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A Preliminary Report on the Javanese in Selangor, Malaysia

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I Introduction

This is a preliminary report on research I conducted at Parit Baru in the District of Sabak Bernam, Selangor. The research period covered forty days in August and September 1987, including library work at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and a brief field trip to a rural area of Johor. Field research in Sabak Bernam itself was conducted for two weeks in the first half of September.¹⁾ Since my field research was of a preliminary nature, and is to be followed by longer, more intensive work at the same location, this is only a limited attempt to present a general view of the area and its people.²⁾

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- 2) Some of accounts in this article may sound self-evident to Malaysians and Malaysianists. But I am addressing this report not just to them but also to the Japanese reading public who are not necessarily familiar with the social conditions of Malaysia.

One of the prominent features of Sabak Bernam is that the majority of the population there are Javanese who first immigrated to this area between the 1910s and 1930s from many different areas of Central and Eastern Java. Though they are ethnically Javanese, from the Malaysian point of view they are classified as one of many sub-groups of the Malays, in contrast to the Chinese, the Indians, and the Orang Asli. The Javanese in Sabak Bernam are now fully assimilated into the Malaysian nation. There are Javanese everywhere in the area, including a number of local government officials and employees. They still speak Javanese as their mother tongue. But, except for some very old ones, most of them are bilingual, speaking Bahasa Malaysia very fluently and sharing the marked local accent with other local Malays who are not Javanese.

Thus, this paper is about the Javanese in a Malaysian rural community. These Javanese are not a minority group who have migrated to a totally unfamiliar environment already inhabited by quite different people with a different culture. They have become Malaysian Malays without much difficulty as far as the ethnic relation between them and other Malay sub-groups is concerned. They still maintain their ethnic identity as Javanese, particularly their language, and they tend to concentrate in their own village

communities. But, despite these facts, they have incorporated themselves into the Malay community in Malaysia.

The fact that they are at the same time Javanese and Malays of the Malaysian nation presents an interesting problem, because the Javanese (in Java) and the Malays as an ethnic category (in Indonesia and Malaysia) are often contrasted in oppositional terms. Students in Indonesian studies often suggest that there is a marked difference in overall cultural traits between the Javanese (and perhaps the Balinese, too) on one hand, and several major ethnic groups in Sumatra, coastal areas of Borneo (called Kalimantan in Indonesia), and Sulawesi, on the other. They tend to see the Javanese and other groups in Western Indonesia in a dichotomous scheme, and stress the uniqueness of Javanese culture in contrast to others. This uniqueness is usually attributed to the Javanese tradition of large-scale kingdoms with a highly sophisticated court culture, which was deeply influenced by the Indic tradition before it was Islamized. It is also pointed out, a little exaggeratedly and impressionistically, that the Javanese are more used to the complex network of governmental hierarchy, more accommodative to collective actions, and more obedient to higher authorities, while peoples of other ethnic groups are less tightly bound to collective order, more straightforward, and put more stress on individual strength and power.

Though I suspect the usefulness of sweeping generalizations, which are often found in arguments about ethnic or national characters, I believe that the sensitivity and adapt-

ability of the Javanese in Java to the governmental and cultural hierarchies are fully exploited by the present Indonesian government as an important resource in running the modern state of the Republic of Indonesia. When I conducted field research in Central Java, the omnipresence of the governmental and cultural hierarchy was striking.³⁾ It permeated in quite concrete forms as far as the everyday thoughts and actions of villagers are concerned. For example, every government official from central to village levels seemed to represent the authority and dignity of the state vis-a-vis the common masses who were ruled. The notion of hierarchy was even internalized by individual villagers in their ways of speech and behaviour. In contrast to this, it seems to me that the Javanese at Sabak Bernam live without the heavy burden of such a social hierarchy. The difference I found between the Javanese in Central Java and Sabak Barnam presents further questions. What framework can we adopt to explain this difference? Is it attributable to the difference between two contemporary states—Malaysia and Indonesia—in conceptualizing and operating the state and statecraft? Do differences in ecology and mode of subsistence play any part? How do Javanese in Sabak Bernam view their world? What is their perception of self, society, power, and authority?

Though it is not my intention to jump to any quick conclusion in this preliminary report, I write with these questions in mind, and try to give some idea how Javanese in a

3) I conducted fieldwork in Sukoharjo regency of Central Java in 1975, and in 1978-79.

particular locality of Peninsular Malaysia are different from their counterparts in Java. In other words, this is an attempt to explore how and to what extent the Javanese can be different among themselves according to different social environments. I hope that the comparative framework I follow will cast a new light on the present situation of rural Malays in a particular part of Selangor. That is what our joint research project generally aims at.

