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BEYOND REMITTANCES: MIGRATION AS MORAL ECONOMY, SYMBOLIC PRACTICE, AND IDENTITY NEGOTIATION AMONG RETURNED MIGRANTS IN CILACAP REGENCY

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Abstract *This study examines migration and remittance practices among returnees to Cilacap Regency, moving beyond dominant economic perspectives and focusing on their cultural and symbolic dimensions. Based on in-depth interviews with ten returnees, the study explores how migration is embedded in moral obligations, social recognition, and identity negotiations. The findings indicate that migration is primarily understood as a moral responsibility towards family, where remittances function as obligatory expressions of reciprocity rather than voluntary financial transfers. At the same time, remittances operate as visible markers of success that shape social status and generate new forms of inequality through processes of comparison and recognition. Furthermore, the return experience highlights ongoing identity negotiations, as migrants navigate expectations, gender roles, and shifting positions within their communities. Remittances are not simply economic resources but symbolic practices that sustain relationships, generate meaning, and shape social life. Thus, this study extends existing migration scholarship by demonstrating that economic outcomes cannot be fully understood without examining the underlying cultural logics. While previous research, particularly by Hein de Haas, has emphasized the conditional economic impacts of migration, this study complements that perspective by highlighting the moral, symbolic, and experiential dimensions of remittance practices.*

Keyword:

Migration, remittances, moral economy, symbolic capital, identity negotiation

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1. Introduction

Migration is not simply the movement of people across space, but also the movement of meanings, obligations, and social relationship across borders. Yet despite the deeply social and cultural nature of migration, much of the migration-development literature continues to frame migration primarily through economic indicators such as remittance flows, household income, and poverty reduction (Aggarwal et al., 2006; Hamed, 2022; Yougie Alhabsy Barnadi et al., 2025). In many parts of the Global South, including Indonesia, migration has become a common yet transformative practice through which individuals and families negotiate their position within

broader structural inequalities and opportunities (Kirecci, 2021; Suyanto, 2018). However, the dominance of economistic approaches has left limited space for understanding how migrants themselves interpret migration and remittance practices as culturally meaningful and morally embedded experiences.

Existing studies have widely demonstrated the economic contributions of remittances, particularly in improving household welfare, education, healthcare access, and consumption (Andini et al., 2023; Cahyanti & Sugiharti, 2022; Lu, 2013; Mora-Rivera & Van Gameren, 2021). Nevertheless, these studies often treat remittances as quantifiable economic transfers rather than as social practices shaped by moral obligations, kinship expectations, symbolic values, and local cultural norms. As a results, migration is frequently reduced to a technical development mechanism, while the lived experiences, interpretations, and everyday negotiations of migrants and their families remain underexplored. However, reducing migration solely to economic flows ignores the deeper processes by which migration is experienced, understood, and produced in everyday life. Migration, in this sense, is not only about the redistribution of resources, but also about the reconfiguration of relationships, identities, and values (Fonseca et al., 2021; Khoudja et al., 2025). Although contemporary scholarship has reconciled the previously polarized pessimistic and optimistic views of migration, and placed greater emphasis on the conditional and context-dependent nature of its impacts (Carling et al., 2021; De Haas, 2005), much of this literature remains anchored in an economistic imagination. Migrants are often portrayed as rational actors facing structural constraints, and remittances are treated as a measurable variable whose effects can be quantified and compared (Bettin et al., 2024; Démurger & Xu, 2011; Mannan, 2015; Nsiah & Fayissa, 2013). Such an approach, while analytically sound, tends to silence the voices, experiences, and interpretations of migrants themselves.

