

Weapons of the Weak
EVERYDAY FORMS OF
PEASANT RESISTANCE

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Preface

The limitations of any field of study are most strikingly revealed in its shared definitions of what counts as relevant. A great deal of the recent work on the peasantry—my own as well as that of others—concerns rebellions and revolutions. Excepting always the standard ethnographic accounts of kinship, ritual, cultivation, and language—it is fair to say that much attention has been devoted to organized, large-scale, protest movements that appear, if only momentarily, to pose a threat to the state. I can think of a host of mutually reinforcing reasons why this shared understanding of relevance should prevail. On the left, it is apparent that the inordinate attention devoted to peasant insurrections was stimulated by the Vietnam war and by a now fading left-wing, academic romance with wars of national liberation. The historical record and the archives—both resolutely centered on the state's interests—abetted this romance by not mentioning peasants except when their activities were menacing. Otherwise the peasantry appeared only as anonymous contributors to statistics on conscription, crop production, taxes, and so forth. There was something for everyone in this perspective. For some, it emphasized willy-nilly the role of outsiders—prophets, radical intelligentsia, political parties—in mobilizing an otherwise supine, disorganized peasantry. For others, it focused on just the kinds of movements with which social scientists in the West were most familiar—those with names, banners, tables of organization, and formal leadership. For still others, it had the merit of examining precisely those movements that seemed to promise large-scale, structural change at the level of the state.

What is missing from this perspective, I believe, is the simple fact that most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity. Or, better stated, such activity was dangerous, if not suicidal. Even when the option did exist, it is not clear that the same objectives might not also be pursued by other stratagems. Most subordinate classes are, after all, far less interested in changing the larger structures of the state and the law than in what Hobsbawm has appropriately called “working the system . . . to their minimum disadvantage.”¹ Formal, organized political activity, even if clandestine and revolutionary, is typically the preserve of the middle class and the intelligentsia; to look for peasant politics in this realm is to look largely in vain. It is also—not incidentally—the first step toward concluding that the peasantry is a political nullity unless organized and led by outsiders.

And for all their importance when they do occur, peasant rebellions—let alone

1. Eric Hobsbawm, “Peasants and Politics,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1, no. 1 (1973): 3–22.

revolutions—are few and far between. The vast majority are crushed unceremoniously. When, more rarely, they do succeed, it is a melancholy fact that the consequences are seldom what the peasantry had in mind. Whatever else revolutions may achieve—and I have no desire to gainsay these achievements—they also typically bring into being a vaster and more dominant state apparatus that is capable of battering itself on its peasant subjects even more effectively than its predecessors.

For these reasons it seemed to me more important to understand what we might call *everyday* forms of peasant resistance—the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them. Most forms of this struggle stop well short of outright collective defiance. Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on. These Brechtian—or Schweikian—forms of class struggle have certain features in common. They require little or no coordination or planning; they make use of implicit understandings and informal networks; they often represent a form of individual self-help; they typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority. To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand much of what the peasantry has historically done to defend its interests against both conservative and progressive orders. It is my guess that just such kinds of resistance are often the most significant and the most effective over the long run. Thus, Marc Bloch, the historian of feudalism, has noted that the great millennial movements were “flashes in the pan” compared to the “patient, silent struggles stubbornly carried on by rural communities” to avoid claims on their surplus and to assert their rights to the means of production—for example, arable, woodland, pastures.² Much the same view is surely appropriate to the study of slavery in the New World. The rare, heroic, and foredoomed gestures of a Nat Turner or a John Brown are simply not the places to look for the struggle between slaves and their owners. One must look rather at the constant, grinding conflict over work, food, autonomy, ritual—at everyday forms of resistance. In the Third World it is rare for peasants to risk an outright confrontation with the authorities over taxes, cropping patterns, development policies, or onerous new laws; instead they are likely to nibble away at such policies by noncompliance, foot dragging, deception. In place of a land invasion, they prefer piecemeal squatting; in place of open mutiny, they prefer desertion; in place of attacks on public or private grain stores; they prefer pilfering. When such stratagems are abandoned in favor of more quixotic action, it is usually a sign of great desperation.

Such low-profile techniques are admirably suited to the social structure of the

2. Marc Bloch, *French Rural History*, trans. Janet Sondheimer (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1970), 170.

peasantry—a class scattered across the countryside, lacking formal organization, and best equipped for extended, guerrilla-style, defensive campaigns of attrition. Their individual acts of foot dragging and evasion, reinforced by a venerable popular culture of resistance and multiplied many thousand-fold, may, in the end, make an utter shambles of the policies dreamed up by their would-be superiors in the capital. Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines. But just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do the multiple acts of peasant insubordination and evasion create political and economic barrier reefs of their own. It is largely in this fashion that the peasantry makes its political presence felt. And whenever, to pursue the simile, the ship of state runs aground on such reefs, attention is usually directed to the shipwreck itself and not to the vast aggregation of petty acts that made it possible. For these reasons alone, it seems important to understand this quiet and anonymous welter of peasant action.

To this end, I spent two years (1978–80) in a Malaysian village. The village, which I call Sedaka, not its real name, was a small (seventy-household), rice-farming community in the main paddy-growing area of Kedah, which had begun double-cropping in 1972. As in so many other “green revolutions” the rich have gotten richer and the poor have remained poor or grown poorer. The introduction of huge combine-harvesters in 1976 was perhaps the coup de grace, as it eliminated two-thirds of the wage-earning opportunities for smallholders and landless laborers. In the course of two years I managed to collect an enormous amount of relevant material. My attention was directed as much to the ideological struggle in the village—which underwrites resistance—as to the practice of resistance itself. Throughout the book I try to raise the larger issues of resistance, class struggle, and ideological domination that give these issues their practical and theoretical significance.

The struggle between rich and poor in Sedaka is not merely a struggle over work, property rights, grain, and cash. It is also a struggle over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle over how the past and present shall be understood and labeled, a struggle to identify causes and assess blame, a contentious effort to give partisan meaning to local history. The details of this struggle are not pretty, as they entail backbiting, gossip, character assassination, rude nicknames, gestures, and silences of contempt which, for the most part, are confined to the backstage of village life. In public life—that is to say, in power-laden settings—a carefully calculated conformity prevails for the most part. What is remarkable about this aspect of class conflict is the extent to which it requires a shared worldview. Neither gossip nor character assassination, for example, makes much sense unless there are shared standards of what is deviant, unworthy, impolite. In one sense, the ferociousness of the argument *depends* on the fact that it appeals to shared values that have been, it is claimed, betrayed. What is in dispute is not values but the facts to which those values might apply: who is rich, who is poor, how rich, how poor, is so-and-so stingy, does so-and-so shirk work? Apart

from the sanctioning power of mobilized social opinion, much of this struggle can also be read as an effort by the poor to resist the economic and ritual marginalization they now suffer and to insist on the minimal cultural decencies of citizenship in this small community. The perspective adopted amounts to an implicit plea for the value of a "meaning-centered" account of class relations. In the final chapter I try to spell out the implications of the account for broader issues of ideological domination and hegemony.

The fourteen months I spent in Sedaka were filled with the mixture of elation, depression, missteps, and drudgery that any anthropologist will recognize. As I was not a card-carrying anthropologist, the whole experience was entirely new to me. I do not know what I would have done without the very practical lectures on fieldwork sent to me by F. G. Bailey. Even with this wise advice, I was not prepared for the elementary fact that an anthropologist is at work from the moment he opens his eyes in the morning until he closes them at night. In the first few months, perhaps half my trips to the outhouse were for no purpose other than to find a moment of solitude. I found the need for a judicious neutrality—that is, biting my tongue—to be well-advised and, at the same time, an enormous psychological burden. The growth of my own "hidden transcript" (see chapter 7) made me appreciate for the first time the truth of Jean Duvignaud's comment: "For the most part, the village yields itself to the investigator and often he is the one to take refuge in concealment."³ I also found neighbors who were forgiving of my inevitable mistakes, who were tolerant—to a point—of my curiosity, who overlooked my incompetence and allowed me to work beside them, who had the rare ability to laugh at me and with me at the same time, who had the dignity and courage to draw boundaries, whose sense of sociability included talking literally all night if the talk was animated and it was not harvest season, and whose kindness meant that they adapted better to me than I to them. What my time among them meant for my life and my work, the word gratitude cannot begin to cover.

Despite a determined effort to trim the manuscript, it remains long. The main reason for this is that a certain amount of storytelling seems absolutely essential to convey the texture and conduct of class relations. Since each story has at least two sides, it becomes necessary to allow also for the "Roshomon effect" that social conflict creates. Another reason for including some narrative has to do with the effort, toward the end, to move from a close-to-the-ground study of class relations to a fairly high altitude. These larger considerations require, I think, the flesh and blood of detailed instances to take on substance. An example is not only the most successful way of embodying a generalization, but also has the advantage of always being richer and more complex than the principles that are drawn from it.

3. Jean Duvignaud, *Change at Shebika: Report From a North African Village* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), 217.

Wherever the translation from Malay was not straightforward, or where the Malay itself was of interest, I have included it in the text or footnotes. As I never used a tape recorder, except for formal speeches given by outsiders, I worked from fragmentary notes made while talking or immediately afterward. The result is that the Malay has something of a telegraphic quality, since only the more memorable fragments of many sentences were recoverable. Early in my stay, as well, when the rural Kedah dialect was strange to my ears, quite a few villagers spoke to me in the simpler Malay they might use at the market. A glossary of specific Kedah dialect terms that appear in the text and notes will be found in appendix D.

This book is for a special reason, I suspect, more the product of its subjects than most village studies. When I began research, my idea was to develop my analysis, write the study, and then return to the village to collect the reactions, opinions, and criticisms of villagers to a short oral version of my findings. These reactions would then comprise the final chapter—a kind of “villagers talk back” section or, if you like, “reviews” of the book by those who should know. I did in fact spend the better part of the last two months in Sedaka collecting such opinions from most villagers. Amidst a variety of comments—often reflecting the speaker’s class—were a host of insightful criticisms, corrections, and suggestions of issues I had missed. All of this changed the analysis but presented a problem. Should I subject the reader to the earlier and stupider version of my analysis and only at the end spring the insights the villagers had brought forward? This was my first thought, but as I wrote I found it impossible to write as if I did not know what I now knew, so I gradually smuggled all those insights into my own analysis. The result is to understate the extent to which the villagers of Sedaka were responsible for the analysis as well as raw material of the study and to make what was a complex conversation seem more like a soliloquy.

Finally, I should emphasize that this is, quite self-consciously, a study of local class relations. This means that peasant-state relations, which might easily justify a volume on resistance, are conspicuously absent except as they impinge on local class relations. It means that issues of ethnic conflict or religious movements or protest, which would almost certainly become important in any political crisis, are also largely bracketed. It means that economic origins of the petty class relations examined here, which might easily be traced all the way to the board rooms of New York City and Tokyo, are not analyzed. It means that formal party politics at the provincial or national level is neglected. From one point of view all these omissions are regrettable. From another perspective the effort here is to show how important, rich, and complex local class relations can be and what we can potentially learn from an analysis that is *not* centered on the state, on formal organizations, on open protest, on national issues.

The unseemly length of the acknowledgments that follow is indicative of how much I had to learn and of the patience and generosity of those who taught me.

To the families of "Sedaka," whose names are disguised for obvious reasons, I owe a great personal debt—a debt that is the heavier because more than one would feel their hospitality abused by what I have written. That is, of course, the human dilemma of the professional outsider, and I can only hope that they will find what follows an honest effort, by my own dim lights, to do justice to what I saw and heard.

My institutional affiliation while in Malaysia was with the School of Comparative Social Sciences at the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang. I could not have been more fortunate as a guest or scholar. At the School, I want particularly to thank Mansor Marican, Chandra Muzaffar, Mohd Shadli Abdullah, Cheah Boon Kheng, Khoo Kay Jin, Colin Abraham, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor—then Dean—Kamal Salih, and Assistant Dean Amir Hussin Baharuddin for their advice and kindness. Nafisah bte. Mohamed was an exceptional tutor of the Kedah dialect who helped me prepare for the fieldwork. The Centre for Policy Research at USM has conducted much of the finest research on the Muda Scheme in Kedah and, for that matter, on agrarian policy anywhere. Lim Teck Ghee and David Gibbons of the Centre not only helped me plan the research but became valued friends and critics whose efforts are evident throughout the book—even when I decided to go my own way. Thanks are also due Sukur Kasim, Harun Din, Ikmal Said, George Elliston, and, of course, the Director of the Centre, K. J. Ratnam. Officials of the Muda Agricultural Development Authority's headquarters in Teluk Chengai near Alor Setar were unfailingly generous with their time, their statistics, and above all their great experience. One would look long and hard in any development project to find officials whose learning, rigor, and candor would match that of Affifuddin Haji Omar and S. Jegatheesan. Datuk Tamin Yeop, then General Manager of MADA, was also very helpful.

Members of the "invisible college" working and writing on rural Malaysian society whose paths crossed my own contributed enormously to my understanding. They are numerous and I shall undoubtedly overlook a few. Some might well prefer not to be implicated at all. But I should mention Syed Husin Ali, Wan Zawawi Ibrahim, Shaharil Talib, Jomo Sundaram, Wan Hashim, Rosemary Barnard, Aihwa Ong, Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, Diana Wong, Donald Nonini, William Roff, Judith and Shuichi Nagata, Lim Mah Hui, Marie-André Couillard, Rodolfe de Koninck, Lorraine Corner, and Akira Takahashi. Two staff members from Universiti Sains who came to Yale for graduate work, Mansor Haji Othman and S. Ahmad Hussein, were important sources of advice and criticism. Finally, I should single out the generosity of Kenzo Horii of the Institute of Developing Economies in Tokyo, who conducted a study of land tenure in Sedaka in 1968 and made the results available to me so that I could establish what a decade of change had meant.

The final manuscript was much changed thanks to the detailed criticism of

colleagues. I made painful cuts; I dropped arguments they thought ludicrous or irrelevant—or both; I added historical and analytical material they thought necessary. Even when I spurned their wisdom, I was often driven to strengthen or shift my position to make it less vulnerable to a direct hit. Enough is enough, however; if they had had their way completely, I would still be at work revising and trying to reconcile the confusion they unwittingly sowed. I cannot wait to return the favor. Thanks to Ben Anderson, Michael Adas, Clive Kessler, Sam Popkin (yes, that's right), Mansor Haji Othman, Lim Teck Ghee, David Gibbons, Georg Elwert, Edward Friedman, Frances Fox Piven, Jan Gross, Jonathan Rieder, Diana Wong, Ben Kerkvliet, Bill Kelly, Vivienne Shue, Gerald Jaynes, and Bob Harms. There are unnamed others who agreed to read the manuscript—or even solicited it—and who, perhaps on seeing its bulk, had second thoughts. They know who they are. Shame!

A good many institutions helped keep me and this enterprise afloat since 1978. In particular, I should like to thank the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Science Foundation (Grant No. SOC 78-02756), and Yale University for support while in Malaysia. Most recently a post-doctoral Exxon Fellowship awarded by the Science, Technology, and Society Program of Massachusetts Institute of Technology made it possible to complete the final draft and most of the revisions. Carl Kaysen was tolerant of my preoccupation with the manuscript and, together with Martin Kreiger, Kenneth Kenniston, Charles Weiner, Peter Buck, Loren Graham, Carla Kirmani, Leo Marx, and Emma Rothschild, helped make my stay intellectually rewarding. A symposium on "History and Peasant Consciousness in Southeast Asia" sponsored by the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, Japan, and arranged by Shigeharu Tanabe and Andrew Turton helped sharpen my perspective. Another and more contentious workshop organized with the help of the Social Science Research Council and held at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague was responsible for the analysis of resistance in chapter 7. I doubt if any of the participants of either exchange would want to subscribe fully to the argument I advance, but they should at least know how valuable their own writing and criticism have been for this work.

