

# MERANTAU TO MALAYSIA: PERSPECTIVES OF INDONESIAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN PENANG, MALAYSIA

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**Abstract.** This study explores the concept of *merantau* from the perspectives of Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia, focusing on their reasons of *merantau* to Malaysia. Unlike general labor migration, *merantau* represents a socio-cultural tradition deeply rooted in Indonesian communities, often encompassing economic, social, familial, and even religious dimensions. This research uses a qualitative approach to understand how *merantau* is conceptualized and experienced in the context of cross-border migration, and the data collected through in-depth interviews with 15 Indonesian migrant workers. The findings reveal 6 emerging themes that represent the reasons of *merantau*: economic perspective, self-determination perspective, job opportunities perspective, geographical and cultural perspective, working condition perspective and religious perspective. This research also contributes to the theorization of *merantau* by expanding Mochtar Naim's study on *merantau*, especially on the part of *merantau*'s characteristics, and its relevance beyond Minangkabau contexts. The relevance means that the culture of *merantau* can possibly be found in other ethnic groups with various understandings and not limited anymore for Minang people. The study also highlights the connection of *merantau* with more complex motivations, especially religious and better working conditions. It also offers the changing nature of *merantau* from temporary to permanent movement. In conclusion, this study is not only understanding the reasons of *merantau* from subjective reality, but also contextualizes and further reflects the findings with *merantau* theory, so eventually contributes to the development of *merantau* studies.

**Keywords:** *migration, merantau, migrant workers, Indonesian migrant workers*

## Introduction

Migration has been a part of human life for hundreds of years, including those who currently reside in the Nusantara Malay Archipelago (today's Southeast Asia). The phenomenon of human migration has had significant and rapid growth in contemporary times. Particularly due to the expansion of the information, communication, and technology revolution, this facilitates the rising number of migrations (Bustami and Wekke, 2016). There are various factors that drive them to migrate from their place of origin to another place. For example, in Asia, people tend to migrate due to economic and demographic factors. Politics and discrimination also contribute to motivate them to move (Zehadul Karim, 1999), especially in the condition that they must escape from colonizers or superiors in their motherland. Another one is the law in certain ethnic groups of the Nusantara Malay Archipelago, such as the Minang (Hugo, 1982) that culturally drive them to go outside their own places. Migration is commonly known as the process of moving from one place to another (Scholl, 2013). The International Organization for Migration defined that migration is a movement from their usual place of residence, either international or within a state (Serraglio and Adaawen, 2023). Migration could also be defined as temporarily crossing the border of an administrative unit (Tataru, 2019). Migration itself may happen both locally and internationally (Scholl, 2013). Local or internal migration means movement within a country's borders

(Stone et al., 2016; Finney, 2013), while the international one is a migration act that requires crossing national borders (Brown and Bean, 2016). Indonesian migrant workers, it is, of course, included to the international migration since the workers going out of the borders to get jobs in the host countries.

In several Southeast Asia countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, maybe also Singapore, people are more familiar with the term merantau to describe migration activity, and the word perantau for the migrant. Merantau means the practice of individuals temporarily residing on a different island for an extended period before eventually returning to their homeland (Hugo, 1982). However, it differs from the context of culture. It is not just as simple as moving from one place to another. Therefore, defining merantau is not as simple as defining migration (Naim, 1979). Because of this familiarity, it is quite common for Indonesian migrant workers to identify themselves as a perantau, even though this terms actually more embedded to the culture of Minang. Today, self-identifying as a perantau is a common thing for Indonesian or Malaysian who go out from their place of origin to other places, mainly because of economic reasons. In the case of Indonesian migrant workers, of the many countries that are destinations for work, many of the Indonesian workers prefer to choose Malaysia as the destination for working abroad, also Hong Kong and Taiwan. But the number of people who placed to work in Malaysia in total is largest than others. Based on statistical data retrieved from BP2MI (Badan Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia) (*Table 1*), it shows that Malaysia is always in the top 5 as a destination to work besides Hong Kong and Taiwan from year to year. The highest number of PMI (Pekerja Migran Indonesia) or Indonesian Migrant Workers' placement in 2023 is in Malaysia with total 57.746 from January to September (Badan Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia, 2023).

