Postponing Labor in Fisheries, Tourism and Agriculture Sectors: Rural Eastern Indonesian University Students in Java

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Abstract This paper explores the migration of Eastern Indonesian university students who come to Java for education. Often from rural, economically disadvantaged regions such as the Kei Islands in Southeast Maluku, and Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), these young adults delay joining fisheries, agriculture, or tourism sectors. Instead, these relatively high-performing students travel to the "center of the country" seeking skills and experiences promised by higher education in Javanese urban centers. This qualitative, anthropological research complements other, more technical and economic approaches. Based on interview and observational data, a complicated portrait emerges of these bright young people from fishing and farming communities in Maluku and NTT. Many idealistically plan to return to their home communities, hoping to improve local fishing and farming methods or to work as teachers, civil servants, or tour guides. Others do not intend to return home, where they think jobs are scarce and traditional livelihoods unattractive. Analysis of this generation's perspective has critical implications for educators and policymakers wishing to prevent a "brain drain" of their educated native sons and daughters, whose experience and skills could contribute importantly to the various socio-economic demands present in island regions, including fisheries and agriculture, conservation, tourism, and employment.

1. Introduction
Migration has been part of the human experience since prehistoric times, the movement of individuals and groups to feed their families seek economic opportunities and adventure. In what is now the Republic of Indonesia, seafaring and inland peoples have been encountering each other through trade, war, and political affiliation for millennia [10]. In recent centuries this movement has been linked to centralized political and economic power radiating from a Javanese Center out to peripheral Outer Islands, through 17th and 18th century Dutch efforts to monopolize the spice trade in the archipelago, later through the Dutch East Indies colonial project, and since 1945 through the Java-centric government of the Republic of Indonesia. This center-periphery dynamic consolidates power and wealth in the metropole—Java—drawing human and natural resources from Outer areas for the benefit of the Center, leaving peripheral regions such as Maluku and East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) comparatively underdeveloped in aspects of infrastructure, employment, and education. It is in the context of this regional economic inequality that young people from Eastern Indonesia and elsewhere migrate to the cities of Java for higher education.
At the time of Indonesian Independence after World War II, there were few options for higher education, mostly in Java and reserved for children of the elite [11-12]. Since then, the numbers of Indonesians achieving basic, middle, and higher education has grown steadily, yet inequalities in access and quality persist [3, 6, 8].

This ethnographic account of the experience of educational migrants from islands in NTT and the Kei Islands of Southeast Maluku builds on the author’s MA thesis fieldwork in Malang, East Java [5], and on his ongoing (2016—2017) Fulbright Research Fellowship in Yogyakarta and Malang on Java, the province of NTT, and the Kei Islands of Southeast Maluku. This paper seeks to create a partial portrait of this population of young working-age people, who choose to pursue higher education rather than directly enter the workforce for various motivations. It also hopes to describe some of the factors and processes that drive this migration, as well as some of the personal, economic and societal effects of this increasing and ongoing phenomenon of educational migration in Indonesia. Particular attention is paid to a comparison between the inland rural, agrarian region of Manggarai, Flores, NTT, and the Kei Islands of Southeast Maluku, where small-scale agriculture, fishing, and other marine livelihoods and industries predominate.

2. Methodology

This research is based on data collected by the author through semi-structured interviews, and unstructured observations and conversations with students at universities, polytechnics, academies and Sekolah Tinggi (higher schools), as well as with alumni and educators in the Javanese cities of Yogyakarta and Malang, urban educational hubs that attract students from all over Indonesia. Data also come from interviews and observations on the island of Flores, NTT, the home island of a large number of study participants. As the research is ongoing, data do not yet include field observations and interviews in the Kei Islands themselves, relying for the time being on interviews conducted in Java with Kei Islanders studying there.

To date, qualitative data include 44 semi-structured interviews with a total of 87 participants, recorded in 2015 and 2017. Of these, 22 come from the administrative Districts of Manggarai, Flores, NTT, while 8 are from the Kei Islands of Southeast Maluku. (Other participants are primarily from other islands in NTT, such as Timor, Sumba, Adonara, and others.) Analysis of the text of these interviews complements the researcher’s written observations and notes from organized and informal activities. While individual accounts can and do differ depending on personal experience, through a sufficient sample size, some common themes and trends emerge upon analysis [4]. Participants were recruited through the researcher’s work as a guest lecturer and affiliate at Universitas Kanjuruhan Malang, as well as through what Bernard calls “chain referral sampling,” also known as “snowball sampling” [2].

Formal authorization and ethical protocol adherence for working with human subjects are respectively under the auspices of RISTEK (the Indonesian Ministry of Research and Technology) and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the researcher’s former institution, Oregon State University.

The use of qualitative methods and ethnographic methods is intended to complement the quantitative and technical methodology frequently used in other fields, giving voice to the human experience at the center of a given topic [2,4,9].

