

Psycho-Pious Motivations and Muslim Migration to the West: The Case of Singaporean Malay-Muslims in Melbourne, Australia

Motivasi Psiko-Soleh dan Migrasi Orang Muslim di Barat: Kes Melayu-Muslim Singapura di Melbourne, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Muslim migration to the West has witnessed a surge in the last few decades in light of a host of crises and conflicts that have been taking place across the Muslim world. This article analyses the case of a group of Muslims from a stable and highly-developed country that similarly took the life-changing step of migrating to the West. We argue that one of the crucial factors that have driven Malay-Muslims from Singapore to migrate to Australia is what could be termed as “psycho-pious motivations.” By this, we mean motivations that are borne out of a negative psychological context and of being in a disadvantaged position when it comes to religiosity, thus generating the desire to relocate to a different country where a better life and the freedom to enliven one’s religiosity can be fully realized.

Keywords: Migration; Muslims; Singapore; Motivations; Piety Psychology

ABSTRAK

Penghijrahan orang-orang Muslim ke Barat telah menunjukkan lonjakan peningkatan dalam beberapa dekad yang lalu berikutan pelbagai krisis dan konflik yang telah berlaku di seluruh dunia Islam. Artikel ini menganalisis kes sekumpulan orang Islam dari sebuah negara yang stabil dan maju mengambil langkah mengubah hidup berhijrah ke Barat. Artikel ini memberikan pandangan dan hujah bahawa salah satu faktor penting yang mendorong orang Melayu-Islam dari Singapura untuk berhijrah ke Australia ialah apa yang boleh diistilahkan sebagai “motivasi psiko-soleh.” Maksudnya ialah motivasi yang lahir daripada konteks psikologi negatif yang merasakan diri berada dalam kedudukan yang kurang bernasib baik dalam soal amalan keagamaan, sekali gus mendorong keinginan untuk berpindah ke negara lain di mana kehidupan yang lebih baik dengan kebebasan menghidupkan amalan agama seseorang boleh direalisasikan sepenuhnya.

Kata kunci: Penghijrahan; Muslim; Singapura; Motivasi; Psikologi-soleh

INTRODUCTION

Why do Muslims migrate in large numbers to western countries? The answers to this question seem straightforward enough. Many Muslims from crisis-stricken countries migrate to Australia, New Zealand, Europe and North America to escape poverty, violent conflicts, abuses of power, corruption and rampant unemployment. Most perceive these western countries as safe havens where jobs are aplenty, where education and standards of living are significantly higher than back home and where the rule of law as well as democracy and free speech prevail.¹ Beyond these reasons, there is a factor that has been generally neglected in existing studies of Muslim migration to the west: the intertwining relationship between psychology

and piety. In this article, we argue that the primary driving force for Singaporean Malay-Muslims to migrate to Melbourne (Australia) lies in what we term as *psycho-pious motivations*. More about this concept will be explained below. Our research seeks to expand the current research on the psychology of Muslim migration in a few ways.

First, we hope to go beyond the prevailing scholarship on the psychology of Muslim migrants that are often focussed on the larger theme of acculturation stress. Such research devotes its attention to problems of adjustment in a new society, and inter-group relations between immigrants and host country residents.² Gretty M. Mirdal, for example, studied the somatic complaints of Turkish migrant women in Denmark in the 1980s,³ and followed up two decades later to investigate

the changes that had taken place in actual living conditions and subjective perception of well-being of these women.⁴ The research on psychological adaptability of Muslim migrants, or the lack of it, makes the same argument that Muslims from war-torn and conflict-ridden countries are least likely to integrate well into western societies.⁵ Very little attention, if any, has been given to psychological motivations of Muslim migrants from developed and generally stable countries. The case of Singaporean Malay-Muslims fills this gap.

Secondly, we endeavour to extend existing insights on the cognitive drivers of migration. Though works on the psychological motivations to migrate are few and far between, in the last couple of years, there are a few studies on the psychological states of potential migrants that have proven particularly useful for our research. The first is a study by Jean-Luc Cerdin, Manel Abdeljalil Diné and Chris Brewster which investigates why educated and skilled immigrants in France migrated into the country as well as their strategies of integration with French society.⁶ The group of immigrants in this study is similar in profile to the Singaporean Malay-Muslim migrants in Melbourne in numerous ways. Firstly, most Malay-Muslim migrants in Australia from Singapore are qualified immigrants from economically stable middle-class backgrounds. Secondly, like the French immigrants from North Africa (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) Malay-Muslim migrants from Singapore who have migrated to Australia experience significant cultural differences with their host society. Issues of cultural preservation and the freedom of religious practices have been expressed by respondents in a recent paper of ours.⁷ Another study by Zsuzsa Györffy, Diana Dweik and Edmond Girasek probes into the correlation between the willingness to migrate and the potential effects of burnout.⁸ According to them, “emotional exhaustion and depersonalization dimensions of burnout have direct impact on the willingness to migrate.” Singaporean Malay-Muslim migrants, as we shall show later, cite such psychological challenges as their reasons for migration.