Thanks are due the following publications in which small portions of an earlier draft have appeared: *International Political Science Review* (October 1973); *History and Peasant Consciousness in Southeast Asia*, edited by Andrew Turton and Shigeharu Tanabe, *Senri Ethnological Studies*, No. 13 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 1984); *Political Anthropology* (1982); and, in Malay, *Kajian Malaysia* 1:1 (June 1983).

There are a good many typists, processors of words, and editors who are delighted that this manuscript is now out of their hands. Among the most delighted are Beverly Apothaker, Kay Mansfield, and Ruth Muessig; I do want to thank them for their fine work.

The relationship between this book and my family life is complex enough to rule out any of the banalities that usually appear in this space. Suffice it to say that, try though I may, I have never remotely persuaded Louise and our children that their function is to help me write books.

1 • Small Arms Fire in the Class War

This is, exactly, *not* to argue that “morality” is some “autonomous region” of human choice and will, arising independently of the historical process. Such a view of morality has never been materialist enough, and hence it has often reduced that formidable inertia—and sometimes formidable revolutionary force—into a wishful idealist fiction. It is to say, on the contrary, that every contradiction is a conflict of value as well as a conflict of interest; that inside every “need” there is an affect, or “want,” on its way to becoming an “ought” (and *vice versa*); that every class struggle is at the same time a struggle over values.

E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*

RAZAK

The narrow path that serves as the thoroughfare of this small rice-farming village was busier than usual that morning. Groups of women were on their way to transplant the irrigated crop and men were bicycling their children to the early session of school in the nearby town of Kepala Batas. My children were all gathered, as usual, at the windows to watch as each passerby gazed our way from the moment the house came into view until it passed from view. This scene had become, in the space of a few weeks, a daily ritual. The villagers of Sedaka were satisfying their curiosity about the strange family in their midst. My children, on the other hand, were satisfying a more malevolent curiosity. They had come to resent mildly their status of goldfish in a bowl and were convinced that sooner or later someone would forget himself while craning his neck and walk or bicycle straight into the ditch alongside the path. The comic possibility had caught their imagination and, when it inevitably happened, they wanted to be there.

But something was amiss. A small, quiet knot of people had formed in front of the house next door and some passersby had paused to talk with them. Hamzah and his older brother, Razak, were there, as was Razak's wife, Azizah, and the village midwife, Tok Sah Bidan.¹ The tone was too subdued and grave to be casual and Azizah, along with other women from poor families, would normally have already left for work with her transplanting group. Before I could

1. A list of dramatis personae for this study, together with a map of the village and its environs, may be found in chapter 4.

leave the house, Haji Kadir, the well-to-do landlord with whose family we shared the house, walked in and told me what had happened. "Razak's little child is dead, the one born two seasons ago." "It's her fate; her luck wasn't good."²

The details were straightforward. Two days ago the child had come down with a fever. It was the end of the dry season in Kedah when fevers are expected, but this seemed to be more than the ordinary fever, perhaps measles, someone suggested. Yesterday she had been taken to Lebai Sabrani, a highly venerated religious teacher and traditional healer in the adjoining village of Sungai Tongkang. He recited verses of the Koran over her and suggested a poultice for her forehead. I am implicated in this too, Razak told me later. Had I not been visiting another village, he would have asked me to drive the child to a clinic or to the hospital in the state capital, Alor Setar. As it was, he did ask Shamsul, the only other automobile owner in the village, and was told that it would cost M\$15 for gas. Razak did not have any money or, I suspect, enough confidence in hospitals to press the matter, and his daughter died shortly before dawn the next day.

Instinctively, I started for Razak's place, behind Hamzah's house, where the body would customarily be on view. Razak stopped me and said, "No, not there. We put her in Hamzah's house; it's nicer here." His embarrassment was evident from the way he avoided meeting my eyes.

Razak is the "down-and-out"³ of the village, and his house was not only an embarrassment to him; it was a collective humiliation for much of Sedaka. When I had arrived in the village, Razak and his family were living *under* the house, not in it. Two walls of attap⁴ and bamboo had fallen away and much of the roof had collapsed. "They live like chickens in a henhouse, a lean-to, not like Malays," villagers said with derision. Not long after that, the local leader of the ruling party, Basir, mindful of the fact that Razak had joined his party and embarrassed that any Malays in his village should live on the ground like the beasts of the field, got the subdistrict chief to provide a modest sum from his discretionary funds for lumber to repair the house. A small voluntary work party, all members of the ruling party, then repaired three walls, leaving the last wall and the roof for Razak to finish. After all, Razak and Azizah made attap roofing for a living. The roof remains as it was, however, and the boards to repair the last wall are gone. Razak sold them *twice*—once to Rokiah and once to Kamil,

2. *Habuan dia, nasib tak baik*. Here and elsewhere in the text, when it seems important or where reasonable people might differ on the translation, I have included the original Malay in the footnotes. A brief glossary of local Kedah dialect terms that may be unfamiliar to speakers of standard, urban Malay is also provided in appendix D.

3. *Papa-kedana*.

4. Long, rectangular "shingles" stitched together from the stems and leaves of the nipah palm, which constitute the roofs and occasionally the walls of poor houses.

but only Kamil got the lumber; Rokiah calls Razak an "old liar" and says he would sell his own children. She swears she will never buy anything from him again unless she takes delivery first.

As we mounted the ladder to Hamzah's house, I realized that this was the first time I had actually entered his family's one-room living and sleeping quarters. I never did enter Razak's house or the houses of six of the other poorest families in the village. They chose instead always to receive me outside, where we squatted or sat on simple benches. We remained outside because they were embarrassed about the condition of their houses and because actually entering the house would imply a level of hospitality (coffee, biscuits) that would strain their meager resources. When possible, I made an effort to meet on neutral grounds—in the rice fields, on the path—or perhaps in one of the two small shops in the village or at the twice-weekly nearby market, where I could legitimately play host. For the rich people of the village the problem never arose; they never went to the homes of the poor. Visiting, except between equals, was always done *up* the status ladder in the village, and particularly so during the ritual visits following the end of the Moslem fasting month.⁵ In fact, the pattern of visits served to define the village status hierarchy. This pattern was broken significantly only in the case of grave illness or death in a poor household, when the normal rules of hospitality were suspended out of respect for a more universal human drama.

Thus it was that the death of Maznah (Razak's daughter) had opened Hamzah's house to me and to many others. She was lying on a tiny mattress surrounded by mosquito netting strung from the rafters. Her body was wrapped in a new white cloth, and her face was barely visible beneath a lace shawl of the kind women wear for prayer. Beside the netting was incense and a tin plate. Each new visitor would, after lifting the netting to look at the child, place money on the plate: as little as 50¢, or as much as M\$2. The contributions to funeral expenses, known as "lightening" or "instant donations,"⁶ were especially necessary in this case since neither Razak nor many of the other very poor villagers subscribed to a death benefit society that "insures" for funeral expenses. The money on the plate at the end of the day would provide for at least the minimal decencies.

There were perhaps twenty-five villagers, mostly women, sitting on the floor of the bare room talking quietly in small groups. A few men remained to talk among themselves, but most left quickly to join the other men outside. Razak, sitting by the door, was ignored, but his isolation was not a collective act of respect for his private grief. At feasts, at other funerals, at the village shops, and even at market stalls, the other men always sat somewhat apart from Razak. He did not intrude himself. His daughter's death was no exception; the men

5. Called *Hari Raya Puasa* or simply *Hari Raya*.

6. *Derma kilat*.

who left shuffled around him as if he were a piece of furniture. On the rare occasions when he was addressed, the tone was unmistakable. A group of men sitting in one of the village stores having ice drinks and smoking would hail his arrival with "Here comes Tun Razak" followed by knowing smiles all around. "Tun Razak" was the aristocratic title of Malaysia's second prime minister, and its application to this ragtag, frail, obsequious village pariah was intended to put him in his place. Whoever was treating that day would pay for his drink, and Razak would help himself to the tobacco and cut nipah leaves used to make peasant cigarettes. He was extended the minimal courtesies but otherwise ignored, just as today the village was burying his daughter but he himself might as well have been invisible.

Directly across the path, outside the combination village hall, religious school (*madrasah*),⁷ and prayer house, a few young men had begun measuring the spare boards they had rounded up for a coffin. Yaakub thought the boards were far too long and Daud, the son of the village headman, was sent back to Hamzah's house with string to measure. Meanwhile Basir arrived with hot tea and the special canvas used for the bottom of the casket. The talk turned, as it often did in the coffee shops, to an exchange of stories about Razak's many capers, most of which were established staples of village gossip. Amin shared the most recent installment having to do with the subsidies given by the government for house improvement and permanent outdoor toilets.⁸ Razak, along with other members of the ruling party—and only them—was the recipient of a porcelain toilet bowl. Despite explicit warnings against selling such material, Razak had exchanged his for Amin's plastic bowl and cash and in turn sold the plastic toilet to Nor for M\$15. Yaakub, to the general merriment, asked why Razak should build a toilet anyway, when he did not even have a house.⁹

Yaakub then wondered whether anyone else had seen Razak dig into the curry at the wedding feast for Rokiah's daughter two days before, a feast to which he had not been invited. Shahnnon added that only yesterday, when Razak turned up at the coffee stall in the town market, he invited him to have some coffee, it being understood that Shahnnon would pay. The next thing he noticed, Razak had left after having not only drunk coffee but taken three cakes and two cigarettes. Others recalled, partly for my benefit, how Razak took payment for

7. The two-story building built with government help some fifteen years ago is generally referred to as the *madrasah*, since the ground floor is used regularly for religious classes as well as for village meetings. The upper floor is used exclusively as a prayer house (*surau*), especially during the fasting month. See in photo section following p. 162.

8. The called the *Ranchangan Pemulihan Kampung* (Village Improvement Scheme), the program made grants available to selected villages throughout the country. In this village, the assistance was distributed along strictly partisan lines. An account of this episode may be found in chapter 6.

9. *Apa pasal bikin jamban, rumah pun tak ada.*

attap roofing from Kamil and never delivered it and how Kamil gave him cash for special paddy seed that Razak said he could get from a friend in a nearby village. Accosted a week later, he claimed his friend with the seed had not been at home. Accosted again the following week, he claimed his friend had already sold the seed. The money was never returned. On various occasions, they claimed, Razak had begged seed paddy for planting or rice for his family. In each case, the gift had been sold for cash, not planted or eaten. Ghazali accused him of helping himself to nipah fronds from behind his house for roofing without ever asking permission and of having begged for a religious gift of paddy (*zakat*) even before the harvest was in. "I lost my temper," he added as many shook their heads.

When the well-to-do villagers lament, as they increasingly do, the growing laziness and independence of those they hire for work in the fields, the example of Razak is always close at hand. They have other illustrations, but Razak is by far the most serviceable. Any number of times, they claim, he has taken advance wages in cash or rice and then failed to show up for work. As for his poverty, they are skeptical. He has, after all, half a *relong* (.35 acre), which he rents out like a landlord rather than farming himself.¹⁰ The general verdict is that he is simply not capable of getting ahead.¹¹ When the subdistrict chief (*penghulu*), Abdul Majid, confides to me that the poor are reluctant to work anymore and now insist on unrealistic wages, he seizes the example of Razak. "He has made himself hard up, it's his own doing."¹²

By now the simple coffin was nearly finished and Amin, the best carpenter in the village, began to add some small decorative touches at the ends. "No need to add decorations," put in Ariffin, and Amin left off. As they carried the coffin across to Hamzah's house, where Maznah lay, someone sized up the work and said, "shabby."¹³

Returning to my house I encountered a small group of Pak Haji Kadir's wife's friends talking about the child's death. They all seemed to agree that Razak and Azizah were largely to blame. After all, they took their sick daughter to Rokiah's feast the day before yesterday, fed her food she should not have had, and kept her up to all hours. "They don't eat at all well," said Tok Kasim's

10. Razak claims, with some justice, that he is too weak and ill to cultivate and that, in any case, he does not have the money for tractor charges, fertilizer, or seed.

11. *Tak pandai pusing*. The implication of this phrase is that Razak does not take pains, does not hustle.

12. *Dia buat susah*. Abdul Majid went on to describe many local Chinese families who had begun with nothing and were now rich. One might possibly translate this phrase as: "He is pretending to be hard up," since the verb for "shamming" (*membuat-buat*) is occasionally abbreviated.

13. *Lekeb*. This word in Kedah carries the meaning of "vulgar, common, shabby, not refined," and is much like the use of *kasar* in standard Malay. It is variously applied to people, feasts, commodities, music, cloth, personal behavior, and so forth.

wife, "they have to tag along at other people's feasts."¹⁴ At my urging, the details of the family's scant cuisine emerged. For breakfast, if there was any money in the house, coffee and perhaps cassava or a bit of cold rice left over from the day before. Otherwise, only water. And Razak's family, someone added, drank water from the same ditch used for bathing. Rarely any porridge, never any milk, and almost never any sugar unless Azizah brought some back from her relatives in Dulang. By contrast, the village headman, Haji Jaafar, usually took his morning meal in the town coffee shop, where he had porridge or fried flat bread with sugar or curry, assorted cakes and sweets made with sticky rice, and coffee with sweetened condensed milk. The midday meal, the main one in the village, for Razak's family would typically include rice, vegetables that could be gathered free in the village,¹⁵ and, if finances permitted, some dried fish or the cheapest fish from the market. No one had ever seen Razak buy vegetables. Fresh fish, when they had it, was normally cooked over an open fire, for it was rare that they could afford the 30¢ minimum purchase of the cheapest cooking oil. Haji Jaafar's midday meal, on the other hand, reflected both his wealth and his rather sumptuous tastes: a tasty curry made from the most expensive fish and market vegetables and, at least twice a week, a luxury that Razak never bought—meat.

Razak's household, like its food, was distinguished less by what it had than by what it lacked. The couple had no mosquito netting, which helped explain why their children's arms and legs were often covered with the scabs of old bites. Maybe once a year they bought a bar of the cheapest soap. They had to share three tin plates and two cups when they ate. They lacked even the traditional mats to sleep on, using instead an old cast-off plastic sheet Razak found at the market. As for clothes, Azizah had not bought a sarong since her wedding, making do instead with worn-out cloth given her by Basir's wife. Razak's one pair of pants and shirt were bought three years ago when there was a sale of secondhand clothing that had not been redeemed at the pawnbrokers. As Cik Puteh pointed out, the responsibility for this deplorable situation rested squarely with Razak. "He has land but he doesn't want to plant it." "He's always looking for short cuts."¹⁶ "He takes the money first but doesn't want to come thresh paddy." "Now, those who are hardup are getting cleverer; there's more cheating these days."

14. *Makanan tak jenub, kena tumpang kenduri orang.*

15. The generic term for such vegetables, which can be eaten raw with rice, is *ulam*. Some of the locally available *ulam* include *kangkong*, *daun cemamak*, *daun pegaga*, *bebuas*, *daun putat*, and the banana *spadix*. Both Razak and his wife would also occasionally catch rice-paddy fish with line and hook. Since the beginning of double-cropping and the increased use of pesticides, however, such fish have become less plentiful and may in fact have serious long-run health consequences for the poor who continue to eat them.

16. *Selalu cari jalan pendek.*

The sound of motorcycle engines next door told us that the body had been prepared for burial and the funeral procession was about to begin. Normally, in the case of an adult, the coffin would have been carried the two miles to the mosque with a cortege of men following on foot, on bicycle, and on motorcycle. Since Maznah was so small and light, Hamzah, her uncle, carried her wrapped in a new batik cloth slung over his shoulder like a bandolier as he rode pillion behind Basir on his Honda 70. The plain coffin was carried athwart Amin's motorcycle by Ghani Lebai Mat. Counting Razak and myself, there were only eleven men, and it was the first entirely motorcycle-borne cortege I had ever seen. The villagers and later the Chinese shopkeepers in Kepala Batas paused briefly to watch us pass.

