



Cultural Dynamics among Indonesia Migrant Worker in Various Countries: Returned Migrants Point of View

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Abstract. As a melting pot of different cultures and backgrounds, host countries often present a challenge for migrants to maintain their cultural identity. This is especially true for Indonesian migrants who leave their home country in search of better opportunities in new lands. However, the journey to adapt to a new culture is not easy and often ends in social isolation. Often, these migrants struggle to navigate cultural differences and feel a sense of displacement. However, despite these challenges, many are still surviving and trying to blend in and adapt. They do this not only for economic reasons, but also to take advantage of the opportunity to gain experience and learn from different cultures. The objective of the research is to describe the context of cultural identity and its impact on social isolation as a cultural dynamic in a new environment which migrant worker overcome. Using qualitative data methods, this research aims to gain deeper understanding that migrant dynamics are not okay and it need a special attention from origin and host countries. Through their perseverance and determination to adapt, these migrants are able to bridge the gap between their cultural identity and the communities in which they currently live. This not only enriches their personal experience but also serves to increase cultural understanding and acceptance in the host country.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Social Isolation, Cultural Dynamics, Migrant Worker

1 Introduction

Migration impacts migrants by changing their identity both consciously and unconsciously. However, while these changes can be beneficial on individual, family, and collective levels, they can also create personal and relational problems. This study conceptualizes cultural dynamics among migrant workers as the multifaceted processes through which individuals and groups engage in adaptation, identity negotiation, and cultural exchange [1]. These processes are characterized by both reciprocal interactions and asymmetric power relations, where cultural influences can be mutual but are often shaped by hegemonic structures. The dynamics reflect the interplay between migrant agency and structural forces within the host society, resulting in both the preservation of cultural identity and the potential for cultural assimilation or dominance. Migrants create cultural melting pots and change the cultural composition of host societies simply through mixing [2]. Migrant workers often experience limitations, feeling trapped between their home culture and their host culture. As an example, language adaptation

tends to occur more quickly than changes in cultural behavior or knowledge acquisition [3], that there is a shift in mother tongue in overseas countries, so that migrants prefer to use common languages [4]. Some migrant workers, especially those pursuing higher education, can act as cultural intermediaries, mediating new cultural values and practices to their peers [5]. Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) are also trying to do something similar. Although many migrants integrate aspects of their host culture, they often maintain strong ties to their cultural practices. Factors such as type of employment, income, and marital status can influence the extent of cultural adaptation [6]. While migrants struggle to improve their economic lives, they are faced with the complicated issue of social isolation.

Social isolation, in the context of migrant workers, refers to the lack of meaningful social connections and interactions with others, which can lead to a diminished sense of belonging and support. This phenomenon is not only physical, due to geographic separation, but also psychological, arising from feelings of exclusion and alienation within the host society. Social isolation is compounded by structural barriers such as legal status, language barriers, and institutional constraints. For migrant workers, particularly in the agricultural sector, these barriers are intensified by irregular working conditions, remote living areas, and limited access to community networks. Research demonstrates that migrant workers in countries such as China, the United States, and Spain experience increased isolation due to these factors [7].

Contrary to social capital theory, which posits that migrant networks tend to strengthen over time, empirical studies of Tamaulipas agricultural workers suggest that an increasing migrant population may, paradoxically, exacerbate social isolation due to competition for scarce employment opportunities. For undocumented workers, this isolation is often correlated with mental health issues, including anxiety and depression [8]. Furthermore, the psychological toll of social isolation is amplified by experiences of stigmatization, cultural nonconformity, and familial tensions, which can erode self-esteem and strain personal relationships. In extreme cases, this may even lead to family breakdown. Despite these challenges, migrants actively engage in identity preservation strategies, striving to maintain a positive social identity in their new environment. These reflect a form of resilience, as migrants navigate and adapt to cultural differences while preserving their sense of self, even in the absence of direct supervision.

The study of the cultural dynamics of migrant workers has been widely discussed by researchers from various fields, including research examining economics which focused in improved income levels [9] [10] [11] and entrepreneurial spirit of returned migrants [12], also the uncertainty of migrant workers after returning to their country of origin [13] while other studies focused in sociological dimensions [14] [15], and psychological dimensions which focused in how migration affect migrant's mental

health [16] [17]. However, research on the social isolation experienced by migrants as a result of cultural dynamics is still very lacking. This research was conducted to complement existing deficiencies. Previous studies regarding the cultural dynamics of migrant workers include studies of migrant workers which saw that apart from the results of their work (money), migrant workers often export their host culture to their home countries [2]. Therefore, this research aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the social isolation experienced by migrants and how they survive these conditions, with the assumption that they merge the culture brought from their country of origin by adopting and adapting to the new culture in the receiving country.

