

A Rural Community in Kelantan, Malaya

A Brief Account of Its Socio-Economic Organization
and Regional Setting

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Within the very restricted limits of this paper an attempt will be made to present a concrete instance of a Malay village within its regional setting, whereby the most salient features of its socio-economic organization and their relationship to the larger context will be set forth.¹ Before proceeding to the community in question, however, a brief description of the state and its history will be given.

Kelantan, on the northeast coast of the Federation of Malaya, lies well within the tropics and its climate is monsoonal, there being a very dry period extending roughly from March to June and one with heavy rains from November to January or February. The annual rainfall is generally in excess of 125 inches.²

Most of the state is covered with jungle, and is very sparsely settled. The plain around the mouth of the Kelantan River in the north, however, is one of the most densely populated areas in Malaya, with rural densities ranging from 200 to 650 per square mile.³

There is very little in the way of industry, and the population is engaged for the most part in agricultural pursuits, of which the chief ones are rice, coconut, and rubber cultivation, and fishing. The Kelantan delta is, in fact, one of the two largest rice-producing regions in the country. Although the state has a total population of just over 500,000, the only town of any size is the state capital, Kota Bharu, with about 38,000 inhabitants. For the rest there are two district capitals at 8,000 and 9,000 and some smaller ones at about 2,000.⁴

The most striking demographic fact about Kelantan as opposed to most of the west coast states is that there are so few Chinese. Whereas in the west they number almost half of the population, in Kelantan they constitute under 6%.⁵ They are found almost exclusively in the towns, moreover, so that village commerce is mostly in the hands of Malays.

Kelantan has been relatively isolated from the west coast of Malaya in modern times, but formerly it seems to have had considerable contact with the outside world, thanks primarily, no doubt, to its position on the old trade route between China, Indo-China, and the West via Singapore, or Tumasik, as it used to be called.⁶ It is not known with certainty how long Kelantan has been in existence, but it is mentioned as having been subject to both the Sumatran empire of Srivijaya in the thirteenth century and the Javanese one of Majapahit in the fourteenth.⁷ Moreover, many traces of Javanese influence are still evident there. It was probably converted to Islam sometime during the fifteenth century, as was the rest of the peninsula.⁸

Control of the state, outside of periods of interregnum when authority was split up among a number of local rajas, seems to have shifted irregularly between Patani to the northwest and Trengganu to the southeast. There was also intermittent interference on the part of Thailand, who claimed suzerainty over all three, and her influence was strong.⁹ In the nineteenth century Thailand began to take a more direct interest in the administration of the state, and in 1903 appointed a British Adviser to assist her with it.¹⁰ Only in 1909 did control pass into the hands of the British government, at which time Kelantan became one of the Unfederated States of Malaya.¹¹

The fact that Kelantan was an Unfederated State would seem to account in part for its relatively slow economic and social development, for owing to its greater degree of autonomy, it did not participate fully in the changes brought about by the British administration in the Federated States. It was isolated geographically as well, there having been no direct route connecting it with the west coast until the railroad was put through in 1931. What is perhaps more important is the fact that no mineral resources of any great consequence were found to attract capital. Rubber planting

did start early in this century, but it has never been produced on the scale that it has been on the west coast.

This is not to say that the development of the state was completely ignored by the administration. A network of roads was laid out, drainage was improved, efforts to increase rice production were made, public education was introduced, albeit on a very small scale. The administration was improved, and so forth. Nobody was in a hurry to transform the country, however, and indeed it seems to have been the intention to maintain the basic agricultural nature of the economy in the hope of eventually making Kelantan the rice bowl of Malaya.¹² This policy, incidentally, was doomed almost from the start, as Kelantan's imports of rice exceeded her exports for the first time in 1924, and she has been unable to meet her own demands ever since.¹³

After the last war, with Kelantan in the new Federation of Malaya and independence promised within a definite and relatively short period of time, the tempo of development was greatly increased. Not only was the government progressively "Malayanized," but roads were improved, irrigation projects were undertaken, and other aids to agriculture intensified, government loans were made available to individuals and communities for small-scale enterprises and community development by the Rural Industrial Development Authority, education was made compulsory, more English schools were established, and so on. The postwar years have thus altered Kelantan's position in Malaya as a whole and have accelerated changes in her internal economy and structure.

