each year, while teams are made up of only four to seven people. Of the first three employees hired by the Love & Compassion Centre in 2006, none is still working in the organization. Hence, teaching in these schools may be a "mission", but it is rarely a long-term one. In December 2011, one of my former colleagues, ThenSong,

decided to quit the Love & Compassion Centre. In a conversation, a couple of months earlier, he had complained about working too much, not having time for himself, and accused Paul and Dorothy of having too many demands. Although I do not know what exact reasons led ThenSong to leave the organization, I suspect that he had had enough of the working conditions at the Love & Compassion Centre. To my knowledge, he did not try to negotiate these conditions with the South-Koreans or Pdt. Laurence but decided to resign at once. He now owns a stall as a self-employed cook in a shopping mall, an occupation that brings him closer to his dream of becoming a "chef" one day. But ThenSong keeps contact with staff and students of the Love & Compassion Centre through Facebook and regularly posts notes saying that he "misses" (*rindu*) them and pictures of them he took while still working for the school. Like ThenSong, other teachers of the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home have problems collaborating with the South-Koreans. One of them explained to me that Paul and Dorothy "want everything and want it right away, that's the problem".

One Rhetoric Fits All

When we look at the rhetoric described above (with regard to the Love & Compassion Centre, the Shepherd's Home and other church schools in Sabah) in a comparative perspective, it appears as exclusive neither to that part of the world nor to Christian organizations. In a paper on the "Islamic ethic of education" advocated by Turkish Muslim scholar Fethullah Gülen and infused into his schools worldwide, Bekim Agai writes:

teaching in this context becomes a holy duty, and the teacher is a blessed person [...] Because Gülen ascribes very Islamic attributes to the teacher, being a dedicated teacher becomes a kind of religious merit and a way to ensure the salvation of the individual in a religious sense. This double justification becomes a strong motive for teachers to choose their profession [...] Teachers do their work with devotion even under very unfavorable circumstances, because they perceive it as a duty to God. (Agai 2002:37-40)

The "ethic" applying to teachers in schools of the transnational "Gülen Movement" seems to be very similar to that of Sabahan church schools. In particular, teaching as a "duty to God", which allows one to become a better Muslim or Christian, is a feature common to both types of organizations. The resemblance hints at common justification mechanisms, across faiths and regions, that make work a religious act (Agai 2002:39).

"Fellowships": Social Ties and Control

So-called "fellowships", one of the most important and structuring moments in teachers' daily life at the Love & Compassion Centre,⁵ are another important site to study the workings of organizational control. Fellowships are a kind of ritual held once a week in the evening for about two hours. Typically, all residents of the teachers' quarters (i.e. teachers, South-Korean and American missionaries, and myself, at the time I lived there) get together in a big room, sit in a circle, sing Christian songs, read a passage of the Bible and then pray.

Fellowships strengthen social ties and contribute to create a real community out of a cluster of people living together. They are moments of reunion, where everyone takes time off to meet and communicate with the others. Through fellowships, residents of the teachers' quarters get to know each other well, intimately, which brings them together, makes them "friends", as they like to call themselves.

The Pressure to "Share"

After having read the passage of the Bible, each participant is supposed to react to it by giving her/his own interpretation and saying what it evokes to her/him. Most of the time, participants use this opportunity to talk about what they have on their minds and in their hearts, and find attentive ears among their colleagues and housemates. Everyone is encouraged – sometimes even pushed – to open up to others; "share" (*berkongsi*) is the watchword.⁶

On the one hand, the act of "sharing" has a cathartic function. It allows individuals to let out thoughts and feelings, or simply information, that hitherto burdened them. In general, participants talk about personal problems and worries, both private and professional, or mention a negative event that has affected them and their family. They get moral support from the others, who ask questions, provide comments, advice, and comforting words, and show compassion. "Sharing" therefore works as a mechanism of relief for individuals and plays an important role in the well-being of teachers working at

5 Staff at the Shepherd's Home also organize fellowships but I have not been able to take part in them due to my working schedule. I do not know whether staff of other church schools also take part in similar rituals.

6 Writing about a similar type of gatherings taking place within the missionary network YWAM, Yannick Fer (2010) notes that: "Le Biblical Counseling puise une partie de ses ressources dans cet 'air du temps' fait de psychologie élémentaire et d'une compréhension relationnelle du bonheur: tout problème se résout en rétablissant de 'bonnes relations' (avec Dieu, avec ses parents, sa famille ou avec soi-même) et en apprenant à mieux communiquer." (73)

the Love & Compassion Centre, given the demanding environment they work in.⁷

On the other hand, fellowships produce social control, because the incentive to "share" is also a pressure to make confessions, admit weaknesses, misbehaviors or negative attitudes, or simply acknowledge thoughts and feelings that deviate from the norm. Social control, as rooted in fellowships, is not necessarily experienced negatively by participants. Generally, they seem to be looking for redemption and eagerly proceed to their self-critique. Some spontaneously make commitments to adjust their behavior to expectations: one teacher pledged never to leave the school, even after her marriage and the birth of her first child; another one promised to wake up earlier every morning and not to let herself be lazy again; and a third one confessed that he had difficulties in getting along with several Muslim students but guaranteed that he would "do [his] best to love them" nonetheless. Usually, a cheerful atmosphere follows these evening rituals and participants joke on the way to their beds, which shows that they do not feel the least embarrassed by their confessions. It also happens, though, that some participants hesitate before exposing themselves to others. They remain silent, pretend not to have anything to say in particular. But their "friends" then typically ask them insistently "Are you sure you don't have anything to share?" and they eventually give in, having no other option.