Most importantly, we would like to add another dimension that has encouraged Muslim migration to the west, which is piety. By far, no study has correlated psychology and piety in shaping decisions for migration. We argue here that the perceptions of discrimination and discriminatory practices toward Islam coupled by the stresses of

Singaporean living have pushed some Singaporean Malay-Muslims into taking the life-changing decision of relocating to Melbourne, Australia. We call such motivations for migration, *psycho-pious motivations*. As we will show, these motivations are borne out of a negative psychological context and of being in a disadvantaged position when it comes to religiosity, thus generating the desire to relocate to a different country where a better life and the freedom to enliven one’s religiosity can be fully realized. Psycho-pious motivations, we further argue, may be born out of actual experiences or perceptions. Either way, psycho-pious motivations are powerful in encouraging even the most successful Singaporean Malay-Muslims to migrate out of the country and start life as well as their careers anew just for the sake of being liberated from the constraints of uncompromising secularism and excessive competitiveness in Singapore.

This paper proceeds in three parts. The first part discusses the various strains that Singaporeans in general face living in a highly competitive and fast-moving country, and psychosomatic problems that have arisen from this. We also show how these strains bear most heavily on the Malay-Muslims who are at the lowest end of the socio-economic ladder in Singapore. In the second part, we expound the first cluster of psycho-pious motivations which consist largely of the longing for a balanced Muslim lifestyle in Australia. Singaporean Malay-Muslim migrants hope that migration would afford them more time for their faith and families than in Singapore. In the third part, we delve into the second cluster of psycho-pious motivations which is the feeling of being discriminated and of being over-regulated, particularly in the realm of their religious practices, identity and socio-economic as well as political status. We conclude this paper with reflections on how the concept of “psycho-pious motivations” could be used to study other religious minorities and the decisions to migrate out of their home countries.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on data collected between October 2019 and February 2020, although initial contacts have already been established with Singapore Malay-Muslims in Melbourne in a pilot project that was conducted between January 2015 to December 2016. Before beginning the fieldwork in Melbourne throughout December 2019, we

contacted Singapore Malay-Muslims through social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram. The sample size was limited to those between the ages of 30 to 60 years old who have stayed in Melbourne for at least 3 years. All have obtained either Permanent Residency (PR) in Australia or have become Australian citizens. They were informed of the research project and were supplied with preliminary questions of the interview. This move proved to be rewarding as 30 Singapore Malay-Muslims (20 males and 10 females) eventually agreed to be interviewed. From this group, we find the insights of 20 interviewees (12 males and 10 females) to be most instructive.

All interviews were carried out in English and Malay, whichever the interviewees were comfortable with. We put to productive use what Steinar Kvale termed as “semi-structured life-world interview” that “comes close to an everyday conversation, but as a professional interview it has a purpose and involves a specific approach and technique; it is semi-structured – it is neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire.”⁹ Interviewees were free to go into directions that are, at times, unrelated to the questions posed to them. We also visited the homes and community gathering places of Singapore Malay-Muslims in the northern, eastern and southeastern suburbs of Melbourne. Interviews and casual conversations were made at public food joints, cafes as well as during recreational sessions to get more insights in more relaxed and less formal settings. To triangulate the data gathered from face-to-face interviews, another round of interviews was carried out in January and February 2020 via phone calls and social media to further supplement the data gathered earlier on. The names of the people interviewed are kept confidential here and pseudonyms are used throughout.