In the graveyard next to the mosque, Tok Siak (caretaker of the mosque) and his assistant were still digging the grave. Maznah, covered with a cotton winding sheet, was taken gently from the batik cloth and placed in the coffin on her side so that she would be facing Mecca. A large clod of clay from the grave was lodged against her back to prevent her position from shifting. Tok Siak was now bailing water from the grave with an old biscuit tin; the burial plot was on reclaimed paddy land and the seasonal rains had begun. The prayers, led by Lebai Sabrani, took less than ten minutes and it was over. Most of the men then entered the mosque to pray for Maznah's soul. When they emerged, Basir handed them envelopes containing a dollar, as is the custom.¹⁷ The six men who had prayed returned the envelopes. Villagers believe that these prayers help lighten the burden of sin and speed the soul on its way to heaven; the more who pray, the more rapid the soul's progress. On the way back to the village, I asked Amin why there were so few people at the burial. He replied that, since Maznah was so young, her sins were few, and thus it was not so important that many people pray on her behalf. But it was a sensitive question, for we both remembered the burial of Tok Sah's infant granddaughter a month earlier when two or three times that number had come to the graveyard.

That night, again at Hamzah's house, there was a small funeral feast.¹⁸ Not more than fifteen men came, and Haji Kadir led the brief Islamic prayers and chants. The expenses, for coffee, flat bread with sugar, and the makings of

17. These prayers after burial are called *Doa Talkin*, and the gift to those who pray varies, depending on the status of the deceased. This traditional practice is under attack by Islamic fundamentalists, who wish to purify Malay religious practice by banning pre-Islamic practices. In the adjacent state of Perlis, *Doa Talkin* are officially forbidden.

18. *Kenduri arwab* are normally celebrated on the first, second, third, seventh, fourteenth, fortieth, and hundredth days after a death in the family. *Kenduri arwab* may be celebrated at other times as well (often after harvest) and are sometimes combined with feasts of thanksgiving as well. The *kenduri*, much like the *selamatan* in Indonesia, is clearly a pre-Islamic custom that has been thoroughly integrated with Islam.

peasant cigarettes came to less than M\$12 and were partly defrayed by minute donations of coins. Razak, as usual, was ignored, invisible. Later, as Yaakub and I walked back home along the village path, he asked if I had noticed how the tobacco had run short because Razak had pocketed some for later use. "Shabby," was his summary.

Early in the morning, three or four days later, Razak appeared at the foot of my steps waiting to be asked up. Whenever he came to see me it was always early enough so that no one else was about; if someone else did happen by, he would fall silent and take the first opportunity to leave. Despite the fact that the gossip about him had long aroused my curiosity, I had already found myself avoiding much talk with him in public, having sensed that it could only set village tongues wagging. Was he taking advantage of me? What tales and slanders would he put in my ear? Did I actually approve of this good-for-nothing?

Razak had come to thank me for my large contribution to the funeral expenses. I had made a discreet donation directly into Razak's hands the day his daughter died, knowing that if I had put M\$20 directly on the plate near the body, I would have received no end of scolding.¹⁹

Before long we passed on to the topic I had been raising recently in conversations with villagers: the enormous changes that have come to Sedaka since the beginning of double-cropping eight years ago. It was clear to Razak that things were generally worse now than before irrigation. "Before it was easy to get work, now there's no work in the village and the estates (rubber and oil palm) don't want anyone." "The poor are poorer and the rich are richer."²⁰ The trouble, he added, is mostly because of the combine-harvesters that now cut and thresh paddy in a single operation. Before, his wife could earn over M\$200 a season cutting paddy and he could earn M\$150 threshing, but this last season they only managed M\$150 between them.²¹ "People weren't happy when the ma-

19. I should add that much of this was conscience money in the sense that I felt guilty for having been out of the village the day before, when I might have driven the child to the hospital. Another reason for discretion was that such a large sum, given openly, would, I felt, have demeaned the smaller contributions on the plate, which represented a more than comparable sacrifice for others, and would have *publicly* placed Razak in my permanent debt.

20. *Orang susah, lagi susah; orang kaya, lagi kaya*. The fact that he should use the term *susah*, which might be translated as "hard up," for his class rather than the term *miskin* (poor) and the term *kaya* (rich) for those who are well-to-do rather than the term *senang* (comfortable), which would make a logical pair with *susah*, is significant. For further discussion, see chapter 5.

21. Figures on the loss of wages due to combine-harvesters may be found in chapters 3 and 4. Razak, however, is frail—many would say lazy too—and can thresh paddy for piece-work wages only half as fast as his younger brother, Hamzah.

chines came." "You can't even glean anymore."²² What distressed him about the machine as well was how it removed money from the village and gave it to outsiders. Money that might have gone to paddy reapers and threshers from the village and in turn been used partly for local feasts within Sedeka was now paid directly to the owners of these expensive machines. As Razak put it, "They carry it away for their own feasts."²³

Not only was wage work harder and harder to come by, but it was almost impossible now to find land to rent. In the old days, he said, landlords wanted you to take land and hardly bothered about the rent. Today, they farm all the land themselves or else rent out large plots under long-term leases to wealthy Chinese contractors with machinery. "They won't give (land) to their own people." "They won't even give five cents to someone who is hard up."²⁴

Razak has begun to warm up to one of his favorite laments, one he shares with many of the other village poor: the growing arrogance and stinginess of the rich. It is reflected in what he sees as their attitude toward charity. Little wonder that Razak—with a tiny patch of rice land, four (now three) young children, and a frail physique (and many would say a reluctance to work)—should be concerned about charity. The official *poverty-level* income for a family of Razak's size would be M\$2,400.²⁵ Their actual income, not counting charity, last year was less than M\$800, by far the lowest in the village. It would be misleading to say they get by, for Maznah's death may be evidence that they do not. Without the small amount of charity they receive, without Azizah's frequent flights with the children back to her parents' village of Dulang when the food gives out, and perhaps without Razak's capers, which offend the village, it would be hard to imagine the rest of them surviving at all.

If others blamed Razak's situation on his own moral failings, he hurled the charge back at them. "There are lots of Malays who are not honest."²⁶ "Now, Malays who get wages of even three or four hundred dollars have become arro-

22. *La 'ni, katok pun tak boleh buat.* Gleaning was a traditional means for those with little or no land (rented or owned) to thresh paddy a second time for the grains left on the stalk from the first threshing. The machines now cut up the stalks and scatter them all over the field, eliminating the piles of paddy stalks that used to be left beside the threshing tubs when harvesting was done by hand.

23. *Bawa balik kenduri depa.*

24. *Lima duit pun tak bagi sama orang susah.*

25. Defined as "an income sufficient to purchase a minimum food basket to maintain a household in good nutritional health and the minimum needs for clothing, household management, transport, and communication." Cited in International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Malaysia: Selected Issues in Rural Poverty*, World Bank Report 2685-MA, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1980), 4.

26. The words Razak used were *tak betul*, which is hard to render exactly in this context. A person who is *betul* would be honest and good-hearted.

gant.”²⁷ “They don’t help others out. In the village, they don’t even give you a single cup of coffee.” The charge is not strictly true. As nearly as I could calculate over a year, Razak’s family received enough gifts of paddy and rice (milled paddy) to feed them for perhaps three months. At the end of Ramadan it is the duty of each Moslem to make a religious gift of rice, called *firab*. In addition to the customary gifts to the mosque, the *imam*, and the village prayer house, rice is often given, one gallon at a time, to poor relatives and neighbors, particularly those who have worked during the season for the farmer making the gift. Razak was given nearly ten gallons of rice as *firab*, although not without a residue of bitterness. Rather than waiting politely to be summoned to collect his *firab* as is customary, Razak went from house to house asking for it. Only a few refused;²⁸ after all, a family ought to be able to eat rice on the major Islamic feast day, and such gifts are seen as a way of cleansing one’s own possessions. Razak collected smaller gifts, in the same fashion, on the second major Islamic feast day a month later.²⁹ The third occasion for religious gifts is at harvest time, when all Muslims are enjoined to tithe 10 percent of their harvest (the *zakat*). Despite the fact that official responsibility for *zakat* collection has recently been taken over by the provincial authorities, informal *zakat* payments along traditional lines persist. It is given in paddy, not rice, and is an important supplement to the income of poor, landless families. Razak received a gunny sack of paddy from his eldest brother in Yan, for whom he had threshed, and four or five gallons from within the village, by using his usual aggressive methods. From time to time, Razak also asks for small gifts of rice from likely prospects. Usually, he puts it in terms of advance wages, using language that masks the nature of the transaction, but the fiction is paper thin. Those who are importuned say he is “begging for alms.”³⁰

Being pushy has its rewards. Razak receives a good deal more food than many

27. *Sombong*. Along with the charge of being stingy, this is probably the most serious personal charge that is commonly heard in village society. People who are *sombong* have, in effect, removed themselves from the community by acting superior to their fellows. The opposite of *sombong* is *merendabkan diri*, “to act modestly” or “to lower oneself.”

28. One wonders how much Razak would have gotten had he behaved less aggressively. I suspect much less, but I have no way of knowing.

29. *Hari Raya Haji*, when pilgrims leave for Mecca. Donations of rice on this occasion are normally given by the quarter gallon (*cupak*).

30. *Minta sedekah*. The social definition of what Razak is doing is important. As Simmel understands: “no one is socially poor until he has been assisted. . . . And this has general validity: sociologically speaking, poverty does not come first and then assistance . . . but a person is called poor who receives assistance.” *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), 175. In the same sense no one is a beggar in Sedaka until he is perceived to have asked for alms.

of the other poor in the village—more than Mansur, Dullah, Mat “halus” (“Skinny” Mat), Pak Yah, or Taib. The additional cost to his reputation is minimal; his standing is already virtually the definition of rock bottom.³¹ On the other hand, he does not do nearly so well as his younger brother, Hamzah, who is often held up as an example of the deserving poor. Hamzah is an acknowledged hard worker, as is his wife; he serves as caretaker of the *madrasah* and he unfailingly appears to help with the cooking at feasts, to assist in house moving,³² and to help repair the village path. After last season’s harvest, and partly out of sympathy for a month-long illness that prevented him from working as usual, he received eight gunny sacks of paddy from villagers and relatives. Basir calls him the “*zakat* champ,”³³ contrasting the results with the meager return from Razak’s more aggressive style. “We don’t want to give alms to Razak, he’s a liar—only to honest poor like Hamzah.”³⁴ Fadzil, another influential villager, echoed these sentiments. “There are lots of poor who lie, cheat, and are lazy.” “They look for a shady tree to perch on.” “They want to gobble up the lazy-to-do.”³⁵ In a reflective moment, however, he noticed the potential for a vicious cycle here. “If we don’t give them alms because they steal, then maybe they have to keep stealing.” This was as close as anyone I spoke with ever came to recognizing explicitly the importance of charity for the social control of the village poor.

On the political front, Razak has done what a prudent poor man might do to safeguard his and his family’s interests. Four or five years ago he paid the M\$1 subscription to join the village branch of the ruling party, which dominates politics and the division of whatever loaves and fishes filter down to the village level. “If you go with the crowd, there’s a lot to be had. With the minority, it would be difficult. I used my head. I want to be on the side of the majority.”³⁶

31. Erving Goffman has captured the strange power that those without shame can exercise. “Too little perceptiveness, too little *savoir-faire*, too little *pride* and considerateness, and the person ceases to be someone who can be trusted to take a hint about himself or give a hint that will save others embarrassment. . . . Such a person comes to be a real threat to society; there is nothing much that can be done with him, and often he gets his way.” *Ritual Interaction: Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior* (Garden City: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1967), 40, emphasis added.

32. *Usung rumah* is meant literally here. The entire house is detached from its pillars and moved to a new location by a crowd sometimes approaching 120 men.

33. *Johan zakat*.

34. *Kita ta’ mau bagi sedekah sama Razak, dia bobong, mau bagi saja sama orang miskin yang betul, macham Hamzah.*

35. *Mau makan orang yang ada.* The verb means literally “to eat” but is used here, as it often is, in the sense of “to exploit,” to “live off of.”

36. *Sebelah orang ramai, banyak. Sebelah sikit, lagi susah. Kita punya fikir otak, kita mau sebelah orang banyak. Kita,* literally “we,” is often used in the sense of “I” or “my family” in the local dialect.

Razak's logic, shared by some but by no means all of the village poor, has paid the expected dividends. When a drought, a year earlier, forced the cancellation of the irrigated paddy season, the government created a work-relief program. Politics weighed heavily in the selection of workers and Razak was a winner. The local Farmer's Association office hired him to take care of their poultry for forty days at M\$4.50 a day, and he was paid M\$50 to help clear weeds from a section of the irrigation canal. None of the poor villagers who were on the wrong side of the political fence did nearly as well. The wood with which his house was partly repaired came through the political influence of Basir. More free wood and the toilet bowl that Razak sold were part of a subsidy scheme that, in Sedaka at least, was available only to followers of the ruling party. If the figure of speech were not so inappropriate to the Malay diet, one might say that Razak knew which side his bread was buttered on.

As a beneficiary of local patronage and charity, however reluctantly given, one might expect Razak to entertain a favorable opinion of his "social betters" in the village. He did not. He also sensed what they said behind his back. "I don't go to the houses of rich people; they don't ask me in. They think poor people are shabby (vulgar) people. They think we are going to ask for money as alms. They say we're lazy, that we don't want to work; they slander us."³⁷ What offended Razak as much as anything was that these same rich people were not above calling on the poor when they needed help. But when it came to reciprocity, there was none. "They call us to catch their (runaway) water buffalo or to help move their houses, but they don't call us for their feasts."

It has not escaped his notice either that he and many others like him are *invisible men*. "The rich are arrogant. We greet them and they don't greet us back. They don't talk with us; they don't even look at us! If the rich could hear us talking like this, they'd be angry."³⁸ Razak is special in some respects, but he is not unique. Compare what he has to say with this couplet from the agricultural laborers of Andalusia:

37. The word Razak used for "shabby," "vulgar," is *lekeh*, the same word used to describe Maznah's coffin and Razak's behavior. The word used here for slander is *mengumpat*.

38. *Orang kaya sombong. Kita tabik, depa tak tabik balik. Tak chakap, tak tengok pun. Kalau orang senang dengar kita sembang, depa marah* (I find it impossible to determine whether Razak's use of *kita* here means "I" or whether he wishes to include other poor people like himself in the statement). Just how deeply humiliating it is to be beneath notice, to be invisible, not to have one's greeting returned is at the core of Hegel's notion of the dialectic of self-consciousness. It is in an act as banal as a greeting that it becomes clear that one's own self-esteem is dependent on being accorded recognition by another, even if this greeting, as in Hegel's famous example of the duel, must come at the cost of life. See, for example, Hans Georg Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), chap. 3.

I was a rich man and I became poor
 to see what the world gave them.
 And now I see that nobody
 looks at the face of a poor man.³⁹

A week after the funeral, I returned to my house from the market to find a land-rover on the path in front of Hamzah's house. The emblem on the door said "Ministry of Health." Presently, two nurses emerged from behind Hamzah's house where Razak lived. They had instructions, they said, to make an inquiry whenever a young child's death was reported and to try to help the family with nutritional advice. They had left some powdered milk, but they seemed profoundly discouraged by what they had seen and learned. "What can you do with people like that?" they asked no one in particular as they climbed into the land-rover for the trip back to the capital.

HAJI "BROOM"

Before considering the significance of Razak for class relations in Sedaka, it is instructive to introduce his symbolic, mirror-image twin, his fellow outcast from the opposite end of the social pyramid, Haji Broom. My stories about him are all secondhand, for he died some five or six years before I arrived in the village, but they are plentiful.

Not long after I moved to Sedaka, Lebai Hussein invited me to attend a wedding feast for his son Taha, who was marrying a woman from a village near the town of Yan Kechil, six miles to the south. To accommodate the large number of guests, the bride's family had built a covered pavilion outside their house where the male guests sat. Talk centered on the prospects for the current main-season crop and on how the cancellation of the previous irrigated-season crop due to the drought had postponed many marriages until the main-season crop could be harvested.