I should also note here that my comparative framework is a synchronic one; that is, I compare present-day Javanese in Sabak Bernam with those in Central Java. Synchronic comparison of two communities in different geographical areas cannot avoid arbitrariness to some extent, and I hope I can complement this by a diachronic comparison or a search into the historical process of change in one and the same community. If I can obtain reliable information about social conditions in the particular local communities in Java where the forefathers of the Javanese in Sabak Bernam lived at the turn of the century, our understanding of Sabak Bernam would be much deepened. But this will be a hard task. I interviewed several elderly people of the community who migrated from Java themselves. But so far I have only obtained piecemeal information about their early lives after they came to Malaya. These oral histories can be supplemented by governmental and other records in Malaysia from the early part of this century. But a further historical survey on the social conditions of the particular localities of Java which they left is not intended in this paper, or in my

ongoing research project. I shall have to wait for a future occasion to pursue research in that direction.

II A Profile of Sabak Bernam District

The village of Parit Baru Baroh where I stayed for the field research is located in Sabak Bernam district at the north-western fringe of the State of Selangor (see Fig. 1). Administratively, the district (*daerah*) is divided into six subdistricts (*mukim*), each of which is then further divided into several villages (*kampung*). Parit Baru Baroh is one of those villages in the subdistrict of Sungai Air Tawar.

Sabak Bernam district has a land area of 995 square kilometers and a population of 103,261. About seventy percent of them are Malays, while Chinese and Indians represent respectively twenty-five percent and five percent of the population (in 1987; see Table 1). Though no statistics are available about the exact numbers of each ethnic group among the Malays, a number of local people told me that the Javanese are the largest group, while the Banjarese, who originally migrated from the southern part of Indonesian Borneo, are second. Sumatran peoples, such as Kamparese and

Table 1 Population of Sabak Bernam by Ethnicity

| | |
|---------|---------|
| Malays | 72,778 |
| Chinese | 25,509 |
| Indians | 4,927 |
| Others | 47 |
| Total | 103,261 |