Binding People Through Exchange

Fellowships build a community through "sharing", but they also have another way of binding people together, namely by creating mutual obligations. Toward the end of a fellowship, each participant makes a list of "prayer requests", communicates it to the others, who then relay it while addressing God directly. They all intercede for each other, in a way, but each person remains free to decide what others should ask on her behalf. Beyond expressions of solidarity, these collective prayers are an exchange of reciprocal services, that nurtures and reaffirms the community. Marcel Mauss (2007) suggests that exchange is omnipresent in social life and responsible for the cohesion of groups of humans. Applying his insight on exchange to fellowships at the Love & Compassion Center, I have realized that the obligation to pray for each other creates one-to-one links between every single participant and all the others, because prayers have to be proportionately comparable. Among my many blunders, I regularly made insufficient or insignificant requests – not out of reluctance but rather lack of personal problems and imagination –

⁷ For a description of working conditions at the Love & Compassion Center and the Shepherd's Home, see p. 50 and 54 respectively.

which made everyone feel visibly uncomfortable. By doing so, I was asking for too little from them, in comparison to what I was giving (namely help to heal a beloved brother, to succeed in an important exam, to buy a new car, etc.).

Conclusion

Church schools for children of migrant workers have several functions. As this chapter shows, these organizations not only train children, but also give adults an opportunity to live their faith. Teachers demonstrate and increase their moral value as Christians through their daily actions in the "service" of children. The same holds true for missionaries, who are convinced of participating in "God's mission" by running and supporting church schools. In this sense, discourses on the divine character of church schools and the activity of teaching provide individuals with meaning and motivation.

At the same time, these discourses produce social control. They make certain types of behaviors desirable, others not. At the Love & Compassion Center, Paul, the school's informal manager, uses such discourses to discipline teachers and push them to surpass themselves in their work. Following Michel Foucault and his theory of power as having both a productive and a repressive dimension, I suggest considering these two aspects of church schools' rhetoric as two sides of the same coin. The rhetoric of "doing God's work", as "form of knowledge", both enables and regulates individual action.

Because they often bring together Christians of various origins and affiliations, who have been socialized in very different religious, cultural and political environments, church schools are also sites of negotiation of Christian identity. A charismatic Presbyterian from South-Korea certainly has a different notion of what it means to be a Christian than a Malaysian Anglican. But these people meet and collaborate in church schools, where they must find common ground if their action is to be successful. Their encounter both creates the ecumenical notion of a worldwide Christian community and proves its validity. At the same time, though, church schools are traversed by power relations, with some actor striving to make their understanding of Christianity dominant over that of others.

EDUCATION AS SALVATION

Conceptions and representations of education form the subject of this last chapter. From an emic perspective focusing on the staff, founders, and supporters of Sabahan church schools for children of migrant workers, I analyze widespread discourses on, and images related to, education circulating in these organizations. To sum up a complex reality in a few words, Sabahan Christians view the education of migrants' children as a way to these children's salvation: it rescues them from material misery and simultaneously puts them on the right moral path.

In order to be coherent, this conception requires the parallel construction of migrants as craving for, and needing, education. Parents are depicted as education seekers, so to say, and as people asking for help, while their children allegedly "dream" of the "other future" schooling alone can offer them. Without such representations, the salvational character of education, and hence the mission of church schools, would make no sense. There is, simply, no one to save if people are not in a terrible situation or if they do not ask for help.

The different virtues attributed to "salvational" education in church schools derive from the same logic, which insists on the necessity to produce a "change of mentality" in students. Neoliberalism informs the way this change is envisaged and promoted, which, I argue, contributes to masking the unequal treatment of non-citizens in Malaysia.

Representations of Migrant Parents' Expectations

To begin with, we should analyze how migrant parents' expectations in terms of education are represented in church schools. We have seen in the chapter "Schooling in Church Schools"¹ that three schools (the Love & Compassion Centre, the Shepherd's Home and Light of Hope) present migrant parents' request as the triggering factor for their foundation. According to these schools' histories, pastors were approached by members of the migrant community, who asked for help in solving one of their problems, namely the absence of schooling opportunities for their offspring. So the impetus allegedly came from

¹ P. 49

the parents and not from the pastors, who only reacted to it.² In these accounts of the birth of an organization, migrant parents are portrayed as "desperate", filled with "sadness", and even "begging" for the opening of a school, whereas school founders are given an aura of empathy, altruism and disinterest. Such views are regularly expressed in the church schools I have studied. At the Love & Compassion Centre, for instance, one of my colleagues told me that "parents are ready to do anything in order that their children receive an education".