A word on demography. Out of a population of nearly six million, Malays in Singapore number 535,824, and make up 13.4 per cent of the country’s resident population.¹⁰ 99 per cent of Malays in Singapore are Muslims, and for this reason the term ‘Malay-Muslim’ is often used interchangeably in identifying Singaporean Malays.¹¹ In terms of education, the educational attainment of Malays are still below national average.¹² Malays in Singapore who have post-secondary educational qualifications form 35.9 per cent of the community.¹³ The respondents for our paper are categorised within this segment of the Malay community, with all possessing certificates at the post-secondary

school level. Nonetheless, Malays generally have a good mastery of English and even in two or more languages, surpassing other communities in the country.¹⁴

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

THE STRESSES OF BEING SINGAPOREAN AND SINGAPORE MALAY-MUSLIMS

Works across different fields on stress and anxiety among Singaporeans have grown exponentially in the last few decades. Most noteworthy are the stresses faced among students and educators which is topic that has been examined by various researchers.¹⁵ Patterns of suicide among Singaporeans of different racial and religious backgrounds have received significant attention since the 1980s.¹⁶ As recently as 2018, the high rate of suicide in Singapore was recorded at 8.36 suicides per 100,000 Singapore residents, prompting more studies on the subject matter and a concerted national strategy of achieving a “zero-suicide society.”¹⁷ There is a positive correlation between suicides and work stress as well as occupational burnout among different professional groups in Singapore.¹⁸ Stress and anxiety have been cited as significant push factors for Singaporeans to migrate overseas, to places such as Canada and Australia. Contributing to the stress and anxiety of life in Singapore is the high cost of living; lack of work-life balance; pressure and competition in school; as well as crowding and congestion in the urban city.¹⁹

On the issue of high cost of living, all of our respondents cited Singapore’s exorbitant lifestyle as one of the main reasons for migration out of Singapore. The 2020 Cost of Living (COL) index by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) reports Singapore, along with Osaka and Hong Kong, as the world’s most expensive city to live in.²⁰ Singapore’s reputation as one of the most expensive cities to reside in has been consistent since the last two decades and is barely in congruent with the rise in wages especially among the Malays. According to the 2010 census, Malays in Singapore have a household monthly income of SGD 4,575.²¹ Although this official figure may suggest that Malays are able to cope with the cost of living in the country, the reality is however more complex. Malays generally have larger families than other communities and therefore less savings needed for unexpected unemployment or failing health. The

2015 Singapore Household Survey states that: “The Malays had more children than the Chinese and the Indians on average. Among resident ever-married females aged 40-49 years, the Malays had an average of 2.64 children in 2015, higher than the Indians (1.94) and the Chinese (1.73).”²² Malays are also the highest represented within the underclass and working class category and are often trapped within a poverty trap as they seek to survive within a high-cost environment that polices the poor.²³ Indeed, one recent analysis concluded that inequality that exist in Singapore has reached a point that “the balance has swung too far towards prioritizing the economy over the society.”²⁴

Many Malay migrants anticipated, like other Singaporeans, that their retirement savings would not be enough to survive in an increasingly costly country. One of our respondents, Andi (aged 48 years old) explained to us:

“The cost of living in Singapore is ridiculously high... With the Central Provident Fund (CPF)²⁵ minimum sum scheme, we don’t get to stretch our retirement savings. The monthly pay-out annuity from CPF is barely enough to keep us alive. With the cost of living increasing at much quicker pace than salary increments, lives of the average Singaporeans are only getting tougher as the years go by... Here in Australia, I can at least see a comfortable retirement scenario where my wife and I can survive comfortably on government pension pay-outs, especially after the house and car are fully paid. The land we live on is freehold, not a 99-year lease like in Singapore. The car is ours for keeps without having to buy a new one every 10 years at exorbitant prices.”

Connected to the high cost of living is the problem of overworking. Although the city-state is well-known for its remarkable efficiency and economic growth, it has ranked very low in terms of work-life balance.²⁶ Much like South Korea, the Singapore government has implemented several policies such as encouraging workplace flexibility, institutionalizing a five-day work week and increasing leave days for maternity, paternity, sickness and on compassionate grounds. But such policies are barely effective in reducing long work hours (more than 46 hours a week) as companies and governmental institutions are largely geared toward staying competitive with other developed economies by moving away from taking a non-welfarist stand and embracing fully the aims of neoliberal capitalism. Labour unions in the country are also generally weak and “the state appears to be pushing for the responsibilities of proper time management for a healthy lifestyle back upon employers and individual workers.”²⁷ Another respondent we spoke

to by the pseudonym “Lin (in her late 30s)” was formerly a schoolteacher and currently a homemaker after migrating to Melbourne related the problem poor work-life balance in Singapore. She described that she has “more time now to indulge in physical activities such as jogging and Zumba which she could not in Singapore due to massive deadlines week after week.” When asked about working life in Singapore, another respondent, Sara (in her early 40s) said it pointedly: “Hectic, it’s a rush most of the time. The competitiveness sometimes can be quite stifling.” Jannah (37 years old), an IT data analyst explained at length:

“Both my husband and I worked in the same dept in the same govt agency and when work got busy (which is almost all the time), both of us would get involved. There were times when we didn’t get to see each other and there were also times when I hardly interacted with my children. Most of the time when we reached home, they were already asleep... We tried [to change our lifestyle to achieve a balance between our careers and families] but the challenges of living in Singapore’s society made us even more frustrated, that we decided the move is a must and acted on it until we finally migrated... We tried to change our lifestyle to achieve a balance between our careers and families. The challenges of living in Singapore’s society made us even more frustrated.”