Source: Sabak Bernam District Information Office, 1987

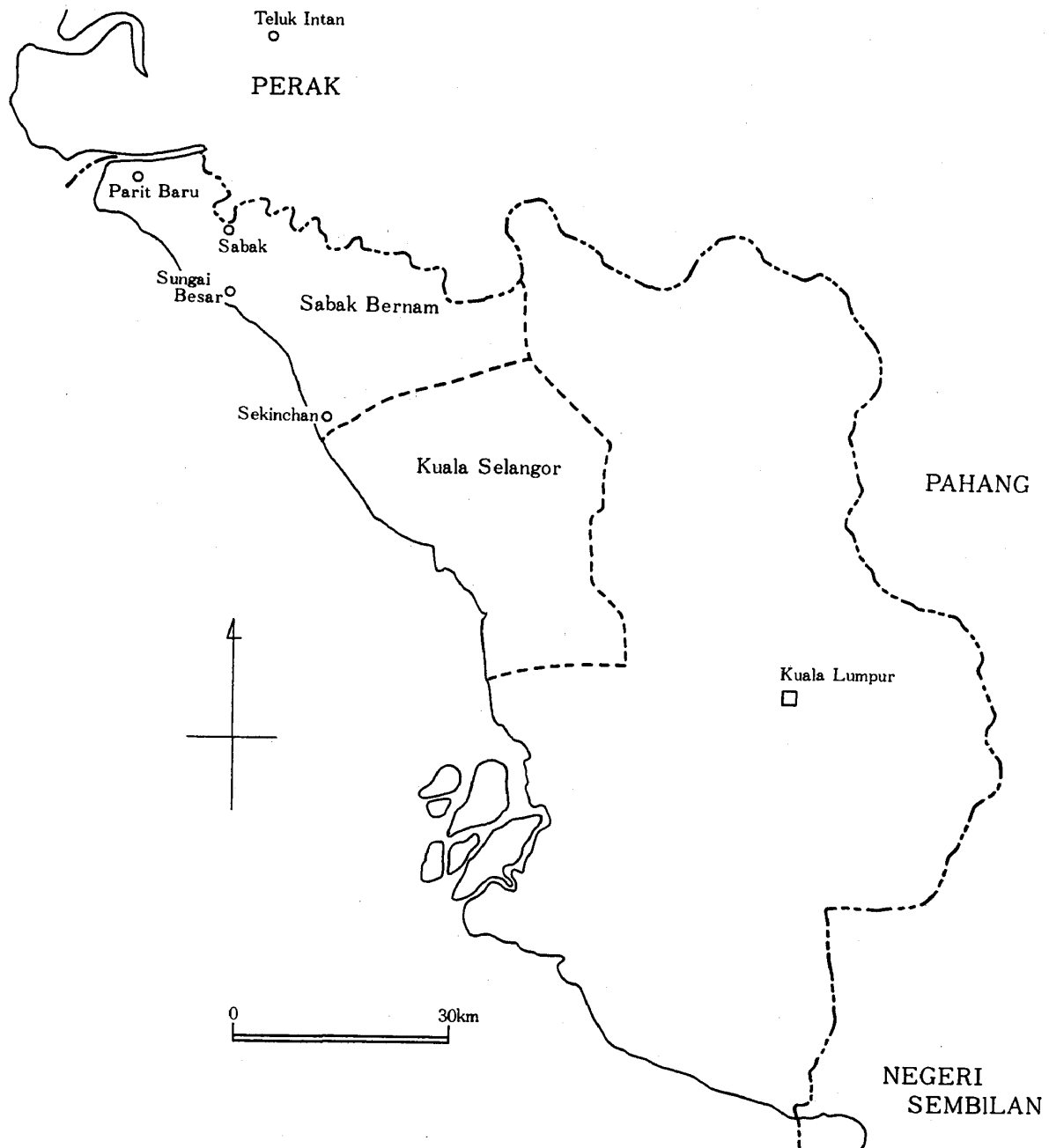


Fig. 1 Selangor

Minangkabau, are also found in the area. And there are a few Malays whose forefathers were the original settlers in the area and engaged in fishing. Thus, Sabak Bernam was an almost vacant frontier at the beginning of the century. It was then

filled with people from various areas of Indonesia. Studies by Khazin [1984] and Shamsul [1986] reveal that such a history of immigration and subsequent amalgamation of various ethnic groups with the Malays was a very common pattern in

twentieth-century Selangor.

The Chinese came to the area no later than most other immigrants who are now Malay. While many Chinese engage in trade and other businesses in towns and rural marketplaces of the area, there also are a number of them who are either fishermen, living in villages along the seacoast and the lower reach of the Bernam River,⁴⁾ or grow rice and vegetables, especially on the outskirts of the town of Sekinchan. Though most local Chinese form their own exclusive communities apart from other ethnics, I also met Chinese families who lived by themselves in a village of Javanese in order to trade and process coconuts. I found through a brief conversation with them that they could speak Javanese. The Indians of the area mostly work on two large coconut estates in Sabak subdistrict. All the villagers of Parit Baru Baroh and the neighbouring villages are Javanese. As far as I could tell from my observations, their relationships with Chinese are remote and those with Indians almost non-existent, except that the villagers shop daily at a nearby market where a single row of Chinese-owned stores sell perishable food and other sundry commodities.

The district faces the Malacca Straits to the west, and, separated by the Bernam River, borders on the State of Perak to the north and the northeast. There are three subdistricts along the Malacca Straits and

4) A Japanese anthropologist, Yuzo Kawasaki, has conducted two years of fieldwork in a Chinese fishermen's village in Sabak Bernam. His writings helped me to understand Chinese of the area (cf. Kawasaki [1984] among his other articles).

three more along the Bernam River (see Fig. 2). Wet rice is grown extensively in the southwestern coastal area, in Pasir Panjang and Panchang Bedena subdistricts. Further to the north, in the subdistricts of Bagan Nakhoda Omar, Sungai Air Tawar, and Sabak, few rice fields are found, and people grow coconuts and cacao, as do the people of Parit Baru Baroh and neighbouring villages. A traveller through the northern part of the district would find an endless stretch of land covered densely with tall coconut palms. Careful observation would reveal smaller cacao trees planted in the shadow of the coconut palms, as well as villagers' houses half-hidden by this vegetation. As is pointed out by Shamsul, most social scientific studies on rural Malaysia have dealt with rice-growing communities [Shamsul 1986 : 3]. Thus, I hope that my ongoing research in a coconut growing area will broaden our perspective on the rural communities of the country.

There are three major towns in the district, namely from south to north, Sekinchan, Sungai Besar, and Sabak. Each of these towns is located along the federal coastal highway from Kuala Lumpur to the city of Teluk Intan in Perak, and each has a large mosque, a bus terminal, a marketplace, and rows of stores and restaurants, mostly owned and run by Chinese. As the town of Sungai Besar is the seat of the District Officer (*Pengawai Daerah*), it accomodates a large complex of government and police offices. Sabak is a much older town, being located on the bank of the Bernam River. Navigable rivers were much utilized in the past for transportation, and large old warehouses