This type of discourse is not unique to Sabahan church schools. Development interventions in general, whether faith-based or not, are often conceived as answering a request originally formulated by the "recipient" population and as satisfying this population's "needs".³ There is definitely some truth to this way of seeing things. In Sabah, at least, it does reflect certain aspects of reality. Many migrant parents, for instance, explicitly want their children to enroll in school and get basic teaching – I have heard them say so myself. Moreover, parents who have children attending school allocate a considerable part of their salaries to the resulting expenses, which proves their dedication to schooling.⁴ However, not all migrant workers seem to regard it as primordial. A report on schooling opportunities for Indonesian children in Sabah indicates, for instance, that "many parents still don't understand the importance of schooling". According to this document, Indonesian parents' lack of interest in schooling is one of the main reasons why a considerable number of children are still out-of-school in Sabah.⁵ Similarly, according to teachers of the Love & Compassion Centre, children are sometimes taken out of school by their parents as soon as they have acquired basic literacy skills, which suggests that some migrant parents are only interested in schooling up to a certain point, beyond which additional skills are deemed unnecessary. These accounts seriously challenge the

2 The foundation of these schools also appears as the work of God, but one thing does not exclude the other. See chapter "Doing God's Work", p. 84.

3 With respect to the sector of education, Lange (2003:156ff.) notes, however, that emic representations of school and education, among which those of the students' parents, have not been taken into account by experts during international conferences on education (Jomtien in 1990; Dakar in 2000), although they are, according to her, a decisive factor in the success of the "Education for All" policy.

4 School fees are generally kept low, between 10 and 45 MYR (3-15 CHF), but transport fees can easily reach 80 MYR (27 CHF) per month if the family lives far away from the school. Since many migrant families include four to six children and live on a single salary of 400-1000 MYR, the education budget of the family is often the biggest one.

5 "*Selain itu, sikap para orang tua yang kurang menyadari arti penting dan manfaat pendidikan bagi anak-anaknya juga sering menjadi kendala.*" Source: "Pelayanan Pendidikan Untuk Anak-Anak WNI Di Sabah, Malaysia" from the *Konsulat Jenderal Republik Indonesia* in Kota Kinabalu, available online at <http://www.deplu.go.id/kotakinabalu/Pages/InformationSheet.aspx?IDP=1&l=id> (last consulted 22.06.2012)

widespread representation, in church schools, of migrant parents as having the highest expectations for their children in terms of education.

There is also strong evidence that parents' expectations depend on the context. The principal and teacher of a PKBM told me that Indonesian parents living in her area were only interested in literacy at first, but as soon as the Indonesian consulate opened a secondary school in Kota Kinabalu, their expectations grew and they expressed, for the first time, a desire for longer and more complete studies. Some of them even began to talk about sending their children to university. French socio-anthropologist of development Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1995:74) has an interesting way of explaining this phenomenon. For him, it is offer that creates "demand" and not the other way around. Analyzing the identification of "needs", a procedure that precedes many development interventions, he warns that:

La conception selon laquelle il y aurait des besoins objectifs, communs à toute une population [...] qu'il suffirait donc d'"écouter" ou de "recueillir", cette conception-là est erronée. [...] Les villageois [...] expriment des "besoins" ou des "demandes" qui sont largement déterminés par ce qu'ils pensent que [les] experts, cadres ou consultants sont prêts à leur offrir. L'identification des besoins n'est dès lors plus qu'une procédure faisant légitimer [...] les projets que les opérateurs du développement avaient de toute façon plus ou moins dans leurs cartons sous forme d'"offres". (Olivier de Sardan 1995:74)

In Sabah, this is also true, albeit only to a certain extent. The opening of special schools for children of migrant workers – among them church schools – might have stimulated migrant parents' interest in schooling but it certainly has not created it completely. Sabah's migrant workers come from countries in which enrollment rates at primary level are relatively high (approximately 95% in 2005 for both Indonesia and the Philippines according to the UNESCO).⁶ For them, and especially for the younger ones, going to school is therefore a normal part of childhood, unlike in some other parts of the world, where it is the exception rather than the rule.

But instead of seeking to determine whether migrant parents' interests and needs have been decisive in the opening of church schools in Sabah, it is more interesting to ask ourselves why, in the discourse of Christian organizations, migrant parents' "demand" for education services are given predominance over these organizations' readiness to supply

6 Source: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001572/157274e.pdf> (last consulted 03.07.2012)

such services. The question addresses the general issue of development aid's intrusiveness and the methods used to conceal it. In the case of Christian organizations, putting forward migrants' desire for education simultaneously hides the non-altruistic motives of these organizations and the less legitimate part of their agenda, which is necessary in order to make them appear as genuine products of pure, disinterested Christian charity. We shall see below that it is also a prerequisite for the salvation of their children through education.

The Construction of "Migrant Children" as a Social Category

Incomplete Human Beings

Accompanying the figure of the education-craving parent is that of the education-needing child. In church schools, "migrant children" are envisaged above all through their lacks and deficiencies.⁷ As a recipient population, they are depicted in turn as disadvantaged; poor; uprooted; victims of their fate; abandoned by their peers; excluded from society at large; unaware of basic moral values; uneducated in their own religion; etc. And education, as provided in church schools, allegedly has the potential to fix all of that.

