



# The church, the state and the migrant in Singapore

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## Migration and Home

Migration theorists have persuasively highlighted the experience of human mobility as a highly variegated terrain. Foregrounded in the research is how transnational migrants face conflicting experiences as they are caught in webs of asymmetrical relationships of power in various stages of the migration process (Salazar Parranes, 2008; Oishi, 2005; Yeoh et al., 2004). In exploring the migrant perspective, scholars have insisted that invariably the migration process intersects with experiences of disruption, conflict and pain and, in some instances, is compounded by the physical separation of the migrant from home and family (Salazar Parranes, 2005; Sobritchea, 2007; Chambers, 1994). In this case, the concept of 'location' as theorized in the migration literature is infused by the dichotomy of 'here' and 'there' and problematised as being the root of migrant tensions and disruptions. The debate here is that migrants identify primarily with the homeland to which they feel a sense of belonging and that they suffer a disruption in their lives as a result of moving from one locale to another (Ahmed et al., 2003). Other theorists have proposed alternative interpretations, highlighting instead the positive aspects of mobility as new identities and meanings are created in the migration process (Braidotti, 1994; Yeoh & Huang, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Ernestine, 1997). Yet others have argued for more nuanced analyses of migrant responses to their new social environments (Abdul Rahman, 2005).

Ahmed, Castañeda, Fortier and Sheller have argued compellingly how 'home' is never a distinct cat-

egory from 'migration' (Ahmed et al., 2003). Instead they invite us to examine home and migration in terms of "specific processes, modes and materialities of uprooting and regroupings, in different contexts and on different scales" and that home and migration should be understood in terms of "the workings of institutional structures" (Ahmed et al., 2003: 2). Drawing inspiration from this thesis, this brief note speaks to how the local institution of the Catholic Church in Singapore mediates the experience of leaving and returning home for low-skilled temporary migrants. Specifically, this note interrogates how experiencing 'home' for migrants has come to be defined by the Catholic Church through the Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants & Itinerant People (ACMI). The paper asserts that while for the purposes of the state, low-skilled migrants are treated as a temporary feature in the migrant landscape of the country and thereby through its labour rules and policies reinforces notions of detachment among this group, the concept of 'family' and thereby home is intrinsic to how the Church perceives all social relationships and, therefore, extends this concept to migrants in spite of contradicting state constructions. As such, the notion of home, for them, while infused with meanings of being "family to migrants" is aimed at fostering a sense of "belonging" among this group who are separated from their own families back home ([http://www.acmi.sg/aboutus\\_logo.php](http://www.acmi.sg/aboutus_logo.php)). Undoubtedly, the perception the Church holds of migrants is bound up with notions of social justice and social in-

clusiveness for those it views as marginalised in society. It is within this ideological framework that the Church is motivated to create a 'place to call home' among migrants.

### The Socially Conscious Church

Religion and morality are often thought to be closely intertwined and almost inseparable (Reynolds & Tanner, 1995). Being a moral agent is bound up with one's relationships with other people. In the case of the Catholic Church, being socially conscious and centred is posited to be equally important to practising one's faith (Pontification Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). While the teachings of the Church direct its followers to look to a higher being, followers are at the same time called to reach out to others around them. Thus, beyond having faith, members of the Church are asked to act on their faith. Similarly fundamental to the Church's teaching is doing what is right for the greater good of individuals in society. It is in this context that the Church is interested in social justice. According to the Church's perspective, it is about giving to each person what is due to him or her as a social person since s/he is made in the image of God. The social teaching of the Church is also concerned with the preservation of the dignity of the person and facilitating his/her intellectual, physical, emotional and psychological growth and development (Ibid.).