**Table 1.** Indonesian migrant workers placement in 2023 (BP2MI).

Country	Placement in July 2023	Placement in August 2023	Placement in September 2023	Total placement in 2023
Hong Kong	7,337	8,296	8,095	57,366
Taiwan	7,777	7,969	7,265	62,187
Malaysia	6,776	7,502	4,993	57,746
Singapore	649	978	962	5,161
Japan	807	833	710	7,277

Source: Badan Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia (2023).

According to the 2019 DPTLN (List of voters for Indonesia's Presidential Election in Foreign Country) data by the committee of Indonesian presidential election in Penang, there are 60,610 Indonesian migrant workers in northern Malaysia, including Penang. The number may increase from year to year. Additionally, the quantity of undocumented Indonesian migrant workers is unknown. Consequently, there are no definite numbers of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia, particularly in Penang. The reasons why people migrate perhaps have been studied in some research. In macro level, commonly because of lacking in human and economic development, demographic, oppression and conflicts (perhaps also politics), social and environmental factors. Furthermore, in meso level, the causes are more connected to the linkage of individual to his/her religious or ethnic norms and diasporic relations. While in micro level is education, religion, or personal attitude toward migration (Castelli, 2018). However, the studies are lacking in focusing on the migration in merantau side from the perspective of

Indonesian migrant workers as *perantau*. The concepts are quite similar to previous studies, but the conditions are perhaps different, especially in the context of migration activities in Southeast Asia with its socio-cultural backgrounds. And even more, this study is conducted using qualitative approach to capture respondents' meanings and explanations about the reasons of *merantau* to Malaysia.

### ***Literature review***

Indonesian migrant worker has a long history to explain. During the colonial era in the 19th century, workers were relocated from Java to Malaysia, marking the beginning of the history of people from Indonesia to go "*merantau*." Forced migration was common at the time to work on plantations and roads, contract coolie migration was common to work on plantations for a set period of time and be punished if the contract were broken, and spontaneous migration was common as a temporary working either by own initiative or invited by friends and family, according to Hugo (1993). Javanese were not the only people to engage in migration in the past, whether compelled by colonizers or driven by their own initiatives. According to previous research, it is clear that the Minangkabau from Sumatera, Bugis from Sulawesi, and Javanese from Java were the main groups of early Indonesian immigrants who moved to Malaya using maritime transit (Zehadul Karim, 1999). Migration, from the perspective of push and pull factors, is driven by various aspects. Castelli (2018) stated that migration drivers could be categorized into three parts, namely macro, meso, and micro levels. The macro-level drivers include disparities in human and economic development, demographic changes, urbanization, climate change, conflicts, and land grabbing, which collectively push individuals to leave their homes. At the meso-level, the drivers are social media, diaspora networks, and the indirect effects of land exploitation, further reinforce the desire to migrate by highlighting opportunities abroad. While the micro level is more about personal characteristics like education, marital status, and individual aspirations, which play a pivotal role in the final decision to migrate (Castelli, 2018).

Other explanations about the drivers of migration are specifically elaborated through the concept of push and pull factors of migration. The push factors are connected to the conditions that urge individuals to leave their homeland. Meanwhile, in contrary, the pull factors are the aspects that attract people to migrate to certain places (Urbański, 2022). The push and pull factors of migration in Southeast Asia could be seen from a few points: economic factors, political factors, demographic factors, social factors, & environmental factors (Bustami and Wekke, 2016). The economic factors are perhaps the primary driver of migration, not only in the ASEAN region but all over the world. It is also important to consider that different destination countries bring different reasons and conditions for migration. While Malaysia attracts Indonesian migrant workers due to its geographical proximity, cultural similarities, and labor demand in informal sectors, other countries like Saudi Arabia present a different appeal, particularly for spiritual and religious motivations (Anggara et al., 2024). Similarly, Japan and South Korea are more appealing to migrants seeking higher living standards and skill development in industrial sectors (Anggara et al., 2024). These variations indicate that migrant workers' motivations are highly contextual, shaped not only by economic factors but also by the specific opportunities, policies, and cultural dynamics of the receiving countries (Bustami and Wekke, 2016). In the context of Southeast Asia, particularly within certain ethnic groups, the term "*merantau*" is sometimes used to describe migration. However, it should be noted that the definitions of both "*merantau*"