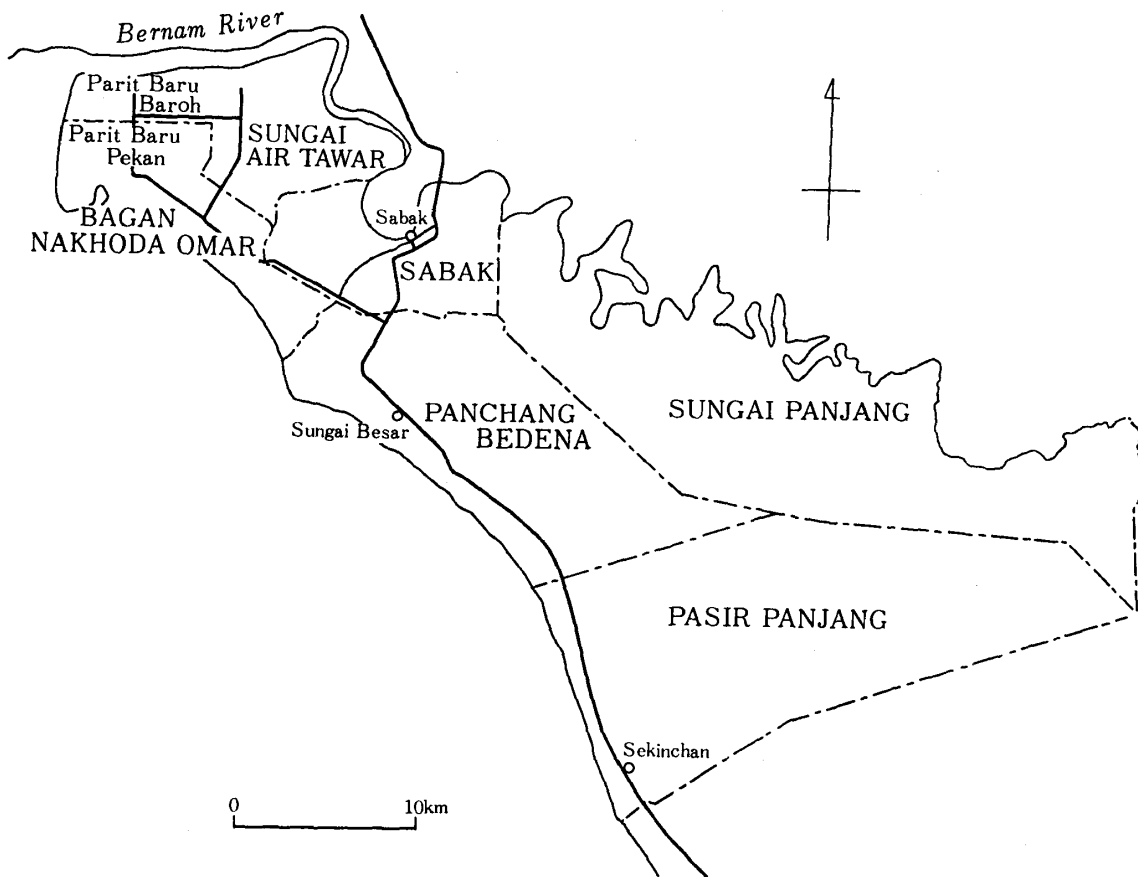


Fig. 2 Sabak Bernam District

and the broken remains of wharfs still occupy the waterfront of Sabak. Since the 1960s, however, waterways have been mostly replaced as transportation routes by new highways. The district office was moved in the 1960s, too, from Sabak to Sungai Besar. The present town still has a busy bus terminal for local and long-distance travel, but its past supremacy as the local center of commerce and transportation has faded.

Rural development projects since the 1960s have drastically improved transportation in the area. Until about 1960, Parit Baru Baroh village and the surrounding rural area were largely isolated from the outside world. Only primitive bike roads connected

the village and the nearest town of Sabak. The one-way trip to the town took half a day by bicycle, and was almost impossible on rainy days. People also went to Sabak by ferry on the Bernam River, but the waterway took much more time and money. The town of Sabak was then connected with the outside mainly by water. In the 1930s the British administration began constructing a tide bank along a long stretch of the sea coast together with a network of drainage canals, in order to alleviate marshy conditions and flooding of the area. The narrow road on the top of the bank was, until 1965, the only land route to areas to the south such as Kuala Selangor and Kelang [Mohamed Salleh Lamry 1978 : 84].

Nowadays, 24 kilometers of paved and well-maintained country road connects the village with the town, and the journey takes less than half an hour by bus, taxi, or other motor vehicle. From the town, a new federal highway leads through major towns in the state to Kuala Lumpur, a distance of 140 kilometers, and to the city of Teluk Intan in Perak to the north. The frequent bus service to Kuala Lumpur covers the distance in just two or three hours. These public works and other government projects have certainly improved general living conditions in the area. But, at the same time, they have brought about several basic changes in the social life of the people. I will return to this topic later.

III Village Community, Administration, and Leadership

The village of Parit Baru Baroh where I stayed for the short-term fieldwork has the population of about 950 in 116 houses according to information given by the village headman (*ketua kampung*). If this is correct, each house accommodates about eight people on average. It seems to me that this figure for the average number of family members under the same roof is too large, but I have not checked it myself.

Until 1968, Parit Baru Baroh was a part of the larger administrative village called Parit Baru, which was then divided into the three villages of Parit Baru Baroh, Parit Baru Pekan, and Sungai Apong, each with a population of from 700 to 1,500. What makes the matter administratively more complicated is the fact that the village of Parit Baru Baroh belongs to the subdistrict

of Sungai Air Tawar, while other two villages belong to Bagan Nakhoda Omar. But, despite this administrative reform, people in these three villages still maintain close interactions with each other in their daily life, and the area, which is generally called Parit Baru, can be seen as a single local community. For example, the village of Parit Baru Baroh has no mosque yet, so the villagers go to the one in Parit Baru Pekan for Friday prayers and other religious activities. The market place I have mentioned in Parit Baru Pekan is visited daily by people in these three villages. They all share the same ecological environment and depend on the same main crops, coconuts and cacao. The village of Parit Baru Pekan functions as the *de facto* center of the Parit Baru area, where, besides the aforementioned market place, there are a primary school, a junior-high religious (Islamic) school, a government medical center, and an agricultural extension station.

