

# Faith and Identity in Migration: A Comparative Study of Religious Practices among Filipino and Indonesian Migrants in Singapore

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## Abstract:

As a highly diverse immigrant society, Singapore has long attracted substantial numbers of labor migrants and settlers from the Philippines and Indonesia. These migrants constitute not only a vital segment of Singapore's labor force but also play a significant role in shaping its cultural and religious landscape. In the context of transnational migration, religion functions as more than a source of spiritual solace—it also serves as a key mechanism for sustaining cultural identity and maintaining social networks through rituals, religious organizations, and everyday practices. This study conducts a comparative analysis of Filipino and Indonesian migrants in Singapore, focusing on the intersection between religion and cultural identity. It explores how religious practice becomes a central means through which migrants negotiate belonging, preserve cultural continuity, and forge social connections in a foreign environment. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of transnationalism and cultural identity, this study synthesizes insights from academic literature, data from governmental and international organizations, and existing ethnographic sources. Using comparative and qualitative methods, it examines the everyday religious practices of these groups within churches, mosques, and faith-based communities, identifying both divergences and convergences in organizational participation, ritual engagement, and communal interaction. By illuminating the ways in which migrants confront cultural difference and seek belonging, this paper highlights the crucial role of religion in shaping migrant identity and social cohesion in the host society.

**Keywords:** Migration; Religious Practice; Cultural Identity

## 1. Introduction

Within the transnational migration networks of Southeast Asia, Singapore has consistently served as a crucial node. As a regional financial hub and labor market, it has long attracted migrant populations from neighboring countries. According to official data released by the Singapore government, as of June 2025, the country's non-resident population has reached 1.91 million—approximately one-third of the total population. Among these, migrants from the Philippines and Indonesia represent significant proportions: there are roughly 210,000 Filipino nationals residing in Singapore [1], while Indonesia remains the largest source of domestic workers, accounting for more than half of Singapore's foreign household labor force [2]. The arrival of these migrant groups has not only reshaped Singapore's economic structure but also produced profound social and cultural impacts.

Religion plays a pivotal role in migrants' adaptation to daily life. For Filipino migrants, Catholic and Protestant traditions form essential sources of communal belonging and spiritual support. For Indonesian migrants, Islam serves as a vital link for maintaining identity and fostering social cohesion. Religion thus helps migrants cultivate a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar urban environment, while also providing a channel through which transnational connections and cultural traditions are sustained. Under conditions of demanding work schedules and limited social space, religious practices often exhibit greater durability and collective strength than other forms of social activity.

Singapore's own religious landscape further provides a distinctive context for this phenomenon. On the one hand, the state emphasizes religious freedom and plural coexistence; on the other, it exercises regulatory oversight through laws and policies governing religious activity. This institutional environment—characterized by both tolerance and control—creates a particular tension in which migrants' religious practices are simultaneously recognized and constrained. Within this framework, Filipino and Indonesian migrants have developed differing religious strategies: some draw upon the support of transnational church networks, while others rely on mosque-based systems to preserve internal community solidarity. Existing scholarship has primarily focused on Singapore's domestic religious governance or on the experiences of a single migrant group, with limited comparative analysis across different religious traditions and social positions. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how migrants from the Philippines and Indonesia sustain, adapt, and reconstruct their religious practices throughout pro-

cesses of migration and settlement. It further explores how these practices, in turn, shape their identity formation and sense of belonging. By comparing the experiences of these two communities, this paper aims to reveal the multifaceted functions of religion in migratory contexts and to provide new insights into the interaction between migrant populations and host societies.

## 2. The Academic Context of Migration and Religion Studies

In recent years, research on the religious activities and identity formation of Southeast Asian migrants abroad has grown significantly. Scholars have increasingly moved beyond earlier frameworks focused primarily on economic and labor dimensions, instead conceptualizing religion as a crucial resource through which migrants sustain family relationships, reconstruct cultural identities, and cope with structural insecurities in the process of transnational mobility.

Ullah, from the perspective of migration culture and transnational social networks, analyzes the processes of cultural adaptation, connection, and deculturation among Southeast Asian migrants engaged in cross-border movements. He argues that culture not only facilitates migrants' adjustment to new environments but also maintains—or transforms—their identity bonds with the homeland [3]. Reyes-Espiritu, adopting a lens of spiritual care and “transnational motherhood,” examines how Filipino migrant care workers draw on religious and spiritual resources to sustain inner strength and self-identity while caring for others. She observes that prayer, religious gatherings, and faith narratives serve as vital mechanisms through which women migrant caregivers relieve stress and reconcile the demands of transnational family obligations with personal meaning [4].