and "migration" are not straightforward. Since merantau is a local term, comprehending it as a concept is not as straightforward as assuming that it carries the same meaning as migration (Naim, 1979). Merantau and Migration indeed differ in terms of their linguistic origins, with Merantau being a local term and Migration being English. Naim (1979) stated in his book about Merantau, an adaptation to Indonesian from his PhD dissertation in 1973, Merantau refers to a specific sort of migration that carries cultural connotations. It is not readily translatable into English or other languages (Naim, 1979). Naim defines merantau as the voluntary departure from one's cultural territory, either temporarily or permanently, for the purpose of seeking employment or acquiring new knowledge and experiences, typically with the objective of eventually returning to the place of origin (Salazar, 2016).

The terms merantau and perantau are frequently used by Minang People or Minangnese (an Indonesian tribe from West Sumatra). For them, merantau is a part of a strong ethnic tradition that requires them to leave their native country for places like Jakarta, Surabaya, or even overseas in order to earn a great deal of money (Parker and Raihani, 2011). The study of Merantau that was conducted by Naim (1973) was about merantau from the perspective of Minang culture. Merantau has been institutionalized within the social structure of the Minang ethnic group, influencing the roles of men and women in this group (Naim, 1979). As time passed, the term merantau was not only used in the Minang community, but also by people in several countries in Southeast Asia mentioned above, particularly in certain ethnic groups like Buginese, Boyanese, Javanese, also Bataknese. Merantau is a general term for people who move from one place to another with a specific purpose, but with the intention of returning to their homeland with experience, knowledge and possibly wealth. Many people, especially Indonesians, eventually decide to migrate in order to work, even overseas. They eventually become Indonesian migrant workers and become Perantau abroad. Merantau is one of the important parts in Minang culture. People who have successfully left their hometown and are now living abroad are called "Perantau," and they are highly admired. They become examples for people who want to be noticed and move up in society (Downes and Paritosa, 2017). Meanwhile in Javanese, merantau could facilitate youth to go through the process of transitioning from 'childhood' to 'adulthood' because of the Javanese mindset that permits this separation from their parents (Wei and Fee, 2023). Merantau in Bugis ethnic group is based on the philosophy that derived from its social system, and it is a symbol of principle on looking for better living. Local term of Merantau for Bugis People is *sompe'* (Kompas Web Portal, 2008). The Bugis philosophy for merantau '*kegisi monro sore lopic, kositu tomallabu se'ngereng*' (where there is a boat harboured, there shall be a life to be strengthen). Therefore, many Bugis people choose to merantau and go work abroad (Zulfikar, 2019).

Boyanese culture is even more fascinating. It is typical for Boyanese to go merantau especially for the males and sons. Merantau may represent maturity in Boyanese. It can be demonstrated by the story of a woman who wanted to divorce her husband solely because she claimed he was not mature enough because he had never gone merantau (Hugo, 1993). The Batak culture also encompasses a philosophy regarding merantau. For instance, the Batak Toba people consider it essential for young individuals to migrate, particularly if they wish to establish a family. They are anticipated to construct a prosperous domain (*Kerajaan*), whether it is on a personal (*sahala harajaon*) or familial level (*sahala hasangapon*), in the *Tanah Rantau* (the destination of migration). In the Batak language, the act of migrating can be referred to as "*mangarantau*" or other Batak

phrases that related to merantau (Silalahi et al., 2013). Merantau is characterised by six distinct features: (1) it entails a deliberate departure from the migrant's place of origin; (2) the migration is a voluntary choice; (3) the migration is temporary, regardless of its duration; (4) the purpose of the migration is to improve one's livelihood, acquire new knowledge, or gain unique experiences; (5) the initial intention of the migration is to eventually return to the place of origin; and (6) merantau is a culturally specific social practice (Naim, 1979).

## Materials and Methods

This article is a qualitative descriptive study. Conducted using abductive research strategy to enable researchers to capture insights and meanings from the social actors (Blaikie and Priest, 2019) or the participants of the research themselves, in this case are the Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia. Researchers can collect data from people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experience, and interactions with one another with the help of interviews (Mason, 2002). So that, to obtain the data, the researchers conducted interviews to 15 Indonesian migrant workers in Penang Malaysia. The participants are working in many sectors like factories, constructions, domestics, also as entrepreneurs and social workers. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis to enable the researchers to capture the meanings through emerging themes.