When I entered the village for the first time and met the village headman and other villagers, I was struck by both similarities and differences between them and the Javanese of present-day Java. They spoke Javanese which was basically the same as that spoken in Java.⁵⁾ They accepted me with the same kind of warm hospitality that I had often experienced in Java. Their mild behaviour was also similar to that I had found in Java. But, to my surprise, their houses had a quite different structure

5) Unlike people in rural Central Java, Javanese in Sabak Bernam speak mostly the lower speech level of Javanese. But they are well aware that the language has layered speech levels.

from those in Java. They live in Malay-style houses which are raised high on posts, while the Javanese houses in Java sit directly on the ground. Answering my question, elderly villagers told me that they preferred the Malay-type house structure because the area had once been so swampy and wet. But since the Javanese in Java usually stick to the traditional house design even in swampy areas, a simple technical reason may not be enough to explain why Sabak Bernam Javanese have adopted the Malay-type structure. I would like to investigate further whether their search for a new identity in the new environment affected their preference in house type.

The pattern of settlements is also different. Most of the villages I know in Java are clustered settlements with houses built very close to each other. But, in Sabak Bernam, each house in a village is surrounded by a large square plot of farmland planted with coconuts and other crops, and is rather distant from neighbouring houses. These plain facts of the settlement pattern have a peculiar side-effect on the fieldworker. When I was in a village in Central Java, I could observe the villagers' daily activities more easily because they lived close together in a clustered settlement, and because they worked in wide-open rice fields. A brief observation from the fringe of a stretch of rice fields reveals instantly and clearly who is doing what kind of activities in the fields. A fieldworker can even estimate easily the total yield of rice in the season—and income from it—for each household before interviewing villagers. In Sabak Bernam, however, I had difficulty in

observing the daily activities of the villagers. From the village headman's house or its front yard, I could not see what his neighbours were doing. Their work on their farmland was also hidden from my eyes behind the densely planted coconut palms. If I was following and observing a villager working his farmland, it was impossible to see at the same time what others were doing. In short word, one can get a bird's-eye view of villagers' daily activities in Java, but in Sabak Bernam one has to follow individual villagers. I have a very tentative hypothesis that these differences in ecological and economic settings between Sabak Bernam and Java may have some effects on the pattern of governmental control of villagers in these two localities, because local government officials in Java must be able to grasp who is doing what much more easily than can their counterparts in Sabak Bernam. This hypothesis occurred to me because I found in the two areas a profound difference in the form of local administration. The villages I know in the Surakarta area of Central Java are much more tightly controlled by the government than those in Sabak Bernam so far as the formal administrative hierarchy is concerned.

Many villages in the Surakarta area have specially built official buildings for village officials, which are imposing and much larger than villagers' houses. The village headman has his own office in the building, which is neatly arranged and decorated with a large national flag on the wall. He sits behind a large desk in a dignified manner, just as higher local government officials do

in their offices. All the village officials wear the same safari jackets, which are very similar to the uniform of the government officials. They try to keep some distance from villagers, and to demonstrate their dignity as well, when villagers come to the office. The majority of the villagers, who are of low socio-economic standing in the community, behave and speak very politely and humbly toward the village officials. In a word, the village government is much formalized, and the social hierarchy carefully protected. These formalities are intensified in the present New Order of Indonesia, in which the state administration has penetrated deep into village communities and village officials are made to function as an integral part of the national government. However, it has also been reported that Javanese village headmen during Dutch colonial rule had authoritative powers over their villagers, including the power to arrest and punish them, exactly as the representatives of local governments or local lords and princes.

The situation I found in Sabak Bernam is quite different. The village community of Parit Baru Baroh seems to be more egalitarian than those in Java. The village headman of Parit Baru Baroh looks just like his fellow villagers. And his daily interaction with them appears to involve neither rigid formality nor the show of status hierarchy. As there is no special office building, he uses the front room of his own house as an office. Though such was also the case in Java, and still is in some villages, the informal office of the Parit Baru Baroh headman lacks any visible sign of his official status. Village head-

men's offices in Java are easily discernible because they have in front of them large signboards which read in the official style: "The Village Headman of the Village A of the Sub-district of B of the Regency of C of the Province of D." The signboards one sees in Sabak Bernam Area are not for the village headman's office but for the village-level branch of the government party, UMNO, and these generally stand in front of the village headman's house.