The political organization of the state is simple. It is headed by a Sultan, who rules with the advice and concurrence of a council of appointed ministers. The state is divided into eight districts, each headed by an appointed district officer, and these districts are further subdivided, each subdistrict, or *daerah*, being headed by a *penggawa*, also appointed. The *daerah* are further subdivided into *mukim* for land registration purposes, but the latter have no political function. Finally there is still another appointed official, the *penghulu*, who has one or more villages under him, depending on their size. He acts solely as an assistant to the subdistrict head and has no independent authority. In some particularly populous districts near the capital, local councils have been established, but

most villages have no official political organization. Each district has one or more police stations and a law court.

Separate from the political organization is a religious one, headed by a *mufti* and a religious council, *Majlis Ugama*, in Kota Bharu. Each of the eight districts into which the state is divided has a *kathi*, who presides over a religious court, and each district contains a large number of subdistricts called *mukim* (they do not correspond to the registration *mukim* mentioned above), each with a mosque, headed by an *imam*.

Land taxes are paid to the civil government, and a tax on rice amounting to 10% of the annual yield above a certain minimum is paid to the religious authorities.

The village with which we are here primarily concerned, Kampong Jeram, is situated in the northeastern part of Kelantan near the southern limits of the plain, just to the east of a range of hills running northward into the plain parallel to the Kelantan River. It is about four miles from Pasir Puteh, the capital of the district in which it is located, a town of some two thousand people, and lies astride the road connecting that capital with the capital of the district of Machang in the Kelantan River valley on the other side of the hills. Population density in this area is between 200 and 300 per square mile,¹⁴ which is appreciably lower than in the delta proper, as can be seen above, and reflects the hillier terrain and poorer soil.

Although roads in Kelantan are relatively recent—the British did not make serious efforts to develop a network connecting the main parts of the state until about 1915, and very few miles were asphalted until after the last war—the village was by no means isolated in earlier times. It was connected by river and the sea with the district capital and Kota Bharu and by footpaths and streams with many other parts of the state, and seems to have long been an important village in the area.

It cannot be said with certainty when it was founded, but the earliest traditions of the inhabitants and historical accounts available go back to the latter part of the eighteenth century, when a member of the ruling house in Kota Bharu was sent to Jeram as a representative of the throne and given authority over what seems to have been approximately the present district of Pasir Puteh.¹⁶ The village became the center from which the surrounding country

was opened up, and descendants of the original royal representative continued to reside there, although none of them was granted the feudal powers of the latter.

At present the village contains some 700 people, living on the average four to a house. It is nuclear in form, but the houses are scattered irregularly over an area roughly $\frac{1}{2}$ by $\frac{2}{5}$ of a mile. Within the village are fruit, coconut, areca nut, and some rubber trees and small vegetable gardens. A mosque and most of the shops are found along the main road, and there is a government primary school on the northern edge of the village. Surrounding the village are its rice fields and most of its rubber.

As we have seen, villages in Kelantan have as a rule no official organization of their own. The only two people with official status who might be found in one are the *penghulu* and the *imam*. The former's authority as village headman is practically nil, however, as working for the government is not considered respectable and the appointment is usually sought by the appointee himself. The *imam*, as religious leader and head of the mosque, may enjoy considerable prestige, but since his jurisdiction extends over a number of villages, that prestige is not a function of his position in the village organization itself. At the time of investigation Kampong Jeram had a *penghulu*, but although it was the site of a mosque, the incumbent *imam* was from a neighboring village.

There is normally, however, as in Jeram, an unofficial head, called *ketua*. This man is not elected, but is accepted by the majority of his fellow villagers as more or less a *primus inter pares*. They bring their problems and disputes to him, and he tries to settle them as best he can by means of discussion with the parties involved. He also acts as representative of the village in matters concerning other villages. The authority which a *ketua* possesses is usually both moral and physical. Not only must he have good character and a knowledge of the right way of doing things, but he should have physical prowess as well, to impress those not so easily swayed by moral arguments. He does not preside over a council of elders nor try to enforce his authority in any public manner.

Matters which concern the village as a whole are discussed after the Friday meeting at the mosque, which all adults are supposed to attend. Such matters may only be broached by one of the leading members of the community, but the rest of the villagers are then

free to comment on them. There are no official rules of procedure and no vote is taken, but in practice nothing will be carried out without the concurrence of all the prominent men.

