Antje Missbach, *Troubled Transit: Asylum Seekers Stuck in Indonesia*. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015. 308 pp. ISBN: 9789814620567, price: USD 29.90 (paperback).

Troubled Transit: Asylum Seekers Stuck in Indonesia intervenes in current academic, political, and policy debates surrounding 'transit migration' within the growing field of migration studies. Antje Missbach critiques the "Eurocentric perceptions of transit migration" (p. 13) that presume calculated migration trajectories of migrants, and predetermined destinations in the global North, namely the United States, Europe, and Australia. Instead, she argues for a more nuanced approach to understanding transit migration and the experience of those identified as transit migrants (e.g. refugees, asylum seekers, irregular migrants, displaced and undocumented migrants, etc.). In its approach to transit migration as an indeterminate process, rather than a stable procedure, the book highlights the broader significance of transit as a concept and methodological approach to studying the contemporary socioeconomic and political conditions of countries in the global South designated by international organizations as 'transit' states, such as Indonesia, for the management of migrants until they arrive in presumably more desirable destinations like Australia, and the subsequent segregation of migrants and refugees through arrests and detention. Missbach draws on extensive (2010–2014) and multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in West Java, Nusa Tenggara Timor, and the Riau Archipelago. Exploring the experiences of various transit migrants in Indonesia on their journey to Australia, the book offers a wide-ranging study of the economic, legal, and political dimensions of transit migration, interrupting the powerful, contemporary "migratory flows" narrative of "the Middle East via the Mediterranean states into the EU" (p. 11).

Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of existing literature and policy debate surrounding transit migration, establishes the parameters of the book's conceptual and methodological boundaries, chronicles the shifting immigration policies towards asylum seekers in Australia and its ongoing bilateral negotiations with Indonesia on migrant management, before outlining the book's structure. Chapter 2 "Transiting Indonesia: Past and Present" covers a thirty-year long history of the Indonesian state's acceptance and resettlement of refugees in its Galang Island mainly to contrast with the current climate of hostility and reluctant reception of migrants and asylum seekers. Directing attention to the increasing number of transit migrants from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa seeking asylum in the last decade, Missbach chronicles the gradual development of Indonesia as a transit state through internationally

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE

© TINA SHRESTHA, 2019 | DOI:10.1163/22134379-17501010

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the prevailing CC-BY-NC license at the time of publication.

Downloaded from Brill.com04/26/2023 01:13:37PM
via free access

mandated policies and bilateral agreements between the Indonesian state and Australia, which has ultimately facilitated in “the immobilization and warehousing of asylum seekers in Indonesia” reducing “the number of people reaching its [Australian] shores” (p. 56). Chapter 3 “The Politics of Detention,” focuses on the normalization of arrest, policing, extortion, and harassment of migrants and asylum seekers in and outside immigration detention centers in Indonesia. Missbach employs the story of Tariq’s migration journey from Pakistan to Indonesia and the harrowing accounts of “life in detention” (p. 75), including the death of an Afghani detainee Taqi, to elucidate the often unplanned modes of entry, uncertain lengths of stay, unpredictable encounters with authorities, and outcomes of being held in the transit state of Indonesia. More broadly, the chapter questions the existing immigration and asylum structure of a transit state that has regularized arrest and detention of asylum seekers as a strategy of governing and deterring transit migration. Chapter 4 “Life on Hold,” provides glimpses of a nationally diverse group of transit migrants, their everyday struggles, hardships, and limited options while navigating the Indonesian social institutions, such as healthcare and education, exacerbated by underemployment and anxiety around waiting in transit indefinitely. The overall hostility, according to Missbach, motivates many young migrants to embark on the boat for Australia despite their knowledge of “risks involved in crossing the sea” and being “punished by mandatory detention in Australia” (p. 113) even if they successfully cross the Mediterranean Sea.

Shifting scale from the state-level and local encounters experienced by transit migrants, Chapter 5 “The Limits of Protection,” documents the changing institutional culture, management strategies, and resettlement practices surrounding “voluntary repatriation” adopted by international organization bodies, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Indonesia. Missbach provides a brief history of UNHCR’s “Refugee Status Determination,” resettlement and repatriation programs in Indonesia, and its increasing annual budget since 2012. Similarly revealing are the sub-sections devoted to IOM’s Indonesia’s operational budget, including the international funding agencies, partners, and networks in the United States, Europe, and Australia. The author follows up with a rhetorical question—“who benefits the most?” (p. 138)—almost as an afterthought, buried in the middle of the chapter, only to echo a familiar policy prescription, delivered by international organizations like UNHCR, on transit states’ responsibility of “developing a domestic asylum system to provide more comprehensive protection to asylum seekers” (p. 146). Chapter 6 “Indonesia as a Transit State: Obligations, Policies, and Practice” advances this prescription by outlining the international legal frameworks and moral obliga-