In her half-year report to sponsors, Susanna portrays Light of Hope's students as "deprived children who didn't ask to be born in Sabah to parents who are foreign workers", in other words as innocent victims of an unfavorable fate. According to another school principal, "migrant children" face extreme poverty and have to endure Malaysians' hostility toward immigrants in general. A third pastor judges them – and their parents – to be naive and thus easy to manipulate or even "abuse". Other employees of church schools report that migrant parents do not take good care of their offspring and often leave them alone for days on end. Thus, the image conveyed is one of vulnerability, ill-treatment, and abandonment. To Paul, students of the Love & Compassion Centre are "wandering children", i.e. young people without roots, who travel aimlessly between Malaysia and the neighboring countries. The South-Korean missionary obviously refers here to these children's transnational lives,⁸ but the image used also allows, or rather calls for, a figurative reading, according to which children are like lost souls looking for a spiritual

7 Magali Chelpi-den Hamer, Marion Fresia and Eric Lanoue (2010:11) call this kind of approach "miserabilist" and note that it is found in many developmental interventions.

8 Interestingly, Paul would certainly not use the same term to describe his own transnational life – or that of his children, for that matter – although Korean missionaries, like non-skilled migrant workers, also go back and forth between their home country and Sabah and could get thrown out of Malaysian territory anytime. Transnationality is endowed with different meanings depending on whom it concerns.

haven where they will want to settle. With regard to Muslim students, one of my former colleagues argued that "their families don't really practice Islam and the kids don't know much about their religion anyway". Here, lack of practice and lack of knowledge amount to a lack of religion as a whole, which, in its turn, justifies the practice of preaching Christianity to these children, for, to the majority of Sabahans, any religion is better than no religion at all.

The conceptualization of migrants' children as incomplete human beings often finds expression in moral terms as well. At the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherds' Home, for instance, children are seen as requiring moral guidance and training. A teacher declared that young students are unable to differentiate between "good" (*baik*) and "evil" (*jahat*) and that they only learn to do so during their first years of schooling. Such a statement implies that, in the absence of the school, children would lack the most basic moral qualities. Other teachers pretend that students don't know what "love" (*kasih/cinta*) is before they arrive at the Love & Compassion Center. Again, the school allegedly has the capacity to remedy such a deficiency. It teaches students "true love", the noblest Christian sentiment, which encompasses, but also exceeds by far, simple filial affection. Many of my interlocutors believe that the absence of schools for children of migrant workers would have disastrous consequences in terms of morality and security: young ones would automatically "end up on the streets" and get involved in vice and criminal activities. "Imagine if we don't do anything to give them an education. We will have a lawless generation filled with revenge", warned a pastor and principal. Behind this fear of a crime outburst, in my opinion, lies an incapacity or a refusal to recognize several aspects of the situation. First, a huge number of children of migrant workers in Sabah have not had – and still have no – access to schooling in Sabah, yet there are practically no signs of resentment, not to speak of rebellious acts, on their part. Second, as my own field research has shown, most out-of-school children either stay home – and feel bored rather than anything else – work or "return" to Indonesia or the Philippines. They are not especially involved in criminal activities. When employees of church schools' attention is drawn to this situation, they usually readily acknowledge it, but the idea of potentially criminal youths remains well anchored in their minds all the same.

Children at Risk and Risky Children

Stephens, who has widely investigated transnational representations of children, notes

that in the contemporary context:

Concerns about "children at risk" proliferate alongside concerns about other groups of "risky children" variously perceived as threatening established social orders. These categories of "children at risk" and "risky children" slide into one another in complicated ways. Sometimes it is precisely by virtue of being "out of place" that is, outside the conventional contexts of family, school, and local neighborhood that children come to be seen as both threatened and threatening. (Stepens n.d.:1-2)

In my view, Stephens's observation fully applies to children of migrant workers in Sabah. As we have seen above, these children are considered "out of place" in the sense that many of them live on their own or with little parental supervision, do not go to school, and lead transnational lives. They definitely do not fit into Sabahans' "conventional contexts". This allows for extreme, even paradoxical projections, like that of the "both threatened and threatening" child.

Deconstructing the Representation of Children

It is crucial to question such representations of children, to not take them for granted. Sharon Stephens insists that they are complex political and historical constructions (Stephens n.d.). The question is not whether these representations are true or false – to be sure, some derive from aspects of these children's lives that can hardly be doubted – but rather to what aim they systematically throw the same light on reality, i.e. one that accentuates children's needs (of assistance, guidance, knowledge, etc.) and conceals the absence thereof. I argue that this mechanism reduces the complexity of reality in a way that justifies the existence and mission of church schools, making them indispensable instruments of salvation.

Education as Children's Salvation

On the backdrop of these representations of "migrant children" as materially and morally deficient people, education in church schools appears as veritable salvation, and not as mere aid – a welcome help in an otherwise difficult life, one could say – nor as a "fundamental right" or an "investment" in the country's future, two other widespread types of representations on education. It "gives [students] a chance"⁹ – whereas they allegedly

⁹ The quote is taken from the title of a Facebook blog fed by one of the Love & Compassion Centre teachers.

would not stand one without it – lifts them into a materially and morally superior sphere and allows them thus to escape the poverty and low human instincts that previously threatened their future.