Chan and his research team employed quantitative methods to study foreign labor populations in Singapore, finding that social support plays a significant role in mitigating psychological stress and enhancing well-being [5].

Turnbull's systematic review of research on female migrant workers concludes that religious faith is a key factor in reducing stress, cultivating a positive life attitude, and securing social support, particularly under conditions of isolation and high pressure [6].

In the study of Indonesian migrants, Fitriyah focuses on female domestic workers and examines the reconstruction of religious gender roles in Singapore through the lens of gender and “border theology.” She argues that Indonesian women strategically reconcile domestic labor with religious obligations, reinterpreting religious norms to assert

both identity and agency [7].

Afkar and Sundrijo focus on transnational Islamic networks, particularly the role of Nahdlatul Ulama—one of Indonesia’s largest Islamic organizations—among overseas migrant communities. They find that the organization provides not only spiritual support but also legal and social assistance, thereby strengthening transnational religious and social linkages [8].

Hwang’s ethnographic research illustrates how churches and umbrella Christian organizations in Singapore engage in outreach activities targeting Indonesian migrants. These initiatives offer supplementary spaces for religious practice and partially compensate for migrants’ limited participation in formal religious institutions [9].

Local research in Singapore provides further insights from the perspectives of religious policy and spatial organization. Woods proposes the concept of “parallel religious spaces,” suggesting that although Singapore legally guarantees religious freedom, the government’s stringent regulation of public spaces and religious activities results in a structural divide in resources and visibility between migrant religious practices and established local institutions. Consequently, migrants’ religious life is often confined to informal or private spaces, limiting equal interaction with mainstream religious organizations [10].

At the policy level, the U.S. Department of State’s International Religious Freedom Report (2023) observes that Singapore’s governance of religion prioritizes social harmony and public order, within which certain limitations on religious expression are imposed. While such institutional arrangements contribute to broader societal stability, they also mean that the space for religious expression among migrant communities is, in practice, significantly constrained [11].

Recent studies have enriched the understanding of the functional dimensions of migrant religiosity—its role in providing emotional support, building social capital, and maintaining transnational connections. However, most existing works focus on a single migrant group, leaving a gap in systematic comparative studies of how migrants from different religious traditions adapt differently under the same institutional regime. This study seeks to fill that gap by comparing the religious practices of Filipino and Indonesian migrant workers in Singapore, exploring how religion becomes an essential resource for identity construction and social integration in a transnational context. Such a comparative approach not only broadens the analytical scope of transnational religion and identity studies but also deepens our understanding of the practical functions of religion in migrant well-being and social cohesion.

### 3. Religious Practices and Identity Reconstruction among Filipino Migrants in Singapore

With Singapore’s socio-structural context—characterized by both religious pluralism and migration governance—the Filipino migrant community exhibits distinct modes of religious practice and identity reconstruction. Centered on Catholic faith, Filipino migrants sustain their religious traditions through transnational networks, church-based activities, and everyday rituals, while simultaneously generating new forms of social connectedness in a foreign environment.

#### 3.1 Transnational Religious Networks and Community Cohesion

The religious practices of Filipino migrants in Singapore are shaped by the dual forces of transnational mobility and local social structures. As a classic labor-exporting nation, the Philippines continues to send large numbers of Catholic workers abroad. Religious practice among these migrants not only transcends geographical boundaries but also reconstructs emotional and social belonging across space. For many Filipino women engaged in domestic work, religious activities serve as a bridge from the “workspace” to a “faith community.” Through church services, prayer meetings, and fellowship, these women rebuild a spiritual home abroad and maintain strong transnational ties with their families.

Singaporean Catholic and Evangelical churches have long integrated Filipino congregants, with some parishes even offering Tagalog-language Masses to meet the spiritual needs of foreign workers. In this context, the church functions not merely as a religious institution but as a community of care—a social network that extends beyond faith to encompass everyday mutual aid. Within these spaces, migrants share accommodation, provide informal legal advice, and offer emotional support, transforming religious space into a locus of social solidarity.

The expansion of these religious spaces is not limited to physical gatherings. As Cacho and Lacsá observe, the rise of digital religious networks has provided overseas Filipino workers with new forms of spiritual care. During the COVID-19 pandemic, such networks fostered a “virtual faith community” that transcended national borders, enabling migrants to sustain religious participation through online Masses and digital worship [13]. This digitized form of pilgrimage preserved the solemnity of traditional rituals while reconstituting collective participation and emotional resonance within virtual space. Some churches

even launched online counseling and sharing sessions, thereby reinforcing the church's role as a source of social support for migrant communities.