This symbolizes the fact that party politics, especially intraparty politics, plays a decisive part in local communities in Malaysia. As this kind of politics is much less visible to outsiders than the official structure of state administration, which is more public in nature, students of Malaysian local politics must first approach the intricacies of party politics at its grassroots, as has been meticulously done by Shamsul for another district in Selangor [Shamsul 1986]. On the other hand, formal demonstration of the state's power and authority, accompanied by ceremonial mobilization of people for the sake of the state, is well developed and very visible in Indonesia (or anyway in Java). Therefore, I assume that a framework that sees local politics in terms of ritual-symbolic forms, which has been much utilized in Javanese and Indonesian studies, would have limited value in studying rural Malaysia.

I was also impressed with a fact that the Javanese in Sabak Bernam identified themselves firmly with Islam. The five neighbourhoods in the Village of Parit Baru Baroh each had a prayer house (*surau*), where males gathered every day for morning

and evening prayers (*sembahyang subuh*, *maghrib*, and *isyak*). Other daily prayers were done alone at home or some convenient place. For the Friday noon prayer, they went to the mosque in a neighbouring village. The village headman recited *Al-Quran* alone every morning after the morning prayer, and gave his twelve-year-old son lessons in *Quran* reading every evening.

That they are pious Moslems is evident, because they are Malays. But I am particularly interested in the past history of these Javanese in Sabak Bernam. I know through interviews with them that they place much value on the pilgrimage to Mecca and that many of them have made the pilgrimage since the time of British rule. Some village pioneers told me that they had left Java because they had wanted to make the pilgrimage, though they could do so only after many years of hard work in Malaya. A number of elderly men in the area, including the headman of Parit Baru Baroh, went to Mecca on their own initiative and by their own efforts before the Malaysian government began supporting the pilgrimage by organizing large-scale group tours. Such people gave me the impression of having active and energetic personalities and a wide range of experience and knowledge. I think it is not just the fact of their having accomplished one of the basic Islamic duties but their strong will, the effort required, and the wider experience they thus acquired that made them influential in the local community.

Thus, the nature of informal leadership in the rural communities of Sabak Bernam is different from that which I found in the

Surakarta area of Central Java. In the latter, people still adhere largely to the Javanese court model of cultural hierarchy in the sense that the Javanese princely courts are seen as the sole source of the such sociocultural values as refined speech, sophisticated behaviour, and esoteric knowledge. They try to imitate these cultural symbols of prestige as far as possible. Those who are successful in this and can claim traditional ties of service or remote kinship (which sometimes can be manipulated) to princely families can gain some influence and power over their fellow villagers. This prestige structure of cultural hierarchy has recently been partly replaced and overlapped by another prestige structure, which stresses academic degrees and positions in the government bureaucracy. But the basic principles are identical: the world is seen in terms of a sociocultural hierarchy centered around the sole source of power and prestige, be it the traditional courts or the modern national government. This structure is not very different from what Geertz calls "the doctrine of the exemplary center" [Geertz 1968; 1980].

In contrast to this, the Javanese in Sabak Bernam appear to live in more egalitarian village communities that are not bound to princely courts, and set themselves in the wider world of Islam in which Mecca is the symbolic center. It should be noted that the Javanese court model is self-contained in the Javanese world. Therefore, the universalistic faith in Islam can pose a challenge to this cultural self-containedness in the island of Java itself. In Javanese history, both peasant and aristocratic rebels have often

fought under the banner of Islam against kings or the Dutch colonial rulers. And the Islamic leadership often provided people with a counter authority in the everyday struggle and political opposition to the rulers.

The more egalitarian political structure and the orientation to the wider Islamic world that I found among the Javanese in Sabak Bernam is very similar to the Islamic counter culture in Java. But it should also be noted that the position of Islam in the national politics of the two countries is not the same. I would like to investigate further how the Javanese in Sabak Bernam have come to attach themselves to Islamic values, and what the relation is between the faith in Islam and socio-political features of their community.

IV Livelihood in a Changing Frontier

To understand the socio-economic conditions of present-day Sabak Bernam, it is important to remember that this area was settled rather recently by immigrant groups of different origins. A brief account of livelihood in Parit Baru is given here against the historical context of migration and development.

Parit Baru area was opened sometime around 1925 by Javanese originating from various localities in Java, including Ponorogo, Pati, Pacitan, Surabaya, and Kebumen among other places. The first pioneers of Parit Baru did not come from Java directly but first went to coconut plantations in Perak as indentured labourers,

coming to Sabak Bernam to seek their own land in the Malay Reservations after they had finished the terms of their contracts. As Khazin points out in his book [Khazin 1984], the British administration at that time encouraged new settlements of Malays to increase production of staple food. Land grants and other subsidies, mainly in the form of land tax exemption for the first few years of new settlements, were extended to Malays, provided they were ready to grow rice.

