

Book Review/*Ulasan Buku*

Japanese Anthropologists and Malaysian Society. Contributions to Malaysian Ethnography. Shamsul A. B. and Tomiyuki Uesugi (eds.). Senri Ethnological Studies no. 48. Suita, Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology. 1998. i-xiii; 1-161 pp.

In this series of ethnological studies, readers will be delighted to discover what Japanese anthropologists have been doing in Malaysia. A sample of their works are presented in this collection that gives some indication of the depth and scope of their involvement in Malaysia, though the choice of contributors may not be to everyone's delight.

Six people contributed to the volume which contains a preface, an introduction and four ethnographic papers, each by Suelo Kuwahara, Hiroshi Tawada, Noboru Ishikawa and Tomiyuki Uesugi. A postscript, written by Narifumi Maeda Tachimoto, and an impressive bibliographic listing of selected works on Malaysia (mostly in Japanese) compiled by Uesugi, make up the rest of the volume.

The introduction by Shamsul A. B., a name well-known and highly respected in Malaysian studies, is indeed very informative and well-researched. It not only discusses the development of the social sciences in Malaysia in a comprehensive style, but it also tries to explain how Japanese scholars fit themselves into the local research context. The introduction also highlights the history of anthropology in Malaysia, the road that the discipline has taken, and why it was eventually recognised as a teaching discipline in Malaysian universities, especially after the significant political crisis of May 13, 1969. Ironically it is anthropology which plays the role of mid-wife in the later development of Malaysian studies on a much bigger scale, incorporating other disciplines as well, though the general orientation has always been burdened by the tendency to study Malays and bumiputera groups more than others. Shamsul has elegantly explained why this had been so and suggests measures to remedy the shortcoming.

The manner in which the Japanese scholars have conducted research in Malaysia ranges from serious and half-serious students, to 'high flyers' and 'fly-by-night' researchers who conduct speedy-Gonzales type of surveys, many of whom include 'in-house' corporate researchers sponsored by big corporations. Sad to say, many of the findings by the last group, the so-called 'corporate warrior researchers', are not easily accessible for obvious reasons. Nevertheless, Japanese interest on Malaysia has increased tremendously as testified by the formation of JAMS, based at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, and by the creation of more research groups in other universities.

Kuwahara's paper shows how economic factors such as the increasing

importance of rubber over padi triggered changes in a matrilineal system in Rembau. With men wielding more power than women over ownership of rubber land, he argues that *adat perpatih* (the traditional socio-legal code) now survives in a symbolic form, as manifested in feasting and marriage ceremonies, thereby serving to underscore the social identity of a Negri Sembilan person more than anything else.

Tawada's discussion is based on an observation of the intricacies between rituals and politics among Kelantanese Malays. It shows how religious leaders take advantage of their position, through the conduct of some crucial rituals, to hit out at others who belong to the wrong side of the political camp. Tawada's description of a marriage ceremony that went slightly off the normal course is spiced up with an episode of ritual comedy, but it also shows how Islam as a universal religion is seen in the local context, acted upon and interpreted to suit prevailing social, cultural and political situation.

Ishikawa's contribution deals with the agrarian policies introduced by the second White Rajah of Sarawak, Charles Brooke, and their effects on the local population. The changes brought about were more beneficial to the migrant Chinese, towkays and coolies included, leaving the indigenous Dayak population with much to lose. Other native groups also suffered.

Uesugi's analysis of a modern Murut myth regarding the secret of Japanese postwar development is another interesting piece of modern ethnography. Uesugi tried his best to deconstruct the myth; after all he was about the only real Japanese the Murut have ever met since the war, but they steadfastly refused to believe him. In fact, they were too absorbed in their own emic way of explaining things. By looking closely at four other local myths, Uesugi tries to understand why and how the myth was perceived in that particular Murut manner.

The postscript by Narifumi Maeda Tachimoto, definitely one of the most respected Japanese anthropologists who have done fieldwork in Malaysia, gives an account of how interest in Malaysian studies was originally conceived after the Second World War. Among other things, his paper discusses one of the pioneers, Dr. Joji Tanase, who led various research trips to Malaysia in early 1960s, taking along a host of scientists and a number of students who later became big names in their own right in the field of anthropology. Tachimoto's paper reads like a who-is-who among researchers of Malaysia, with a nostalgic touch or two thrown in here and there, testifying to his long-term involvement in Malaysian studies.

The selected bibliography, with the translation of Japanese titles into English by Uesugi, is a very commendable piece of work. The real value of this effort lies in its extensive coverage of what has been written in Japanese about Malaysia. Readers who read no Japanese can now find out what Japanese scholars, previously known only through their English works, have actually written in their native language. This can be quite revealing, and perhaps surprising as well.

On the whole the volume of essays edited by Shamsul and Uesugi is an indispensable piece of work. The rich ethnographic details furnished by the four papers are proof enough that the contributors have done extensive research in their respective fieldwork location. The introduction, the postscript, and the impressive bibliographic listing are among the most valuable sections. The volume should be made compulsory reading for new scholars contemplating to do research in the country, regardless whether they are Malaysians or foreigners.

Mohamed Yusoff Ismail
Department of Antropology and Sociology
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
43600 UKM Bangi
Selangor D.E., Malaysia