Noticing what seemed to be a huge new warehouse on the horizon, I idly asked my neighbor what it was. He told me that it was a rice mill being built by Haji Rasid and his brother Haji Ani. At the mention of these two names most of the other conversations in the pavilion stopped. I had somehow, it was clear, stumbled on a subject of lively interest. For the next hour or so the men regaled one another with stories about the two brothers and especially about their father, Haji Ayub. In fact, as I quickly learned, the name of Haji Ayub was a sure-fire conversational gambit in any company, sufficient to set off a small avalanche of tales.

39. From Juan Martinez Alier, *Labourers and Landowners in Southern Spain*, St. Anthony's College, Oxford, Publications, No. 4 (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971), 206.

There is little doubt that Haji Ayub became in his lifetime the largest owner of paddy land that the state of Kedah (and perhaps the whole country) had ever known. At the time of his death, he was reputed to have owned more than 600 *relong* (426 acres) of paddy fields in addition to his other holdings of rubber and orchard land. The magnitude of his feat must be viewed against an agrarian setting in which the median holding is less than three *relong* and a farmer who owns twenty *relong* is considered to be quite rich. Alarmed at the astonishing speed with which Kedah's rice land was passing into the hands of Haji Ayub, the State Assembly at one point actually forbade him to acquire more.

The stories that swirl around the career and exploits of Kedah's rice-land baron, however, touch less on his fabulous holdings per se than on his style of life and the manner in which he built his empire. What makes Haji Ayub such a conversational staple is his legendary cheapness. To judge from the popular accounts I was introduced to that afternoon, Kedah's richest landowner maintained, by choice, a style of life that was hardly distinguishable from Razak's. Like Razak, he lived in a broken-down house that had never been repaired or rebuilt.⁴⁰ Rather than buy manufactured cigarettes, he continued till the end of his life to roll his own peasant cigarettes, using the cheapest tobacco and *nipab* wrappers he cut from his own plants.⁴¹ Like the poorest of the poor, Haji Ayub bought only a single sarong cloth a year and, if you passed him, you would have thought he was the village beggar. Surpassing even Razak, he was said to have eaten nothing but dried fish, except on feast days. Although he could have afforded a luxurious car, and a surfaced road passed near his house, he traveled by foot or on bicycle. Haji Kadir, at this point, brought down the house with a pantomime of Haji Ayub on his ancient Raleigh, weaving back and forth, accompanied by an approximation of the loud squeaking noises only the rustiest bicycles could possibly have made. It was in this fashion that Kedah's rice baron issued forth to collect rents from scores of tenants who had not already come of their own accord. The spirit of self-denial touched all aspects of his life save one: he had allowed himself three wives.⁴²

The humor of Haji Ayub's tight-fisted ways depended of course on their contrast with his fabulous wealth. He had clearly become a legend because he represented the apotheosis of the rich miser, the unapproachable standard by

40. The condition of his house is often the first remark about Haji Ayub. In contrast, one of the very first investments that even modest peasants made with the first proceeds of double-cropping in 1971 was to repair or make additions to their houses.

41. It is a poor peasant indeed in Sedaka who does not buy (for 10¢) a bundle of *nipab* cigarette wrappers in the market.

42. The miser is the symbol of pure accumulation in the sense that he acquires money and property as an end in itself, not as a means to the pleasures they may provide. In this respect, Haji Ayub's three wives, one short of the maximum allowed by the Koran, may have represented simply another aspect of accumulation. On this subject, see Simmel's essay "Miser and Spendthrift," in *Georg Simmel*, 179–86.

which all other rich misers might be judged. In this respect, he was Razak's precise opposite number. But while Razak's fame was purely local, Haji Ayub was the pacesetter for the district if not the state of Kedah.

When it came to describing how Haji Ayub acquired all this land, the conversation was just as animated but not nearly so jovial. The whole process is perhaps best captured in the nickname by which he is widely known: Haji "Broom." Peasants prefer the English word in this case because, I suspect, its sound suggests a single, vigorous sweeping motion. Quite literally, Haji Broom swept up all the land in his path. The force of the word also connotes something akin to what is meant by saying that one has "cleaned up" at poker (that is, swept up all the chips on the table) or "cleaned out" one's opponents.⁴³ The image is more powerful precisely because it is joined with "Haji," a term of respect for those who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Thus the nickname "Haji Broom" accomplished for Haji Ayub more or less what the nickname "Tun Razak" accomplished for Razak.

Haji Broom's name came up not long afterward when I was asking a few villagers gathered under Pak Yah's house about moneylending and credit practices before double-cropping. Nor was explaining to me the notorious *padi kunca* system of credit and began his account with, "This is the way Haji Broom would do it." It involved an advance of cash roughly six months before harvest, repayable by a fixed quantity (a *kunca*) of paddy at harvest time, which typically amounted to an effective annual rate of interest approaching 150 percent. For at least half a century, until 1960, it was the standard form of seasonal credit extended by shopkeepers, rice millers, moneylenders, and not a few wealthy landlords. Virtually all observers of rice farming cited it both as a major reason for persistent poverty in the paddy sector and as the cause of defaults that further concentrated land ownership.⁴⁴ It was clear, moreover, that in this area Haji Broom and *padi kunca* were nearly synonymous.

43. The Malay verb "to sweep" (*sapu, menyapu*) carries the same metaphorical force. Thus when someone wished to describe how a rich man had rented up all the available land in the area, he would say, *Dia sapu semua* (He swept it all up).

44. See, for example, Unfederated Malay States, *Annual Report of the Advisor to the Kedah Government*, December 11, 1912, to November 30, 1913, W. George Maxwell (Alor Setar: Government Printer, 1914), 23; *Annual Report of the Advisor to the Kedah Government*, 1914, L. E. D. Wolferton (Alor Setar: Government Printer, 1915), 14; and Government of Malaysia, *Report of the Rice Production Committee, 1953* (Kuala Lumpur: 1954), vol. 1, p. 82. The Rice Production Committee describes the system as follows: "a man borrows, say M\$50 for the purpose of obtaining credit over the planting season and promises to pay a *kunca* (160 gallons) of padi at harvest worth \$102 at current government guaranteed minimum price, but \$140 at the market average." It is worth noting here there is no necessary symmetry between the gain of the moneylender and the distress of the borrower. High interest rates in rural Southeast Asia have often reflected the actual cost of money and the high risk of debtor default. Thus, while these interest terms may have been punishing to smallholders, they do not imply a fabulous return to the lender.

If the practice of *padi kunca* skirts perilously close to the strong Islamic injunction against interest, it appears that Haji Broom also became a money-lender pure and simple. Mat "halus" said that Haji Broom regularly lent money, usually in M\$100 amounts, for six months, requiring repayment of M\$130 or M\$140. "His sons, Haji Rasid and Haji Ani, do the same thing. It's sinful.⁴⁵ They've been doing it for seven generations. They only care about this world." Part of this lending, they said, was secondhand. That is, Haji Broom would take money from large Chinese moneylenders at 40 percent interest and relend it to peasants at 80 percent interest, pocketing the difference. In the eyes of these villagers, the fact that he worked hand-in-glove with the Chinese creditors in town made for an even worse transgression than if he had operated alone. The Chinese practice of lending cash at interest, on the other hand, occasions virtually no commentary; it is expected. After all, it is their normal business practice and nothing in their religion forbids it. For a Malay—a member of their own community, their own religion, and in this case a Haji—to practice usury despite its explicit denunciation in the Koran is to call forth the most profound censure.⁴⁶

But the keystone of Haji Broom's fortune, the means by which most land fell into his hands, was the practice of *jual janji* (literally, promised sale).⁴⁷ Nor, Pak Yah, and Mat "halus" can each tick off easily the names of families in the area who lost land to Haji Broom in this fashion. The practice worked as follows: Haji Broom would lend a man a substantial sum in return for which the title to all or a part of the borrower's land would be transferred to Haji Broom. The written contract of sale provided that if, by a specified date, the borrower repaid the initial sum (nearly always less than the market value of the land), he could recover his land.⁴⁸ For the borrower, the loss of the land was, in principle at least, not irrevocable. In practice, of course, it often was, and most of the large landholdings in Kedah were acquired in this fashion. Haji Broom and a few

45. *Haram* here means "forbidden by Islamic law," but the force of the word as it is actually used conveys the deep sinfulness of taking interest; *makan bunga* (literally to "eat" interest).

46. One of the many relevant passages in the Koran reads as follows: "They who swallow down usury, shall arise in the resurrection only as he ariseth whom Satan hath infected by his touch. This, for that they say, Selling is only the like of usury, and yet God hath allowed selling, and forbidden usury. He then who when this warning shall come to him from his Lord, abstaineth, shall have pardon for the past, and his lot shall be with God. But they who return [to usury], shall be given over to the fire; therein shall they abide forever." Surah II:275. *The Koran*, trans. J. M. Rodwell (London: Everyman's Library, 1977), 369.

47. Analogous practices could be found throughout colonial Southeast Asia, for example in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Burma.

48. There are variants in the actual timing of the formal transfer of property and in the use rights to the land while it is thus "mortgaged," but the basic arrangements remain the same.

others, Nor adds, devised a new wrinkle to the procedure. A few days before the final date, he would go into hiding so that a peasant who was lucky enough to have amassed the cash to redeem his land could not find him. Once the date had passed, he would then immediately ask the court to award him the land of the defaulting borrower.⁴⁹ By such stratagems, Haji Broom turned nearly all his *jual janji* loans into land sales. As if to dramatize the finality of a loan from Haji Broom, Pak Yah noted that a visitor to the land baron's house would have found him seated in front of a large cupboard filled from top to bottom with land titles.

Something of a lighthearted competition had developed among the three men to tell the most outrageous stories about Haji Broom. Nor provided the finale by describing how the man treated his own sons. He would come to visit his son Haji Ani, Nor said, bearing a sack of one hundred sapodilla fruits (an inexpensive brownish fruit from the same tropical evergreen that produces chicle), ostensibly as a gift. Before leaving, he would ask Haji Ani to give him one hundred duck eggs in return. "Which is more expensive?" Nor asked me rhetorically. This is not just another story of Haji Broom's sharp dealing. Here he had violated the spirit of a gift to make a profit, he had actually *asked* for a return, and he had, above all, exploited his own family for his private gain. Mat "halus" summarized it all by describing his behavior as "the politics of getting ahead."⁵⁰

When I remarked that I had never heard of a man so "stingy," Pak Yah corrected me, "Not stingy but greedy,"⁵¹ thereby emphasizing that Haji Broom was not so much husbanding what he already had as plundering others. "He is without shame." In a sense, this last is the ultimate accusation, one that I have heard applied to Razak as well. For it is shame, that concern for the good opinion of one's neighbors and friends, which circumscribes behavior within the moral boundaries created by shared values. A man without shame is, by definition, capable of anything.⁵²

49. While in theory a borrower could have deposited the required amount in an escrow account and informed the court, thereby saving his land, it was a rare peasant indeed who knew about, let alone exercised, this option.

50. *Politik hidup*. The term is not easy to translate; it also implies that Haji Broom is concerned solely with getting ahead in this world at the expense of his immortal soul.

51. *Bukan lokek, haloba*.

52. As Moroccan peasants put it succinctly: "Those who have no shame do as they please." Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977), 158. This folk wisdom makes its tortuous way back to social science in the following guise: "to ostracize a man is to remove him from social controls. . . . He has nothing to lose by conformity and perhaps even something to gain by vexing them." George C. Homans, "Status, Conformity, and Innovation," in *The Logic of Social Hierarchies*, ed. Edward O. Lauman et al. (Chicago: Markham, 1970), 599.

Nor finally makes it clear that it is not Haji Broom's wealth per se that is offensive but rather the way in which he came by it and subsequently deployed it. "No matter if a person is rich, if he is a good man, the villagers will help him. If he had a feast, villagers would bring gifts of rice, even if he had a hundred gunny sacks in his granary already. But if he is not good-hearted, we don't want to help him at all."⁵³ Neither the fortune of Haji Broom nor the poverty of Razak would have become so notorious were it not for the shamelessness of their behavior, a shamelessness that breaks all the rules and makes of them virtual outcasts: the one becoming the symbol for the greedy rich, the other the symbol of the grasping poor.

Only in Haji Broom's case, however, does the condemnation take on a somewhat mythical, religious dimension. More than once I was told that, when Haji Broom fell ill, his body was so hot that he had to be moved beneath the house, where it was cooler. And when he was borne to the cemetery, they said, smoke (some say fire) was already rising from the freshly dug grave. When I once asked Ghazali, with deliberate naïveté, whether this had really happened, he replied, "Maybe, but it could be a fairy tale too."⁵⁴ The point of course does not depend on the actual truth value of such reports, but rather on the social fact that villagers should conjure up the fires of hell waiting to consume Haji Broom even before he was finally laid to rest.

Most of that class of wealthy landowners of which Haji Broom is simply the most blatant and therefore serviceable example are also Hajis. That is, they are also men who have fulfilled the fifth "pillar" of Islam by making the pilgrimage to Mecca. Some have in fact made more than a single pilgrimage. The pattern of association between religious status and landowning wealth evidently has its origins in the late nineteenth century when much of the Kedah rice plain was settled by migrants led by respected religious teachers. Land grants, voluntary gifts, and the Islamic tithe allowed much of this class to become something of a landed gentry, while strategic marriage alliances with officials and the lower aristocracy solidified their position.⁵⁵ By 1916, the Acting British Advisor was

53. Compare this with the comment made by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie in the course of his portrait of a thirteenth-century Albigensian village in southern France: "Wealth in itself was not the real object of attack. What the people of Montailou hated was the unhealthy fat of the undeserving rich, clerics, and mendicants who exploited the village without giving in return any spiritual aid or even those services of help and protection habitually provided by a well-to-do domus or by wealthy local nobles." *Montailou: Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Braziller, 1978), 341.

54. *Dongeng* could be variously translated as "legend," "fairy tale," "myth," all of which call into question its truth value.

55. See Affuddin Haji Omar, *Peasants, Institutions, and Development in Malaysia: The Political Economy of Development in the Muda Region*, MADA Monograph No. 36 (Alor Setar: MADA, 1978), 50-56.

complaining about fraud on the part of the larger landholders who had applied for several smaller land grants, using bogus names in order to avoid the risks of applying openly to the State Council for a large grant.⁵⁶ Class barriers have, however, remained quite permeable, as Haji Ayub's case illustrates, and a good many wealthy Hajis in the region are comparative newcomers.

The fact that most of the larger Malay landowners, paddy traders, rice millers, and owners of agricultural machinery are also Hajis,⁵⁷ having amassed sufficient capital to make the pilgrimage, lends the title a highly ambiguous status. On the one hand, there is a genuine veneration for the act of pilgrimage itself and for the religious charisma that pilgrims thereby acquire. On the other hand, not a few of these pilgrims have accumulated the necessary capital for the Haji only by decades of sharp practices (for example, moneylending, taking *jual janji* land mortgages, renting land at the highest possible rates, being tightfisted with relatives and neighbors, minimizing ceremonial obligations), which most of the community judges abhorrent. Small wonder that villagers should be less than completely worshipful of a returning Haji whose trip to Mecca was financed by their land, their labor, and their rents.

Perhaps this is why the term *Haji* is often joined in popular parlance to adjectives that are anything but complimentary. *Haji Sangkut*⁵⁸ refers literally to a man who wears the cap and robe of a Haji without having made the pilgrimage, but it is also used to describe, behind their backs, actual pilgrims whose subsequent behavior continues to violate what the community would expect of a religious man. *Haji Merduk* and *Haji Karut*⁵⁹ refer to "false" or "fake" Hajis who have made the voyage to Mecca but whose conduct is anything but saintly. Since one of the main purposes of the Haj in village terms is to cleanse oneself of sin and prepare for Allah's judgment, it is an especially grave transgression—a sign of bad faith—to persist in sinful ways. As Basir says, "God will not accept Hajis like that. They have just wasted their money. There's no benefit. It's useless." The sins of such a Haji are worse than those of ordinary Muslims, Fazil adds, because "He knows it's wrong but he does it anyway. A false Haji is the very worst.⁶⁰ He goes to Mecca to wash his sins clean but . . . God doesn't like signs like that."