Sending money is never simply about money. It is a gesture, an obligation, and a demand. It carries with it expectations of care, reciprocity, and recognition, and is embedded in a moral framework that defines what it means to be a good child, a responsible parent, or a successful migrant(Carling, 2014; Mahmud, 2021; Mckay, 2007; Renz Marion Gavino et al., 2023). Recent interdisciplinary work has begun to acknowledge this dimension by conceptualizing remittances as part of a moral economy in which economic transactions are inseparable from social relationships and affective bonds (Rössel et al., 2024; Suyanto & Fajrul, 2022). In this perspective, sending money home is not only an economic act but also a symbolic performance through which migrants maintain a sense of belonging and negotiate their place within transnational families (Boccagni et al., 2025; Carling, 2014; Lee, 2022; Mckay, 2007; Yeoh et al., 2020). However, these insights remain at the margins of mainstream migration-development discourse, which continues to prioritize macro-level explanations and policy-oriented solutions.

The dominance of such perspectives leaves several questions unanswered. How do migrants themselves understand the meaning of remittances? In what ways are these meanings shaped by cultural norms, social expectations, and local histories? How do remittances change not only economic conditions but also social hierarchies, gender relations, and symbolic forms of power within communities? Existing studies have shown that remittances do not flow evenly across social groups and that their benefits are often distributed in ways that generate inequality (Anwar et al., 2024; Bouoiyour & Miftah, 2014; Ghandour et al., 2025; Zuliandika & Anggraeni, 2025). However, the processes through which such inequalities are experienced, accepted, or contested remain underexplored. Similarly, although gender is recognized as an important dimension of migration, women's everyday roles in managing remittances, keeping families together, and negotiating moral obligations are rarely placed at the center of analysis (Ceasar et al., 2025; Faristiana & Daroini, 2025; Islam et al., 2025; Ullah & Chattoraj, 2023).

These limitations become particularly evident in the Indonesian context, where migration is deeply embedded in local cultural systems. For many households, the decision to migrate is

not only a response to economic necessity but also a reflection of aspirations, social pressures, and moral responsibility. Migration is often associated with notions of sacrifice, dedication, and success, which shape how individuals envision their futures and evaluate their achievements. Remittances, in turn, are used not only to meet material needs but also to establish social status, maintain family honor, and fulfill culturally defined obligations. Despite this complexity, much of the existing literature on migration in Indonesia continues to focus on economic indicators and policy implications, leaving the cultural and symbolic dimensions of migration relatively understudied theoretically (Bastide & Yeoh, 2024; De Haas, 2005; Hall, 2022).

Understanding this trend, this article approaches migration not as a purely economic phenomenon but as a cultural process in which meaning is produced, negotiated, and contested. Drawing on interpretive and symbolic anthropological perspectives, this study seeks to understand remittances as part of a broader signifying system in which material exchange is inseparable from moral values and social relations. Within this framework, remittances are not only resources but also symbols that reflect and shape how individuals relate to one another in a transnational context. By focusing on how migrants and their families interpret and implement remittance practices in their daily lives, this study aims to uncover layers of meaning often overlooked in macro-level analyses.

This study focuses on Cilacap Regency, a region that has long been recognized as one ot the major migrant-sending areas in both Central Java and Indonesia more broadly. For decades, international labor migration has become deeply embedded in the social economic life of many communities in Cilacap, shaping household strategies, livelihood patterns, and local aspirations. Migration in this region is not merely an occasional economic response, but has evolved into an intergerenational social practice sustained through kinship networks, recruitment infrastructures, and shared cultural expectations regarding mobility and success. The high number of Indonesian migrant workers originating from Cilacap has positioned the regency as an important site for examining how migration and remittance practices are socially normalized, culturally interpreted, and morally negotiated within everyday life.

To further strengthen the significance of this research, it is necessary to clearly formulate the central questions guiding the analysis. Rather than delving into separate issues, this article is driven by one central question: How are migration and remittance practices understood, experienced, and realized as culturally embedded processes that shape social relations, moral obligations, and structures of inequality in everyday life? This central question is designed to go beyond the dominant economic framework by highlighting meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences. This goal aims to capture migration not simply as a result of structural forces, but as an ongoing process in which individuals and families actively negotiate their place in the broader social world. By asking how migration and remittances are understood and implemented, this study emphasizes the perspectives of actors, highlighting the ways in which economic practices cannot be excluded from cultural logics and moral frameworks.