The transnational nature of religious belief also reflects how Filipino migrants redefine the notion of home. Through religious festivals and community celebrations, they preserve emotional and cultural connections to their homeland. Migrant churches frequently function as a "home away from home," re-embedding cherished traditions—Simbang Gabi, the Filipino pre-dawn Christmas Mass—within the rhythms and constraints of Singapore's urban landscape. These ritualized practices become vital acts of cultural remembrance and identity affirmation [14]. The spread of digital religious participation further dissolves the boundaries of geography and regulation, expanding the spatial imagination of home. Within this hybrid structure of online and offline worship, Filipino migrants construct a transnational sacred landscape through which they sustain faith, social relations, and cultural identity simultaneously.

### 3.2 Faith Practice and Identity Reformation

For Filipino migrants in Singapore, religious life is an ongoing process of identity reconstruction. Many Filipino women work as live-in domestic helpers, occupying the lower tiers of the host society's labor hierarchy. Yet religious communities provide them with a symbolic space that transcends their occupational identity, enabling them to renegotiate their positions between the roles of "servant" and "citizen." Through collective worship, volunteer service, and educational activities, these migrants transform from passive laborers into active participants of faith, thereby reclaiming moral agency and dignity.

This transformation manifests most clearly in the creation of ritual and emotional communities. Filipino migrants actively participate in Masses, prayer circles, and festive celebrations within Catholic and emerging Evangelical congregations in Singapore. In doing so, faith becomes a carrier of both cultural and national meaning. These rituals not only preserve homeland traditions but also offer expressive platforms within unfamiliar social structures. Through prayer, singing, and personal testimonies, migrant workers articulate moral subjectivity and gain renewed recognition in public religious spaces.

For instance, Salt&Light featured the story of Hydie Valdez, a Filipino domestic worker who, after years of church participation, became a group leader organizing Bible studies and mentoring fellow migrants—a transformation that reflects the empowerment embedded in religious engagement [15].

Religious networks also facilitate what might be termed

quasi-citizenship for Filipino migrants. Through participation in volunteer service and charitable initiatives, migrants assert a moral presence and social contribution within the host society. As Cacho and Lacsá argue, digital church communities provide transnational platforms for migrant voices, allowing them to engage with social issues through faith-based discourse. Although such participation lacks formal legal citizenship, it constructs a form of faith-based citizenship—a symbolic mode of belonging rooted in moral agency and collective care [16].

Thus, the religious practices of Filipino migrants represent more than cultural continuity or spiritual consolation; they constitute a dynamic process of social identity reformation. Through faith, migrants transcend the boundaries between "worker" and "citizen," forming a subjectivity centered on belief and community participation. In this sense, religion functions as a social force—empowering migrant groups to gain symbolic visibility and moral voice within an institutional framework that otherwise constrains them.

## 4. Religious Life and Collective Identity among Indonesian Migrants

The religious practices of Indonesian migrants in Singapore reflect not only individual expressions of faith continuity but also collective efforts to redefine religious spaces within institutional and social constraints. Relying on mosques and informal study groups, Indonesian migrants have built networks of mutual support in which religious spaces serve both as sanctuaries of emotion and as intersections of social integration and cultural boundary-making.

### 4.1 Reconstructing Religious Practice and Migrant Space

Singapore's governance framework seeks to balance the protection of religious freedom with the maintenance of public order, a dynamic that both enables and delimits religious activity. Within this context, the religious visibility and freedom of action available to Indonesian migrants are circumscribed, prompting them to depend heavily on community networks and semi-private spaces to sustain their faith.

Religious and social outreach programs for Indonesian migrant workers are often facilitated through collaborations between mosques and para-religious organizations. These gatherings, typically held on workers' rest days, include worship services, Qur'an study sessions, and care-oriented programs. They thus operate as intermediary spaces between public mosques and private homes—sites that function simultaneously as physical venues of devo-



tion and as emotional refuges and identity sanctuaries [17]. Under Singapore's regulatory environment, such informal networks are particularly vital for migrants with restricted mobility.

Local mosques and community-based religious organizations also constitute essential nodes of social support. According to research by Karyawan, many Indonesian Muslim domestic workers participate in Qur'an recitation classes, Eid gatherings, and volunteer programs at mosques such as Darul Aman and Al-Muttaqin. These activities not only strengthen faith but also serve as key channels for mutual assistance and the sharing of lived experience. The study emphasizes the dual function of such religious spaces: on one hand, they are centers for worship and religious education; on the other, they provide safe environments for female migrants to find social interaction and emotional adjustment. In this sense, religious practice becomes an essential mechanism for countering social isolation and cultural alienation [18].