Overcoming the Curse

The following excerpt, taken from the website of an important Christian NGO active in the provision of educational services for children of migrant workers in Malaysia, is especially significant in that regard:

[Name of the NGO] is dedicated to establishing high-quality learning environments, like [Name of a school], for urban and rural children from underprivileged families. We fervently believe that quality education is the key to *breaking the cycle of poverty and negative mindsets* which have *imprisoned* these children and their families *for generations*.¹⁰ (emphasis added)

By using a highly evocative vocabulary, with the words "cycle", "imprisoned" and "for generations", this Christian NGO portrays children (and their forebears) as if they had long been stuck in a terrible situation – or stuck with a curse, one could almost say. But, fortunately, there is a way out of their condition, a deliverance, according to the NGO, and it bears the name education. In the long run, salvation is even guaranteed: "Maybe they won't make it out of their condition... but their children will", commented an American volunteer at Light of Hope.

Change in Mentality

In order to be effective in saving children, education must produce in them a change of mentality. The latter phenomenon is both the alleged result and the fundamental purpose of schooling in church schools. Paul pretends that children "change completely" as soon as they enter the Love & Compassion Center. Susanna claims that "hope springs in [the] hearts" of her pupils after some time spent at Light of Hope. These two pastors' vocabulary evokes nothing less than the metamorphosis of individuals, which, like many of their peers, they acknowledge as one of their aims. Most church schools insist on the necessity to trigger a "mentality change" (sic) or "transformation of mindset" among their students, in order that they abandon old thoughts and feelings, generally associated with their parents and the migrant community in general, and open up to new ones, i.e. those

¹⁰ <http://harvestcentre.webs.com/aboutus.htm> (last consulted 21.07.2012)

promoted by the school.

Change in mindset is key to professional and economical success, as Pdt. Simon explained:

We try to help them get rid of their feeling of being victimized all the time and their feeling of self-worthlessness. [...] If we manage to pull them out of their mentality of inferiority, they will be successful. [...] Some of our alumni have found good jobs, because they are self-confident and good communicators.

According to church schools, change in mentality pulls children out of poverty and opens the doors of material well-being. But it does more than that. It also improves their moral character and corrects their depraved tendencies. Children, who are seen as potential criminals, find their way back to the right path as a result of the schooling they get in church schools. Susanna, for instance, claims that the absence of criminality in her neighborhood in spite of considerable socio-economic disparities is due to the fact that children of migrant workers who live there are literate. Another school principal, Pdt. Simon, also contends that education prevents children from committing misdeeds. According to him, it is because education "exposes" them to "the common law". Simon emphasizes the teaching of "values", for "they are what matters most". Thus, in his school's curriculum, "moral education is everywhere", infused into all subjects. The Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home, finally, focus on discipline as a way to produce "God-fearing" (*takut kepada Tuhan*) and "useful" people (*orang yang berguna*), who will form the foundation of tomorrow's "peaceful and well-ordered society" (*tenteram dan teratur baik*). The message is clear: without a change in mentality, chaos and crime are to be expected.

Making Salvation Visible

Church schools do not only pretend to be saving children, they also provide proofs of it. The regular report, usually in the form of a newsletter, "picture report" or video, is always a good occasion to show a few pictures or short movies of what has been done recently – after all, church schools have sponsors, who are supposed to be interested in knowing where their money goes and whether it is used wisely. In these reports, one mostly finds pictures of children smiling, looking healthy and happy to be in school. These pictures contrast starkly with others, that show the homes some students live in: squalid

tenements, run-down shacks, polluted backyards, etc. The message is clear: children's happiness and harmonious development depends on their schooling opportunities.

But the iconography of these reports (at least those of the Love & Compassion Center and the Shepherd's Home), includes an additional element, namely pictures of children crying, generally during group prayers and other religious rituals. This mix of smiles and tears struck me and it took me some time to explain it. Most people would certainly construe these "poor" children's tears as a reaction to the hardships they face in their lives. But it seems to me that Christians in Sabah, especially those belonging to, or under the influence of Pentecostals-charismatic movements, also read them as a sign of strong emotions, be it dismay, shame, repentance, or felicity. For them, these tears indicate that the child depicted is going through a profound and intense religious transformation – only a transformation of that sort could trigger such strong emotions. Viewers thus interpret them as a proof that the child is on her/his way to Jesus, that she/he is about to be saved. Church schools' project therefore seems on track and their work effective.

Developing the Desire for Education

According to Erica Bornstein, Christian development requires the collaboration of its beneficiaries:

[a] necessary component of Christian development is the willing enthusiastic participation of those it is helping. The incitement of desire for change and for development itself is a crucial aspect of development. (Bornstein 2005:119)

This is particularly true in the area of education, since development, in this case, takes place inside people, not so much in their environment. One cannot be educated against one's will or without one's participation. The same applies to the salvation of children through education; it presupposes a desire to be saved, a full adherence to the changes implied.