Through this approach, this article seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate on migration and development by shifting the analytical focus from outcomes to processes, from structures to meanings, and from aggregates to lived experiences. Rather than asking whether remittances lead to development, this study asks how remittances are understood, how they are embedded in social relations, and how they participate in the production of inequality and belonging. In doing so, it highlights the importance of situating migration within the cultural context in which it occurs and recognizing that development is not simply about economic change, but also a process of meaning-making that shapes how people live, relate, and imagine their place in the world.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach grounded in interpretive anthropology to explore how migration and remittances are understood as meaningful life experiences. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten returnee migrant workers in Cilacap Regency. Participants were purposefully selected based on their experience working abroad and having returned to their home communities for at least one year, allowing for reflective narratives. Each interview lasted approximately 60–120 minutes and focused on migration trajectories, remittance practices, family relationships, and personal interpretations of success, obligation, and social change. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim to preserve the richness of participants' narratives.

Cilacap was chosen as the research location due to its importance as one of the main sending areas for Indonesian migrant workers in Central Java, reflected by its high migration intensity and vulnerability to issues such as human trafficking. The regency is also the focus of the Safe Migrant Village (*Desmigratif*) initiative, which emphasizes community-based protection, migrant community education, and monitoring mechanisms to prevent irregular migration. These conditions make Cilacap a relevant empirical setting where migration is deeply intertwined with everyday social life. Data were analyzed thematically, with an emphasis on interpreting how participants construct meaning around remittances, obligations, and social identities, allowing the research to move beyond economic understandings to a more culturally embedded understanding of the relationship between migration and development. All names used in this study are pseudonyms and have been changed to protect participants' identities.

3. Result and Discussion

Empirical findings from Cilacap Regency reveal that migration is not primarily articulated as an economic strategy, but as a moral project embedded in kinship relationships and culturally structured expectations. For the return migrants in this study, the decision to migrate was rarely narrated in terms of individual accumulation or rational income maximization. Instead, it was consistently framed as a response to a moral calling emerging from within the family. Migration becomes a means of "taking responsibility," a form of action in which individuals position themselves within a network of obligations that precede and transcend economic calculations. In this sense, remittances are not external additions to the household economy, but integral components of the moral order that governs social life.

3.1 Migration as Moral Economy

Migration, in the narratives of returnees in Cilacap Regency, begins not with questions of income, but with questions of responsibility. Migration is not initially envisioned as a strategy for improving life, or as a response to economic constraints, but as a response to a calling already present within the family. Migrating, in many ways, is responding to a calling that is often unspoken, yet deeply felt and socially recognized. Within this framework, migration is not an individual project, but a relational act, grounded in expectations that precede personal choice. Rina's narrative reflects this orientation very clearly. She explains, "I feel that if I don't send money, it's like breaking my obligations as a child. Our parents raised us, so we have to return the favor" (Rina, in interview, 2024). What emerges from her statement is not simply a description of financial behavior, but rather a moral position. The phrase "breaking obligations" indicates that remittances are embedded in a normative order in which actions are evaluated through ethical categories such as obligation, respect, and reciprocity. The act of sending money is thus inseparable from the desire to remain morally legitimate within the family. Failing to send money not only means economic failure but also risks being perceived as someone who has

abandoned relational responsibilities.