tions of the Indonesian government to offer appropriate protection for asylum seekers in its territory. It employs a working definition of a 'transit country' (Kimball 2007) to characterize ways in which this transit model does and does not apply to the Indonesian state. In Chapter 7 "Tidal Ebb and Flow: The Indonesia-Australia Relationship" is divided into two parts. In the first-half Missbach chronicles the contemporary events leading up to the bilateral relations between Indonesia and Australia and effectively shows them as part of a wider contestations surrounding issues of border securitization, Indonesian state sovereignty, and "diplomatic pressure" exerted by Australia in the Asia-Pacific region. The second half of the chapter discusses cases of maltreatment of transit migrants, categorized as smugglers, systematically criminalized, and dispatched to detention facilities in "Offshore Refugee-Processing Centre" for extradition procedures by the Australian authorities. Chapter 8 "Selling Hope" circles back to the transit migrants' experience in Indonesia and an emergent smuggling 'industry' operated primarily by failed asylum seekers, underemployed, and unable to either return home or proceed on to their journey. Challenging the prevailing narratives and stereotypes surrounding people-smugglers and traffickers, Missbach presents three case studies of men convicted for smuggling to argue that transit migrants' experiences of socio-economic marginalization, legal insecurity, and restricted mobility primarily contribute to their transition into a thriving 'industry' of people smuggling in Indonesia.

Troubled Transit conceptualizes transit migration as an ongoing and forward-looking process, even as academics and policy makers continue to describe transit migrants as constantly "stuck" in a particular time and place. Missbach makes this point explicitly when she discusses "stuckedness" (Hage 2009) at various points in the book. This nuanced, rich theme of conceptual paradox introduced at the beginning and used as a springboard for the eight chapters that follow remains underdeveloped, however. This is partly because of the breadth that the book attempts to cover. Each chapter introduces different sub-themes and elements related to transit migration and its impact on transit migrants, yet no particular theme is explored in depth. While the chapters, usually divided into multiple sub-headings and summary at the end, offer useful overviews of policy-relevant implications to those either new to the topic or the regional politics surrounding transit migration, this structure hampered deeper engagement with the issues raised.

It's certainly the case that the exploration of transit migration as an unplanned journey, embarked by transit migrants from various nationalities, resulting in unpredictable outcomes and periods of transitions comes through as a dynamic process much more than one of static "stuckedness." Neverthe-

less, more substantial distinctions could have been made in terms of historical, cultural, and political backgrounds of the transit migrants (whom the author interviewed) from different regions—South Asia (Pakistan and Afghanistan), Africa (Somalia), and Middle East (Iran)—all “stuck” together in Indonesia. There were other similarly unexplored issues and distinctions, too. What kind of social interactions and relationships developed among this multinational group of people identified as transit migrants? To what extent did Indonesia, in other words, function as a site for cultural and knowledge exchanges, besides being a place of transiting, for these sojourners? And, though such highly contingent temporal and survival practicalities, how might these cultural encounters have engendered new interconnections and forms of knowledge practices in transit migration?

After all, Missbach claims that she is not only interested in illuminating ‘how transit migration functions’ but also examining ‘the motivations behind transit migration’ (p. 11). While investigation into how transit migration is operationalized in a local context is crucial to understanding mobility and regulatory frameworks, framing it as two sides of the same coin misrepresents the complex dynamics the book seeks to highlight. Migrant mobility and stuckedness are structurally conditioned and, more importantly, distributed unevenly throughout people’s migration journeys. Hence, the criminalization of ‘transit migrants’ is inseparable from ongoing illegalization of transit migration—a connection that could have been more clearly drawn and further explored.

These limitations by no means compromise the book’s contribution to broaden current discussions of transit migration and experiences of those categorized as transit migrants outside the EU and North America. It goes beyond mapping empirical approaches to investigating into transit migration, serving as launching points for future research and providing a useful conceptual toolkit that can bridge the widening gap between migration and refugee studies in the current political moment. The book is an essential read for researchers, humanitarians, and human rights advocates invested in persuading transnational governing bodies of the human cost of managing migration through detention and deportation regimes.

Tina Shrestha

Waseda Institute for Advanced Study (WIAS)

tinashrestha@aoni.waseda.jp

References

- Hage, Ghassan. (2009). "Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality." In: Hage, Ghassan (Editor). *Waiting*, pp. 97–106. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press.
- Kimball, Ann Elizabeth. (2007). *The Transit State: A comparative analysis of Mexico and Moroccan Immigration Policies*. San Diego: University of California, San Diego.