The idea of burnout feature prominently in the narratives of Singapore Malay-Muslim migrants in Australia, even if the terms ‘burnout’ and ‘exhaustion’ were not explicitly used. Burnout affects not only Singaporean workers but also younger generation Singaporeans who are in the face of acute pressure and competition in schools. With the push for global rankings come rising numbers of students seeking psychiatric help, an increasing number of whom have resorted to self-harm and suicide.²⁸ A global survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that, despite high achievements in their studies, Singaporean students have higher level of distress and the fear of failure more than in any other nation.²⁹ Malay children suffer from an added strain. Malays are the lowest educated group in the country. Because most Malays belong to the working class and therefore rely on dual incomes, most parents cannot afford to teach their children or send their children for tuition or supplementary classes which are necessary given the rising demands of Singapore’s educational curriculum. The inability to do well in schools and the lack of support in terms of resources have generated a vicious cycle: Malay youths generally have low educational aspirations and will do poorly

in education like the preceding generation.³⁰ Even middle class Malays find it difficult to cope with the pressures of Singapore's educational system. One of them whom we interviewed, Uddin (aged 38), was a schoolteacher in Singapore. He lamented to us that students, including with children, are stressed as early as their primary school years. He decided to migrate to Melbourne because his family "wanted an education system that was free from the stresses of PSLE and other exams... Even though the Singapore education system is good, we wanted something more than just examination-based learning."

The burnout that both Malay parents and children experienced are push factors for migration. In line with this, Gyorffy et al. (2018) posit that:

"Burnout of caregivers and their willingness to migrate are in potential correlation. In other words, the wish to change one's work and life conditions can be a plausible response to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and decreased personal accomplishment. The intention to work abroad could fulfil this wish."³¹

Nor is this all. One added reason for migration is overcrowding due to the diminutive size of Singapore. Most respondents said that Singapore has become "boring," "predictable" and "congested." They ended up going to the same places, doing the same things during leisurely hours. RB, a male interviewee who is 49 years old told us that in there is "more to explore [in Australia] during leisure time instead of the usual crowded shopping centres in Singapore." It is obvious that the reasons that motivated Singaporean to seek greener pastures elsewhere in the early 1990s still apply to newer generation of migrants that we interviewed for this study.³² A recent report by the Singapore Institute of Policy Studies suggests the same conclusion that Singaporeans are living overseas to escape the stresses and pressures of a dense global city.³³

PSYCHO-PIOUS MOTIVATION I: DREAMING OF A BALANCED MUSLIM LIFE

Coming largely from less developed countries, Muslims migrants to the West are faced with profound challenges. They usually have to work their way up through the ranks of various occupations, sometimes taking on two jobs for some years, before they are able to live decent lives. The trade-offs that come with this is the loss of quality time with families, friends and also religious pursuits, along with fatigue. With such loss comes psychological distress and disillusionment over migration.³⁴

Singapore Malay migrants we spoke to are aware of psychological stresses that affect other migrants. In fact, almost half of our interviewees mentioned that, prior to migration, they were anticipating being unemployed, underemployed or take on numerous part time jobs before finally settling onto permanent arrangements. The same applies with their places of residence and schooling for children. Most were informed that migration to Australia meant constant movement within Australia itself.

Still, our interviewees saw Melbourne as a site where a balanced Muslim life could be pursued. But what is a balanced Muslim life? Amidst some minor differences between migrants we spoke to, a few definitive criteria are discernible: social security and income; familial happiness and faith time. The first criteria set forth by Singapore Malay migrants is support from the state or other non-state actors to sustain their families upon arrival and in the first few years of migration. Because all of whom we spoke to already secured their Permanent Resident Status prior to moving to Melbourne, they were confident that the Centerlink social services would provide them much-needed support in times of unemployment. Extensive social security provided by the various state agencies in Australia stands in contrast to the Singapore state's neoliberal capitalist approach is one factor which Singapore Malay migrants saw as enabling for them to feel confident to migrate with their families.³⁵ As Tas (aged 50) put it:

"My wife and I had good jobs in Singapore and we accumulated enough savings. But we were barely happy with the busy lives we had. We wanted to migrate. It is about careful planning. It is also about knowing that Australia has more to offer than Singapore. I have worked so long in Singapore. After two jobs and rising up the ladder, I realize there is no balance at all. Things are expensive. I come back late every day. I had so little time to deepen my knowledge of Islam. My children don't spend much time interacting with me on weekdays. In Singapore, if you have money, you are somewhat safe. If you don't have money, no job, the systems will not be there to help you. I am also ready to take on any jobs in Melbourne... We are grateful for the added financial cushion from Centrelink as I wanted my wife to be a homemaker. We have four kids. There is some sort of a safety net. In a way, the system here is pro family."