A similar moral tone emerges in Agus's story: “Working abroad isn't just for yourself, but for your family. If you don't help, it doesn't feel right” (Agus, in interview, 2024). The phrase "not right" refers not to inefficiency or lack of success, but to a sense of moral incongruence. Migration, in this sense, is less about maximizing income and more about aligning oneself with what is considered ethically appropriate. It is a movement that transcends not only geographical boundaries but also moral boundaries, where individuals continually navigate their actions in relation to others, like parents, children, partners, and even the wider community. This moral framework is not limited to a few individuals but is consistently expressed by participants. Slamet noted, “Sometimes we send money not because we have extra money, but because we have to” (Slamet, in interview, 2024), while Yanti explained, “Even though our salaries are small, we still have to set aside some for our families back home; it's our obligation” (Yanti, in interview, 2025). Dewi added, “I often have to put aside my own needs so I can still send money home” (Dewi, in interview, 2025), and Budi reflected, “If I don't send money, it feels like we're not fulfilling our responsibilities as family members” (Budi, in interview, 2025). These accounts reveal a striking pattern that remittances are not contingent on surplus. The money is not sent because of additional income, nor is it calculated based on a rational assessment of costs and benefits. Instead, the money is treated as a fixed obligation that must be met regardless of personal circumstances. Economic constraints do not suspend obligations, rather, they reorganize economic behavior. Migrants adjust their consumption, endure hardship, and prioritize remittances even when it means sacrificing their own needs.

Remittances are not simply financial transactions, but also a relational practice. They are a means for migrants to maintain relationships, reaffirm commitments, and maintain their place within the family's moral structure. The act of sending money becomes a form of communication, a way to say “I remember,” “I care,” and “I'm still part of this (family) relationship.” Lina expressed this relational dimension when she said, “When we send money, it's like a sign that we still care about our family back home” (Lina, in interview, 2025). Andi also noted, “It's not just the amount, but the consistency that's important, so the family knows we haven't forgotten” (Andi, in interview, 2025). What is evident here is that remittances carry meaning beyond their monetary value. They function as symbols through which care, responsibility, and belonging are expressed. The regularity of the remittances, the intention behind them, and the sacrifices involved all contribute to the social significance of remittances. In this sense, money is transformed into a moral medium that maintains relationships across distance and time. This pattern leads to what can be understood as a moral economy, where economic practices are embedded in a system of values, reciprocity, and social expectations. However, what is particularly significant in this context is that morality does not simply accompany economic actions; it precedes and shapes them. Migrants do not begin with economic reasoning and then introduce moral considerations. Instead, they begin with moral imperatives, such as supporting their families, returning favors, fulfilling economic obligations, and then organize their decisions around these imperatives.

The notion of reciprocity is central to this process. Participants frequently referenced the idea that parental sacrifices in the past should be repaid through current support. Lina stated, “Our parents used to take care of us, now it’s our turn to help them” (Lina, in interview, 2025), while Agus emphasized, “If we can earn a living, we have a responsibility to repay what has been given” (Agus, in interview, 2025). These statements reflect the temporal dimension of the moral economy, where relationships are understood as ongoing exchanges that extend across generations. Migration becomes part of this cycle, a way in which individuals fulfill their roles within a broader system of giving and returning. Within this framework, remittances are not isolated acts, but rather moments in an ongoing relational process. What is returned is not just material support, but also care, sacrifice, and emotional investment. The moral weight of these

exchanges cannot be reduced to economic value, as they are based on culturally defined notions of obligation and gratitude. Sending remittances means participating in this moral circulation, reaffirming one's place within kinship networks. This perspective offers a different way of understanding migration than approaches that prioritize economic outcomes. The work of Hein de Haas, for example, has been influential in demonstrating that the impact of remittances on development is not automatic, but contingent on structural factors such as governance, economic opportunities, and institutional contexts. His critique of overly optimistic narratives has been crucial in reframing the migration-development debate. However, such approaches tend to place the significance of remittances on their measurable effects, whether they lead to investment, consumption, or broader economic change. The importance of reciprocity further strengthens this interpretation. Migrants often view remittances as reciprocation for past parental care. This suggests that exchange is integrated into a temporally extended moral system. Migration becomes a mechanism through which individuals fulfill intergenerational obligations, thus positioning themselves within a continuous cycle of giving and returning. This temporal dimension informs the economic interpretation, as the "value" of remittances cannot be reduced to immediate utility but must be understood within a broader moral narrative of indebtedness and gratitude.