Of course in a community of this size there are apt to be factions, and in the village studied there was one group of dissidents numbering some twenty to thirty people. It seems to have formed primarily because of resentment toward the *ketua* and his position by certain individuals and generated considerable ill will. This resentment was expressed principally in noncooperation with the *ketua* and his followers and in some acts of sabotage and vandalism. No direct action was taken against these people, however, even though the existence of such a group caused the rest of the villagers and the *ketua* in particular considerable concern. Pressure was brought to bear on them, however, by refusing them all kinds of cooperation, the ultimate sanction being the withholding of rice land and rubber trees for sharecropping.

Kinship provides no basis for the formal organization of the community. It is bilateral, the kin of neither side being more important than the other. While it is true that there is a stated preference for marrying second cousins, such marriages are becoming increasingly rare, and the very high divorce rate which obtains here, as elsewhere among the Malays,¹⁰ is inconsistent with the establishment of stable marital relations between kin or other groups. One has, of course, certain obligations with regard to one's close relatives, but friendship and proximity are equally important, if not more so, than kinship in the determining of subgroupings within the village. There would seem to be no particular preference for marrying within the village, but because so many of the people are related in some degree to each other, kinship is of minor importance as a discriminating factor. It is important, however, for one's relationships outside the village, providing one with more or less permanent and dependable contacts in what may be a very sizable number of other communities.

The chief economic activities are rice-growing and rubber-tapping. As in most parts of Malaya, the rice is dependent on rainfall, there being no system of irrigation. Nevertheless, all the rice grown in this village is so-called wet rice, even though a considerable amount of dry rice is produced elsewhere in the state. Until the twenties it was possible for the people to construct brush-

wood dams in the river and run the water off through channels to some of the fields, but the river has now dug its bed so deep, thanks primarily to the dredging activities of the Drainage and Irrigation Department downstream, that this could no longer be done, even if it were not forbidden by the government.

Because the rice is completely dependent on rain, yields can vary considerably from year to year, but because of the low fertility of the soil they are at best not very high, ranging from about 450 to 1750 pounds per acre. The preparation of the nurseries begins in June for the main varieties, and the seedlings should be transplanted about forty days after sowing, but if the fields are not wet enough to receive them, it may be necessary to wait anywhere up to two and a half months. After this time the seedlings would be too old. Fertilizer, either of the natural or artificial variety (the latter is subsidized to a certain extent by the government), is usually applied only to the main fields. Once the rice has been transplanted, it requires little work until the harvest in February or March. The water level in the fields is controlled to some extent by opening and closing the bunds between them, but no weeding is done as a rule. One of the chief occupations during this period is finding fodder, sometimes at the cost of great effort, for the cattle, which between seasons graze on the rice fields.

Harvesting is done in this part of the state by means of the small rice knife common in Southeast Asia, the stalks being cut individually eight or ten inches from the top. The stalks are then tied together into small bunches and transported on carrying racks back to the village, where the rice is stored as it is. It is threshed by foot when it is needed, the husk is removed by means of small, hand-driven native mills and the grains are further polished with pestle and mortar, either of the foot or hand variety. Since the installation of a cooperative rice mill in the neighborhood a few years back, however, machine milling has become increasingly popular.

There is no general organization of rice-growing in the village. The only time the farmer needs much help with it is at harvest. In some instances a system of mutual help, which it seems was once more common, is resorted to, but in most cases the owner of the rice pays for the help received, either in kind, which is usual, or in money. Of course draft animals are needed for plowing and

harrowing, and if the planter does not have his own he may rent them from a neighbor at standard rates, payable in rice after the harvest.

There was once a considerable amount of ritual connected with the growing of rice, involving both the individual and the village as a whole,¹⁷ but this is rapidly dying out. Only some of the older people still concern themselves with it, and then only to a limited extent.

Because of overpopulation and the obligation under Moslem law to divide a deceased person's property among all the members of his immediate family, land holdings are for the most part quite small, and almost two-thirds of the people in the village had no rice land at all. The average total amount of rice land held by an individual is on the order of two acres, and this is usually divided up among several holdings.