The growing use of digital media has further expanded the boundaries of religious space. Indonesian migrants widely use messaging apps and social platforms to share prayer times, lecture recordings, and festival information, maintaining religious continuity even when physical movement is limited [19]. These digital practices render faith mobile and adaptable—an extension of migrant identity and belonging beyond the confines of physical and institutional space.

#### 4.2 From Religious Belonging to Social Identity

At the intersection of migration and multicultural society, religious belonging serves not only as a means of maintaining faith but also as a key pathway through which Indonesian migrants construct social identity and a sense of belonging. In the migration context, religion operates as a vehicle for self-definition, emotional resilience, and social participation, allowing migrants to renegotiate the question of "who I am" amid processes of othering and institutional constraint.

Through prayer, study sessions, and religious celebrations, many Indonesian migrants reaffirm their self-worth and social position in the host society. Religious belonging mitigates the loneliness and dislocation associated with labor migration and enables migrants to reinterpret their existence through the moral lens of the "devout believer" rather than the "low-wage worker" [19]. In this transformation, faith becomes a form of symbolic capital that restores dignity and a sense of control over one's life.

The social force of religious communities is equally evident in their dense relational networks and robust mutual-aid systems. Through church-parachurch partnerships

and other faith-based organizations, migrants not only access material support but also negotiate and consolidate a collective social identity abroad. Beyond offering religious services, these organizations provide language communities, cultural programs, and shared resources that help migrants build social ties and belonging outside the realm of formal worship [20]. Through such participation, Indonesian migrants extend their connections to other migrant groups and local believers, moving from the social periphery toward communal and public visibility—thus attaining a form of social recognition and "being seen."

However, religious belonging also entails the reproduction of boundaries. Singapore's pragmatic pluralism, while sustaining interreligious harmony, simultaneously regulates the public expression of religion. Consequently, the religious belonging of Indonesian migrants provides psychological safety but can also reinforce symbolic separation from the host society. Religious belonging thus emerges as a dynamic process of negotiation—one that both connects and divides, empowers and constrains.

### 5. Conclusion

Migration represents not only the movement of people across geographical boundaries but also a process of faith renewal and identity reconstruction. Using Filipino and Indonesian migrants in Singapore as comparative cases, this study has explored both the differences and commonalities in their religious practices. It demonstrates how religion functions as a vital cultural resource and social nexus in transnational migration—providing spiritual anchorage, facilitating emotional and institutional self-organization, and shaping mechanisms of social support and identity formation.

Filipino and Indonesian migrants exhibit divergent trajectories of religious expression. For Filipino migrants, Catholicism serves as a central axis of collective identity. Their religious activities are characterized by outward visibility and public participation: church services and devotional gatherings not only sustain cultural memory from the homeland but also help secure social recognition in Singapore's plural society through explicit expressions of faith. Religion thus becomes a medium of self-representation and social visibility, enabling Filipino migrants to construct a positive public image and integrate into the host society's civic space.

By contrast, Indonesian migrants' religious life is marked by cohesion and functional orientation. Networks of Islamic prayer groups and mosques provide education, mutual assistance, and informational support, positioning faith as the organizing principle of both everyday order

and community stability. Religion here extends beyond spiritual conviction to serve as a structure of social governance and emotional sustenance. This contrast highlights the strategic choices migrants make under different religious traditions and social positions, yet it also reveals a shared religious logic rooted in the experience of migration—namely, the use of faith as a means to reconstruct belonging and meaning. Whether through choir singing or collective prayer, religious practice offers migrants a resilient framework for maintaining cultural continuity and resisting isolation and marginalization within a foreign social environment. Religion, in this sense, bridges the homeland and the host society, transforming migration from a purely economic pursuit into a process of social identity and cultural reproduction.

This “commonality within difference” underscores the distinctive role of religion in Southeast Asian migrant societies. Religion simultaneously delineates group boundaries and provides a shared moral framework for cross-cultural interaction. Amid mobility and diversity, religious practice operates dialectically: it fortifies intra-group cohesion while simultaneously easing inter-group accommodation, propelling identity into a perpetual state of re-assembly through encounter. As an engine of cultural continuity, religion reveals how migrant communities do not merely endure globalization but actively author its local moral grammar and social cartography.

Future research could further examine how digital religious practices influence migrants’ faith and community relations, particularly how second-generation migrants reconstruct belonging and identity in online spaces. In addition, the intersection of religion with labor regimes, gender hierarchies, and state policies deserves closer analytical attention within the broader study of Southeast Asian migration. Religion should thus be understood not merely as a source of spiritual support but as a generative mechanism of social relations and cultural identity. Through religious practice, migrants sustain transnational connections amid mobility, seek resonance amid difference, and continually redefine the meaning of “we” within an interconnected world.

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