3.2 Remittances, Social Status, and the Production of Inequality

While remittances begin as an expression of family obligations, they are not confined to that intimate space. Upon returning to the village, they enter a broader social arena where they are viewed, transformed, and given new meaning. In Cilacap Regency, remittances from abroad not only circulate as economic value but also become part of the language people use to talk about success, effort, and worth. What is brought home is not just income, but also a story that must be visualized to be recognized. For many returnees, the question is no longer how much they have earned, but how that income is translated into a form that others can see and understand. Siti describes this moment quite vividly: “When you come home from abroad, people will definitely see what you bring. A house, a motorbike, those are the measures of success” (Siti, in interview, 2025). This statement suggests that migration is only meaningful when it is realized in the material world. Without such visible signs, the risky experience of working abroad remains invisible, unrecognized, and perhaps even doubted. Joko's reflection echoes a similar sentiment: “A nice house is proof of our hard work. If nothing changes, people will say all sorts of things” (Joko, in interview, 2025). What emerges here is not simply a preoccupation with appearance, but a deeper awareness of our existence, constantly being read by others. Home is no longer simply a place to live; it becomes a statement, a way in which effort translates into recognition. At the same time, it also becomes a place of vulnerability, open to interpretation and judgment.

Remittances do not stop at the level of intra-family exchange. They extend into the broader social sphere, where value is negotiated through visibility. The act of building, buying, or spending is not just an economic decision, but a way to position oneself within a network of relationships. Andi expressed this simply, “If you've worked hard, there must be visible results. Otherwise, people won't know our struggles” (Andi, in interview, 2025). The need for visible results suggests that recognition depends not only on effort but also on the ability to make that effort understandable to others. However, the process of making something visible also creates difference. Not all migrants return with the same capacity for transformation, and it is in these differences that inequality begins to form. Lina speaks of this experience with unease: “If you come home without success, you feel ashamed. The villagers will definitely judge you as a failure” (Lina, in interview, 2025). The feeling of shame here is not only personal, but also social. It arises from the awareness of being seen and judged within a framework of shared expectations. Budi's

narrative adds another layer to this experience: “My family back home always expects money to be sent, even though our conditions there are not always good” (Budi, in interview, 2025). What he points to is a distance not only in space but also in understanding. Migrant life abroad, with all its threats and hardships, is often reduced to an image of success. This image then returns to migrants as an expectation to be fulfilled, regardless of reality.

In everyday life, these expectations take the form of comparisons. Siti notes, “If our neighbors see that we haven't changed since we came back, they immediately compare us to others” (Siti, in interview, 2025). In line with that, Agus also observed, “There's an indirect competition about whoever is more successful is more valued” (Agus in interview, 2025). What emerges here is not an explicit competition, but rather a subtle and ongoing process of measuring oneself against others. Migration creates a space where individuals are placed side by side, their lives legible through what can be seen.