56. Unfederated Malay States, *Annual Report of the Acting Advisor to the Kedah Government, 1916*, G. A. Hall (Alor Setar: Government Printer, 1917), 2.

57. The reverse is not necessarily the case. That is, a good many Hajis are men of fairly modest financial means who have made considerable sacrifices, including the sale of land, to make the pilgrimage. Some never recover financially.

58. From the verb *sangkut* meaning "to hang something up on a peg," hence "to drape clothes on oneself." It is also possible that *sangkut* is a corruption of *songkok*, the Malay cap, thereby implying an imposter who wears the small skullcap of a Haji without having made the pilgrimage.

59. *Merduk* means "a thing or possession of no value" and *karut* means "false or untrue."

60. *Haji karut yang teruk sekali.*

Once, as a few of us sat around Samat's small village store, I asked Tok Kasim whether Haji Ani was like his father. We had just been discussing a well-known minister who had been dismissed, ostensibly for corruption, and Tok Kasim chose to draw the parallel. "A Haji who cheats and steals is just like a minister who does the same. Muslim punishment is more severe (than civil punishment).⁶¹ It's worse because the rich are enjoined to help the poor. Those who don't are not afraid of God, they only want to take (not give). When a Muslim does this, it's the worst possible."

The title *Haji* is often heard in conjunction with other adjectives as well, most of them having to do with miserliness. Much as the Eskimos are said to have a great wealth of words to describe varieties of snow that would pass unnoticed in other cultures, the Malay tongue offers a sumptuous linguistic feast of terms to describe every possible degree and variety of tightfistedness.⁶² Nearly all of them I have heard used at one time or another to modify the noun *Haji*. The terms most in vogue are *Haji Kedekut* and *Haji Bakhil*, each of which means stingy or miserly Haji. One Malay author remembers a chant with which she and her childhood friends used to bait a tightfisted Haji:

Haji Kedekut gets up at night
To count his money on the sly
He eats his rice with only salt
Sleeps on the floor without a mattress.⁶³

It was some time before I realized that Haji Kadir, the well-to-do landlord in whose house I was staying, was the butt of similar jokes and fell into the same folk category. I was visiting a nearby village with Sedaka's ragtag soccer team,⁶⁴ and after the game some of our hosts asked where I was staying. When I replied that we stayed in the front of "Pak" Haji Kadir's house, I was greeted by blank stares of nonrecognition. I tried to describe the location of the house,

61. *Hukuman melayu lagi teruk*. Here the literal translation is "Malay punishment," but the reference is to religion, since the two are synonymous. Thus the phrase *masuk melayu*, which means literally "to become a Malay" and is used to describe people of other races who marry a Malay, is more appropriately translated as "to become a Muslim."

62. A by no means exhaustive list would include the following: *kedekut*, *kikir*, *bakhil*, *berkira*, *lokek*, *tamak*, *tangkai jering* (noun), *keras hati* (also means "stubborn").

63. Haji Kedekut, bangun malam
Kira duit, diam-diam
Makan nasi, lauk garam
Tidur lantai, tak ada tilam

Sri Delima, *As I Was Passing*, vol. 2 (Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing, 1978).

64. Team record for dry season of 1979: two wins, five losses, and one draw—a performance attributable only in part to the author's goal keeping.

thinking that he must surely be well known in these parts. The confusion continued until someone said, "Oh, that must be Kadir *Ceti*" and the smiles around then reflected both recognition and some embarrassment. *Ceti* refers to the notorious southern Indian Chettiar moneylending caste which, in Malaya and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, provided much of the finance capital for agrarian production from 1900 until the Second World War. As a caste specialized entirely to a profession forbidden by the Koran, they became, and remain, a symbol of usurious exploitation and debt bondage.

Although Haji Kadir was the only man with the nickname Pak Ceti in Sedaka, other villages in the vicinity had their own—Haji Lah Ceti and Pak Ali Ceti to name just two.⁶⁵ Once it became known that I had learned my landlord's nickname, the ice was broken and the stories came thick and fast. Much of the nearly twenty relong of paddy fields that he owned locally were acquired by default on money he had lent out, that is by *jual janji*. Abu Hassan's father had lost three relong to Pak Haji Kadir in this fashion, which explained why he occasionally, and to no avail, asked to rent back this plot of land. Villagers said that, like Haji Broom, Haji Kadir had re-lent money borrowed from one of the wealthy Chinese shopkeepers in Kepala Batas. Hamzah, his poor neighbor, complained that he would charge 20¢ for a coconut from his yard rather than simply make a gift of it as others would. Hamzah had another complaint. Last season he had worked as a laborer more often for Haji Kadir than for anyone else in the village and thus expected a gift of paddy (*zakat*) after the harvest. He got absolutely nothing, although far poorer farmers for whom he had worked had been quite generous.

The diet of *Kadir Ceti*, like that of the Haji Kedekut in the ditty, was the object of popular derision. Rather than buying fish from the market, he would, by choice, eat the same tiny, bony fish from the paddy fields that the poorest villagers ate of necessity. Even his brother-in-law, Pak Kasim, did not think he had changed since making the pilgrimage. "Even the Chinese in town call him *Ceti*. He always sits in the same chair. How could he change?"

Although Haji Broom and Kadir Ceti dominated the conversational landscape of miserly Hajis in Sedaka, there was no shortage of stories about other Hajis, living and dead, in the district. The torrent of abusive accounts was such that I eventually tired of them, although the villagers never did. There were Hajis who stole water buffalo; Hajis who boldly took things from stores without paying; Hajis who harvested crops planted in good faith by their tenants; Hajis who rented all their land to Chinese rather than to their own people; Hajis who

65. It appears that the term is widespread, at least in northeast Malaysia. On Mokhzani's list of Malay moneylenders in Perlis (the state immediately to the north of Kedah and forming part of the same rice (plain), half the entries bear the nickname *Ceti*. Mokhzani bin Abdul Rahim, *Credit in a Malay Peasant Society* (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1973), 393–94.

insisted that tenants pay *them* a *zakat* tithe (reversing the usual direction of charity); and at least one Haji who was said to have kicked a woman while she was praying. And, of course, there were many good, pious, modest Hajis (perhaps a majority) whose pilgrimage and conduct were a great credit to Islam. The fact remains, however, that a vast majority of the rich landlords who had earned the animosity of the community were also Hajis. It was impossible to tell whether the cascade of stories was due simply to the inherent richness of the source material or to its social value as a cautionary tale for the rich and would-be rich who had not yet gone astray. Both, I suspect.

Two things were clear, though. First, nearly everyone thought that the problem of the shameless, greedy rich in general, and of shameless, greedy, rich Hajis in particular, was worse now than in the past. Even rich Hajis concurred, while excepting themselves from the charge. Sukur spoke for most when he said: "The old Hajis were real Hajis. These days, they aren't real Hajis. They only wear the robes. They just took a trip to Mecca (not a real pilgrimage). When they came back from Mecca they should be true, but they even practice *padi kumca*. They just want more money; the sky's the limit."⁶⁶ Second, it is clear that, when such Hajis die, their transgressions will earn them the most exquisite punishment their God can prepare. What that punishment will be precisely is a matter for conjecture. But Abdul Rahman captured the flavor of this speculation by concluding: "When they enter hell, they will swim in blood."

THE SYMBOLIC BALANCE OF POWER

The tales about Razak and Haji Broom—suitably embroidered, elaborated, and retold—have far more than mere entertainment value. They amount to an exchange of small arms fire, a small skirmish, in a cold war of symbols between the rich and poor of Sedaka. Hostilities, in this war as in most, are conducted over a shifting terrain in which there are many neutrals, bystanders, and reluctant combatants with divided loyalties. For the time being, at least, it remains a *cold* war both because many of the potential participants have important shared interests that would be jeopardized in an all-out confrontation and because one side, the poor, is under no illusions about the outcome of a direct assault. Thus, the "war news" consists almost entirely of words, feints, and counterfeints, threats, a skirmish or two, and, above all, propaganda.

The stories that circulate about Razak and Haji Broom are perhaps understood in this sense as propaganda. Like effective propaganda, they signify—they embody—an entire argument about what is happening in this small place. The mere mention of Razak's name by rich villagers conjures up a vision of the

66. The last phrase in Malay, *Banyak mana pun tak boleh cukup*, is difficult to render in English, and I have translated it rather freely. A more literal translation would be, "No matter how much, it wouldn't be enough."

grasping, dishonest poor, who violate the accepted standards of village decorum. In their view Razak is the negative model toward which the poor in general are, alas, heading. The mere mention of Haji Broom's name by poor villagers conjures up a vision of the greedy, penny-pinching rich, who likewise violate the accepted standards of village conduct. In their view, Haji Broom is the negative model toward which the rich in general are heading.

Haji Broom and Razak gain much of their power as symbols by virtue of their reality as concrete human examples of the behavior they have come to signify. Everyone in the village can observe Razak as he adds daily to his own legend. For Haji Broom, the experience is only slightly less direct. Nearly everyone has seen or met him and every adult has heard firsthand stories about his land grabbing and moneylending. Given the availability of palpable, local legends that villagers can check against their own experience, this kind of propaganda does not have to rely much on mere credulity to state its case. What one chooses to make of these living legends—precisely what they signify—is of course another matter. But they originate in social facts.

The value of Razak and Haji Broom as social banners, however, stems as much from the extravagance of their conduct as from their palpability. It is this extravagance that not only makes the tales engrossing⁶⁷ but makes them effective vehicles of propaganda. Even the poor of Sedaka agree that Razak's capers place him beyond the pale. Even Kadir Ceti will agree that Haji Broom's fortune was gotten by breaking the commands of Allah and of village society. The rich and the poor have each availed themselves of precisely the extreme examples that will best serve their case, examples that will have to be conceded by the "other side."

The stories that swirl around these two men must also be recognized as cornerstones of an ideological edifice under construction. They embody, as ideology, a critique of things as they are as well as a vision of things as they should be. They are attempts to create and maintain a certain view of what decent, acceptable human behavior ought to be. As negative examples of totally unacceptable behavior, they accomplish their purpose in the same way that any socially sanctioned account of deviance helps to define what is normal, correct, preferred behavior. Such stories can thus be read as a kind of social text on the subject of human decency. They are necessary precisely because the maintenance of a given symbolic order is always as problematic as its change. The ideological work of repair and renovation is never-ending.

The implicit purpose of these competing ideologies is not just to convince but to control; better stated, they aim to control by convincing. To the extent that they succeeded in shaping behavior, they achieve a class purpose as well.

67. In conversation as in literature the bizarre and the evil are always more gripping than the commonplace and the saintly. How else to explain the content of popular newspapers? Caliban is always more interesting than Ariel, Mephistopheles more interesting than the Angel of Light.

Should the rich be chastened by the tales about Haji Broom, they would not lend money at high interest, they would not make designs on the land of others, they would be generous with religious charity and feasts, and they would take on more tenants and workers. The benefits for the poor of such an arrangement are obvious. Should the poor, on the other hand, take the infamous example of Razak to heart, they would not importune the rich for gifts, they would not come to feasts uninvited, they would be faithful workers, and they would be as good as their word. The advantages for the rich of such an arrangement are equally obvious. There is a kind of symbolic equilibrium here. The message to the rich is: If you behave like Haji Broom, you can count on being villified as he is. To the poor, the message is: If you behave like Razak, you will be despised as he is. And if wishes became deeds, if ideology became practice, Sedaka would be a small utopia peopled by generous, sympathetic landlords and honest, hard-working tenants and laborers.

Alas, the equilibrium is only symbolic. These cautionary tales, after all, adjure the rich and the poor to forgo their immediate material interest in order to protect their reputation. But how important is a good name? Or, to put it the other way around, what is the cost of a bad name? The answer unfortunately depends a great deal on who you are, for the cost of a bad name hinges directly on the social and economic sanctions that can be brought into play to punish its bearer. In class terms, one must ask how dependent the poor are on the good opinion of the rich and vice versa. The politics of reputation is, in this respect, something of a one-sided affair.⁶⁸ It amounts to this: The rich have the social power generally to impose their vision of seemly behavior on the poor, while the poor are rarely in a position to impose their vision on the rich. A good name is something like a social insurance policy for the poor against the thousand contingencies of agrarian life. It is built by a record of deferential behavior, service at feasts and house movings, a willingness to work without quibbling too much about wages, and tacit support for the village leadership. It brings tangible rewards in terms of employment, charity, help at times of death or illness, and access to whatever subsidies the ruling party in the village has to distribute. It brings intangible rewards in terms of inclusion both in the informal pleasantries and in the ritual of village life. Razak, having forfeited his good name, thereby acquires a certain freedom to breach the etiquette of village life.⁶⁹ But he pays heavily for that freedom in work and public scorn. His only concession to form is his calculated membership in the ruling party. Hamzah, by contrast, has established and maintained a good name. It costs him the time

68. For an analysis of "the politics of reputation" and empirical studies, see F. G. Bailey, *Gifts and Poison: The Politics of Reputation* (New York: Schocken, 1971).

69. "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose" is quite apt in this instance. See also A. Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Bantam, 1968), 96.

and labor he devotes to village projects, cooking at feasts, and taking care of the village prayerhouse (*surau*) and assembly hall (*balai*). It also costs him a certain amount of swallowed up bile, as we shall see, to feign a respect for his social betters that he does not always feel. But his reputation pays dividends in employment, *zakat* gifts, help when he is ill, and a public show of respect and consideration. Such rewards are significant; they are sufficient to ensure that all but three or four of the poor in Sedaka choose to conform in most respects to the standard of seemly behavior that is defined and imposed by the village elite.

The Haji Brooms and Kadir Cetis of this small world are heavily insulated from the effects of a bad name. They need little or nothing from the poor. It is ironic that their insulation—land and the income and power it provides—was acquired only by violating precisely those rules of generosity and consideration⁷⁰ that might have given them a good name. Now they are virtually beyond sanction.

There is one exception, however. The rich, while they may be relatively immune to material sanctions, cannot escape symbolic sanctions: slander, gossip, character assassination. But even on this small terrain, the contest is an unequal one. Nowhere is this more evident than in the fact that Razak is demeaned *to his face*, while Haji Broom and Kadir Ceti are invariably demeaned *behind their backs*. Thus Kadir Ceti is always addressed “Pak Haji” to his face, and I would be surprised if he was even aware of his popular nickname. The scorn in which he is held need never reach his ears nor trouble his sleep.

Of course, much of the public deference shown to Haji Kadir is “false” deference.⁷¹ Poor villagers, and not only they, choose to dissemble, knowing full well the penalties of any other course. Thus when an old villager, Ishak, ventures to talk disparagingly about Haji Broom, he ends by asking me not to breathe a word of it to anyone in Yan or Mengkuang for fear of retaliation. What we have here is a difference between “onstage” and “offstage” behavior; to the extent that the deference expressed in public, power-laden situations is negated in the comparative safety of offstage privacy, we can speak unambiguously of false deference.

But even false deference is an unmistakable exhibition of the social power of the well-to-do. It is no small matter that the village elite continues to control the public stage. The public symbolic order is maintained through outward deference, to which there is no open challenge. On this largely symbolic plane, as well as in the sphere of material exchange, then, the social imbalance of power

70. The equivalent for “consideration” in Malay is *timbang rasa*, which means literally “to weigh feelings” (of others).

71. This brief analysis of “deference” benefits from the analyses of Howard Newby, “The Deferential Dialectic,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17, no. 2 (April 1975): 139–64, and Erving Goffman, “The Nature of Deference and Demeanor,” *American Anthropologist* 58 (June 1956): 473–503.

allows public insults of Razak but prevents public insults of Haji Kadir or Haji Broom.