2 Methods

The method used in this research is a qualitative design, which is organized into two main steps, namely observation and in-depth interviews to gain a deeper understanding of cultural dynamics among migrant workers. The initial step consists of direct observation of migrant workers' interactions and behavior in various situations. This phase helps in understanding the social context and cultural nuances that shape their experiences. Observations were carried out at community centers, social gatherings, and workplaces that frequently interact with migrant workers. Detailed field notes were taken to capture the intricacies of their daily lives, including non-verbal communication, social hierarchies and cultural rituals. The second step is to conduct in-depth interviews to dig deeper into the experiences of each migrant worker. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, focusing on individuals who returned to Indonesia after working in other countries. The selection is based on their unique experiences and perspectives, ensuring a diversity of viewpoints. In-depth interview participants were selected through a purposive sampling technique, namely individuals who had returned to Indonesia from various countries were selected based on their unique experiences and points of view. Interviews were conducted in the participant's native language and lasted approximately one hour. The collected data was transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis techniques to identify patterns and themes related to cultural dynamics among migrant workers. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of migration on cultural proximity.

3 Result and Discussion

The migration phenomenon often creates complex struggles for individuals regarding their cultural identity. This is especially visible in *Pekerja Migran Indonesia* (PMI) who are faced with the challenge of preserving their origins while adapting to the host country. The experience of social isolation is common for many Indonesian migrants as they face the differences between their country of origin and their new hometown.

Although it can feel intimidating at first, many are comforted by the opportunity to interact with a diverse group of individuals in their host country. One of the big challenges for PMI is having to be separated from their families for long periods of time. This move often creates deep feelings of loneliness and isolation, having a detrimental impact on their emotional well-being. In addition, adapting to a new culture and environment can be a tough task for PMIs as they face different social norms, language and living conditions. Additional restrictions on meeting fellow PMIs could further exacerbate feelings of isolation and hinder community support. In addition, demands at work can be enormous, with PMIs often having to work long hours, even on holidays, due to the need to earn additional income. The responsibility of caring for children, the elderly, and taking care of household tasks can also add to their already heavy workload. However, despite these challenges, PMIs have resilience and find ways to overcome them, using their experiences to grow both personally and professionally. Despite facing challenges and limitations in their work as PMI, many migrant workers find ways to survive and thrive. Becoming a PMI worker also opens up opportunities for cultural exchange and adaptation.

3.1 Cultural dynamics amidst challenges faced by *Pekerja Migran Indonesia*

Many workers are still drawn to the country by its promise of better economic opportunities. For some people, this is an opportunity to support their families back home and ensure a better future for their children, like Sukirah, one of the Indonesian migrant workers from Cilacap. Despite facing various challenges as a PMI, Sukirah remains dedicated to her work and beliefs. He was grateful for the understanding and support of his employer who allowed him to carry out his worship, even though initially he could not fast due to communication problems. With a starting salary of 350 ringgit/month, Sukirah is able to support herself and her family. As his workload increased, he was grateful to receive a salary increase of up to 700 ringgit/month, which enabled him to better meet his family's needs. However, Sukirah is not allowed to operate electronic equipment by her employer. This is very challenging for Sukirah, especially because she has limited access to electricity at her residence provided by her employer. Apart from that, due to strict employer policies, Sukirah is not allowed to meet fellow PMI workers outside working hours. Despite her limitations, Sukirah remains committed to her work and is grateful for the opportunities it has given her and her family. The salary he earns he uses to cover important expenses such as housing and his children's school fees.