Church schools therefore see to it that children long for education and the rewards it is supposed to bring. Teachers at the Love & Compassion Center and the Shepherd's Home push them to strive for "excellence" (*kecemerlangan*) and "success" (*kejayaan*). At the end of each semester, for instance, three children are picked in each class according to their grades and elected as "best students". They receive congratulations from all teachers, as well as more and better "presents" than their comrades. Students at the Love &

Compassion Center and the Shepherd's Home are also incited to aspire to better living conditions, for now and the future. Jobs like their parents', i.e. peasant, laborer, cook, or housemaid are explicitly made into objects of aversion and, instead, students are encouraged to long for positions as clerks, civil servants (in their parents' countries), or even doctors and lawyers. Likewise, it is no coincidence that they learn at school to find food from Kentucky Fried Chicken "delicious" (*sedap*) – their parents could never afford it. Finally, Paul, the South-Korean missionary, presents the Love & Compassion Centre and the Shepherd's Home – and thereby indirectly education provided by these schools – as "the dream of [students'] lives". His discourse strongly influences staff and students, since the latter regularly relay it themselves by declaring: "We have a dream!".¹¹

The Neoliberal Politics of Salvation

A Change in Mentality as Neoliberal Project

As noted above, church schools allegedly save children by transforming them. The principles guiding this transformation and the way it is brought about indicate that church schools adhere to a neoliberal conception of the subject and practice a neoliberal type of governmentality. Indeed, these organizations, especially those under the influence of Pentecostal-charismatic theology, exhort children to adopt a proactive attitude in life, be competitive, and desire upward social mobility as well as better material living conditions. They also incite children to take responsibility for their actions and their futures, in other words to consider themselves as masters of their own fate.

These characteristics – i.e. emphasizing individual success, free choice and personal responsibility – are traditionally understood by contemporary scholars as typical of "neoliberal subjectivity". In his 1978-1979 lectures at the *Collège de France*, Michel Foucault (2008) describes neoliberalism as the extension of the rules of the market to life as a whole. For the French thinker, the neoliberal subject is a *homo economicus* or "an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself" (226). Jason Read (2009) notes that neoliberalism, according to Foucault, provides an understanding of individuals as governed by interest and competition. More than just an ideology, neoliberalism is a mode of governmentality and forms an "intimate part of how our lives and subjectivity are structured" (35).

¹¹ See picture p. 117.

As a mode of governmentality, neoliberalism operates on interests, desires, and aspirations rather than through rights and obligations; it does not directly mark the body, as sovereign power, or even curtail actions, as disciplinary power; rather, it acts on the conditions of actions." (Read 2009:29)

In short, neoliberal governmentality affects people's "sense of what is possible" (Foucault 2008), with, of course, far-reaching consequences. In the case of Sabahan church schools, it prompts students to think about, and desire, "success" (*berjaya*), which, generally, is the first step to actually reaching it. Some alumni might "make it" and become doctors or lawyers – who knows? But most of them will not and, as the next section shows, if they do not blame anyone but themselves for it, it will also have to do with church schools' neoliberal ideology.

Salvation and its Depoliticizing Effect

Church schools' notion of salvation, because of its neoliberal character, has a potentially depoliticizing effect. This is due to the fact that the neoliberal ideal of the fundamentally self-interested individual makes collective political action inconceivable and thereby curtails it (Read 2009:36). As Wendy Brown explains:

The model neoliberal citizen is one who strategizes for her or himself among various social, political, and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options. (Brown 2005:43)

Applied to Sabahan church schools, these insights on neoliberal subjectivity suggest that students, who are pushed to consider their fate and future in an individualistic fashion and take responsibility for it, are, by the same token, prevented from seeing the possibility of, and organizing – now or in the future – collective reflexion and action in order to change the rights of migrant workers in general in Malaysia. Church schools' education allegedly saves "migrant children" by allowing them to extract themselves from a terrible condition, but, at the same time, it potentially limits their readiness to address and remediate the injustices they face. The state's responsibility in setting up a normative framework leading to structural inequalities between migrant workers and other segments of the Malaysian population is masked. "Migrant children" are less likely to complain about the comparatively bad quality of the education they receive (few hours of study per week, untrained and overworked teachers, limited facilities, etc.), and more likely to blame

themselves, not the Malaysian state or Malaysian churches, for not being able to cope with obstacles that might turn up in their lives, whether now or in the future.

Several aspects of the reality I have observed in Sabah are in accordance with, and bolster, the reflexion presented here. Firstly, the issue of migrant workers' rights is practically never brought up in church schools, much less in front of students, and even less with a view to question the state's policies. Thus, if students develop an awareness of their unequal rights as children of immigrants, it is certainly not in church schools, on the contrary. Secondly, church schools themselves admit to have "very limited activities in terms of advocacy". They help migrant workers and their families in coping with their individual, daily lives, but do not seek to change the conditions affecting these lives in general, especially not if it requires confronting the state.

Sabahan church schools' neoliberal ideology of salvation and their aim to keep away from state politics seem to be widespread features of Christian development. Writing about East Africa, Katharina Hofer claims for instance that:

many evangelical mission agencies [in Kenya and Uganda] embrace a political theology that promotes economic initiative and competitiveness, whilst encouraging submission under authoritarian leadership in the political domain. (Hofer 2003:390)

Pavel Stefan Zaleski (2012) even argues that welfare organizations in general, and the "new system" they belong to, have a depoliticizing function. In his book on "neoliberalism and civil society", Zaleski writes: "instead of resolving the social problems, the new system [of welfare organizations] serves to manage them, that is to make them tolerable" (255).¹² Applied to the Sabahan context, this forces us to contextualize church schools' embracement of neoliberal ideology: all schools for children of migrant workers, not only those of Christian organizations, but those too, together form a system which allows for, and contributes to, a *status quo* of the general condition of migrant workers. Such a conclusion seems paradoxical with respect to church schools, given their claim to "change" and "save" children, but I think it is relevant and faithful to the reality I have observed.

