

## BOOK REVIEW

*Population Movement in Wet Rice Communities.* By Ida Bagus Mantra. Jogjakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1981. Pp. x, 210.

*The Economics of Malaysian Paddy Production and Irrigation.* By Donald C. Taylor. Bangkok: The Agricultural Development Council, 1981. Pp. xvi, 204.

Both Indonesia and Malaysia are heavily committed to developing their padi sector, partly in order to approach self-sufficiency in rice, and partly to raise rural living standards. But Malaysia is wealthy, and its rural development policies are couched in terms of equity and the eradication of poverty; in Indonesia, and more particularly in Java, the first priority for the millions is simply survival.

The Indonesian Government introduced its first policy to encourage the intensification of rice farming in 1959, and since then a series of “mass guidance” (BIMAS) programmes has been implemented, encouraging or obliging padi farmers to adopt the new varieties and technology of the Green Revolution.<sup>1</sup> A recent World Bank survey indicated that the absolute incidence of poverty in Java was declining, at first glance a welcome proof that the benefits of development were being equitably distributed. A closer analysis shows less cause for optimism. The new technology has not been neutral in its effects: it seems that while the proportion of those classified as “poor” has indeed decreased slightly, the proportion of “destitute” families has risen rapidly.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the recent technological changes have destroyed many of the traditional redistributive mechanisms such as group harvesting rights, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for the poor to gain access to land even as share-croppers or labourers. In his village surveys in the Jogjakarta area, Mantra established that half the families owned no rice-land, while most families produced insufficient rice for their own needs. Mantra’s study explores the alternative sources of income that enable such families to survive.

Despite the desperate poverty of many rural families, there is surprisingly little migration from the Javanese countryside to the cities. It appears that movement from one city to another is more common, and apart from Jakarta, whose population is swollen by a constant influx of migrants from the outer islands, Javanese cities are growing rather slowly.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it

is clear that Javanese towns and cities provide essential income opportunities for the rural population. Mantra distinguishes three categories of movement out of the village: commuting (a daily activity), circulation (longer term), and migration (permanent), and establishes the interesting fact that the Javanese, like the Japanese and Americans, are a nation of commuters. The majority of the many villagers who have jobs in the towns travel daily, by bicycle or by bus, and often combine their urban job with some form of employment in the village. The Javanese are reluctant to leave their village outright, because there they feel secure, and the cost of living is lower. This is a key consideration, since most of the urban jobs available are very poorly paid. Mantra has identified and documented a very important aspect of Javanese life, hitherto neglected, but his study has certain shortcomings. Chief of these is the tendency to treat the village as a homogeneous community. Although Mantra scrupulously categorizes commuters according to age, sex, and occupation, he fails to distinguish between socio-economic categories as such, and does not explore the relationship between commuting and landlessness, for example, or compare agricultural incomes with urban wages. This is a pity, for it would have been an ideal opportunity to explore new aspects of the process of economic differentiation and marginalization in rural Java.

In the Javanese case, it is evident that worsening rural conditions and the growth of landlordism are forcing peasants to seek poorly paid work in nearby towns. In Malaysia, the case is less clear-cut. In his excellent comprehensive yet concise account of the Malaysian rice sector, Taylor maintains that the expansion of the industrial sector, and of the economy generally, is luring villagers away from their rice-farms to take up well-paid jobs in the cities; he believes that this is a far more important factor in the current rural exodus than overpopulation or landlord exploitation. From my own experience in Kelantan, I would agree with Taylor that the effects of the new rice technology so actively propagated by the government in recent years have been relatively evenly distributed, and that Malaysian landlords are as likely to be exploited as exploitative.<sup>4</sup> But those who have studied recent developments in the Muda area would disagree, seeing the expansion of capitalist farming and rural class differentiation as a serious and growing problem.<sup>5</sup> The more technical aspects of Taylor's study provide a key to explaining this apparent discrepancy.

Taylor's expertise comes from wide experience, in India, Indonesia, and Thailand, as well as Malaysia, and he sets Malaysian rice production firmly within the broader Asian context. Neither the soils, the water supply, nor the climate of Malaysia are ideal for rice cultivation, and Taylor's comparative figures make plain the difficulties that Malaysian rice farmers face. The production of rice is time-consuming and expensive, and particularly in the large irrigation schemes, where rice monoculture is encouraged, alternative

sources of income are scarce. Taylor's results emphasize two points. Firstly, those regions which are naturally suited to irrigation are already provided with developed irrigation networks which offer little scope for cost-effective improvement, while those regions where irrigation is lacking would prove prohibitively expensive to irrigate. Further investment in irrigation, then, would be extremely costly, and would have a minimal effect on raising national production. It would raise local farmers' incomes, but this could be achieved more economically by developing opportunities outside the rice sector. Secondly, the Malaysian rice sector presents a striking regional diversity. The cost, the effectiveness, and the profitability of irrigation are just one aspect of this diversity. Labour inputs and yields also differ significantly; for example, labour use is 30 to 35 per cent below average in the higher-yielding Northwest and 20 to 25 per cent above average in the Southwest, Northeast, and East (p. 97). This goes a long way towards explaining why Kelantan farmers are leaving their rice-fields uncultivated and seeking jobs in the city. It is not that they cannot produce sufficient rice to feed themselves, as is the case in Java. But under the adverse conditions of production, whatever the size of holding or the farmer's tenurial status, rice farming is hard work and unprofitable. In Kedah, on the other hand, conditions of production are much more favourable and profit margins increase perceptibly with the size of the farm. The use of wage-labour is increasing as well-to-do farmers add to their farms at the expense of their poorer neighbours. Here, productivity is rising and there is no danger of the land lying idle. As far as increasing national rice production is concerned, Kedah is a success story of which the Malaysian Government can be proud. As far as the achievement of economic "equity" is concerned, it presents a novel and potentially serious threat, exposing the exploitation of Malay by Malay.

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#### NOTES

1. I. Palmer, *The New Rice in Indonesia* (Geneva: UNRISD, 1977).
2. Benjamin White, "Political Aspects of Poverty, Income Distribution and their Measurement: Some Examples from Rural Java", Rural Dynamics Series, Agro-Economic Survey, Bogor, 1978.
3. Alden Speare, Jr., "Rural and urban migration", in *Agricultural and Rural Development in Indonesia*, edited by Gary E. Hansen (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1981).
4. Akimi Fujimoto, *Land Tenure and Income Sharing among Malay Peasants* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983).
5. Lim Teck Ghee, D.S. Gibbons, G.R. Elliston and Shukur bin Kassim, *Land Tenure in the Muda Irrigation Area: Final Report, Part 2: Findings* (Centre for Policy Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, 1981).