

## **Socio-Economic Change and Cultural Transformation in Rural Malaysia**

—A Preliminary Research Report—

---

### **Editors' Introduction**

Tsuyoshi KATO\* and SHAMSUL A.B.\*\*

The present special issue of *Southeast Asian Studies* comprises a preliminary report on the research project entitled "Socio-Economic Change and Cultural Transformation in Rural Malaysia," the first product, and hopefully one of many to come, of joint research efforts between five Malaysian and three Japanese scholars. Let us first briefly explain the inception, nature and characteristics of the project.

The origin of the research project goes back to early 1985, when Shamsul A.B. of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia spent two months in Kyoto as a visiting fellow of the Institute of Economic Research at Kyoto University. Around the time of his stay in Kyoto, Narifumi Maeda and Tsuyoshi Kato of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies had been looking for a way to organize a cooperative research project between Malaysia and Japan. The two Japanese scholars had been urged by the JSPS (the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science) and

VCC (the Vice Chancellors' Council of National Universities of Malaysia) to expand to the social sciences and humanities the cooperative research efforts which had already been successfully launched in the field of engineering under their sponsorship. They inquired if Shamsul would be interested in joining them in their endeavors. His response was positive. Thus was laid the setting for the eventual conceptualization of the present research project.

After exchanging views and ideas on the fledgling cooperative research project, Shamsul and Kato, the designated project leaders in their respective countries, reached an agreement on the following points:

- 1) the research topic should concern social change in rural Malaysia with a strong focus on the reassessment of the NEP (New Economic Policy),
- 2) methodologically, we should concentrate on village-level studies, mainly utilizing the survey and participant observation methods, and avoiding excess dependence on secondary materials such as macro-level statistical data,
- 3) theoretically, we should view village

---

\* 加藤 剛, The Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

\*\* Jabatan Antropologi dan Sosiologi, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

society not as a self-contained whole but as part of a larger entity, e.g., the nation,

- 4) we should carry out our research in a historically informed manner,
- 5) we should try to form a research team with varied disciplinary backgrounds and regional concentrations,
- 6) we should strive to maintain frequent contact between the research participants, both in and out of the field,
- 7) the entire research should consist of four phases, namely, implementation of the preliminary research in 1987, publication of a preliminary report and implementation of the main research in 1988, a seminar in 1989, and publication of the final report in 1990.

With these guidelines in mind, Shamsul and Kato set about selecting the research participants and looking around for funds to finance the project.

The characteristics of the present research project are exemplified by our approach to the reassessment of the NEP. The launching of the NEP in 1971, in association with the Second Malaysia Plan (1971-75), has brought about a tremendous change in rural life in Malaysia. The NEP may rightly be considered as a "social engineering" experiment of worldwide significance, in its attempts to readjust income distribution, population distribution and social equity in general.

There exists a corpus of materials evaluating changes instigated by the NEP development programs in rural Malaysia. However, it is small compared with the considerable body of scholarly publications on

Malaysian social studies. Furthermore, most of the available materials are official reports and consultant observations focusing almost solely on the "economics" of such changes. This is not surprising because, to a large extent, these reports have been policy evaluations made mainly for the benefit of the policy makers. Studies of broader academic interest have been comparatively few. These reports also tend to concentrate on evaluating large-scale, multi-million dollar development projects such as the Muda and Kemubu irrigation schemes or the big land development schemes of the FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority). Very little attention has been paid to the changes experienced by "traditional" village communities, which form the larger part not only of rural Malaysia but of Malaysia as a whole.

The present research project aspires to fill precisely this gap. Our emphasis on first-hand village-level studies and our intention to ground village society within larger societal and historical processes should suit this objective nicely. To wit, the present project does not simply aim to study selected communities in Malaysia; rather it tries to examine Malaysian social, economic, political and cultural "reality" through the presentation of social life in the selected rural communities and to do so within a historical perspective.