Others see it as a stepping stone to gain new skills and knowledge, with the hope of eventually finding better job opportunities abroad. One example is Sukirah's friend, Yemilia, who left her family in Indonesia to work as a PMI in Malaysia more than a decade ago. According to Sukirah, Yemilia has gained valuable experience and language skills while in Malaysia and was able to get better job opportunities in countries such as Singapore and South Korea. This success story has inspired many

other PMIs to also pursue higher dreams, beyond just working in Malaysia. However, this also means that they have to face the challenges of leaving their families for long periods of time and adapting to a new culture and environment. But for these determined workers, the rewards they receive are greater than the difficulties they face as they continue to strive for a better future. Migrant workers working in Hong Kong and Taiwan, like Sutyem, also experience other unique cultural dynamics. For example, many of them work as PMI (private migrant insurance) in Hong Kong, taking care of the household, while others work in Taiwan to care for the elderly. Unfortunately, some of them were forced to stop working due to unforeseen circumstances, such as the death of their employer, and had to return to Indonesia. However, despite these difficulties, they found solace in their faith and spirituality. In fact, they are allowed to continue practicing their religion while working abroad. Every Sunday, these dedicated workers gather with fellow PMIs at Victoria Park in Hong Kong to pray and seek comfort and support from each other. It was heartwarming for them to see how they formed a close-knit community far from home. There are even those who have a similar background, as quoted from the informant:

“...my husband was also a PMI in Malaysia before returning to Indonesia and now taking up odd jobs in the village.” (Sukirah, 50 y.o. in the middle of interview in June, 2022).

With their hard-earned salaries, many are able to invest in homes or land in their home countries, which is a testament to their determination and resilience. Another migrant worker, Ratmini, faced many challenges and experiences while working as a PMI in Singapore. Even though he is far from his family and loved ones, he is responsible for looking after his employer's children, taking care of the household, and even looking after the elderly. He also has to live in a household with a large family, which can sometimes be overwhelming. Apart from her household responsibilities, Ratmini had to overcome various obstacles in order to qualify to work as a PMI. Even though he was below the minimum age requirement, his height exceeded the minimum height requirement of 145 cm, so he was able to get a job. In the past, many Indonesian women were motivated to become PMI because of their desire to be independent and earn their own income. Luckily, Ratmini was able to continue practicing her religious beliefs while working in Singapore. However, one of the restrictions he faces is that he is not allowed to meet fellow PMIs outside working hours. Despite these challenges, Ratmini's husband also found work as a credit counter officer, which gave them additional financial stability through salary and other benefits such as housing, land and vehicles such as cars.

4 Conclusion

The experiences of *Pekerja Migran Indonesia*'s (PMIs) are multifaceted, encompassing significant challenges and rich opportunities for cultural exchange and personal growth. Separation from family, adaptation to a new culture, and demanding working

conditions are the main difficulties faced by PMI. Despite these difficulties, they demonstrated extraordinary resilience, utilizing their roles to learn local customs and share their cultural heritage, thereby fostering an inclusive work environment. Religious practices and community-building activities provide solace and support, helping them maintain their faith and form close-knit communities. Economic motivation drives PMIs to work abroad, and many of them achieve financial stability and acquire new skills that open doors to better opportunities. Through their determination, PMI not only improves their own lives but also contributes to cultural diversity and understanding in their host countries. Working closely with the employer's family allows PMI to learn about local customs, traditions, and even language. They are able to share their own culture and introduce new culinary delights to their households. In addition, on the Eid al-Fitr holiday, entrepreneurs often invite their PMI to join in celebrating and celebrating the holiday, thereby providing a sense of togetherness and friendship. This exchange of cultural knowledge can create a more inclusive and diverse work environment for both parties. Additionally, providing regular religious services to PMIs not only allows them to maintain their beliefs but also increases understanding and acceptance among different religious beliefs. For some people, their dedication to their employer and desire to earn additional income drives them to work longer hours on supposed holidays. Others find comfort in their faith and are allowed to practice their religious beliefs through worship. However, restrictions on not being able to meet with fellow PMIs can create feelings of isolation and a lack of community support.

Despite these difficulties, many migrant workers adapt and create a sense of community within themselves, finding strength in each other's company and mutual understanding. Their shared experiences as migrant workers abroad unite them, forming close friendships that provide a sense of belonging and support. This friendship also serves as a means of emotional release and respite from the demands of their work. Additionally, some PMIs have found creative ways to connect with coworkers, such as through social media or holding meetings during breaks. This small act of rebellion against imposed isolation demonstrated the workers' resilience and determination to create a sense of community despite the obstacles placed upon them. It is through these cultural dynamics that migrant workers continue to gain strength and support in both their work and personal lives.

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