## Results and Discussion

### *Profile of the participants*

As stated in the methodology part, 15 respondents are invited to be interviewed to acquire data. They are Indonesian migrant workers who work in Penang Malaysia. The participants' data are shown on the Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Participants' profile.*

Name (Initials)	Gender	Place of origin in Indonesia (Province)	Working sectors
KSA	Female	Central Java	Factory
SRN	Female	North Sumatera	Factory
TY	Female	East Java	Domestic
SS	Female	North Sumatera	Factory
JT	Female	North Sumatera	Factory
SJ	Female	North Sumatera	Factory
DW	Female	North Sumatera	Factory
DR	Female	Central Java	Factory
NJ	Female	West Nusa Tenggara	Factory
RBK	Male	East Java	Social Worker
SE	Male	East Java	Construction
WI	Female	Lampung	Domestic, Entrepreneur
STV	Female	Central Java	Factory
MA	Male	Banten	Factory
KA	Male	Central Java	Entrepreneur, Social Worker

### *Reasons of merantau to Malaysia*

There are 6 emerging themes that were identified in this study. Below are the results of the study. The themes are economic perspective, self-determination perspective, job opportunities perspective, geographical and cultural perspective, working condition perspective and religious perspective.

### *Economic perspective*

The participants described that because of financial problems that they experienced before going to Malaysia, they had to make big decision, it is to go merantau to Malaysia for working. The causes were varied. Some of them had to merantau in order to make living for their family, while others had to earn money to pursue their dreams. A participant stated that she needed to earn money. However, due to the difficulties to find work in her hometown, she decided to earn money through merantau to Malaysia and working in a factory.

*“It is because of economic factors.”*

(Participant 1, worker in factory, from central Java)

Participant 1 had to work because she aspired to attend university in the future and support her family's economy. She even previously worked at a pizza restaurant in Medan. However, since job opportunities in Malaysia were more promising, she chose to move to Malaysia to meet her economic needs. Some of them made the important decision to merantau to Malaysia in order to find work there because of the role that they played in their family, such as being a single mother or the first child.

*“Since becoming a single mother, I had to provide for my children by myself. That is why I wanted to go abroad to change the fate of my family, and why did I choose Malaysia? Because I ever came here in 2013 for school training, and I felt like it was fun to stay here, therefore I'd like to return to Malaysia.”*

(Participant 9, worker in factory, from West Nusa Tenggara)

*“Previously, because my husband was gone, it was difficult to make a living to eat. I decided to come to Malaysia, and there there was an agent looking for people who wanted to work.”*

(Participant 12, worker in domestic sector, entrepreneur, from Lampung)

*“That is correct! Economic factors in the family. Because I, as the first child, must also consider that it is impossible to be overly selfish; I can work in Medan and pay for college with my earnings, but I can't afford to help my parents with my salary. That's why I must go to Malaysia.”*

(Participant 2, worker in factory, from North Sumatera)

A participant expressed her intention to enroll in a university, just like participant 1. Nevertheless, due to financial constraints, she had to assist her parents in sustaining her family's economic situation, even though she did not like it.

*“At first, I didn't think about working abroad and far away. I was expecting opportunities to study at university. Since the financial condition could not support my willingness to study, I decided to work abroad.”*

(Participant 4, worker in factory, from North Sumatera)

Economic situation indeed could drive them to look for many ways to earn money, including merantau to Malaysia. A participant said that he had a dream to attend a

police academy. Again, because of financial condition, he could not proceed with the registration.

*“I used to want to pursue my dream of getting into the police academy. I passed the test but was asked for money, at that time it was about one million and a half rupiah (between 1986 or 1987). Because of my parents' poor economic situation, my brother invited me to merantau to Malaysia instead. I decided to merantau to Malaysia to collect money, I wanted to pursue my dreams. If I got the money, I would try to apply again (to the police academy). But after that, I thought about how old I was, so I thought maybe... maybe not.”*

(Participant 11, worker in construction sector, from East Java)

Interestingly, as his age increased, he eventually decided to continue working in Malaysia, and not to continue pursuing his dream as stated above. Another participant must decide to merantau because he encountered economic difficulties in his hometown at the time, as well as relational conflict. First, he went to a neighboring province. And then, somebody offered him an opportunity to work in Malaysia.