In Singapore, the Catholic Church has acted on its faith in numerous ways such as actively meeting the needs of the poor through the St. Vincent de Paul community and other similar charitable arms under the Archdiocese. Migrant workers in Singapore have also become beneficiaries of various programmes of the Church. While each parish independently organises its own activities for migrant workers, there are also Church-wide programmes beyond the parish level. The Dawn Migrant Centre supported by the Redemptorist Community and the Filipino Ongoing Development Programme (FILODEP) managed by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary are such examples.

ACMI, through funding from Caritas Singapore

Community Council (CSCC), has had the most wide-ranging line-up of programmes catering to between 500 to 600 migrants at any one time from various migrant groups. Under the Commission established in 1998, the Befriender's and Bread Basket programmes were started. While the Befriender's programme reaches out to migrants in hospitals and others who may be facing problems and are unable to leave their homes, the Bread Basket programme seeks to reach out to migrant workers through the distribution of basic provisions and food in the dormitories housing migrant workers. ACMI also renders assistance to migrant workers facing various work-related or social problems during their sojourn in Singapore by connecting migrants to relevant individuals who are able to provide solutions.

Additionally, programmes under the Commission directed at migrants include the establishment of a Training Centre which organises classes primarily for women migrants. Since its inception in 2001, the Centre has trained over 8,000 women migrants from Indonesia, the Philippines, India, Myanmar and Sri Lanka employed in Singapore's domestic work sector. Foreign spouses from Indonesia, Nepal, Thailand and Vietnam have also participated in these classes. Taught by volunteers, classes are conducted on a range of skills such as on baking, caregiving, cooking, dress-making, hairdressing, and beauty and wellness. Migrant women are also given the opportunity to learn computer skills, improve on their English proficiency, and receive instruction on how to start up small-scale enterprises. Because the costs of running these activities are heavily subsidised by ACMI, women migrants pay only a nominal fee to attend these classes. These classes, held over a period of eight months, are only organised on Sundays when these migrants have their day off from work.

Clearly while the ideological rationale for these programmes are "led from above" (Berger, 2005: 18), at the grassroots level the logic for providing these programmes is that they meet migrant needs brought about as a result of migrants "often experience[ing] alienation, anxiety and uncertainty" because of having been compelled to leave their homes for foreign countries for political and economic reasons

([http://www.acmi.sg/aboutus\\_logo.php](http://www.acmi.sg/aboutus_logo.php)). For example, by ensuring that migrants receive “gifts” of food and are prevented from falling to neglect through the Bread Basket Programme, it is the Church’s intention that migrants would feel at home and not as “strangers” in a foreign land. In this regard, the Church is cognizant that it is meeting a physical need of these migrants since these migrants may not have easy access to food because of their work and living conditions. The logic for especially establishing the Training Centre, in contrast, is so that migrants have a place to go on their day off. In this regard, the Church’s intent is for migrants to develop a sense of belonging and security in a country distant from their homeland, while learning a skill they might consider useful, whether in their stay in Singapore or on return to their home countries.

### Contextualising ‘Home’: State and Church Constructions

According to the state, low-skilled migrants clearly constitute the ‘other’ in Singapore. That these migrants are only sojourners in Singapore is signalled by the fact that they are employed on work permit passes, which allow them to temporarily stay in Singapore for a fixed duration of two years (Devasahayam, 2010). Their temporary status is further delimited by the state through discriminatory policies that subject this migrant group to one set of labour rules while highly-skilled migrants face an entirely different compendium of regulations (Kaur, 2007). Furthermore, the labour laws for low-skilled migrants, such as (female) domestic workers and (male) construction workers, prohibits them from bringing their families with them into Singapore for extended periods of time as well as marrying a Singapore national. Deportation rules also apply to the temporary woman migrant worker in the event she is found to be pregnant. The same action is also undertaken by the state should a woman migrant be found to be HIV positive, a law that applies to male low-skilled migrants as well. While the “diasporic processes of separation and lived experience ‘elsewhere’ casts doubt over the naturalness of home” (Ramji, 2011), invariably in this case the

state only reinforces the migrants’ experience of Singapore as never being home to them. Thus, according to state discourse, migrant loyalties, identities and desires and, thus, home are in the ‘places [they] left behind’.