3. Results and Discussion

The majority of the participants in this study are from small rural families in villages where farming and small-scale fisheries are the predominant occupations, while a few have parents who are teachers, civil servants or small business owners. The overwhelming majority are among the first generation to attend a university, including some whose parents are yet illiterate. Previous generations, and even older brothers and sisters of the current generation, had little opportunity or means to achieve an education beyond a basic level due to barriers of cost and access.

A librarian in his 50’s now working at a Sekolah Tinggi in Flores related his experience growing up in a remote Manggarai village. After finishing elementary school, to attend junior and the senior high school he was obliged to live with relatives in the district capital of Ruteng, at that time a two-day
journey by foot. Very few of his contemporaries were sufficiently motivated and financially supported by their families to accept such difficulties and costs to pursue education. Even fewer continued to university education in Java as he did, working in restaurants and in the library at his school in East Java to pay tuition and living expenses to supplement the meager funds his parents were able to send him. Since the time Mr. Silvestrus (all names are pseudonyms) attended university in the 1980’s, more Catholic and national elementary, middle, and high schools have opened in and near his home village, and improved transportation means that a trip to the district capitol is only a few hours by bus.

A similar evolution has happened in the still remote village of Wukir, East Manggarai, where increased opportunities for elementary, junior and middle school education have increased in recent decades, and transportation is marginally better (though still arduous, especially in the rainy season). According to informants there, including teachers, students and returned alumni, now nearly all junior high (SMP—Sekolah Menengah Pertama) graduates go on to high school (SMA—Sekolah Menengah Atas), and the majority of SMA graduates aspire to attend higher education (with one or two exceptions from graduating classes of 35-40). A group of middle school teachers told me that just ten years ago they estimate that only some 50% of their students completed high school and went on to university or other higher education. The senior teachers at the Catholic SMP (built in the early 1980’s) can count on their fingers the few students from the ‘80’s and ‘90’s who went on to higher education. The founding of additional private and public SD (Sekolah dasar—elementary schools), SMP, and SMA’s in the area in the 2000’s produced more graduates ready for higher education, and now many of those university graduates have returned to teach in those same schools, in turn preparing and priming the youngest generation to follow in their footsteps. Many returned graduates also staff the local government, health, and agriculture institutions.

This dramatic change in only a few decades is exceptional, and cannot be generalized, except as an example of a community that values basic, middle, and higher education and has incorporated this value into the local culture.

Informants from Kei reported a drastically different story, suggesting that they are among a minority of their peers who attend higher education. Still, it seems to be at a higher rate than their parents’ generation, which could suggest that their community is at an earlier point on the growth curve than their Manggarai contemporaries. Interestingly, among the small sample of Kei students in this study, two were from a family of teachers and PNS (civil servants) in the city of Tual, and three others were their cousins, having attended SMA in the same city. Though unconfirmed as of this writing, it’s plausible that these lucky few can study in Java thanks to historical benefits from privileged family networks that favor education and access to power and position to particular groups in Kei [1,7].

Despite improved access to education, and an increased societal and familial support in recent years (as in the case of Wukir and other participants’ Manggarai villages), sending a son or daughter to attend university in Java or anywhere is still a significant financial sacrifice for a family. For a family from a rural farming or fishing community—such as in Manggarai and Kei—income is unpredictable and seasonal, unlike their counterparts who hold the few civil service positions (Pegawai Negeri Sipil—PNS) and get a monthly salary from the government. From their meager earnings, families must pay the substantial cost of transportation to Java, as well as tuition and cost of living.

This is in addition to the cost borne by families in terms of giving up a son or daughter whose absence means they will be unable to contribute to labor-intensive farming, fishing, gardening and household duties, not to mention years of paying for SD, SMP, and SMA tuition, uniforms, and fees. Costs rise even more when more than one child chooses to attend university.

Despite these costs and barriers, increasing numbers of young people (and their families) are choosing to do so. A look into the motivations and perceived benefits is important to understanding this phenomenon.