Those with power in the village are not, however, in total control of the stage. They may write the basic script for the play but, within its confines, truculent or disaffected actors find sufficient room for maneuver to suggest subtly their disdain for the proceedings. The necessary lines may be spoken, the gesture made, but it is clear that many of the actors are just going through the motions and do not have their hearts in the performance. A banal example, familiar to any motorist or pedestrian, will illustrate the kind of behavior involved. The traffic light changes when a pedestrian is halfway across the intersection. As long as the pedestrian is not in imminent danger from the oncoming traffic, a small dramatization is likely to ensue. He lifts his knees a bit higher for a step or two, simulating haste, thereby implicitly recognizing the motorist's right-of-way. In fact, in nearly all cases, if my impression is correct, the *actual* progress of the pedestrian across the intersection is no faster than it would have been if he had simply proceeded at his original pace. What is conveyed is the *impression* of compliance without its substance. But the symbolic order, the right of the motorist to the road, is not directly challenged; indeed, it is confirmed by the appearance of haste.⁷² It is almost as if symbolic compliance is maximized *precisely* in order to minimize compliance at the level of actual behavior.

It is with analogous forms of minimal compliance that poor villagers are able to insinuate the insincerity of their performance. They may come to the feast of a rich villager but stay only long enough to eat quickly and leave. They have complied with the custom of accepting the invitation, but their compliance skirts the edge of impropriety. They may also bring a gift in cash or kind that is less than what might be expected but not so little as to constitute a direct insult. They may, as "required," greet a big landowner on the village path, but their greeting is abbreviated and not as warm as it might be. All these and other forms of reluctant compliance stop short of overt defiance and at least conform to the minimal standards of politeness and deference that the rich are normally in a position to require. And yet they also signal an intrusion, however slight, of "offstage" attitudes into the performance itself, an intrusion sufficient to convey its meaning to the directors but not so egregious as to risk a confrontation.⁷³

72. The opposite case, in which the pedestrian openly refuses to make even an appearance of haste (or actually slows down) also occurs. Here there is a direct defiance of the motorist's right to the road, an open breach of the symbolic order. The community of pedestrians in effect announces its prior right to the road. Such an open dare invites a game of "chicken" in which the motorist, alas, is usually best equipped to prevail.

73. A good deal of attention, as one might expect, has been devoted to such forms of "protest within compliance" under slavery. For two fine examples, see Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), and Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977).

The kind of conflict with which we are dealing here is singularly undramatic. At one level it is a contest over the definition of justice, a struggle to control the concepts and symbols by which current experience is evaluated. At another level it is a struggle over the appropriateness of a given definition of justice to a particular case, a particular set of facts, a particular behavior. Assuming the rich ought to be generous, for example, is a certain landowner's refusal to make a gift a violation of that principle or is it a legitimate rebuff to a man who is only feigning poverty or who has, by his comportment, forfeited his right to charity? Finally, at a third level, of course, it is a struggle over land, work, income, and power in the midst of the massive changes brought about by an agricultural revolution.

The resources the different contestants bring to this contest hardly bear comparison. The local elite nearly always has its own way in the economic life of the village. Given its sway over resources, it can also largely control public ritual life—that is, the “onstage” conduct of most of the poor in the community. Only “backstage,” where gossip, tales, slander, and anonymous sabotage mocks and negates the public ritual order, does elite control fall away. To return to the military metaphor, it is only here that the terrain is *relatively* favorable to the meager arsenal of the disadvantaged.

One might well ask: Why are we here, in a village of no particular significance, examining the struggle of a handful of history's losers? For there is little doubt on this last score. The poor of Sedaka are almost certainly, to use Barrington Moore's phrase, members of “a class over whom the wave of progress is about to roll.”⁷⁴ And the big battalions of the state, of capitalist relations in agriculture, and of demography itself are arrayed against them. There is little reason to believe that they can materially improve their prospects in the village and every reason to believe they will, in the short run at least, lose out, as have millions of peasants before them.

The justification for such an enterprise must lie precisely in its banality—in the fact that these circumstances are the *normal* context in which class conflict has historically occurred. By examining these circumstances closely, it may be possible to say something meaningful about normal class consciousness, about everyday resistance, about commonplace class relations where, as is most often the case, neither outright collective defiance nor rebellion is likely or possible.

74. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 1966), 505.

2 • Normal Exploitation, Normal Resistance

Almost invariably doomed to defeat and eventual massacre, the great insurrections were altogether too disorganized to achieve any lasting result. The patient, silent struggles stubbornly carried on by rural communities over the years would accomplish more than these flashes in the pan.

Marc Bloch, *French Rural History*

As the editor of *Field and Garden* once wrote, great men are always unpopular with the common people. The masses don't understand them, they think all those things are unnecessary, even heroism. The little man doesn't give a shit about a great era. All he wants is to drop into a bar now and then and eat goulash for supper. Naturally a statesman gets riled at bums like that, when it's his job to get his people into the schoolbooks, the poor bastard. To a great man the common people are a ball and chain. It's like offering Baloun here, with his appetite, a small Hungarian sausage for supper, what good is that. I wouldn't want to listen in when the big shots get together and start griping about us.

Schweyk, in Bertolt Brecht, *Schweyk in the Second World War*, Scene I

THE UNWRITTEN HISTORY OF RESISTANCE

The idea for this study, its concerns and its methods, originated in a growing dissatisfaction with much recent work—my own as well as that of others—on the subject of peasant rebellions and revolution.¹ It is only too apparent that the inordinate attention accorded to large-scale peasant insurrection was, in North America at least, stimulated by the Vietnam war and something of a left-wing academic romance with wars of national liberation. In this case interest and source material were mutually reinforcing. For the historical and archival records were richest at precisely those moments when the peasantry came to pose a threat to the state and to the existing international order. At other times, which is to

1. See, for example, Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 1966); Jeffrey M. Paige, *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World* (New York: Free Press, 1975); Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976); Samuel L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979).

say most of the time, the peasantry appeared in the historical record not so much as historical actors but as more or less anonymous contributors to statistics on conscription, taxes, labor migration, land holdings, and crop production.

The fact is that, for all their importance when they do occur, peasant rebellions, let alone peasant "revolutions," are few and far between. Not only are the circumstances that favor large-scale peasant uprisings comparatively rare, but when they do appear the revolts that develop are nearly always crushed unceremoniously. To be sure, even a failed revolt may achieve something: a few concessions from the state or landlords, a brief respite from new and painful relations of production² and, not least, a memory of resistance and courage that may lie in wait for the future. Such gains, however, are uncertain, while the carnage, the repression, and the demoralization of defeat are all too certain and real. It is worth recalling as well that even at those extraordinary historical moments when a peasant-backed revolution actually succeeds in taking power, the results are, at the very best, a mixed blessing for the peasantry. Whatever else the revolution may achieve, it almost always creates a more coercive and hegemonic state apparatus—one that is often able to batten itself on the rural population like no other before it. All too frequently the peasantry finds itself in the ironic position of having helped to power a ruling group whose plans for industrialization, taxation, and collectivization are very much at odds with the goals for which peasants had imagined they were fighting.³

For all these reasons it occurred to me that the emphasis on peasant rebellion was misplaced. Instead, it seemed far more important to understand what we might call *everyday* forms of peasant resistance—the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them. Most of the forms this struggle takes stop well short of collective outright defiance. Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. These Brechtian forms of class struggle have certain features in common. They require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms. To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand what much of the peasantry does "between revolts" to defend its interests as best it can.

It would be a grave mistake, as it is with peasant rebellions, to overly romanticize the "weapons of the weak." They are unlikely to do more than mar-

2. For an example of such temporary gains, see the fine study by E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rude, *Captain Swing* (New York: Pantheon, 1968), 281–99.

3. Some of these issues are examined in James C. Scott, "Revolution in the Revolution: Peasants and Commissars," *Theory and Society* 7, nos. 1–2 (1979): 97–134.

ginally affect the various forms of exploitation that peasants confront. Furthermore, the peasantry has no monopoly on these weapons, as anyone can easily attest who has observed officials and landlords resisting and disrupting state policies that are to their disadvantage.

On the other hand, such Brechtian modes of resistance are not trivial. Desertion and evasion of conscription and of *corvée* labor have undoubtedly limited the imperial aspirations of many a monarch in Southeast Asia⁴ or, for that matter, in Europe. The process and its potential impact are nowhere better captured than in R. C. Cobb's account of draft resistance and desertion in postrevolutionary France and under the early Empire:

From the year V to the year VII, there are increasingly frequent reports, from a variety of Departments . . . of every conscript from a given canton having returned home and living there unmolested. Better still, many of them did not return home; they had never left it in the first place. . . . In the year VII too the severed fingers of right hands—the commonest form of self-mutilation—begin to witness statistically to the strength of what might be described as a vast movement of collective complicity, involving the family, the parish, the local authorities, whole cantons.

Even the Empire, with a vastly more numerous and reliable rural police, did not succeed in more than temporarily slowing down the speed of the hemorrhage which . . . from 1812, once more reached catastrophic proportions. There could have been no more eloquent referendum on the universal unpopularity of an oppressive regime; and there is no more encouraging spectacle for a historian than a people that has decided it will no longer fight and that, without fuss, returns home . . . the common people, at least, in this respect, had their fair share in bringing down France's most appalling regime.⁵

The collapse of the Confederate army and economy in the course of the Civil War in the United States is a further example of the decisive role of silent and undeclared defections. Nearly 250,000 eligible whites are estimated to have deserted or to have avoided conscription altogether.⁶ The reasons appear to have

4. See the fine account and analysis by Michael Adas, "From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant Protest in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 2 (April 1981): 217–47.

5. R. C. Cobb, *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest, 1789–1820* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 96–97. For a gripping account of self-mutilation to avoid conscription, see Emile Zola, *The Earth*, trans. Douglas Parmee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).

6. See the excellent study by Armstead L. Robinson, "Bitter Fruits of Bondage: Slavery's Demise and the Collapse of the Confederacy, 1861–65" (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, forthcoming), chaps. 5, 6.

been both moral and material, as one might expect. Poor whites, especially those from the nonslaveholding hill country, were deeply resentful of fighting for an institution whose principal beneficiaries were often excluded from service by law.⁷ Military reverses and what was called the “subsistence crisis of 1862” prompted many to desert and return to their hard-pressed families. On the plantations themselves, the shortage of white overseers and the slaves’ natural affinity with the North’s objective, gave rise to shirking and flight on a massive scale. As in France, one could claim here too that the Confederacy was undone by a social avalanche of petty acts of insubordination carried out by an unlikely coalition of slaves and yeomen—a coalition with no name, no organization, no leadership, and certainly no Leninist conspiracy behind it.

In a similar fashion, flight and evasion of taxes have classically curbed the ambition and reach of Third World states—whether precolonial, colonial, or independent. As we shall learn, for example, the official collection of the Islamic tithe in paddy is, in Sedaka, only a small fraction of what is legally due, thanks to a network of complicity and misrepresentation that eviscerates its impact. Small wonder that a large share of the tax receipts of Third World states is collected in the form of levies on imports and exports; the pattern is in no small measure a tribute to the tax resistance capacities of their subjects. Even a casual reading of the literature on rural “development” yields a rich harvest of unpopular government schemes and programs nibbled to extinction by the passive resistance of the peasantry. The author of a rare account detailing how peasants—in this case in East Africa—have managed over several decades to undo or evade threatening state policy concludes in the following tone:

In this situation, it is understandable if the development equation is often reduced to a zero-sum game. As this study has shown, the winners of those games are by no means always the rulers. The African peasant is hardly a hero in the light of current development thinking, but by using his deceptive skills he has often defeated the authorities.⁸

On some occasions this resistance has become active, even violent. More often, however, it takes the form of passive noncompliance, subtle sabotage, evasion, and deception. The persistent efforts of the colonial government in Malaya to discourage the peasantry from growing and selling rubber that would compete

7. This issue centered on the much resented “Twenty-Nigger Law,” as it was known, which provided that a white man of draft age could be excused from military service if he was needed to supervise twenty or more slaves. This law, coupled with the hiring of substitutes by wealthy families, encouraged the widespread belief that this was “a rich man’s war, but a poor man’s fight.” *Ibid.*, chap. 5.

8. Goran Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania* (London: Heinemann, 1980), 231.

with the plantation sector for land and markets is a case in point.⁹ Various restriction schemes and land use laws were tried from 1922 until 1928 and again in the 1930s with only modest results because of massive peasant resistance. The efforts of peasants in self-styled socialist states to prevent and then to mitigate or even undo unpopular forms of collective agriculture represent a striking example of the defensive techniques available to a beleaguered peasantry. Again the struggle is marked less by massive and defiant confrontations than by a quiet evasion that is equally massive and often far more effective.¹⁰

The style of resistance in question is perhaps best described by contrasting, paired forms of resistance, each aimed more or less at the same objective. The first of each pair is "everyday" resistance, in our meaning of the term; the second represents the open defiance that dominates the study of peasant and working-class politics. In one sphere, for example, lies the quiet, piecemeal process by which peasant squatters have often encroached on plantation and state forest lands; in the other a public invasion of land that openly challenges property relations. In terms of actual occupation and use, the encroachments by squatting may accomplish more than an openly defiant land invasion, though the *de jure* distribution of property rights is never publicly challenged. Turning to another example, in one sphere lies a rash of military desertions that incapacitates an army and, in the other, an open mutiny aiming at eliminating or replacing officers. Desertions may, as we have noted, achieve something where mutiny may fail, precisely because it aims at self-help and withdrawal rather than institutional confrontation. And yet, the massive withdrawal of compliance is in a sense more radical in its implications for the army as an institution than the replacement of officers. As a final example, in one sphere lies the pilfering of public or private grain stores; in the other an open attack on markets or granaries aiming at an open redistribution of the food supply.

What everyday forms of resistance share with the more dramatic public confrontations is of course that they are intended to mitigate or deny claims made by superordinate classes or to advance claims vis-à-vis those superordinate classes. Such claims have ordinarily to do with the material nexus of class struggle—

9. The best, most complete account of this may be found in Lim Teck Ghee, *Peasants and Their Agricultural Economy in Colonial Malaya, 1874–1941* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977). See also the persuasive argument in Donald M. Nonini, Paul Diener, and Eugene E. Robkin, "Ecology and Evolution: Population, Primitive Accumulation, and the Malay Peasantry" (Typescript, 1979).

10. For a careful and fascinating account of the ways in which China's production teams and brigades could, until the changes in 1978, have some influence on the definition of "surplus" grain that had to be sold to the state, see Jean C. Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China: The Politics of Grain Procurement* (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Michigan, 1983). Nearly all of this resistance was called "soft opposition" by those who practiced it and who made it clear that it was successful only if an "outward manifestation" of compliance was maintained. *Ibid.*, 238.

the appropriation of land, labor, taxes, rents, and so forth. Where everyday resistance most strikingly departs from other forms of resistance is in its implicit disavowal of public and symbolic goals. Where institutionalized politics is formal, overt, concerned with systematic, de jure change, everyday resistance is informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains.¹¹

It is reasonably clear that the success of de facto resistance is often directly proportional to the symbolic conformity with which it is masked. Open insubordination in almost any context will provoke a more rapid and ferocious response than an insubordination that may be as pervasive but never ventures to contest the formal definitions of hierarchy and power. For most subordinate classes, which, as a matter of sheer history, have had little prospect of improving their status, this form of resistance has been the only option. What may be accomplished *within* this symbolic straitjacket is nonetheless something of a testament to human persistence and inventiveness, as this account of lower-caste resistance in India illustrates:

Lifelong indentured servants most characteristically expressed discontent about their relationship with their master by performing their work carelessly and inefficiently. They could intentionally or unconsciously feign illness, ignorance, or incompetence, driving their masters to distraction. Even though the master could retaliate by refusing to give his servant the extra fringe benefits, he was still obliged to maintain him at a subsistence level if he did not want to lose his investment completely. *This method of passive resistance, provided it was not expressed as open defiance, was nearly unbeatable, it reinforced the Haviks' stereotype concerning the character of low caste persons, but gave them little recourse to action.*¹²

Such forms of stubborn resistance are especially well documented in the vast literature on American slavery, where open defiance was normally foolhardy. The

11. There is an interesting parallel here with some of the feminist literature on peasant society. In many, but not all, peasant societies, men are likely to dominate every formal, overt exercise of power. Women, it is occasionally argued, can exercise considerable power to the extent that they do not openly challenge the formal myth of male dominance. "Real" gains are possible, in other words, so long as the larger symbolic order is not questioned. In much the same fashion one might contend that the peasantry often finds it both tactically convenient as well as necessary to leave the formal order intact while directing its attention to political ends that may never be accorded formal recognition. For a feminist argument along those lines, see Susan Carol Rogers, "Female Forms of Power and the Myth of Male Dominance," *American Ethnologist* 2, no. 4 (November 1975): 727-56.