Empirical data shows that migrants who are unable to translate their income into visible forms are often perceived as unsuccessful, regardless of the actual conditions they face abroad. Conversely, those who demonstrate visible achievements are more readily recognized as successful, even when those achievements may mask underlying insecurity. This suggests that inequality is generated not only through economic disparities but also through differential access to recognition. Therefore, the role of visibility is crucial. Visibility serves as a mechanism that translates personal experiences into public value, but also exposes individuals to scrutiny and judgment. Migration, in this sense, creates conditions in which individuals are forced to make their experiences legible through material signs. Failure to do so risks symbolic marginalization. This pressure to demonstrate success suggests that remittances are embedded in a performative logic, where economic practices are oriented toward achieving social recognition. Those who are able to translate their migration experiences into tangible forms are more easily recognized, while those who are unable to do so may be overlooked. Budi reflects on this with frustration: “Sometimes we try hard, but because the results are not visible, people think we are unsuccessful” (Budi, in interview, 2024). It means that the issue is not simply about having or not having, but about being seen or not being seen. This suggests that inequality is not only generated through differences in economic resources, but also through differences in recognition. Inequality is shaped by how people interpret what they see, how they assign value, and how they position others within the shared social imagination. In this context, remittances contribute to the formation of inequality not only as material flows, but also as elements of the symbolic order. At this point, it becomes possible to reflect on how this perspective relates to broader discussions about migration. Hein de Haas's work has shown that migration does not automatically lead to development and that its impacts are shaped by structural conditions. This insight is crucial for moving beyond simplistic assumptions. However, when the focus is primarily on outcomes, for example: income, investment, or growth. There is a risk of overlooking the processes by which meaning is generated.

The experiences of migrants in Cilacap demonstrate that what is at stake is not just what remittances do economically, but also what they mean socially. Before contributing to development, remittances contribute to the formation of relationships, expectations, and hierarchies. They shape how people perceive each other, how they perceive themselves, and how they imagine success. In this sense, inequality is not just an existing condition, but something that is constantly produced in everyday interactions. Inequality is present in the gaze of neighbors, in comparisons between homes, in the tacit judgments that follow return. Migration not only reduces or increases inequality, but also changes how inequality is experienced and understood. Therefore, following remittances is not just following money, but also following meaning. This means exploring how value moves, how it changes form, and how it is embedded in people and their lives. In doing so, it becomes possible to see that migration is not just about mobility, but

about the ongoing negotiation of recognition in a world where being seen is as important, if not more so, than belonging.

3.3 Gender, Return, and Identity Negotiation

Findings from ten returnees in Cilacap Regency reveal that migration and remittance practices are deeply gendered processes, inextricably linked to the construction and negotiation of identity, particularly during the return phase. Migration is not experienced uniformly, but rather shaped by specific cultural expectations embedded in gender roles, which influence how responsibilities are distributed, how success is defined, and how individuals interpret their own experiences. Among the participants, women consistently articulated a double burden that goes beyond economic contributions to encompass both moral responsibility and the emotional labor of maintaining family life across long distances.

The female participants emphasized that their roles as migrants do not replace their roles within the household but rather expand them in the transnational space. Dewi explained, "Even though I'm far away, I still have to manage the family's finances from there. That's my responsibility as a mother" (Dewi, in interview, 2025). This statement illustrates that physical absence does not diminish responsibilities; rather, responsibilities are reconfigured and expanded through remittance and communication practices. Similarly, Rina noted, "Women have to be stronger, because they not only earn money but also keep the family together" (Rina, in interview, 2025). The emphasis on "strength" reflects gendered expectations that women must simultaneously fulfill both economic and emotional roles, placing them at the center of family unity. Migrant women are not only positioned as economic providers, but also remain primarily responsible for maintaining emotional ties, managing household continuity, and ensuring the well-being of family members across long distances. This suggests that remittances, for women, simultaneously function as an economic contribution and as a substitute for care. In other words, financial transfers are expected to compensate for physical absence, transforming money into a medium through which emotional presence is exercised. This double burden suggests that women's participation in migration does not disrupt existing gender norms, but rather reinforces them in a transnational context.