In carrying out the project, we also propose a new approach to interdisciplinary cooperative research. We conceive of cooperative research in terms of information-sharing and cross-fertilization of ideas while the members of a cooperative research team

carry out field research in their respective local communities. We believe that this approach will help us broaden as well as sharpen our scope of investigation and simultaneously sensitize ourselves to the multi-faceted transformation of rural Malaysia, even though, and in some sense exactly because, the researchers are studying relatively small village communities, from differing disciplinary perspectives in various regions of Peninsular Malaysia.

The research team consists of eight scholars, all contributors to the present preliminary report. The Malaysian participants are: Shamsul A.B. of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Azizah Kassim of Universiti Malaya, Mohamed Salleh Lamry of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Norhalim Hj. Ibrahim of Universiti Pertanian Malaysia and Ramli Mohamed of Universiti Sains Malaysia. The Japanese participants are Tsuyoshi Kato and Narifumi Maeda of Kyoto University and Teruo Sekimoto of the University of Tokyo. Their disciplinary backgrounds include anthropology, sociology, political science, development studies, urban studies and communication studies. By area, Kedah, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Johor are represented.

We want to stress here that all the Malaysian participants have long experience of conducting research in Malaysia, while the Japanese have long experience in Indonesia. In general, there has been relatively little academic interaction, especially in social sciences, between Malaysianists and Indonesianists, despite the two countries' geographical, cultural and historical affinity. We hope that our project will be a fore-

runner of more active intellectual exchange across the Straits of Malacca.

It is our pleasure to acknowledge the project's special indebtedness to several organizations. The project is incorporated in the General Exchange Scheme in the field of the Social Sciences and Humanities of the JSPS-VCC Scientific Cooperation Program. Under the program all the research participants and some other scholars will, for a few weeks each, have visited either Japan or Malaysia by the end of the 1988 fiscal year, in order to familiarize themselves with academic situations in their respective counterpart countries. The field research proper, including the preliminary and main research, is funded generously by the Hitachi Scholarship Foundation. The SERU (Socio-Economic Research Unit under the Prime Minister's Department) speedily processed research permission for the Japanese participants, thereby expediting their research activities in Malaysia. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia was a willing host to three workshops organized at their campus during the past two years. The Center for Southeast Asian Studies of Kyoto University cordially received Shamsul A.B. and Azizah Kassim as visiting scholars, respectively for two months and six months during the same period. We hope the Center will be able to extend similar invitations to other Malaysian participants in the future.

The preliminary research was conducted in the fall of 1987, for the duration of one to three months depending on the participating members. The present volume reports tentative findings of the preliminary

research, provisional conclusions and possible directions of future research activities. Our scholarly interests are variegated, as the article titles indicate: agricultural rituals, gender relations, *adat* leadership, formation of frontier settlements in Johor, Javanese in Selangor, social stratification, the Muda irrigation scheme and village development committees. It is a reflection not only of our personal academic predilections but also of the complexity of Malaysian rural society in the midst of rapid transformation. We are hopeful that the wide range of topics discussed in the report will provide us with a useful backdrop and further activate heated yet fruitful discourses among the research participants as we set out for the crucial phase of the project.

The future schedule of the project is tentatively planned as follows: (1) main research for the minimum duration of three months between June 1988 and March 1989;

(2) two workshops at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia during the same period; (3) a relatively large-scale seminar in Malaysia in the summer of 1989; and (4) publication of the final research report in 1990. As leaders of the project, we earnestly hope that in addition to this preliminary report and the final report, by-products of the project will eventually include individually published articles and even monographs.

Any successful cooperative research project requires constructive intellectual feedback not simply among the project participants but also from the "outside." It is in this spirit that we invite from the readers of this report opinions and comments either on the project as a whole or on individual articles presented herein.

Finally, we would like to express our sincere appreciation to Peter Hawkes of Teikoku Women's Junior College from whose editing this report benefited greatly.