12. Edward B. Harper, "Social Consequences of an Unsuccessful Low Caste Movement," *Social Mobility in the Caste System in India: An Interdisciplinary Symposium*, ed. James Silverberg, Supplement No. 3, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968): 48-49, emphasis added.

history of resistance to slavery in the antebellum U.S. South is largely a history of foot dragging, false compliance, flight, feigned ignorance, sabotage, theft, and, not least, cultural resistance. These practices, which rarely if ever called into question the system of slavery *as such*, nevertheless achieved far more in their unannounced, limited, and truculent way than the few heroic and brief armed uprisings about which so much has been written. The slaves themselves appear to have realized that in most circumstances their resistance could succeed only to the extent that it hid behind the mask of public compliance. One imagines parents giving their children advice not unlike advice contemporary wage laborers on plantations in Indonesia apparently hear from their own parents:

I tell them [the youngsters] remember, you're selling your labor and the one who buys it wants to *see* that he gets something for it, so work when he's around, then you can relax when he goes away, but make sure you always *look like* you're working when the inspectors are there.¹³

Two specific observations emerge from this perspective. First, the nature of resistance is greatly influenced by the existing forms of labor control and by beliefs about the probability and severity of retaliation. Where the consequences of an open strike are likely to be catastrophic in terms of permanent dismissal or jail, the work force may resort to a slowdown or to shoddy work on the job. The often undeclared and anonymous nature of such action makes it particularly difficult for the antagonist to assess blame or apply sanctions. In industry, the slowdown has come to be called an "Italian" strike; it is used particularly when repression is feared, as in Poland under martial law in 1983.¹⁴ Piece-work has of course often been used as a means of circumventing forms of resistance open to workers who are paid by the hour or day. Where piece-work prevails, as it did in silk and cotton weaving in nineteenth-century Germany, resistance is likely to find expression not in slowdowns, which are self-defeating, but in such forms as the "shortweighting of finished cloth, defective workmanship, and the purloining of materials."¹⁵ Each form of labor control or payment is thus likely, other things equal, to generate its own distinctive forms of quiet resistance and "counterappropriation."

13. Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), 184.

14. See, for example, *New York Times*, Aug. 18, 1983, p. A6, "Polish Underground Backs Call for Slowdown," in which it is noted that "The tactic of a slowdown, known in Poland as an Italian Strike, has been used in the past by workers because it reduces the risk of reprisal."

15. Peter Linebaugh, "Karl Marx, the Theft of Wood, and Working-Class Composition: A Contribution to the Current Debate," *Crime and Social Justice* (Fall-Winter, 1976): 10. See also the brilliant analysis of piece-work by the Hungarian poet-worker Miklós Haraszti, *A Worker in a Worker's State*, trans. Michael Wright (New York: Universe, 1978).

The second observation is that resistance is not necessarily directed at the immediate source of appropriation. Inasmuch as the objective of the resisters is typically to meet such pressing needs as physical safety, food, land, or income, and to do so in relative safety, they may simply follow the line of least resistance. Prussian peasants and proletarians in the 1830s, beleaguered by dwarf holdings and wages below subsistence, responded by emigration or by poaching wood, fodder, and game on a large scale. The pace of "forest crime" rose as wages declined, as provisions became more expensive, and where emigration was more difficult; in 1836 there were 207,000 prosecutions in Prussia, 150,000 of which were for forest offenses.¹⁶ They were supported by a mood of popular complicity that originated in earlier traditions of free access to forests, but the poachers cared little whether the rabbits or firewood they took came from the land of their particular employer or landlord. Thus, the reaction to an appropriation in one sphere may lead its victims to exploit small openings available elsewhere that are perhaps more accessible and less dangerous.¹⁷

Such techniques of resistance are well adapted to the particular characteristics of the peasantry. Being a diverse class of "low classness," scattered across the countryside, often lacking the discipline and leadership that would encourage opposition of a more organized sort, the peasantry is best suited to extended guerrilla-style campaigns of attrition that require little or no coordination. Their individual acts of foot dragging and evasion are often reinforced by a venerable popular culture of resistance. Seen in the light of a supportive subculture and the knowledge that the risk to any single resister is generally reduced to the extent that the whole community is involved, it becomes plausible to speak of a social movement. Curiously, however, this is a social movement with no formal organization, no formal leaders, no manifestoes, no dues, no name, and no banner. By virtue of their institutional invisibility, activities on anything less than a massive scale are, if they are noticed at all, rarely accorded any social significance.

Multiplied many thousandfold, such petty acts of resistance by peasants may in the end make an utter shambles of the policies dreamed up by their would-

16. *Ibid.*, 13. In 1842, for Baden, there was one such conviction for every four inhabitants. For three centuries poaching was perhaps the most common rural crime in England and the subject of much repressive legislation. See, for example, the selections by Douglas Hay and E. P. Thompson in *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* by Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E. P. Thompson, and Cal Winslow (New York: Pantheon, 1975).

17. Apparently the theft of wood in Germany in this period rarely touched communal forests. It goes without saying that, when a poor man survives by taking from others in the same situation, we can no longer speak of resistance. One central question to ask about any subordinate class is the extent to which it can, by internal sanctions, prevent the dog-eat-dog competition among themselves that can only serve the interests of appropriating classes.

be superiors in the capital. The state may respond in a variety of ways. Policies may be recast in line with more realistic expectations. They may be retained but reinforced with positive incentives aimed at encouraging voluntary compliance. And, of course, the state may simply choose to employ more coercion. Whatever the response, we must not miss the fact that the action of the peasantry has thus changed or narrowed the policy options available to the state. It is in this fashion, and not through revolts, let alone legal political pressure, that the peasantry has classically made its political presence felt. Thus any history or theory of peasant politics that attempts to do justice to the peasantry as a historical actor must necessarily come to grips with what I have chosen to call *everyday forms of resistance*. For this reason alone it is important to both document and bring some conceptual order to this seeming welter of human activity.

Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines.¹⁸ Just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do thousands upon thousands of individual acts of insubordination and evasion create a political or economic barrier reef of their own. There is rarely any dramatic confrontation, any moment that is particularly newsworthy. And whenever, to pursue the simile, the ship of state runs aground on such a reef, attention is typically directed to the shipwreck itself and not to the vast aggregation of petty acts that made it possible. It is only rarely that the perpetrators of these petty acts seek to call attention to themselves. Their safety lies in their anonymity. It is also extremely rarely that officials of the state wish to publicize the insubordination. To do so would be to admit that their policy is unpopular, and, above all, to expose the tenuousness of their authority in the countryside—neither of which the sovereign state finds in its interest.¹⁹ The nature of the acts themselves and the self-interested muteness of the antagonists thus conspire to create a kind of complicitous silence that all but expunges everyday forms of resistance from the historical record.

History and social science, because they are written by an intelligentsia using written records that are also created largely by literate officials, is simply not well equipped to uncover the silent and anonymous forms of class struggle that

18. As Hobsbawm and Rude point out, it is not only conservative elites who have overlooked this form of resistance, but also the urban left: "The historians of social movements seem to have reacted very much like the rest of the urban left—to which most of them have traditionally belonged—i.e. they have tended to be unaware of it unless and until it appeared in sufficiently dramatic form or on a sufficiently large scale for the city newspapers to take notice."

19. But not entirely. District-level records are likely to prove rewarding in this respect, as district officials attempt to explain the shortfall in, say, tax receipts or conscription figures to their superiors in the capital. One imagines also that the informal, oral record is abundant, for example informal cabinet or ministerial meetings called to deal with policy failures caused by rural insubordination.

typify the peasantry.²⁰ Its practitioners implicitly join the conspiracy of the participants, who are themselves, as it were, sworn to secrecy. Collectively, this unlikely cabal contributes to a stereotype of the peasantry, enshrined in both literature and in history, as a class that alternates between long periods of abject passivity and brief, violent, and futile explosions of rage.

He had centuries of fear and submission behind him, his shoulders had become hardened to blows, his soul so crushed that he did not recognise his own degradation. You could beat him and starve him and rob him of everything, year in, year out, before he would abandon his caution and stupidity, his mind filled with all sorts of muddled ideas which he could not properly understand; and this went on until a culmination of injustice and suffering flung him at his master's throat like some infuriated domestic animal who had been subjected to too many thrashings.²¹

There is a grain of truth in Zola's view, but only a grain. It is true that the "onstage" behavior of peasants during times of quiescence yields a picture of submission, fear, and caution. By contrast, peasant insurrections seem like visceral reactions of blind fury. What is missing from the account of "normal" passivity is the slow, grinding, quiet struggle over rents, crops, labor, and taxes in which submission and stupidity are often no more than a pose—a necessary tactic. What is missing from the picture of the periodic explosions is the underlying vision of justice that informs them and their specific goals and targets, which are often quite rational indeed.²² The explosions themselves are frequently a sign that the normal and largely covert forms of class struggle are failing or have reached a crisis point. Such declarations of open war, with their mortal risks, normally come only after a protracted struggle on different terrain.

RESISTANCE AS THOUGHT AND SYMBOL

Thus far, I have treated everyday forms of peasant resistance as if they were not much more than a collection of individual acts or behaviors. To confine the analysis to behavior alone, however, is to miss much of the point. It reduces the

20. The partial exceptions that come to mind are anthropology, because of its insistence on close observation in the field, and the history of slavery and Soviet collectivization.

21. Zola, *The Earth*, 91.

22. I do not by any means wish to suggest that violence born of revenge, hatred, and fury play no role—only that they do not exhaust the subject, as Zola and others imply. It is certainly true, as Cobb (*Police and the People*, 89–90) claims, that George Rude (*The Crowd in History, 1730–1848* [New York: Wiley, 1964]) has gone too far into turning rioters into sober, domesticated, bourgeois political actors.

explanation of human action to the level one might use to explain how the water buffalo resists its driver to establish a tolerable pace of work or why the dog steals scraps from the table. But inasmuch as I seek to understand the resistance of thinking, social beings, I can hardly fail to ignore their consciousness—the meaning they give to their acts. The symbols, the norms, the ideological forms they create constitute the indispensable background to their behavior. However partial or imperfect their understanding of the situation, they are gifted with intentions and values and purposefulness that condition their acts. This is so evident that it would hardly merit restating were it not for the lamentable tendency in behavioral science to read mass behavior directly from the statistical abstracts on income, caloric intake, newspaper circulation, or radio ownership. I seek, then, not only to uncover and describe the patterns of everyday resistance as a distinctive behavior with far-reaching implications, but to ground that description in an analysis of the conflicts of meaning and value in which these patterns arise and to which they contribute.

The relationship between thought and action is, to put it very mildly, a complicated issue. Here I wish to emphasize only two fairly straightforward points. First, neither intentions nor acts are “unmoved movers.” Acts born of intentions circle back, as it were, to influence consciousness and hence subsequent intentions and acts. Thus acts of resistance and thoughts about (or the meaning of) resistance are in *constant* communication—in constant dialogue. Second, intentions and consciousness are not tied in quite the same way to the material world as behavior is. It is possible and common for human actors to conceive of a line of action that is, at the moment, either impractical or impossible. Thus a person may dream of a revenge or a millennial kingdom of justice that may never occur. On the other hand, as circumstances change, it may become possible to act on those dreams. The realm of consciousness gives us a kind of privileged access to lines of action that may—just may—become plausible at some future date. How, for example, can we give an adequate account of any peasant rebellion without some knowledge of the shared values, the “offstage” talk, the consciousness of the peasantry prior to rebellion?²³ How, finally, can we understand everyday forms of resistance without reference to the intentions, ideas, and language of those human beings who practice it?

The study of the social consciousness of subordinate classes is important for yet another reason. It may allow us to clarify a major debate in both the Marxist and non-Marxist literature—a debate that centers on the extent to which elites

23. Lest this seem implicitly and one-sidedly to treat consciousness as prior to and in some sense causing behavior, one could just as easily recoil one step and inquire about the construction of this consciousness. Such an inquiry would necessarily begin with the social givens of the actor's position in society. Social being conditions social consciousness.

are able to impose their own image of a just social order, not simply on the behavior of non-elites, but on their consciousness as well.

The problem can be stated simply. Let us assume that we can *establish* that a given group is exploited and that, further, this exploitation takes place in a context in which the coercive force at the disposal of the elites and/or the state makes any open expression of discontent virtually impossible. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that the only behavior observable is apparently acquiescent, at least two divergent interpretations of this state of affairs are possible. One may claim that the exploited group, because of a hegemonic religious or social ideology, actually accepts its situation as a normal, even justifiable part of the social order. This explanation of passivity assumes at least a fatalistic acceptance of that social order and perhaps even an active complicity—both of which Marxists might call “mystification” or “false-consciousness.”²⁴ It typically rests on the assumption that elites dominate not only the physical means of production but the symbolic means of production as well²⁵—and that this symbolic hegemony allows them to control the very standards by which their rule is evaluated.²⁶ As Gramsci argued, elites control the “ideological sectors” of society—culture, religion, education, and media—and can thereby engineer consent for their rule. By creating and disseminating a universe of discourse and the concepts to go with it, by defining the standards of what is true, beautiful, moral, fair, and legitimate, they build a symbolic climate that prevents subordinate classes from thinking their way free. In fact, for Gramsci, the proletariat is more enslaved at the level of ideas than at the level of behavior. The historic task of “the party” is therefore less to lead a revolution than to break the symbolic miasma that blocks revolutionary thought. Such interpretations have been invoked to account for lower-class quiescence, particularly in rural societies such as India, where a

24. See the argument along these lines by Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954): 77–78.

25. In the Marxist tradition one might cite especially Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quinten Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 123–209, and Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingston (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971). Marx, to my knowledge, *never* used the term “false-consciousness,” although “the fetishism of commodities” may be read this way. But the fetishism of commodities mystifies especially the bourgeoisie, not merely subordinate classes. For a critical view of “hegemony” as it might apply to the peasantry, see James C. Scott, “Hegemony and the Peasantry,” *Politics and Society* 7, no. 3 (1977): 267–96, and chap. 7 below.

26. For other explanations of the same phenomenon, see, for example, Frank Parkin, “Class Inequality and Meaning Systems,” in his *Class Inequality and Political Order* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 79–102, and Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1970).

venerable system of rigid caste stratification is reinforced by religious sanctions. Lower castes are said to accept their fate in the Hindu hierarchy in the hope of being rewarded in the next life.²⁷

An alternative interpretation of such quiescence might be that it is to be explained by the relationships of force in the countryside and not by peasant values and beliefs.²⁸ Agrarian peace, in this view, may well be the peace of repression (remembered and/or anticipated) rather than the peace of consent or complicity.

The issues posed by these divergent interpretations are central to the analysis of peasant politics and, beyond that, to the study of class relationships in general. Much of the debate on these issues has taken place as if the choice of interpretation were more a matter of the ideological preferences of the analyst than of actual research. Without underestimating the problems involved, I believe there are a number of ways in which the question can be empirically addressed. It is possible, in other words, to say something meaningful about the relative weight of consciousness, on the one hand, and repression (in fact, memory, or potential) on the other, in restraining acts of resistance.