Tas underlines the impact of work burnout among Singapore Malay who made the decision to migrate to Australia. They are not seeking to remain in the same industry they were in prior to migration and are willing to work in other professions, even lower end ones. In this case, it seems that their

psychological state is 'beyond immediate repair'. It is clear that they do not hope for a better workplace when they migrated but a better life overall. We argue that they move to repair their psychological state which includes leading a balance Muslim life, and not just to be in a better work environment. Also, Tas' admission that earning just enough to survive is shared by Daran (in his mid-50s) who said that he was looking for happiness in Australia. After migration, his dream of having a balanced life in Australia is fulfilled: "There is no rat race here in Australia. Over here, you have more time for your family and you can pursue your passion or take up new hobby." These accounts bear resemblance with Japanese migrants to Australia. Many were already doing relatively well in their careers but decided to move to the island continent to escape the highly stressful working schedules they previously had. They accepted downward mobility in exchange of more time for leisure aside from social security which Australia afforded them.³⁶

Indeed, more than earning enough to survive and assured assistance from the state, Singapore Malay migrants defined 'balanced Muslim life' as one that includes familial happiness. They seek happiness from themselves, their spouses and children, both at home as well as at work and in schools. One of the sources of happiness is the place of residence. Ahmad (aged 57) showed us around his freehold property, explaining the various spaces where his children and wife regard as uniquely theirs and take pride in. A huge kitchen, a nice garden, a playing area, rooms for every child; these are spaces that life in Melbourne offer which is not possible in Singapore where most have to live in flats where space is limited. Due to the scarcity of land, Singapore flats are getting smaller and micro-living is the new normal for Singaporeans.³⁷ Ahmad felt that: "That was not what I wanted to my family. I am happier now because I have a beautiful backyard. We have different plants here. I organize gatherings with many friends and families. There is no problem with having many people to come because this is a big enough house."

Beyond the luxury of space, Singapore migrants derive happiness from less stressful working and educational environments. Zad who is in his late 40s said that one of the allures of Australia is its "excellent work life balance." Similarly, Hassan (a businessman aged 47) explained: "My main motivation was wanting my daughter to grow up in an environment like I grew up back in those days

of Singapore. Also it's a 'call to action' that my late dad told to leave Singapore if I have the means. Go out of Singapore. My late dad was quite a visionary man." What he meant by Singapore "in those days" was in the 1980s when life was much slower. Aidan (an operations support manager in her 30s) also maintained that they were motivated to migrate because they had the impression that there is "not much stress compared to being in Singapore; kids are happier, they get their study balance. Study and play. As a parent, [they] want to see [their] kids enjoy their childhood rather than slogging all their way everyday with tonnes of homework back in Singapore." Most of our respondents noted that they expected their children to be happier due to the slower pace of studies, lower demands in educational success, less homework and also caring teachers.

There are traces of migrant utopianism in these accounts. The reality of work-life balance in Australia is not as rosy as many Singapore Malay migrants imagined it to be. The Australia's welfare report 2017 shows that 20 per cent men and 7 per cent women were working 50 hours or more per week in 2015. This figure is two hours more than the International Labour Standards on Working Time. The number of Australians and migrants engaged in part-time work is also higher than most Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Granted that the educational systems in Australia is less taxing than Singapore, however career prospects are limited despite the availability of highly skilled population. More than one-fourth of university graduates every batch are unemployed or underemployed since 2016. The report states:

"The proportion of young people (aged 15–24) in full-time work is decreasing, and the percentage working part time is increasing. This trend is consistent with that for all people of working age (see Chapter 4.1 'The changing nature of work and worker wellbeing'). As at March 2017, 27% of people aged 15–24 worked full time, compared with 35% 10 years ago and 48% 30 years ago. The proportion working part time in 2017 was 31%—increasing from 28% a decade ago and 13% three decades ago (AIHW analysis of ABS 2017). Understanding employment outcomes and opportunities for young people is complicated by the fact that young people are generally disproportionately affected by tough labour market conditions. Labour market outcomes have not improved for Australians aged 15–29 since 2008 (OECD 2016a)—as reflected in the youth unemployment rate. This rate has continued to rise since the Global Financial Crisis, but has been consistently higher than the overall unemployment rate over many years (13% in 2016 compared with an overall unemployment rate of 5.7%).³⁸