*“At first, I owed my mother, because the money was actually entrusted to me. Plus, I was having a dispute with the syndicate. Finally, I decided to leave the city where I lived. Firstly, I migrated to Gresik. I went to Gresik, then there, I was offered to go to Malaysia. So, I went to Malaysia, then I tried it, rather than in my hometown, then I went to Malaysia.”*

(Participant 15, social worker, entrepreneur, from Central Java)

### ***Self-determination perspective***

The self-determination factor refers to lifestyle and self-improvement-related aspects that motivate participants to engage in merantau. It implies that they merantau for the purpose of gaining new skills and experiences and that merantau is an integral part of their culture. As stated by participants 3 & 5 that they decided to merantau to gain new experiences.

*“Merantau to Malaysia is about wanting to gain experience from different types of experiences. For me, moving is the experience of migrating because it is the first time I have moved and the farthest I have moved.”*

(Participant 3, worker in domestic sector, from East Java)

*“I choose Malaysia because I want to seek for experiences, as well as knowledge.”*

(Participant 5, worker in factory)

Another participant stated that being perantau and doing merantau has been a part of his life since he was a child.

*“Since I was a child, Merantau has been a part of my life. I used to go Merantau everywhere. Even when attending school, I transferred from one school to another. So Merantau has become a routine and habit for me.”*

(Participant 10, a social worker, from East Java)

### ***Job opportunities perspective***

As mentioned at the first theme, some participants experienced difficulties looking for a job because of the complexity of job requirements.

*“Because looking for a job outside our country is easier than in the inside.”*  
(Participant 7, worker in factory, from North Sumatera)

*“It has to do with the height. The height requirement is not 150 cm at the very least. I was thinking that every job in Indonesia needs people to be a certain height. Because of this, PT. Karyatama, which is a recruitment agency, said that the height is not a big deal for working in Malaysia. This is why I want to work here.”*  
(Participant 13, worker in factory, from Central Java)

### ***Geographical and cultural perspective***

It is inevitable that geography and culture could be factors that drive migrant workers from Indonesia to merantau in Malaysia. Both geographically and culturally, Malaysia and Indonesia share many similarities, including the fact that their languages are very similar. And some participants indeed stated that they merantau and choose Malaysia because of the closeness both geographically and culturally.

*“Why I choose Malaysia because it is easier for me to communicate with, because the language is quite similar to Indonesian.”*  
(Participant 4, worker in factory, from North Sumatera)

*“It is closer to us than other countries. The language is also similar. Besides, I am only a graduate from high school, so working here is what I only can do.”*  
(Participant 5, worker in factory, from North Sumatera)

*“...and the aim to come here is because the closeness of the language, easy to understand and serumpun (cognate/share the same culture).”*  
(Participant 7, worker in factory, from North Sumatera)

### ***Working condition perspective***

Working conditions include the salary, benefits, and work contracts that participants receive from their employers. Some of the respondents understood that the salary they would get from working abroad, including in Malaysia, is bigger than working in Indonesia. It is because the currencies of other countries are higher than Indonesia's. In this case, Malaysian Ringgit is higher than Indonesian Rupiah.

*“You know how difficult it is to find work in Indonesia. So, my high school made an agreement with an agent to work abroad, specifically in Malaysia. We had no idea what position we would be in. But, unlike other types of work, working in a factory is acceptable. So, I decided to work in Malaysia because it is difficult to find work in a factory in Indonesia.”*  
(Participant 1, worker in factory, form central Java)

*“The salary is better in here (Malaysia).”*

(Participant 5, worker in factory, from North Sumatera)

As long as the requirements are simple, most of the Indonesian workers are acceptable to work in Malaysia regardless of their placement. As previously stated, she had no idea where she would be assigned to work. Eventually, she was assigned to work in a factory, which she was accepted. The participants got the information about the salary from his/her relation or from the agents that promoting job vacancies abroad especially in Malaysia.