Clearly at the political scale, this group of migrants remain categorically as outsiders, informing political constructions of Singapore as a transit point for low-skilled workers in the migration trajectory. In other words, for low-skilled workers taking on jobs in Singapore, detachment from place is emphasised as these migrants are compelled to see Singapore as “liminal space” (Walsh, 2007: 509) in the migration process, although by law they are permitted to stay in the country beyond their two-year contracts as long as they are employed. For scores of women migrants, staying in Singapore for ten, fifteen or twenty years has become a reality. For this reason, the meanings of ‘temporality’ are not restricted to time or the duration of having left and returned home but, rather, also to how they are expected to construct, relate to and experience place.

In spite of state constructions of the temporality of these migrants, in the eyes of the Church, it views its role and function as becoming ‘family’ and thereby providing a ‘home’ to migrants to be important and integral to the migrant community. To this end, it views its programmes aimed at migrants as a means of providing a sense of ‘home’ and ‘family’ even if it means that these activities are constructions of what the Church perceives to be meaningful to women migrants. Moreover, from the perspective of the Church, it sees itself as a critical agent in removing any destabilising effects felt by this community as a result of moving from one place to another. Furthermore, the services and assistance rendered to migrants are seen as critical because migrants are physically separated from their own families left behind in their homeland and are simultaneously in a place and culture unfamiliar to them. Thus by no means do the programmes mean to activate the memories of these migrant women by simulating their experiences back home. Instead the migrant experience of home as created by the Church in Singapore is meant to foster a sense of belonging and familiarity among them in a place to

which they do not belong and are unfamiliar with. But in this regard, it is a 'temporary belonging' which forms the experience of migrants who attend these programmes because the time they would spend in Singapore is delimited by the labour laws of the country.

As already implied, for the Church, home need not refer to a distinct place and, as such, a static encounter but is a fluid experience of all people, including migrants, and therefore encapsulates "a continuous act of production and reproduction that is never fully complete" (Gedalof, 2003). As such, "producing home" on the part of the Church involves the enactment of processes encapsulated within a spectrum of activities directed at migrants. In opening up spaces within a location away from the homeland of migrants in its efforts to reach out to this group, it is the Church's intention that Singapore becomes a place that migrants can call 'home', feel accepted and welcomed for the time they are in the country. It is also hoped that migrants will subsequently be able to positively account for their lived experiences on their return home.

### Concluding Remarks

Moving with the tides of globalisation has been an explosion of human flows. With limited options for a better life in her home country, a migrant woman in Singapore has little choice but to "navigat[e] ... transnational routes to and from 'home' and 'host' ....perpetuated by the [country's] disciplinary policies of 'use and discard' (Yeoh, 2006: 150). Thus, the migration experience for temporary workers in Singapore is about leaving and returning to one's homeland because of state definitions attached to this migrant labour community. Until this policy feature in Singapore changes will local institutions such as the Catholic Church continue to create spaces that migrants can call home within the host country?

Clearly the Church's efforts at creating spaces for migrants are tantamount to "blur[ring] the distinction between here and there" (Ahmed et al., 2003: 4) so that locations far from home may also come to be experienced as home: a place where migrants can seek

solace, a place where they can identify with others and thereby call 'family', and a place where they feel welcomed and where their identity as foreigner diminishes such that the question of home and belonging cannot be separated. The example of ACMI's efforts to reach out to migrants, however, demonstrates that home goes beyond the confines of space and, for that matter, time, incorporating the possibility of thinking about home as an experience along a spectrum with multiple belongings created simultaneously (Beck, 2000). It is in this context that the Church provides an opportunity to migrants not only to view "migration as an ongoing process that involves continuing mobility and relationships across national borders" (Gustafson, 2005: 8) but also tempers how migrants come to conceive home and family.

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