Even so, for Singapore Malays, the lack of employment prospects is counterbalanced by a

more sense of excitement, the prospect of exploring a new country and to adopt a new way of life. The last aspiration is connected to their belief that, while in Melbourne, they will have more time to fulfil their religious obligations with their families. They expressed their wish to have more time to attend religious classes, to be involved in mosque and other religious-related activities. Singapore Malays such as Nira (aged 40) are optimistic that they will be better off “mentally and physically in Australia.” She added that “There are various job opportunities especially for those who love to think out of the box – that also means endless learning potentials. Family and work life balance can be found here. My family now lives on one income. I am able to raise happy children and my husband has ample time and flexibility at work to be with family.” A balanced Muslim life to them is to feel a sense of fulfilment, in carrying out their duties as pious parents and as responsible Muslims.

PSYCHO-PIOUS MOTIVATION II: LIBERATION FROM OVER-REGULATION

That the Singapore state regulates religions in the country has been widely discussed by experts in the field. Whether one chooses to accept Singapore’s brand of secularism as “strategic”, “pluralist”, “accommodative”, “patronage”, “muscular”, “provincial” or “electoral”, there is little disagreement over extensive surveillance which the state invests in the management of Islam and Muslims. The strict regulation of the faith and its adherents is tied to the geographical location of Singapore wedged within one of the largest Muslim regions in the world. The rise of global radicalism, increasing Islamic assertiveness and the turn of expressive piety on the part of Muslims since the 1970s have spurred the passing of more laws and the establishment of institutions and programmes to ensure that Muslims in Singapore remain “moderate.” “Moderation” here means accepting that some aspects of Islamic practices, identity and beliefs can be compromised to show that Muslims are fully integrated and compliant citizens.³⁹ For Singapore Malay migrants we interviewed, this is one crucial factor encouraging them to leave Singapore: to escape over-regulation.

We used the term “over-regulation” here because the Singapore Muslims are not against all forms of regulation of Islam. They are aware that Islam in the West is regulated in one way or the another. All interviewees were cognizant

that Australia has policies in place to ensure that religions abide to demands of what it means to be Australian. Singapore Malay migrants’ concern is with the uncompromising and gendered nature of regulatory schemes in Singapore. For this reason, our female interviewees are most vocal in bringing to light the challenges they faced in Singapore. Their psycho-pious motivation for migration is ignited by their inability to maintain their outward Islamic identity in Singapore. Mar who is a nurse in her early 50s explained: “Here, I can wear my *hijab* (Muslim headscarf) at work. There are no uniforms and I am working in one of the best hospitals in Melbourne. My managers respect my religion even though I am the only Muslim in my workplace.” Another nurse, Sara (whom we cited earlier), too highlight her decision to move Australia because of the restrictions regarding the donning of the *hijab* among nurses in Singapore. However, she revealed to us that the over-regulation she experienced in Singapore became something useful for her when she finally made the move to Australia. It made her more sensitive of patients and colleagues who may not be comfortable with *hijab* and a reminder for her to maintain a high level of professionalism and maintain the best conduct as a Muslim nurse.

In my line of work, Singapore has well equipped me to handle any situation. I remembered fellow colleagues were impressed by what Singaporean nurses can do. There were two occasions – just two I can remember – where the patients [in Melbourne] looked and behaved towards me differently. I wear *hijab* at work and my colleagues are fine with how I look or dress. I think coming from Singapore with it being a cosmopolitan city, we are more adaptive as to how we carry ourselves in any environment.”

As of 2019 when we interviewed Malays in Melbourne, there were no changes in the policy of disallowing the wearing of the *hijab* for Muslim healthcare workers and those in other uniformed-based occupations.⁴⁰ Needless to say, the *hijab* is but one example of the state’s over-regulation that has spurred Singapore Malays to migration. Another point of contention is the entry into Islamic schools (known in Singapore as *madrasah*). The last two decades have witnessed an increased interest among Muslim parents to send their children to the six full-time Islamic schools in Singapore which many saw as sites where their children’s Islamic values could be maintained in the face of a highly secularised and materialistic society. Many parents also wished that their children would eventually take on the mantle of becoming future Islamic teachers and scholars who

would guide the Singaporean Muslim community. A segment of our interviewees highlighted that they want their daughters to don their *hijab* upon reaching the age of puberty. Mainstream national schools forbid such inclusion in the school uniforms. However, a quota of 400 students per cohort has been put in place by the government as this number was deemed to be sufficient to meet with the needs of the community. *Madrasah* curricula was also streamlined to be in line with the requirements of the quasi-governmental body, the Islamic Religious Council (or the *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura*, MUIS). Although the government has dedicated millions of dollars to improving the educational achievements of the *madrasahs*, the limits imposed on the intake has left parents seeking to send their children to Islamic schools to seek other options.⁴¹