3.1 Motivations for Educational Migration

When answering the question “why did you choose to study in Java?” respondents’ responses clustered around a handful of reasons, remarkably similar regardless of their geographic origin. A principal motivator is common to youth the world over, a yearning for adventure, to seek experience
(pengalaman) in cities far from home, to see things and people from other parts of the country. They want to see first-hand the Pusat Negeri (the Center of the Nation) they had only known through TV, movies, and stories from older relatives who preceded them in this journey. Related to this is a coming-of-age sense of personal independence (kemandirian) from parents, to prove to themselves and their community that they can find grown-up success through this endeavor. In this way, educational migration is a relatively recent form of mobility that respondents call merantau (wander), which has primarily been a search for work and income to send home. Common destinations of the merantau of respondents or their relatives are to cities for work in construction or factories, to Bali for employment in the tourist industry, to Malaysia, Kalimantan, or Papua to work in palm oil plantations, mining, or service sectors. In fact, some slightly older respondents in their 30's or 40's reported that they had originally set out for this kind of economic merantau with no intention of pursuing higher education at the outset. Mr. Davidus, a high school teacher in Wukir, first studied for a few months at a seminary in Eastern Flores, before he got a call from a friend in Jakarta looking to hire workers for a motorcycle parts warehouse, where he worked for five years, sending remittances home and saving a bit for himself. While in Jakarta he took the opportunity to get a teaching degree, graduating in 2013, and finally returned to East Manggarai after a total of ten years away. Four of his classmates from his SMA had done nearly the same thing, also working in the national capitol and returning with degrees from the same Sekolah Tinggi as him.

When Eastern students decide to study in Malang or other cities in Java, they report that the cost of living there is lower than in other cities—lower for example than in Kupang, the capitol of NTT—and there is at least a chance they can find side jobs to supplement money their family can send them. Besides also having a pleasant climate, Malang has a reputation for being a welcoming place for Eastern students who want to study at one of the 55 campuses there. Yogyakarta is of course also known as an “educational city,” with literally several hundred campuses, small and large. Respondents reported that they chose Javanese campuses because the study program they wanted to pursue wasn’t offered nearer to home, or if it was offered, the quality of lecturers, technology and facilities was perceived to be lower than in Java. According to a lecturer and administrator at STKIP in Ruteng—the capitol of Manggarai District, Flores—her campus was the only one in the province of NTT with the highest accreditation rating of A, yet the number of study programs they offer is only six, limited to teaching, divinity and other humanities.

Underlying motivations to study in the first place vary but also cluster around a few themes. Some wish to gain skills and certification to bring back home to find work in education, government, healthcare, or in private businesses if such options exist. Some of this is a professed desire to help their family and community, which are often economically and educationally disadvantaged, especially when compared to Java. Others want to become entrepreneurs, such as Karlos, from Tual, Kei, who wants to start an import business in his hometown to sell particular products he has come to enjoy during his time in Java. Andi, a second-year veterinary student from Wukir, Manggarai wants to start a feed store and raise improved breeds of cattle when he finishes his degree. Still, others profess a desire to continue their merantau to other places where they hope to find satisfying jobs since they think it will be unlikely to find such employment at home. This troubling pessimism was prominent among several of the respondents from the Kei Islands.

3.2 Challenges and Realities in Java

When Eastern students reach Java and begin higher education, they face a series of obstacles beyond the economic ones already discussed above. Often unfamiliar with admissions procedures at prestigious state universities, they can arrive in Java too late to take the entrance exam, or perform poorly if they do take it, relatively unprepared compared to Javanese peers who attended prestigious SMA’s with higher standards and resources than found in rural Eastern schools. As such, they must enroll in low cost, less prestige private universities with lower accreditation scores. Additionally, as ethnic and religious minorities, they are exposed to other kinds of prejudice and discrimination, particularly in housing choices, and in negative perceptions by other groups, mainly Javanese.

To cope with these challenges, Eastern students forge "new families" of mutual support during their time in Java, younger siblings (adik) relying on older relatives (kakak) from their home towns and also
from other islands [5]. Many students followed *kakak* to Malang, Yogyakarta or elsewhere expressly because they (and their parents) knew they could count on their elders’ guidance and protection. Still, a substantial portion of students is unable to graduate for a handful of reasons, including mismanaging money, big city temptations, violent conflicts with other groups, alcohol or drug abuse, and pregnancy. A girl from Kei Besar estimated that 10-15% of her peers would be unable to graduate due to one of those reasons.

3.3 After University

Despite the challenges and barriers, it would appear that the number of Eastern students graduating from universities in Java is growing. For previous generations, when this number was fewer, there was a good chance they would be able to find the civil service or teaching position in their home areas. But chances are slimmer in the current job climate, which is flooded with graduates and local governments are no longer hiring like they were during previous periods, particularly during the *reformasi* era “*pemekaran*” of the 2000’s when new Districts (*Kabupaten*) and Subdistricts (*Kecamatan*) required staffing. Others do return home and can teach in new private or state schools, but often with meager pay that must be supplemented with farming or other subsistence activities. Nurses and midwives often must take volunteer positions at the local Health Center (*Puskesmas*) since paid positions are unavailable.

Some graduates try to find employment in Java, but face challenges in this realm too, facing stiff competition from Javanese job candidates who attended prestigious state universities such as Brawijaya in Malang or Gajah Mada in Yogyakarta. Others continue their *mental* to other islands to look for work-related or not to their degrees, sending remittances home as they can. In small, remote Wukir, Manggarai, study participants reported that they had relatives living all across the country and the world—an NGO employee in Surabaya, teachers and an oil rigger in Papua, a forestry officer in Kalimantan, and clergy in Germany, the Philippines, and West Africa.