¹² For a similar argumentation, see Kamat (2004:169): "The neoliberal notion of empowerment implies a focus on individual capacities and needs of the poor, and consequently minimizing the social and political causes of poverty."

Conclusion: Neoliberal Subjectivity and Community Building

In the preceding chapters, I have described the important efforts made by some church schools in terms of community-building. The case of the Love & Compassion Center is especially significant in this regard. Much is done, in this school, to bring people together and make them feel like members of a single community – be it that of Sabahan Christians or Christians in general. Rituals take place where students pick up the basics of "global evangelical culture" and meet, interact with, and learn to get along with Protestant Christians from abroad. Interpersonal, and in particular student-teacher, relationships are shaped in ways that promote proximity, sometimes even intimacy, and common belonging, under the banner of the typically Christian principle of love. Yet, I then argue in the present chapter that church schools adhere to, and promote, a neoliberal conception of the subject, which presupposes an individualistic ideology. Here lies an apparent incoherence: how can collectivistic efforts be compatible with a drive toward individualism?

In my view, both aspects can, and do, coexist in church schools, at least at the Love & Compassion Center and the Shepherd's Home. The fact that they are theoretically antithetical should not blind us to this empirical reality. Actually, the underlying individualism in church schools' salvational take on education goes hand in hand with their collectivistic efforts at community-building to produce what Christian organizations are looking for, namely a remodeling of individuals' loyalties. Emphasizing the necessity for each individual to "change" and have success, as well as the capacity to determine her/his own fate, opens the way for a recomposition of social and religious affiliations, which, in turn, can be influenced upon. It is not a coincidence, in that regard, that parents are not allowed in school compounds and not involved in school activities or management. Their exclusion shows that Christian organizations running church schools seek to extract children from their family and community, to isolate them. They do it in order to better reintegrate children in another type of environment, that one shaped along religious lines, over which they have control.¹³ Church schools are not interested in enabling the assimilation of their students into Malaysian society, nor in strengthening their ties to the countries of origin of their parents. The national referential is not relevant to them. Instead, these schools strive to develop their students' proximity with Christianity,

¹³ Of course, both movements are concomitant, not successive. They are embedded and constantly articulated in multifarious educational practices and discourses, in which, most of the time, they can only be told apart with difficulty.

conceived as a deterritorialized community.

The question of whether this mechanism produces the expected results is hard to answer, especially given the young age of the people considered here. What is certain, however, is that it is a subtle way of doing evangelism, one in which the belief in Jesus Christ, the sense of being Christian and of belonging to Christianity progressively take precedence over, or supplant, other beliefs and senses of self and community. Here, we are clearly far away from the popular image of "bible-thumping" missionaries trying to extort conversions – whom, said in passing, I have never met in Sabah.

CONCLUSION

Instead of summarizing the many arguments developed in this thesis, I would like to conclude with a last reflexion, which should put them into perspective. An important question remains, namely: How are we to contextualize the existence and action of church schools for "migrant children" with respect to present-day Sabahan and Malaysian politics? Since the 1970s, scholars doing research on Malaysia have pointed to a phenomenon of "Islamic revival", which marked the political, economic, ethnic, linguistic and cultural scene of the country (Nagata 1980). At that time, these scholars argue, Malaysian politics has taken a strong turn toward Islamism and the influence of Islam has kept growing ever since (Liow 2009). As a result, religious minorities have progressively developed a general mistrust of state authorities and ruling political parties, whom they consider as biased towards Islam and Muslims, and against their faith and community. This is particularly true of Christians, who account for almost one third of the total population of Sabah. In addition, the equation of Islam with Malay identity, and the recognition of the *Bumiputra* status to Malays, have exacerbated the differentiation of the population along ethnical and religious lines and led to a pronounced segmentation, or compartmentalization, of Malaysian society. Christians in Sabah, for instance, are for the most part Malaysian citizens belonging either to the Chinese ethnic community or to one of the numerous communities considered "indigenous". By definition, none of them is Malay, and very few of them mingle with Malays. In recent years, however, migrant workers are increasingly invited to participate in the life of Sabahan churches. The schools that churches have opened for their children are but one example of how they address these people – yet it is an important one, because schools cater for children, i.e. people who are in the middle of an important phase of socialization, and thus easily influenced.

I argue that Sabahan churches' motives in addressing migrant workers and their children can be read as a reaction to the increased role of Islam in Malaysian society and politics. By taking advantage of the sheer number and economic importance of these people for Sabah, churches cannot only grow by attracting new members, but, more generally, strengthen their position vis-à-vis unsupportive and, in some cases, downright

hostile state authorities. Churches thus draw new maps of power relations and political affiliations, that allow them to better protect their own interests in the country. At the same time, as this thesis shows, Sabahan churches take part in highly transnational projects. A school like the Love & Compassion Center, for instance, involves (besides the Sabah Evangelical Church and its Malaysian employees) Indonesian and Filipina/o workers, their children, South-Korean missionaries, "volunteers" from the United States and Switzerland, and "visitors" from overseas Christian communities. These are mobile people, who regularly cross national boundaries and maintain strong links with social actors based outside of Malaysia. Therefore, Sabahan churches' involvement in schools for "migrant children" also appears as a move to place their action outside of the nation-state framework, in which Islam dominates, and to build transnational networks that escape the states' authority. Here, evangelism implies a growth across national borders, a contribution to the spread of global Christianity.