Most rice is planted under a system of sharecropping (rental is rare in Kelantan as opposed to the west coast¹⁸) in which the rice is divided equally between the landlord and the planter. It is not only the few relatively large landholders (absentee and resident) who have their land sharecropped, however, for only about 29% of the landowners in the village farm their own land. The consequences of this system in terms of low productivity and neglect of the soil are obvious, and it constitutes a serious barrier to the improvement of agricultural techniques. Most of the farmers produce only for their own consumption, and any surplus an individual may have is usually sold in the village. The village cannot supply its own needs, moreover, and many villagers must buy all or part of their rice at outside markets.

Of prime importance to the economy of the village is the sale of rubber. This is in sharp contrast, incidentally, to the situation in the central part of the delta and along the coast, where rubber land is scarce. Less than a quarter of the adult villagers own rubber trees (23%), but there are several absentee holdings in the neighborhood as well, and most people tap rubber at least part of the year. The work is less arduous than that involved in producing rice and is, moreover, immediately remunerative. For this reason, among others, more people tap their own rubber than plant their own rice (46% as against 29%). When the trees are share-

tapped, the proceeds are split equally, as in the case of rice, between the owner and the tapper.

Only the preliminary stages of processing are carried out by the villager himself (or herself). He draws the latex from the tree, coagulates it with acid and water, rolls it out on metal rollers to produce corrugated sheets, and dries them in the sun. He then sells them to a local dealer—there is one in Jeram, as in most villages of any size in the area—who sells it again to a factory in Kota Bharu. These sun-dried sheets, which are normally very carelessly produced, are usually graded No. 4 or 5 by the local dealers, and they command a substantially lower price at that point than the No. 1 grade smoked sheet ordinarily produced by the estates. The village dealers are often Chinese, and outside the villages all the rubber is in the hands of the Chinese, with the exception of that produced by the European-owned estates.

Rubber is the chief source of ready cash for the villager, but copra and areca nuts are also sold on a much smaller scale. Most households plant small gardens in which vegetables, tobacco, and betel and fruit trees are cultivated, but in most cases the produce is not primarily for sale.

There are a few shopkeepers, a couple of barbers, a tailor, and some carpenters in the village, but all this enterprise is on a very small scale. Although buying on credit is a common practice, none of the people involved, with the possible exception of the rubber dealer, who is incidentally the only Chinese among the shopkeepers, is in a position to lend appreciable amounts of money.

It does not appear, moreover, that indebtedness constitutes anything like the problem that it does among the rural population of the west coast.¹⁹ The production of rice being primarily on a subsistence level, there is small need for credit connected with it, and practically none is needed for tapping rubber.²⁰ On the other hand, there are no financial resources for improving and expanding production.

The village which has been briefly described here is one whose economy is based primarily on subsistence production of non-irrigated rice, supplemented to a large degree by the production and sale of rubber. Although the village has considerable *esprit de corps*, it is not expressed by any formal organization based either on kin or political groups, and the village is connected through a widespread

network of kinship ties with many others. It seems never to have been completely isolated, and improved communications have greatly facilitated and encouraged contact between it and the rest of the state.

The particular village with which this paper has been mainly concerned may be taken in its general features at least to be typical of a large part of the villages in Kelantan. In conclusion something will be said of their present situation in the economy of the state as a whole.

During and since the war the villages in Kelantan have been more and more involved in state and even in national affairs, and the growing population has increased the numbers of those who seek their livelihood outside the traditional village sphere. Village life has also become increasingly secularized. Traditional rituals are carried out now by only some of the older generation, the native doctors, who are the repositories of most of the knowledge connected with them, are training few, if any, pupils, and communal rites are rarely performed. This process has been accelerated by universal education.

These villages are changing, therefore, but, as must be apparent from what has been said above, there are considerable obstacles in the way of their proper participation in the economic development of the state. This is not the place to discuss all the problems involved in the development of the rural economy or the various measures which could be adopted to that end,²¹ but it may be well to emphasize a few of the basic factors which have been described in this paper or are at least directly connected with them. They relate to circumstances both internal and external to the villages themselves.

In the first place, in spite of the changes that have been taking place, the villagers are still pretty much attached to their old way of life. They are antipathetic toward the government and the people of the towns in general, and they hold to values based on their subsistence economy, according to which wealth should be distributed among relatives and friends and its personal accumulation is regarded as antisocial.