*“I asked permission to my lecturer to go to Malaysia for two years since my friends said that basic income in Malaysia is better than in our country.”*

(Participant 6, worker in factory, from North Sumatera)

*“Initially, I wanted to save money for my hometown. You know, working there, the salary is still lower than the salary here... So, I was recklessly to come here (Malaysia). I chose Malaysia because in the past, the first counseling agent at school, what they promoted was Malaysia.”*

(Participant 14, worker in factory, from Banten)

Some of the participants also learned about the working conditions in Malaysia before deciding to travel there. They recognized that there are significant contrasts between working in Indonesia and working in Malaysia. They opted to merantau to Malaysia since they believed the conditions were better. Working in Malaysia also provides them with privileges such as amenities, dorms, and a longer working contract time.

*“...hostels and uniform for workers are provided, the facilities are complete, therefore, as a worker, we are happy to work abroad.”*

(Participant 6, worker in factory, from North Sumatera)

*“I chose Malaysia because I thought looking for a job in a factory in Indonesia will get only 5 to 6 months contract. And then, I found out that the contract of working in a factory in Malaysia is longer than in Indonesia. The contract here is 2 years, so I decided to choose Malaysia. At first, my parents did not permit me to go, but after some negotiations, they finally granted me permission.”*

(Participant 8, worker in factory, from Central Java)

### **Religious perspective**

One of the interesting points that drive the participants to choose Malaysia as destination for merantau is religious factor. They saw that Malaysia is an Islamic country like Indonesia, but more Islamic.

*“I think Malaysia has a stronger Islamic atmosphere than other countries.”*

(Participant 7, worker in factory, from North Sumatera)

A participant even said that she could find friends that able to invite her to hijrah, to move herself to be a better person, better moslem and has better attitude.

*“Even then, I wanted to go to this neighboring country because what I know that Malaysia is like Banda Aceh, 'Serambi Mekkah'. Now in the past I could be categorized as wayward, not naughty yes, wayward. Therefore, I really want to be where I can find friends who can invite me to hijrah so I really want to hijrah in Banda Aceh even though Banda Aceh is said to be 'Serambi Mekkah' but I still find wayward friends, especially in Jakarta. But after I went to Malaysia, Alhamdulillah, I found many people like that but I didn't follow them, I even followed people who taught me to go to a good path so there I am really grateful that I can change much better than before, so until now it has been 5 years in Malaysia, to leave Malaysia is like I can't bear it because from here we learn a lot of things that I get lah.”*

(Participant 6, worker in factory, from North Sumatera)

This study provides new insights into the phenomenon of merantau, particularly in the context of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. In the findings, there are six key themes emerged that explain why Indonesian workers choose to merantau to Malaysia, namely: economic perspective, self-determination perspective, job opportunities perspective, geographical and cultural perspective, working condition perspective, and religious perspective. These findings align with existing migration theories, particularly the push and pull factors concepts that explained by Urbański (2022), Castelli (2018) as well as Bustami and Wekke (2016) also the traditional characteristics of merantau as described by Naim (1973). Before discussing each theme in depth, it is essential to differentiate between migration and merantau within the Indonesian context.

### ***Migration vs Merantau***

The concept of merantau is deeply embedded in Indonesian culture, particularly among the Minangkabau, where it signifies a journey of self-improvement and economic advancement (Naim, 1973). Unlike general migration, which is often driven solely by economic or political factors, merantau carries a symbolic and cultural meaning, encompassing social mobility, knowledge acquisition, and spiritual growth (Salazar, 2016). This distinction is crucial in understanding why Indonesian workers do not merely migrate but engage in merantau, which is a term that embodies both economic necessity and a broader process of personal transformation (Salazar, 2016).

### ***Economic perspective***

Economic hardship emerges as the strongest push factor, forcing many Indonesian workers to seek employment abroad. Several participants stated that family financial struggles, limited job opportunities, and aspirations for a better future are their primary motivations (Participant 1, Participant 4). This aligns with the push factors described by Bustami and Wekke (2016) as well as Hugo (1982), who argue that economic constraints heavily shape migration decisions (Bustami and Wekke, 2016; Hugo, 1982). Additionally, family obligations, such as being the eldest child (Participant 2) or a single mother (Participant 9), also the aspects that indicate the strong motivation to go merantau in economic perspective. The aspiration for higher education was another common driver, consistent with Castelli (2018), who notes that educational aspirations frequently intersect with economic migration (Castelli, 2018).