Since there were few roads in the area at that time, the first pioneers came from Perak in small boats, landed at Bagan Nakhoda Omar, and proceeded to their destination on foot. After building temporary shelters, they cleared the forest and began growing wet rice and bananas. As they had saved some money while working in the estates, they survived on purchased rice and other foodstuffs till they could harvest enough. After planting rice for several seasons they shifted to coconuts because this swampy area along the coast was too damp and salty, and because the rice price was very low after a temporary surge during World War I. The pioneer community of Parit Baru consisted mostly of males of working age. But once the village was established and some harvest was secured, many of them traveled to their homeland in Java to find wives to take back to the village. Once they had families, and as some of their relatives and friends from Java joined them, the population gradually increased. In the meantime, they also built the mosque and, in 1932, an elementary school by their own collective effort. The

village elders told me about the hardships they faced in the early years of their lives, about their desperate fight against the swamp and occasional floods. Some villagers were forced to return to Perak as seasonal labourers in the plantations. The completion in 1937 of the coastal bank and drainage canal project, commenced by the government in 1932, greatly improved the agricultural and living conditions of the area. But, as I have mentioned, the general living conditions continued to be hard until the 1960s, when the government inaugurated a variety of rural development projects in the area.

Besides paved main roads to towns, networks of secondary village roads have been improved and covered with laterite since the 1960s. Piped water supply was introduced around 1970, but even today it is insufficient in prolonged dry months. Telephone facilities have been available in Parit Baru since the early 1970s. Some villagers now have home telephones and use them even for intra-village personal communications. Electricity reached the village rather late, in the period between 1981 and 1986. Before 1966, when a new high school was founded in the vicinity along a road to Sungai Air Tawar, students from the Parit Baru area had to go as far as the town of Sabak and to lodge in school dormitories. Now they can go to high school easily by bicycle. But because the nearby high school accommodates students only up to the fifth grade, those who want to continue their secondary education to higher levels have to transfer to a school in Sabak or a more distant town. School

teachers told me that almost all the children in the area finish secondary education up to the third grade of high school, but only a few of them reach the sixth or seventh grade, which is required for university entry.

As I have mentioned, agriculture in the Parit Baru area depends solely on coconut and cacao, though all the farmland is still officially allocated for rice on the land certificates (*gran tanah*) the villagers hold.⁶⁾ As most villagers are landed peasants, landlessness does not seem to be a very urgent social problem.⁷⁾ Typically, each household owns a rectangular plot of five acres on which about three hundred coconut palms are planted. Each palm is harvested every three months, and the average yield per acre is about one thousand coconuts, which bring 80 ringgits per thousand for whole fruits and 130 ringgits in the form of copra.⁸⁾ The prices of coconuts and copra are subject to the demand of the international market and are always unstable. The price of whole fruit has dropped from 30 cents a piece four years ago to the current low level.

To supplement their small and unstable income from coconuts, coconut growers in the area began planting cacao in 1970 with the government's encouragement. Cacao is planted in the same plots under the coconut palms, and annually yields up to one

6) See below for the British administration's preference for rice.

7) Mohamed Salleh Lamry reports that in an adjoining village in Parit Baru area, 85.83 percent of his respondents own land [Mohamed Salleh Lamry 1981].

8) One ringgit is approximately equivalent to 0.4 U.S. dollar in 1987.

thousand ringgit per acre if the crop is cared for very well. Income from cacao is presently better than that from coconuts, but the price is also unstable, and the harvest depends greatly on the weather. Both young coconut palms and cacao trees need chemical fertilizer, and the latter also need insecticide and weedicide. Farmers who form small groups to do these works collectively can get a government subsidy. But for harvesting, processing, and marketing of coconuts and cacao, each farmer works by himself and sells his products to Chinese merchants.

The villagers told me that both organizational and financial support from the government is greater for rice growers, but they seemed to have no intention of shifting to rice. They said that their land was not fit for growing rice and that the rice price was lower. Only a few villagers in Parit Baru own rice fields in the Sungai Besar area about thirty kilometers to the southeast. They leave for the rice fields early in the morning in their small trucks, and return late in the evening.

Comments made by several people in Sabak Bernam may attract the attention of students in Javanese studies. They said that the Javanese in Sabak Bernam generally preferred coconuts and cacao, whereas the Banjarese in the same area were more oriented to growing rice. These comments are worth attention if there is any such general tendency, because one of the stereotypical images of the Javanese in Java, held both by the Javanese themselves and outsiders, is that of rice-growing peasants. The preference of Sabak Bernam Javanese for crops other

than wet rice may be attributed simply to technological and historical reasons. The rural settlements of the Javanese in the area were founded before the British administration began its wet-rice projects in the 1930s, which attracted people from various parts of Indonesia. It may have been only natural for the Javanese pioneer settlers to grow coconuts after they had given up rice cultivation in this swampy and flood-prone area. Only the large amount of investment and work by the government could make rice cultivation favourable in Sabak Bernam. And when this project was completed, the Javanese settlers may already have established their way of life based on coconuts.

But we should also note that the stereotypical notion that the Javanese only grow rice if it is possible is onesided. Javanese villagers in the lowland plains of Java always maintain two different modes of agriculture. First, they grow coconuts, fruits, peas, vegetables, and root crops in their home gardens, of which the produce is very important for their home economy. Second, they grow wet rice in fields which are set apart from their homes, gardens, and settlements. It seems to me that, instead of keeping up this dual practice, the Javanese in Sabak Bernam maintain just one of them, that is, the one practiced in the home gardens in lowland Java. Thus, their practices may not be a deviation from the typical way of life of the Javanese in Java.

