Estate youth and complicated migration in Malaysia's oil palm plantations: the emotions of leaving and connecting back

Kabita Chakraborty, Shanthi Thambiah & Janarthani Arumugam

To cite this article: Kabita Chakraborty, Shanthi Thambiah & Janarthani Arumugam (2018): Estate youth and complicated migration in Malaysia's oil palm plantations: the emotions of leaving and connecting back, Children's Geographies, DOI: 10.1080/14733285.2018.1479514

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2018.1479514

Published online: 24 May 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 21

View Crossmark data
Estate youth and complicated migration in Malaysia's oil palm plantations: the emotions of leaving and connecting back

Kabita Chakraborty a, Shanthi Thambiah b and Janarthani Arumugam c

aChildren's Studies Program, York University, Toronto, Canada; bGender Studies Program, University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; cEmpower, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT
This paper investigates the emotional relationship young Tamil Indians have with oil palm plantations they are leaving behind or have left behind. Working in a small town in Malaysia, as well as in a large estate, we show how communal and individual aspirations of migration shape young people's mobility. While young people recognize the poverty and marginalization of plantation life, they continue to be emotionally and affectually connected to plantations through socio-cultural and spiritual practices. Post-migration we show how youth maintain estate connections, and argue that the pull back towards plantations is contrary to state-sponsored ideologies of modernization. Not all young people feel the same pull; many try to distance themselves from their estate roots through consumption and other social practices. Responding to calls for researchers emotions to be present in youth research, the paper also briefly reflects how adult emotions shape our understanding of young people's emotions of migration.

Plantations and young people's emotions of migration
This paper details young people's emotional and affectual negotiations when migrating out of oil palm plantations in contemporary Malaysia. The young people we worked with are all Tamil-speaking Malaysian Indians, whose families migrated to Malaysia from India over four generations ago through a colonial system of migration. These 'estate' youth reflect both a history of migration in Malaysia, and contemporary migration, where plantation residents are migrating out of estates (either forced, or voluntary).

Our paper describes how young Tamil Indians feel pressured to leave a plantation we call Alakana Estate, and move into a nearby town in a systematic way. We show that this migration is linked to policies that no longer favour the family as a unit of labour within plantations. This migration is also influenced by the changing nature of estates, which are being developed into housing, industry and luxury hotels (a trend since the 1970s). We show how young people adjust to urban living and racially mixed schooling, and describe how this transition is stressful. Young people's difficulties are complex, as they are tied to racialized state policies, individual experiences of discrimination, as well as individual and communal aspirations. While all of the young people we worked with view plantation work as a sunset industry, in spite of young people's own discourses of poverty and hardship about estate living, many return to the plantations. Some return for leisure, others for school. Not all participants are drawn back to the estate. We explore how some desire to be 'cool' kids in town. We argue that to understand young people's relationship with plantations we need to unpack their textured emoscapes – emotional and affectual (felt, bodily) realities of being

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 6 October 2017
Accepted 19 April 2018

KEYWORDS
Migration; young people; emotions; plantations; aspirations; Malaysia

CONTACT Kabita Chakraborty kabita@yorku.ca
© 2018 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group