### ***Self-determination perspective***

Beyond economic necessity, some participants viewed merantau as a means of self-improvement and personal growth (Participant 3, Participant 5). This aligns with Naim (1973) conceptualization of merantau as a cultural rite of passage, where individuals seek new experiences and expand their social networks. Similarly, Hugo (1982) describes circular migration as a pattern where workers not only migrate for financial reasons but also for knowledge acquisition and skill development (Hugo, 1982). This perspective also in line with Czaika and Reinprecht (2022) state about migration decisions, which are not solely driven by economic disparity but by long-term aspirations for better livelihood opportunities (Czaika and Reinprecht, 2022).

### ***Job opportunities perspective***

Limited employment options in Indonesia serve as one of major push factor, while Malaysia's higher labor demand and lower entry barriers act as pull factors. Participant 7 and Participant 13 indicated that Malaysia provided more accessible job opportunities compared to Indonesia, particularly in sectors with less stringent height and educational requirements. This supports the findings of Urbański (2022) as well as Castelli (2018), in which emphasize that structural labor market conditions significantly influence migration decisions (Urbański, 2022; Castelli, 2018).

### ***Geographical and cultural perspective***

Geographical proximity and cultural familiarity make Malaysia a preferred destination for Indonesian workers. Several participants emphasized that linguistic similarities, shared cultural heritage, and existing social networks eased their transition into Malaysia (Participant 4, Participant 7). This aligns with Bustami and Wekke (2016) as well as Salazar (2016), that identify cultural affinity and historical ties as major pull factors. The concept of serumpun (shared ethnic and linguistic heritage) is particularly relevant, as it facilitates integration and reduces adaptation challenges (Murad, 1978). This perspective aligns with this serumpun concept.

### ***Working condition perspective***

Better wages, job security, and additional benefits serve as strong pull factors that attract Indonesian workers to Malaysia. Participant 6 and Participant 8 stated that longer work contracts and provided accommodations made Malaysia an attractive choice. This finding aligns with Urbański (2022), who argues that migrants assess economic benefits against working conditions when choosing destinations. The role of recruitment agencies and informal labor networks further facilitated migration decisions, supporting the argument that meso-level migration infrastructures play a critical role in shaping migration flows (Czaika and Reinprecht, 2022).

### ***Religious perspective***

Religion also emerged as a significant pull factor. Several participants, such as Participant 7 and Participant 6, stated that they preferred Malaysia due to its stronger Islamic environment, which they perceived as more aligned with their values. This finding resonates with Naim (1973), who describes religious motivations as a fundamental aspect of merantau, particularly among Muslim migrants. The perception that Malaysia is more Islamic than Indonesia further influenced their decisions. Salazar

(2016) also highlighted in his study that merantau also driven by religiously motivated migration, indicates that religious perspective is indeed one of pull factor that attracts Indonesian migrant workers to go merantau to Malaysia.

### ***Expanding Mochtar Naim characteristics of merantau***

In previous study, Naim (1973) had laid a strong foundation for understanding merantau. One of the concept is about characteristics of Merantau. The findings of this study align with and could expand upon Mochtar Naim's six key characteristics of merantau. The participants' experiences demonstrate that merantau remains a voluntary migration process driven by economic needs, self-improvement, and cultural expectations, consistent with Naim's framework. However, the study also reveals that merantau is increasingly influenced by religious motivations and structural labor market conditions, which were not heavily emphasized in Naim's original thesis. While Naim highlighted merantau as a temporary or cyclical process with an intention to return home, this study finds that the participants, as a perantau and Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia, no longer view their movement as temporary, since merantau, in their point of view, can evolve into long-term or permanent settlement. Additionally, the decision-making process before merantau has become more complex. While Naim identified economic hardship and cultural expectations as primary factors, this study highlights additional considerations, including better working conditions, legal status, social networks, and religious identity. Many participants selected Malaysia not only due to its economic opportunities but also because of its cultural and religious familiarity, reinforcing the idea that merantau is influenced by both push factors (limited job opportunities, financial struggles) and pull factors (higher wages, religious environment, and easier adaptation).