I would suggest that, in Java, rice fields are of a public nature while home gardens are private. Both Javanese and colonial rulers have held tight control over the rice fields, because both taxation and recruit-

ment of *corvée* labour have been based on the size of the rice fields and their produce. The official status of each villager in a community has been determined by ownership and size of rice fields. The point I would like to make is that Javanese peasants in Java have been growing rice not just because of their cultural preference but because of the political conditions under which they lived. They are quite adaptable to crops other than rice. Similar to this in some respects was the situation in Kuala Selangor District under colonial rule, about which Shamsul gives us a detailed picture [Shamsul 1986]. According to his book, the British administration encouraged wet rice while imposing severe restrictions on Malay peasants growing cash crops in order to protect the interests of European agricultural estates in the area. Local peasants resisted this policy but faced overwhelming administrative obstacles. Thus, both in Java and in Selangor, rulers had an interest in keeping the rural population as rice growers. I think it is not enough to see villagers' preference for certain types of crops just in terms of ecological-technical conditions. Ecological settings cannot be taken independently from the political relations between rulers and rural people. In the next stage of my field research, I would like to examine further how the Javanese in Sabak Bernam chose and have adhered to crops other than rice, and what kind of politico-ecological conditions lie behind their agricultural practices.

Now let me return to present-day Parit Baru. Both villagers and local government officials told me that the income from

coconuts and cacao was insufficient to maintain villagers' livelihood, to say nothing of its unstable nature. The government is encouraging villagers to diversify their effort into other types of farming, such as vegetables, corn, and chickens. But so far no consensus has been reached on what is promising. One exception to this is the raising of milk cows. I met a young man who was successful in this new business. Four years ago he attended the government's job-training course in dairy farming, then he began in business, purchasing cows, milking tools and machines, and the like with a government's loan. Now he is doing fairly well with ten cows. He was a school teacher when he began dairy farming, but with the growth of his business, he quit teaching two years ago.

Despite these efforts by a few people to extend farming, many villagers find hope for the future in making their children urban waged laborers and white-collar workers. Though I have not yet obtained quantitative data of a more exact kind, I have a strong impression through talks with local people that the improved transportation facilities have caused a huge urban exodus, especially among youths. Now, more and more villagers depend partly on remittances from their children working in urban areas around Kuala Lumpur. Since most young people in the village want to leave for urban centers upon graduating from high school, the number of working youth is unproportionately small in the village demographic composition. The only promising jobs youths can find in the area are employment by the government either as local

government officials or school teachers. Because they are well-educated, have more direct access to governmental resources, earn a stable and good income, they are influential in the local communities. They are all the more so in the villages exactly because of the better transportation facilities. Before country roads were constructed or much improved, those government employees lived together, close to their offices and schools. But now they can live in their home villages and commute by car to their work. The presence of waged and privileged commuters has much affected the nature of communal relationship and leadership in villages, which were once composed exclusively of less-educated and less-privileged peasants. In a word, village communities in the area are now more directly exposed to the government's power and influence.

V Conclusion

Generally speaking, the Javanese in Sabak Bernam are much better off than their counterparts in rural Java. Landlessness and poverty are less visible; houses are larger and well equipped; village children of school age are not seen working to support their families' livelihood; and the infrastructure is more developed. The people in the area often told me that the Javanese in Sabak Bernam enjoyed a better life now because their forefathers had worked so hard to improve their living conditions. To prove whether this is a happy story of a successful immigrant community, I need to conduct more detailed research in the area.

But, one point which is apparent is that social problems are much less transparent in present-day Sabak Bernam than in Java. If such problems exist, they must be hidden beneath the calm surface of everyday life.

I have mentioned that landlessness and poverty were not urgent problems in the area. But this is partly because the urban exodus of village youth alleviates population pressure; and because some of the educated young people can find a stable and good source of income as government employees. This situation is quite different from rural Central Java, where a large number of educated youth stay in their home villages without a stable job. It may be that the relative stability of rural life in Sabak Bernam hinges rather precariously on the government's ability to further accelerate urban industrial development and to keep maintaining its corps of local government employees. An official of the district office told me that people depended too much on the government's development policies and lacked their own initiative to improve their lives. This sounds ironical to me, because it is the people's struggle for decades in the swampy coastal forests that has made possible the present stability of their life. Will their backbreaking efforts over the years end only in increasing dependency on the government? As I have pointed out a further search into the villagers' views on their lives, their communities, and their relation to power and authority must be made, even into the details of the diverse personal versions, in order to come closer to the answer. Folk socio-political theories of the Sabak Bernam Javanese may have less

formalized rhetoric and ritual expressions than those in Java. But considerable insight will be gained if their theories are contextualized into their relatively short but condensed history.

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