The village organization also has a restraining effect, for while its diffuseness leaves the village relatively open to outside influences, reducing the community commitments of its members to

a minimum, the lack of any well-defined political institutions makes it extremely difficult for the villagers to undertake activities on a community basis. Thus, for example, in one case known to the writer, it was impossible to get any concerted action on a local irrigation project which would have brought considerable economic benefit to the village in question, in spite of the fact that the great majority of the inhabitants favored it.

Overpopulation, which has already been mentioned as a factor stimulating change, most certainly has a depressing effect on the standard of living. The Kelantan plain was already one of the most densely settled areas in the Federation, and even though the population in the state has been increasing at a lower rate than the national average, it still grew almost 13% between 1947 and 1957.²² Although most of Kelantan is covered with practically uninhabited jungle, the latter does not lend itself to human settlement on a large scale and its exploitation is difficult. The scope of the problem is indicated by a statement of the Federation of Malaya Rice Committee to the effect that if each of the present estimated 91,500 adult male rice planters were to be given a holding of five acres of rice plus two additional acres for other crops, no less than 62,500 of them would have to be moved from the plain and be given a total of 437,500 acres elsewhere.²³

Some of this excess population has been drained off by migration to other states, notably to northern Trengganu,²⁴ but the lack of industry within the state makes it impossible for the towns to absorb adequately large numbers of the rural population.

The situation is finally complicated by ethnic factors, since almost all business outside the rural sphere is in the hands of the Chinese, or to a lesser extent of other ethnic groups, which tends to confine the Malays to the agricultural sector of the economy.

NOTES

1. The fieldwork on which this paper is based was carried out from September, 1957 to December, 1958 for the Studies of Cultural Regularities project of the University of Illinois. The project was directed by Professor Julian H. Steward and was financed by a grant from the Ford Foundation.
2. N. Ginsburg and C. F. Roberts, Jr., *Malaya* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), p. 7.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
4. *1957 Population Census of the Federation of Malaya. Report No. 1* (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Statistics, Federation of Malaya, 1958), pp. 43f.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
6. Anker Rentse, "History of Kelantan. I," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, XII (1934), 45.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 55; D.G.E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1955), p. 184.
9. Rentse, *op. cit.*, *passim*.
10. W. A. Graham, *Kelantan. A State of the Malay Peninsula* (Glasgow, 1908), pp. 1f.
11. Ginsburg and Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
12. Kelantan Administration Reports, 1910-1940.
13. *Ibid.*, 1927, p. 9; 1928-1940.
14. Ginsburg and Roberts, *op. cit.*, map 3, p. 53.
15. Mahmud bin Ismail, *Renghasan Chetera Kelantan* (Kota Bharu, 1933), pp. 24, 27.
16. Cf., e.g., Rosemary Firth, *Housekeeping among Malay Peasants* (London: Monographs on Social Anthropology No. 7. The London School of Economics and Political Science, 1943), pp. 23-35; M.G.A. Swift, "A Note on the Durability of Malay Marriages," *Man*, LVIII (1958), No. 208.
17. A. H. Hill, "Kelantan Padi Planting," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, XXIV (1951), pp. 56-76.
18. T. B. Wilson, *The Economics of Padi Production in North Malaya. Part 1. Land Tenure, Rents, Land Use and Fragmentation* (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Agriculture Bulletin No. 103, 1958), p. 35.
19. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *The Economic Development of Malaya* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1955), pp. 55f.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
21. Cf., e.g., *Final Report of the Rice Committee, Federation of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur, 1956); Ministry of Agriculture, Federation of Malaya, "Review of Methods of Yield Improvement," *Malayan Agricultural Journal*, XLI (1958), pp. 200-220; Ooi Jin-bee, "Rural Development in Tropical Areas, with special reference to Malaya," *The Journal of Tropical Geography*, XII (1959).
22. The 1957 total is 505,585 (1957 Population Census, *op. cit.*, p. 1) as opposed to 448,600 in 1947 (quoted in International Bank, *op. cit.*, p. 6).
23. *Final Report of the Rice Committee, op. cit.*, pp. 35, 31.
24. T.E. Smith, *Population Growth in Malaya. An Analysis of Recent Trends* (London and New York: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1952), p. 22.