### ***Theoretical implications on the study of merantau***

The findings of this study highlight several new dimensions that contribute to the development and expansion of the theory of Merantau.

(a) Expansion of Merantau Beyond Minangkabau Ethnicity: Naim (1973) initially contextualized merantau as an exclusive socio-cultural practice among the Minangkabau people. However, the findings of this study suggest that the concept of merantau has evolved and is now widely adopted by various ethnic groups in Indonesia, including Javanese, Batak, and other ethnic group migrants. In this study, the participants (the perantau) are mostly from Javanese and Batak. This broader application suggests that merantau is no longer an ethnic-specific institution but rather a migration pattern embedded in the broader Indonesian socio-cultural landscape. Naim's framework can thus be expanded to incorporate the experiences of other ethnic groups beyond the Minangkabau.

(b) More Complex Decision-Making Factors in Merantau: Naim (1973) primarily emphasized economic and social factors as the main motivations behind merantau. However, this study identifies additional decision-making factors, such as self-determination, religious motivation, and better working conditions, which were not extensively discussed in Naim's original thesis. For the religious part, the findings of this study expand Mochtar Naim's theory by demonstrating that religion is not only a factor that pushes individuals to leave their hometowns but also a factor that influences

their choice of destination. In the case of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia in this study, the respondents said that the country's stronger Islamic atmosphere could be one of the reasons for their migration decision, in this case is Malaysia, as Malaysia considered as a country with better Islamic environment. This aligns with Naim's observation that religious considerations have historically played a role in merantau, particularly among Minangkabau traders and scholars who carried Islamic teachings to new regions. However, while Naim emphasized the role of religion in shaping the identity and responsibilities of perantau, he did not explicitly classify it as a standalone determinant in migration decisions. The findings of this study suggest that religious affinity should be recognized as an independent factor influencing merantau, particularly in transnational migration contexts, where the perantau seek not only economic opportunities but also an environment that aligns with their spiritual values. Another important aspect in this point is that the findings also show that merantau is a part of habit or way of life. This suggests that merantau is not solely driven by economic necessity but also by aspirations for self-improvement.

(c) *The Changing Nature of Merantau: From Temporary to Permanent Migration:* One of the important points in Naim's work is that merantau is a temporary migration process, with migrants intending to return home after achieving their goals. However, this study finds that many Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia no longer intend to return like what Participant 6 said in the results part, indicating a shift from temporary to permanent migration. This finding challenges the traditional notion of merantau as a cyclical process and suggests that, in the contemporary era, merantau can also lead to long-term or even permanent settlement.

## Conclusion

This study provides a deeper understanding of merantau from the perspective of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia, particularly in Penang. By analyzing the reasons behind merantau through qualitative interviews, this research highlights six key factors influencing migration decisions: economic necessity, self-determination, job opportunities, geographical and cultural familiarity, working conditions, and religious motivations. These findings reaffirm traditional migration theories, particularly Naim (1973) concept of merantau, while also expanding it with new dimensions relevant to contemporary transnational migration. The study contributes to the theoretical development of merantau by demonstrating that it is no longer exclusive to Minangkabau culture but has become a broader socio-cultural phenomenon among various Indonesian ethnic groups. Furthermore, while Naim emphasized merantau as a temporary, circular migration, the findings suggest that many Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia now consider their migration permanent, challenging the traditional assumption that merantau always involves an eventual return to the homeland. Additionally, religious factors have emerged as a significant determinant in migration decisions, as some migrants perceive Malaysia as offering a stronger Islamic environment compared to Indonesia.

This study also reveals that the decision-making process before merantau has become more complex, influenced not only by push factors such as limited job opportunities and financial constraints but also by pull factors such as higher wages, cultural and religious affinity, and established migration networks. The increasing role of recruitment agencies and informal labor networks further indicates that merantau is now facilitated

by structural migration mechanisms beyond traditional cultural motivations. In conclusion, while merantau remains a voluntary migration process that constructed by economic, social, and cultural influences, its evolution in a transnational context necessitates a reassessment of existing theoretical frameworks. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of merantau on both sending and receiving communities, particularly in terms of social integration, identity formation, and labor rights of Indonesian migrant workers abroad.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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