Should church schools for children of migrant workers therefore be considered as countering the state's project of hegemony? On the contrary. In my view, these organizations, while claiming to "save" people, paradoxically reproduce migrant workers' subordinate position in Malaysian society and guarantee their exploitability. Christian organizations active in Sabah rely on the dominatedness of migrants for their own success, much like economic actors and the state apparatus. The fact that church schools are tolerated by the Sabah Education Department is significant, in that regard, because it brings to light a certain convergence of interests between the government and Christian organizations. Basically, both agree that there is no room for migrant workers and their children as full members of Malaysian society. The government's reason for leaving out these people may have to do with the fundamental problem of social cohesion faced by the country; blatant propaganda towards "national unity in diversity" scarcely hides the increasing difficulty in patching Malaysia's ethnic communities together to make a nation, and adding migrants to the equation could prove decisive in causing a collapse of the government's legitimacy. For Christian organizations, on the other hand, the exclusion of migrants from full-membership in Malaysian society acts as a necessary corollary to their inclusion in the world of Christianity. It is essential in the vision of education as salvation and in the construction of migrant workers and their families as ideal recipients of Jesus' love. In short, it justifies evangelism in Sabah.

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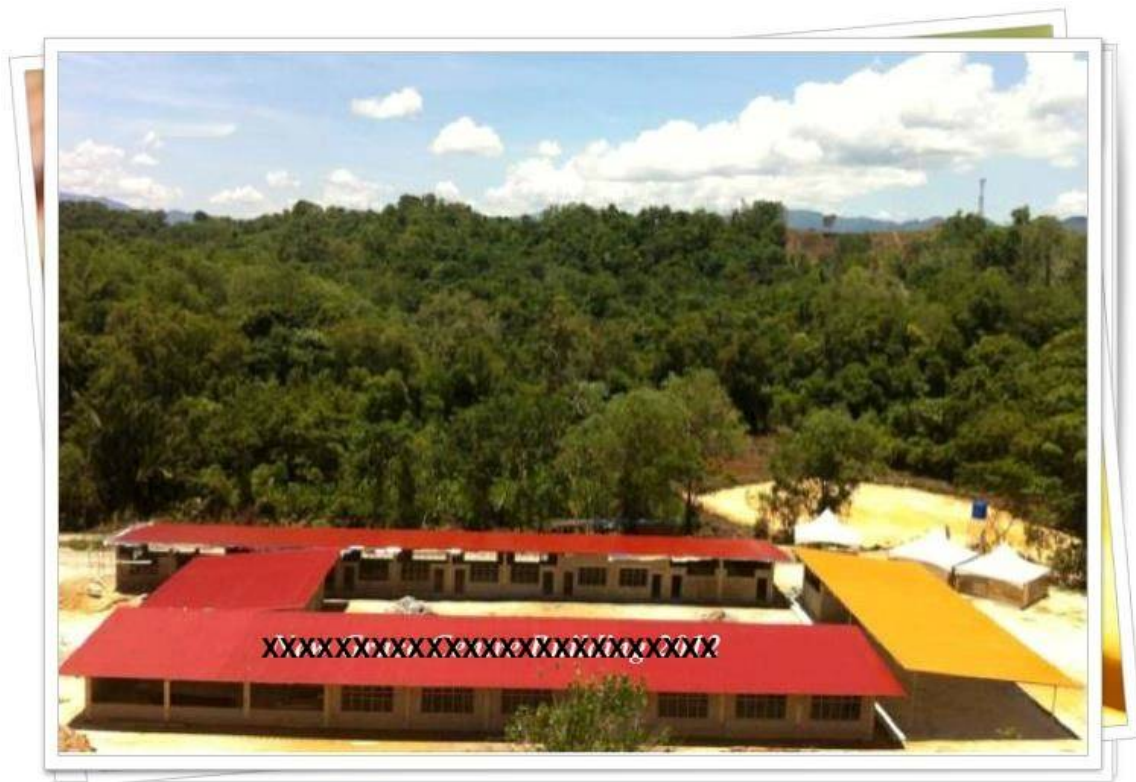
ANNEX



Dwellings of migrant workers in Sabah. Their children are students at Light of Hope.



The way to the Shepherd's Home. Located away from the main road, the school is well hidden.



*The Love & Compassion Center's new building, in the outskirts of City X.
The school can only be found if one knows where to look for it.*



*Students of the Love & Compassion Center and the
Shepherds' Home regularly declare that they "have a dream".*



Note written by a student of the Love & Compassion Center for one of her teachers.



A teacher of the Love & Compassion Center bringing his students to visit his hometown and stay with his family for the week-end.



*Wedding ceremony of one of the Love & Compassion Center's teachers.
The girls and boys are all students of the school, i.e. children of migrant workers.*



Teachers of the Love & Compassion Center washing their students' feet during the "healing".



Teachers and students of the Love & Compassion Center hugging at the end of the "healing".



South-Korean "visitors" helping children of Indonesian migrant workers during a sports event at the Love & Compassion Center