Our interviewees discerned the opportunities which migration to Melbourne offer in the form of full-time and high-quality Islamic education. Furthermore, Australian public schools allow the wearing of the *hijab* for girls and offer other provisions for Muslims. The city of Melbourne hosts one of the largest numbers of Islamic schools in Australia. The state government of Victoria website states: “Students can wear clothing particular to their religion or culture in Victorian government schools. For example, Muslim female students can wear a *hijab*.”⁴² Hal who is now in his late 40s told us that he moved to Australia because he wanted his children to attend schools where the *hijab* is allowed. Even though he had an engineering degree, he had to work in several contract jobs before landing in a permanent one. He felt that the decision to migrate was gratifying. “I have accomplished so much living in Australia which I think that would be possible if I am still living in Singapore... On reaching puberty, my girls have adorned *hijab* when going to schools, a privilege we could not practice in Singapore.” Andi went as far as to say:

“You will be surprised to find that Australia is actually more tolerant to Islam than Singapore. All the universities here have mosques within campuses, with imams and Friday prayers. You don’t find that in Singapore. And surprisingly, even in workplaces, they have prayer rooms, something that I never came across in my entire life working in Singapore. Even the high school that my kids went to have a mosque in the school including Friday prayers.”

One other form of over-regulation that motivated Singapore Malay migrants to migrate was entry into and prospects within certain occupations. Mention has been made earlier about the prohibition

of wearing the *hijab* which is one occupation that is restricted for Muslim women hoping to maintain their Islamic identity while pursuing careers in the healthcare and uniformed-based sectors. To be added to this is the negative experiences of Singapore Malays in getting promoted within the jobs they had in Singapore. Karim, a retiree who is now 60 years old and has a PhD degree in marketing, decided to “pack up his bags” not because he was doing badly in his career in Singapore. Rather it was otherwise. He was in relatively high position within a financial institution. But at a certain point, his promotion was stunted. “There are three things you cannot change in this world, discrimination, corruption and prostitution. In Australia, I found equity is more important than meritocracy. No glass ceilings and being Muslim doesn’t matter as much as being good at what I do.” Ali (in his mid-30s) mentioned to us that he chose Australia because “employers *tak kira kulit* (don’t look at your skin colour). Discrimination exists everywhere but opportunities here are wider.”

These observations have been corroborated by surveys done by government-linked bodies in Singapore. In 2019, it is reported that: “While there were improvements in relations between the different groups, researchers found an area of concern – almost 60 per cent of Malays and 56 per cent of Indians perceived discriminatory treatment at work... Minority groups indicated in the survey that they felt discriminated against when applying for jobs or seeking a promotion.”⁴³ A sense of relative deprivation and status frustration emerges from the years of discrimination faced by Singapore Malays. Coupled by their hope to preserve their faith and enhance their piety in a more embracing environment, Singapore Malays developed the belief that Australia provides some kind of psychological improvement, if not, psychological liberation from over-regulated Singapore. On this note, we would like to stress here that evidence provided by interviewees suggest that this psychological liberation may not always take place, and that many potential migrants to Australia do not fully grasp the challenges that lie in wait for them during the first year after migration. Nonetheless, perceived and experienced discrimination and the inability to fulfil certain religious requirements in secular Singapore have been powerful push factors for Singapore Malays to leave their country and undergo the challenges of being Muslim migrants in the West. Haroon who is currently a manager of an engineering firm sums this up well when he said: “Migration is

a path that will lead to a better one. That crossroads are filled with many challenges. We might not reap the benefits but our future generations will.”

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that, like all migrants, Singapore Malay migrants were well aware that life in Australia would be highly challenging, especially during the first couple of years. In truth, most of our respondents admitted that there was no real urgency for them to migrate out of Singapore. Most were from middle or lower-middle class families with somewhat secure jobs and careers. Why then were these Singaporeans Malay-Muslims willing to leave the relative security and comfort of Singapore to live permanently in Australia?

