

Book Review: Missbach, Antje: Troubled Transit: Asylum Seekers Stuck in Indonesia

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Book Review

Missbach, Antje (2015), *Troubled Transit: Asylum Seekers Stuck in Indonesia*

Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, Yusof Ishak Institute, ISBN 978-981-4620-56-7, 289 pages

Cross-border migration in Southeast Asia has been predominantly seen through the spectre of labour migration and the economics of this major flow of people into and across the region, from labour-sending to labour-receiving countries. Less attention has been paid to those crossing borders irregularly or in search of protection. These border crossers have been caught up in the securitisation and militarisation of borders in Southeast Asia, sometimes at the behest of regional destination countries such as Australia, or due to increased threats of terrorism.

Thus, much attention has been paid to the illegality of these border crossings; often, the way that people smuggling and trafficking is written about in Southeast Asia is from a geopolitical angle or one that explicitly foregrounds legal frameworks rather than lived experiences. Missbach's monograph addresses this gap by weaving together the politics, economics, and social drivers of transit migration through Indonesia to Australia and by focusing more on the people actually making the journey.

This is an important monograph that sheds light on an under-researched area of anthropology and regional affairs. It straddles the space between political science monograph and ethnography, moving from personal stories of migrants to national and international migration statistics, detention numbers, and interviews with officials. Not many researchers have gained the level of insight and insider status in so many arenas of migration as Monash University-based social anthropologist Antje Missbach. She flows effortlessly between ethnographic research with people she calls "transit migrants" and interviews with staff from detention facilities, the Indonesian police, and international and local organisations involved in the service provision, apprehension, and detention of asylum seekers and refugees. This is what good ethnography is all about – placing the particular into the bigger picture of international migration and refugee flows.

The chapters that deal with the ethnographic exploration of the refugee world thus provide the reader with the richest insights. One chapter explicitly recounts the experiences of detention in Indonesia, a dark chapter that demonstrates the interconnectedness of a transit state's

detention network with destination-state policies. In this case, Australia's role in funding and supporting Indonesian detention facilities shows the regional scope of Australia's border protection network.

Refugees and asylum seekers often get stuck in Indonesia in detention or end up living in limbo because they cannot afford an onward journey, because they do not qualify for resettlement via the UNHCR, or because the sea route to Australia is too dangerous or has been rendered inaccessible by policy changes that happened towards the end of Missbach's fieldwork. Today, hardly any boats leave Indonesia for Australia, because the so-called Pacific Solution II means anyone intercepted by Australian authorities will be processed offshore without access to Australian legal protection. The people Missbach calls transit migrants know about these changes and make conscious decisions about their journey. As Missbach reminds the reader, "though transit migrants may be vulnerable, they are not passive and helpless" (p. 18).

At the beginning of the book there is an important section on methodology that highlights the difficulty in triangulating information from highly mobile interlocutors, especially information pertaining to migration routes. Thus, as researchers we must always bear in mind the multi-directionality of migration aspirations, stories, and biographies (p. 20). Indeed, the search for the truth often takes us to stories, myths, and misunderstandings that require painstaking listening, recording, and re-reading of interviews and other data to get at the heart of the story, for there may be not one but several truths about the migration journey.

The focus is not only the migrants themselves, as Missbach also draws attention to the various domestic drivers in Indonesia that have hitherto prohibited a more compassionate or systematic approach to refugees. Much like Malaysia, Indonesia worries of the cost of such a refugee-processing mechanism. Missbach argues that a greater worry may be that if such a policy were implemented, "Australia could then designate Indonesia as a safe first country and return people there, which Indonesia wants to avoid more than anything else" (p. 122). These are political stratagems at a high level, but Missbach also recounts the view of an academic at an Indonesian university who said, "if we treat the smuggled people too nicely, they won't stop coming" (p. 113).

Chapter 7 charts the sometimes rocky history of Indonesia–Australia relations over the last two decades. It is nonetheless a good primer to understanding the patchy policy and operational cooperation between the two countries that co-chair the Bali Process, a range of fora and meetings that aim to curb people smuggling and trafficking in the region. Whilst both countries can agree on the need to curb transnational crime

through cooperation and to create a robust legal framework to deal with such offences, the picture on the ground seems more complicated. Missbach singles out corruption as a major obstacle to domestic reform and meaningful international cooperation. She recounts the embezzlement, extortion, and self-enrichment of detention staff and notes that “law enforcement and the prosecution of people smugglers have been severely impeded by corruption and the involvement of Indonesian *oknum* (dishonest law enforcement officers)” (p. 164).

This monograph is a welcome addition to a field of study we desperately need to know more about, and one can only hope that policymakers read and learn from it. It is a book written for a broad audience and thus offers an impactful study of transit migration in this world region. As an anthropologist, I would have hoped for more ethnographic vignettes about the refugees and asylum seekers and the people working to detain them, profit from them, and help them: recommendations for the next book!

Gerhard Hoffstaedter

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