A half-dozen informants are university lecturers who have lived in Java for decades and taken spouses from there and raised families. Their experience as early Eastern pioneers at Javanese universities in Java was difficult and expensive, requiring sacrifices from their entire families. In their estimation, returning home after graduation wouldn’t have afforded them a chance to recoup their families’ financial investment in their academic career. So they found higher paying work than they could get back home, and theirs is a story of one-way migration, with occasional trips to Flores or Adonara every few years to visit relatives.

Wukir is remarkable that many did, in fact, return to their home village, even though chances of making money are slim there. Some of it is a practical economic decision, especially if one’s family holds land since it is then possible to feed the family, even if a salary is low or nonexistent.

Another important motivator to return home (at least to Wukir), despite the drawbacks, is the strong sense of community and roots, not only with living relatives and neighbors but also a strong faith in the protection and respect of ancestors (*leluhur*) who also inhabit the area and watch over the residents. This strong adherence to local *adat* is a reason given by several people in Wukir for the relatively high standard of well-being there, despite poverty and the hard life of a farmer. This well-being, according to a well-educated and prominent figure at the local health facility, includes spirituality, health, and education, values shared by the *leluhur* as well, who want the best for their people. She thought this was not the case in other places, with less emphasis on education, and where *adat* was also not as carefully followed as in Wukir. It will be interesting to explore whether there is a further correlation between adherence to *adat* and the average level of education in other areas of NTT and Maluku.

4. Conclusion

What does this mean for the workforce in rural and island towns and villages, the sending communities of these educational migrants? They choose to leave home, to *merantau*, at an age when their youth and energy could be very useful to their parents in traditional occupations, such as farming and fishing. They leave and become consumers of education, spending their families’ savings, instead of undertaking a classic *merantau* in search of medium-term economic gain in foreign and domestic labor.
to bring home cash to build a house, buy land or a boat, or pay for a dowry. They are hoping their investment will pay off in the longer term, with increased economic prospects over a lifetime. Clearly, the twenty-first century requires even the sons and daughters of farmers and fishermen to have at least basic education to be successful participants in society and the economy. Stereotypically, it had been true for decades that anyone who went further and attended university would be rewarded with a prestigious, well-paying position. But this is no longer guaranteed.

What does it mean that the median level of education is increasing in places like Wukir and Kei to include ever more university graduates who might or might not be able to find work that corresponds to their degrees or that compensates the time and resources their communities invested in them? In Wukir, it would seem that the local culture has changed in just a few decades so that now nearly all young people attend SMP, SMA then wants to go on to higher education. Despite poverty, people hold "school parties" (pera Sekolah) to raise funds for young sons and daughters heading off to attend school. These parties are perceived as a form of gotong royong (mutual assistance), and elders perform adat ceremonies to seek the blessing of the ancestors for the success of the party and the student. Only a decade or two earlier, parental pride and familial success were measured in weddings and births. Now a young woman’s parents have added additional educational criteria for prospective sons-in-law. A young man without a college degree is a less attractive candidate for marriage than a graduate.

What is the difference then between Kei, where respondents report being bored, pessimistic about finding work and meaning to move elsewhere after graduation, compared to a place like Wukir, where education is prized, and young graduates still frequently choose to return following their merantau on other islands? At the time of writing, the researcher had yet not carried out his fieldwork in Kei, so the answer to this question is pending input from students, families, and colleagues there. As well, an analysis of the quantitative elements (statistical data on population, income, literacy, education, etc.) of this story would help to triangulate whether these qualitative observations can be generalized. From an anthropological perspective, it’s appealing to consider if there is a correlation between adat adherence, education, and attitudes about one’s home community. Perhaps adat is an indicator of community health and well-being, and thus something that can attract young people back home after their educational migration, where they can apply their new knowledge and experience for the benefit of their community, as well as their ancestors.

Communities can try to promote interest in and preservation of adat by encouraging students to conduct their final theses (skripsi) on topics related to the traditions and wisdom of their elders. Besides recording and saving this knowledge in written and electronic form, it would also serve to increase young people’s affiliation with their home communities, and this could make coming home more attractive to university graduates. Coming home is also more attractive if there is gainful employment to be had. Perhaps local, provincial, national scholarships for students entering particular fields identified as especially in demand by the local economy would be beneficial, as might small business loans and entrepreneurship training for young people attempting to boost their local economy. Likely, these measures have been applied already with varying measures of success, and future fieldwork will explore their effects, benefits, and drawbacks.

As mentioned earlier, this research is ongoing, and this paper and presentation are intended to stimulate discussion and highlight these human aspects of the workforce from the island and rural areas in Eastern Indonesia. The researcher welcomes feedback from interested colleagues.

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