The argument for false-consciousness, after all, depends on the symbolic alignment of elite and subordinate class values—that is, on the assumption that the peasantry (proletariat) actually accepts most of the elite vision of the social order. What does mystification mean, if not a group's assent to the social ideology that justifies its exploitation? To the extent that an exploited group's outlook is in substantial symbolic alignment with elite values, the case for mystification is strengthened; to the extent that it holds deviant or contradictory values, the case is weakened. A close study of the subculture of a subordinate group and its relation to dominant elite values should thus give us part of the answer we seek. The evidence will seldom be cut and dried, for any group's social outlook will contain a number of diverse and even contradictory currents. It is not the mere existence of deviant subcultural themes that is notable, for they are well-nigh universal, but rather the forms they may take, the values they embody, and the emotional attachment they inspire. Thus, even in the absence of resistance, we are not without resources to address the question of false-consciousness.

To relieve the somewhat abstract nature of the argument thus far, it may be helpful to illustrate the kind of evidence that might bear directly on this issue. Suppose, for example, that the "onstage" linguistic term for sharecropping or for tenancy is one that emphasizes its fairness and justice. Suppose, further, that the term used by tenants behind the backs of landlords to describe this rela-

27. But note the efforts of lower castes to raise their ritual status and, more recently, the tendency for *harijans* to leave Hinduism altogether and convert to Islam, which makes no caste distinctions among believers.

28. See, for example, Gerrit Huizer, *Peasant Mobilization and Land Reform in Indonesia* (The Hague: Institute of Social Studies, 1972).

tionship is quite different—cynical and mocking.²⁹ Is this not plausible evidence that the tenant's view of the relationship is largely demystified—that he does not accept the elite's definition of tenancy at face value? When Haji Ayub and Haji Kadir are called *Haji "Broom,"* *Haji Kedikut,* or *Pak Ceti* behind their backs, is it not plausible evidence that their claim to land, to interest, to rents, and to respect is at least contested at the level of consciousness, if not at the level of "onstage" acts? What are we to make of lower-class religious sects (the Quakers in seventeenth-century England, Saminists in twentieth-century Java, to name only two of many) that abandon the use of honorifics to address their social betters and insist instead on low forms of address or on using words like "friend" or "brother" to describe everyone. Is this not telling evidence that the elite's libretto for the hierarchy of nobility and respect is, at the very least, not sung word for word by its subjects?

By reference to the culture that peasants fashion from their experience—their "offstage" comments and conversation, their proverbs, folksongs, and history, legends, jokes, language, ritual, and religion—it should be possible to determine to what degree, and in what ways, peasants actually accept the social order propagated by elites. Some elements of lower-class culture are of course more relevant to this issue than others. For any agrarian system, one can identify a set of key values that justify the right of an elite to the deference, land, taxes, and rent it claims. It is, in large part, an empirical matter whether such key values find support or opposition within the subculture of subordinate classes. If bandits and poachers are made into folkheroes, we can infer that transgressions of elite codes evoke a vicarious admiration. If the forms of outward deference are privately mocked, it may suggest that peasants are hardly in the thrall of a naturally ordained social order. If those who try to curry the personal favor of elites are shunned and ostracized by others of their class, we have evidence that there is a lower-class subculture with sanctioning power. Rejection of elite values, however, is seldom an across-the-board proposition, and only a close study of peasant values can define the major points of friction and correspondence. In this sense, points of friction become diagnostic only when they center on key values in the social order, grow, and harden.

THE EXPERIENCE AND CONSCIOUSNESS OF HUMAN AGENTS

It was with such issues in mind that I spent more than a year and a half in the village of Sedaka listening, asking questions, and trying to understand the issues that animated villagers during my stay among them. The result is, I hope, a close-to-the-ground, fine-grained account of class relations in a very small place (seventy families, 360 people) experiencing very large changes (the "green rev-

29. Tenancy in Central Luzon, the Philippines, is a striking case in point. Communication from Benedick Kerkvliet, University of Hawaii.

olution": in this case, the double-cropping of rice). Much of that account, though not all of it, is an account of what appears to be a losing class struggle against capitalist agricultural development and its human agents. It goes without saying that I have thought it important to listen carefully to the human agents I was studying, to their experience, to their categories, to their values, to their understanding of the situation. There are several reasons for building this kind of phenomenological approach into the study.

The first reason has to do with how social science can and ought to be conducted. It is fashionable in some of the more structuralist variants of neo-Marxism to assume that one can infer the nature of class relations in any nonsocialist Third World country directly from a few diagnostic features—the dominant mode of production, the mode and timing of insertion into the world economy, or the mode of surplus appropriation. This procedure entails a highly reductionist leap straight from one or a very few economic givens to the class situation that is presumed to follow from these givens. There are no human actors here, only mechanisms and puppets. To be sure, the economic givens are crucial; they define much, but not all, of the situation that human actors face; they place limits on the responses that are possible, imaginable. But those limits are wide and, within them, human actors fashion their own response, their own experience of class, their own history. As E. P. Thompson notes in his polemic against Althusser:

nor is it [the epistemological refusal of experience] pardonable in a Marxist, since experience is a necessary middle term between social being and social consciousness: it is experience (often class experience) which gives a coloration to culture, to values, and to thought; it is by means of experience that the mode of production exerts a determining pressure upon other activities. . . . classes arise because men and women, in determinate productive relations, identify their antagonistic interests, and come to struggle, to think, and to value in class ways: thus the process of class formation is a process of self-making, although under conditions which are given.³⁰

How else can a mode of production affect the nature of class relations except as it is mediated by human experience and interpretation? Only by capturing that experience in something like its fullness will we be able to say anything meaningful about how a given economic system influences those who constitute it and maintain it or supersede it. And, of course, if this is true for the peasantry or the proletariat, it is surely true for the bourgeoisie, the petite bourgeoisie, and even the lumpenproletariat.³¹ To omit the experience of human agents from the analysis of class relations is to have theory swallow its own tail.

30. *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 98, 106–07.

31. It is also true for the regular pattern of human activities that we call institutions. For example—note well, structuralists—the state.

A second reason for putting the experience of human agents at the center of the analysis concerns the concept of class itself. It is all very well to identify a collection of individuals who all occupy a comparable position in relation to the means of production—a class-in-itself. But what if such objective, structural determinations find little echo in the consciousness and meaningful activity of those who are thus identified?³² In place of simply assuming a one-to-one correspondence between “objective” class structure and consciousness, is it not far preferable to understand how those structures are apprehended by flesh-and-blood human actors? Class, after all, does not exhaust the total explanatory space of social actions. Nowhere is this more true than within the peasant village, where class may compete with kinship, neighborhood, faction, and ritual links as foci of human identity and solidarity. Beyond the village level, it may also compete with ethnicity, language group, religion, and region as a focus of loyalty. Class may be applicable to some situations but not to others; it may be reinforced or crosscut by other ties; it may be far more important for the experience of some than of others. Those who are tempted to dismiss all principles of human action that contend with class identity as “false-consciousness” and to wait for Althusser’s “determination in the last instance” are likely to wait in vain. In the meantime, the messy reality of multiple identities will continue to be the experience out of which social relations are conducted. Neither peasants nor proletarians deduce their identities directly or solely from the mode of production, and the sooner we attend to the concrete experience of class as it is lived, the sooner we will appreciate both the obstacles to, and the possibilities for, class formation.

A further justification for a close analysis of class relations is that in the village, and not only there, classes travel under strange and deceptive banners. They are not apprehended as ghostly, abstract concepts but in the all-too-human form of specific individuals and groups, specific conflicts and struggles. Piven and Cloward capture the specificity of this experience for the working class:

First, people experience deprivation and oppression within a concrete setting, not as the end product of large and abstract processes, and it is the concrete experience that molds their discontent into specific grievances against specific targets. Workers experience the factory, the speeding rhythm of the assembly line, the foremen, the spies, the guards, the owner, and the pay check. *They do not experience monopoly capitalism.*³³

In the same fashion the Malay peasant experiences increasing land rents, stingy

32. See the persuasive argument along these lines by James Brow, “Some Problems in the Analysis of Agrarian Classes in South Asia,” *Peasant Studies* 9, no. 1 (Fall 1981): 15–33.

33. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 20, emphasis added.

landlords, ruinous interest rates from moneylenders, combine-harvesters that replace him, and petty bureaucrats who treat him shabbily. He does not *experience* the cash nexus or the capitalist pyramid of finance that makes of those landlords, combine-harvester owners, moneylenders, and bureaucrats only the penultimate link in a complex process. Small wonder, then, that the language of class in the village should bear the birthmarks of its distinctive origin. Villagers do not call Pak Haji Kadir an agent of finance capital; they call him Kadir *Ceti* because it was through the Chettiar moneylending caste, which dominated rural credit from about 1910 until World War II, that the Malay peasant most forcibly experienced finance capital. The fact that the word *Chettiar* has similar connotations for millions of peasants in Vietnam and Burma as well is a tribute to the homogenization of experience which the capitalist penetration of Southeast Asia brought in its wake. Nor is it simply a question of recognizing a disguise and uncovering the *real* relationship that lies behind it. For the disguise, the metaphor, is part of the real relationship. The Malays historically experienced the moneylender as a moneylender *and* as a Chettiar—that is, as a foreigner and a non-Muslim. Similarly, the Malay typically experiences the shopkeeper and the rice buyer not only as a creditor and wholesaler but as a person of another race and another religion. Thus the concept of class as it is lived is nearly always an alloy containing base metals; its concrete properties, its uses, are those of the alloy and not of the pure metals it may contain. Either we take it as we find it or we abandon the empirical study of class altogether.

That the experienced concept of class should be found embedded in a particular history of social relations is hardly to be deplored. It is this rootedness of the experience that gives it its power and its meaning. When the experience is widely shared, the symbols that embody class relations can come to have an extraordinary evocative power. One can imagine, in this context, how individual grievances become collective grievances and how collective grievances may take on the character of a class-based myth tied, as always, to local experience. Thus, a particular peasant may be a tenant of a landlord whom he regards as particularly oppressive. He may grumble; he may even have fantasies about telling the landlord what he thinks of him or even darker thoughts of arson or homicide. If this is an isolated, personal grievance, the affair is likely to stop there—at fantasy. If, however, many tenants find themselves in the same boat, either because they share the same landlord or because their landlords treat them in comparable ways, there arises the basis for a collective grievance, collective fantasy, and even collective acts. Peasants are then likely to find themselves trading stories about bad landlords and, since some landlords are likely to be more notorious than others, they become the focus of elaborate stories, the repository of the collective grievances of much of the community against that kind of landlord in general. Thus, we have the legend of Haji Broom, which has become a kind of metaphorical shorthand for large-scale landlordism in the region. Thus,

we have poems about Haji Kedikut, which are not so much stories about individuals as a symbol for an entire class of Haji landlords.

If there had ever been (and there has not) a large-scale movement of rebellion against landlords in Kedah, we can be certain that something of the spirit of those legends would have been reflected in action. The way was already symbolically prepared. But the central point to be emphasized is simply that the concept of class, if it is to be found at all, is to be found encoded in concrete, shared experience that reflects both the cultural material and historical givens of its carriers. In the West, the concept of *food* is expressed most often by *bread*. In most of Asia, it means *rice*.³⁴ The shorthand for *capitalist* in America may be *Rockefeller*, with all the historical connotations of that name; the shorthand for *bad landlord* in Sedaka is *Haji Broom*, with all the historical connotations of that name.

For all these reasons, the study of class relations in Sedaka, as elsewhere, must of necessity be as much a study of meaning and experience as it is of behavior considered narrowly. No other procedure is possible inasmuch as behavior is never self-explanatory. One need cite only the famous example of a rapid closing and opening of a single eyelid, used by Gilbert Ryle and elaborated on by Clifford Geertz, to illustrate the problem.³⁵ Is it a twitch or a wink? Mere observation of the physical act gives no clue. If it is a wink, what kind of wink is it: one of conspiracy, of ridicule, of seduction? Only a knowledge of the culture, the shared understandings, of the actor and his or her observers and confederates can begin to tell us; and even then we must allow for possible misunderstandings. It is one thing to know that landlords have raised cash rents for rice land; it is another to know what this behavior means for those affected. Perhaps, just perhaps, tenants regard the rise in rents as reasonable and long overdue. Perhaps they regard the rise as oppressive and intended to drive them off the land. Perhaps opinion is divided. Only an inquiry into the experience of tenants, the meaning they attach to the event, can offer us the possibility of an answer. I say "the possibility of an answer" because it may be in the interest of tenants

34. "Man does not live by bread alone." But "bread" may come to mean more than just food; it may mean the wherewithal for living or cash, as in "Can you loan me some bread, man?" In Malay society, the proverb *Jangan pecah periok nasi orang* (Don't break someone else's rice pot) means "don't threaten someone else's source of livelihood."

35. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973), 6-9. An excellent summary of this intellectual position may be found in Richard J. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 173-236. As Bernstein notes, "These intentional descriptions, meanings, and interpretations are not merely subjective states of mind which can be correlated with external behavior; they are constitutive of the activities and practices of our social and political lives" (229-30).

to misrepresent their opinion, and thus interpretation may be tricky. But without that information we are utterly at sea. A theft of grain, an apparent snub, an apparent gift—their import is inaccessible to us unless we can construct it from the meanings only human actors can provide. In this sense, we concentrate at least as much on the experience of behavior as on behavior itself, as much on history as carried in people's heads as on "the flow of events,"³⁶ as much on how class is perceived and understood as on "objective class relations."

The approach taken here certainly relies heavily on what is known as phenomenology or ethnomethodology.³⁷ But it is not confined to that approach, for it is only slightly more true that people speak for themselves than that behavior speaks for itself. Pure phenomenology has its own pitfalls. A good deal of behavior, including speech, is automatic and unreflective, based on understandings that are seldom if ever raised to the level of consciousness. A careful observer must provide an interpretation of such behavior that is more than just a repetition of the "commonsense" knowledge of participants. As an interpretation, it has to be judged by the standards of its logic, its economy, and its consistency with other known social facts. Human agents may also provide contradictory accounts of their own behavior, or they may wish to conceal their understanding from the observer or from one another. Hence, the same standards of interpretation apply, although the ground is admittedly treacherous. Beyond this, there simply are factors in any situation that shed light on the action of human agents, but of which they can scarcely be expected to be aware. An international credit crisis, changes in worldwide demand for food grains, a quiet factional struggle in the cabinet that affects agrarian policy, small changes in the genetic makeup of seed grain, for example, may each have a decided impact on local social relations whether or not they are known to the actors involved. Such knowledge is what an outside observer can often add to a description of the situation as a supplement to, *not a substitute for*, the description that human agents themselves provide. For however partial or even mistaken the experienced reality of the human agents, it is that experienced reality that provides the basis for their understanding and their action. Finally, there is no such thing as a complete account of experienced reality, no "full verbal transcript of the conscious experience."³⁸ The fullness of the transcript is limited both by the empirical and analytical interests of the transcriber—in this case, class relations broadly construed—and by the practical limits of time and space.

36. Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," *American Scholar* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 175.

37. See, for example, Roy Turner, ed., *Ethnomethodology: Selected Readings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

38. John Dunn, "Practising History and Social Science on 'Realist' Assumptions," in *Action and Interpretation: Studies in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, ed. C. Hookway and P. Pettit (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), 160.

What is attempted here, then, is a plausible account of class relations in Sedaka that relies as much as possible on the evidence, experience, and descriptions of action which the participants have themselves provided. At numerous points I have supplemented that description with interpretations of my own, for I am well aware of how ideology, the rationalization of personal interest, day-to-day social tactics, or even politeness may affect a participant's account. But never, I hope, have I *replaced* their account with my own. Instead I have tried to validate my interpretation by showing how it "removes anomalies within, or adds information to, the best description which the participant is able to offer." For, as Dunn argues,

What we cannot properly do is to claim to *know* that we understand him or his action better than he does himself without access to the best description which he is able to offer. . . . The criterion of proof for the validity of a description or interpretation of an action is the economy and accuracy with which it handles the full text of the agent's description.