Other participants reinforced this gendered dynamic. Yanti stated, "As women, we can not only send money, but we also have to ensure the children are well-cared for, even from afar" (Yanti, in interview, 2025), while Slamet explained, "Sometimes we feel guilty if we can't be there in person, so we substitute attention and money" (Slamet, in interview, 2025). These narratives demonstrate that remittances are not just financial transfers, but also substitutes for physical presence and care, carrying emotional meanings deeply tied to gendered expectations about motherhood and femininity. Even male participants recognized this difference. Andi observed, "Women are usually more meticulous in managing money and family, so their responsibilities feel greater" (Andi, in interview, 2025), suggesting that gender roles are collectively understood and socially reinforced. This dynamic highlights the asymmetry in how responsibilities are distributed and evaluated. Although both men and women send remittances, the meanings attached to their remittances differ. For women, remittances are closely tied to moral expectations of nurturing and devotion, making failure to meet these expectations more likely to result in moral judgment. This suggests that gender functions as a moral framework that regulates not only what migrants do but also how their actions benefit them. Thus, remittances cannot be understood independently of the gender norms that shape their significance.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings highlight that remittance practices are embedded in a gendered moral economy, where expectations of care, sacrifice, and responsibility are distributed unequally. While existing studies acknowledge the role of gender in migration (Ceasar et al., 2025; Faristiana & Daroini, 2025; Ullah & Chattoraj, 2023), the empirical material

here suggests that gender is not simply an additional variable, but a structural principle shaping the meaning of migration itself. Women's labor is not only economic but also symbolic, as they are expected to embody ideals of devotion and responsibility. This dimension is largely absent from Hein de Haas's framework, whose analysis does not regularly incorporate gender as a primary analytical category. Consequently, the different experiences and meanings attached to migration across gender lines remain underexplored in his work.

The process of return further complicates these dynamics, revealing migration as an ongoing negotiation of identity rather than a completed trajectory. Returning does not mark closure, but rather the beginning of a new phase in which migrants must reposition themselves within the local social structure. Empirical evidence suggests that returnees face a confusion between the identities they held abroad and the expectations placed on them at home. This gap creates a state of liminality, where migrants are neither fully reintegrated nor fully transformed, but must continually negotiate their place within a constantly shifting social landscape. Participants described return as a moment of transition marked by both recognition and uncertainty. Andi stated, “After returning home, it’s like starting all over again. Money runs out, jobs are uncertain” (Andi, in interview, 2025), highlighting the economic uncertainty that often accompanies reintegration. At the same time, return is also a moment of social evaluation, where communities assess past migration experiences. Slamet reflected, “Abroad, we are valued for our work, but in our hometown, we have to adapt to the situation” (Slamet, in interview, 2025), indicating a shift in social position that requires adaptation to local norms and expectations.

Other participants described return as a process of renegotiating identities between two social worlds. Joko noted, “We’re used to life abroad, but here we have to follow different rules again” (Joko, in interview, 2025), while Budi explained, “Sometimes I feel confused, wanting to start a business but not being able to, while people already expect us to be successful” (Budi, in interview, 2025). Meanwhile, Dewi added, “After returning home, people see us as successful, even though we ourselves are still searching for direction” (Dewi, in interview, 2025). These stories illustrate that return is not simply reintegration into a stable social position but a complex process of negotiating expectations, self-perceptions, and future possibilities. It shows that remittances play a crucial role as a symbolic bridge between the past and the present. They serve as evidence of fulfillment of obligations during migration and shape expectations for life after return. However, they can also be a source of stress, as the identity of a “successful migrant” must be maintained even when economic conditions are uncertain. This underscores that migration is not a linear progression from departure to return, but rather a continuous process of identity construction across different temporal and spatial contexts.

The institutional environment, particularly the presence of the Safe Migrant Village (*Desmigratif*) program and concerns about human trafficking, further shapes these experiences by introducing a framework of protection and regulation. However, participant narratives indicate that these interventions primarily address the structural and legal aspects of migration, while the deeper cultural and symbolic dimensions remain largely unaddressed. This highlights a gap between policy approaches and lived experiences, where the meanings and expectations driving migration are not fully incorporated into institutional strategies.