Examining the reasons why qualified immigrant Muslims from economically stable backgrounds in Singapore migrate to Australia reveals an aspect of migration that has generally been neglected in existing studies. By far, no study has correlated psychology and piety in shaping decisions for migration. We have shown that the decision for some Singaporean Malay-Muslims relocating to Melbourne, Australia is to redress the stresses of life, along with perceptions of discrimination and discriminatory practices toward Islam in Singapore. We term such motivations for migration *psycho-pious motivations*.

Like other Singaporeans, Malay-Muslims face a multitude of economic and educational challenges within a country that is highly competitive and fast-moving. The high cost of living, pressure and competition in school, crowding and congestion are just some of the factors that contribute greatly to the stress and anxiety among Singaporeans. Being at the lowest end of the socio-economic ladder in Singapore, Malay-Muslims bear these strains most heavily as a community. The lack of work-life balance and burnout from over-working contribute greatly to the desire for change in work and life conditions. Given these difficulties, we note that Singaporean Malay-Muslims were psychologically disillusioned with life in Singapore that they were willing to risk their relative security and comfort to improve their state of mind.

Specifically, in the case of Singaporean Malay-Muslims, life in Australia symbolises the ability to have a ‘balanced Muslim lifestyle’ which includes familial happiness and time for spirituality and pursuits of faith. While these migrants seek social

security and income, many were not actively searching for a higher salary or a means to further their career in Australia. They accepted downward mobility in exchange of more time for family and leisure. Sacrificing career and wealth for more family time and improved emotional well-being indicate that Singapore Malay-Muslims move to Australia to repair their psychological states. The idea of repairing their psychological states is extended onto their children, who now enjoy less pressure in school, a slower pace of education, less homework and lower demands in educational success.

On the whole, the idea of adopting a new, balanced way of life is exciting for these migrants, in part for their ability to fulfil their religious obligations with their families. Therefore, to them, a balanced Muslim life allows them to feel a sense of fulfilment, in carrying out their obligations as parents and as responsible Muslims. This sense of fulfilment could only have been found in Australia, away from the over-regulation of Islam and Muslims in Singapore. Life in Australia has allowed Singapore Malay-Muslims to maintain their outward Islamic identity, particularly with regards to the use of the *hijab* in public spaces and everyday life. For many of our respondents, the current policy of disallowing the wearing of the *hijab* in public schools and in certain jobs (such as in healthcare) in Singapore was a major cause of concern for them. In contrast, public schools in Melbourne allow the wearing of the *hijab* for girls, with some offering provisions for Muslims students, such designated prayer rooms. Malay-Muslim nurses and healthcare workers from Singapore who now are living in Australia are pleased that they are allowed to wear the *hijab* at their workplaces. It is important to note here that that psycho-pious motivations are not simply the inability to fulfil certain religious observations, but also the effect the inability to fulfil these religious obligations has on one’s perception of self-piety.

Another important psycho-pious motivation for many Singapore Malay-Muslim migrants is the challenge of raising their children in the face of a highly secularised and materialistic Singapore society. The desire for many of them is to maintain Islamic values and piety within their families and to raise their children as believing and practising Muslims. In Singapore, many Malay-Muslim families send their children to the six full-time *madrasahs* to achieve this purpose. The awareness and popularity of Islamic education in Singapore has risen over the last two decades even as the slots

available are highly limited. The limits imposed on the intake of full-time *madrrasah* students has left parents seeking to send their children to Islamic schools to seek other options. In this regard, life in Australia offers these parents the desired opportunity to fulfil their obligation as Muslims and their desire to raise their children in a wholesome environment with Islamic values. The city of Melbourne hosts one of the largest numbers of Islamic schools in Australia. Despite knowing well the challenges of migration and settling into a new country and environment, our respondents recognised the opportunities which migration to Melbourne offered to them in the form of full-time and high-quality Islamic education.

The sense of relative deprivation and status frustration emerges from the years of discrimination faced by Singapore Malay-Muslims. Coupled by their hope to preserve their faith and enhance their piety in a more embracing environment, Singapore Malays developed the belief that Australia provides some kind of freedom from over-regulated Singapore. Perceived and experienced discrimination and the inability to fulfil certain religious requirements in secular Singapore have been powerful push factors for Singapore Malays to leave their country and undergo the challenges of being Muslim migrants in the West. To end, we posit that the concept of “psycho-pious motivations” is not unique to Singapore Malays in Australia. It could be used and refined to analyze why religious minorities take the life-changing decision migrate out of their home countries.

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Received: 11 September 2021

Accepted: 3 February 2022

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