In contrast to Hein de Haas's (2005) perspective, which emphasizes the developmental potential of migration through mechanisms such as circular mobility and remittance investments, this study highlights that return is not only a structural component of the migration system but also a deeply personal and socially embedded experience. De Haas's (2005) framework is valuable in demonstrating that migration outcomes are conditional and context-dependent, yet remain primarily concerned with aggregate effects and economic implications. The findings presented here demonstrate that this approach overlooks the ways in which migration reshapes identities, reconfigures gender roles, and generates ongoing negotiations

about belonging and recognition. Migration is understood not simply as a means of generating income, but as a transformative experience that redefines how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others. Within this framework, remittances are not only a tool for development but also a symbol that mediates this transformation. This demonstrates that within the broader context of migration and all its complexities, a relationship between migration and development emerges that recognizes the importance of meaning, identity, and social relationships in shaping the experiences of migrants and their families.

4. Conclusion

This article seeks to go beyond the economics of migration by examining how migration and remittances are understood, experienced, and realized as culturally embedded processes that shape social relations, moral obligations, and inequalities in everyday life. Rather than approaching migration as a set of measurable outcomes, this analysis highlights meaning-making as central to how migration is lived and produced. This argument has been developed through three interrelated analytical lenses. First, migration has been examined as a moral economy, where the decision to migrate and the practice of remittances are embedded in systems of obligation, reciprocity, and care. From this perspective, remittances are not reducible to financial transfers, but are practices laden with moral values through which migrants maintain kinship ties and embody culturally promised forms of responsibility. This helps explain the desirability of remittance flows even in close proximity, where economic rationality alone cannot explain the continued provision.

Second, this article has shown that remittances function as markers of social status and complicity in the inequalities of production. Far from being a neutral resource, remittances acquire value through their visibility and social interpretation. The ability to send money becomes a key to success, allowing some households to consolidate prestige while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from the capabilities derived from migration. In this sense, inequality is not only materially propagated but also symbolically constructed through everyday practices of recognition.

Third, this analysis highlights the gendered dimensions of migration, particularly in relation to return and identity negotiation. Migration reconfigures roles and expectations in uneven ways, shaping who is responsible for maintaining transnational ties and how this responsibility is evaluated. Upon return, migrants are required to renegotiate their position within the local social world, often navigating the tensions of shifting subjectivities and enduring normative frameworks. Identity, in this context, emerges as contingent and relational, not fixed.

These dimensions demonstrate that migration is not simply the movement of labor, but rather a process in which meaning is continually produced and contested. Across these domains, remittances emerge as obligations imposed by kinship ties, as symbols of recognition within local hierarchies, and as resources involved in the negotiation of gender identity. Its significance lies not only in its economic effects, but also in its ability to maintain relationships, provide legitimacy, and reproduce or transform social differentiation. This perspective also demonstrates that theoretical insights are not imposed from the outside but emerge from the empirical texture of migrants' lives. Moral economy becomes visible in the insistence that remittances must be maintained despite constraints; symbolic value is seen in the translation of income into socially recognized forms of prestige; and identity negotiations unfold in the circulations surrounding return. These are not abstract categories, but analytical distillations of lived experience.

Positioned in relation to existing scholarship, this article specifically examines the work of Hein de Haas (2005), whose contributions have been central to reframing migration-development thinking from deterministic and linear models. Emphasizing the conditional and

context-dependent nature of migration outcomes, the discussion in this article focuses on structural variability. However, the primary focus remains on what remittances do, on how they shape development, investment, and inequality at the aggregate level. This article complements this approach by asking how remittances become meaningful in practice. Therefore, this article shifts the analytical focus from outcomes to processes and from structures to lived experiences. The findings demonstrate that development cannot be understood solely through economic indicators. Development must also be approached as a cultural process, in which values, expectations, and social relations are continuously negotiated. Migration, in this sense, is not simply a mobility strategy, but a social practice in which individuals and families rework the terms of belonging, responsibility, and recognition in a transnational world.

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