

## ON THE USEFULNESS OF THE INCOME-SHARING THESIS\*

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[The intention in this paper is to pursue a debate that began in the preceding issue of *Kajian Malaysia* when Akimi Fujimoto replied to a critical review of his "Income Sharing Among Malay Peasants." The initial debate is summarized, Fujimoto's position being further questioned in order to bring out crucial issues which relegate the income-sharing thesis to the real or mythical past. These concern the commoditization of labour, the role of the State, the dynamic nature of agricultural villages and households, class formation and entrepreneurship, harmony and conflicts and, overall, the articulation of agriculture with other sectors and activities.

*Tujuan rencana ini ialah untuk menyambung pembahasan yang timbul di dalam jilid Kajian Malaysia lalu di mana Akimi Fujimoto telah membalas ulasan yang kritikal terhadap bukunya, "Income Sharing Among Peasants". Rencana ini memberi ringkasan pembahasan setakat ini dan menimbulkan beberapa isu penting yang cuba mengeneipkan tesis perkongsian pendapatan. Isu-isu tersebut meliputi pembangunan buruh sebagai komoditi, peranan negara, kedudukan dinamik kampung-kampung dan isirumah-isirumah petani, pembentukan kelas dan pengusahawanan, perpaduan dan perbalahan, dan pada keseluruhannya, artikulasi sektor pertanian dengan sektor-sektor lain.]*

*No other of the arts draws opposite conclusions: dialectic and rhetoric alone do this. Both these arts draw opposite conclusions impartially. Nevertheless, the underlying facts do not lend themselves equally well to the contrary views.*

Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, book 1, Chapter 1, 1355 a 34-37. Oxford translation.

I wish to thank Akimi Fujimoto for his courteous and skilful reply to my criticism of his book.<sup>1</sup> However, since it still leaves a number of major questions unresolved, I would like to pursue it further. In order to do so, it is necessary to recall, in summary form, the major points of my original review and, in turn, of Fujimoto's reply. Brief comments on the latter will allow me to develop further what appear to be the more fundamental issues.

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\*The author wishes to thank Don McTaggart for his helpful comments and corrections.

<sup>1</sup>*Income Sharing among Malay Peasants. A Study of Land Tenure and Rice Production* (Singapore, Singapore University Press, 1983). The review as well as Akimi Fujimoto's reply appeared in *Kajian Malaysia*: Vol. III, no 1, June 1985.

## Summary of the Original Debate

### The Objections

My critique of the income-sharing thesis, as presented by Fujimoto, was based on five major arguments. The first contention concerned the so-called ethics of subsistence and sharing: these appeared to be defined in an entirely subjective way, the ideology of sharing being considered as the proof of a presumed fact. The second was that agriculture and particularly agricultural relations were examined in total isolation from other activities and relations, an omission which prevents the proper understanding of social processes involving village communities. The third criticism dealt with the measurement of the value of land and of ownership *per se*; it was pointed out that Fujimoto, contrary to some of his assertions, did not in fact measure all advantages of ownership, particularly those which relate to social prestige, security, etc., but only the immediate physical and economic productivity of land. The fourth point referred to the actual modes of income-sharing identified by Fujimoto. It was claimed that these so-called modes of transfer were in fact operating, contrary to Fujimoto's view, more to the advantage of owners than to the advantage of others, particularly in the cases of employment of wage labour and the payment of *zakat*. My fifth and concluding criticism was closely related to the four previous ones: Fujimoto's villages seem to be located on the island of Utopia; they harbor no conflicts and gender relations are totally harmonious; non-agricultural employment is unimportant; cities, industries, political parties, and State policies appear equally irrelevant.

### Fujimoto's Reply

Fujimoto begins his reply by stating that I questioned the structure of his book and then he proceeds to defend it. In fact, I did not mean to question his framework; it was simply implied, apparently without sufficient clarity, that Fujimoto's approach was in fact closely related to the so-called orthodox analysis he criticizes. More importantly, he recognizes that I questioned his "theory and facts". Here he states that his formulation of "the concept of income-sharing" represents the significant contribution of the study. I certainly agree that this is his major goal, mine being to challenge that definition.

In replying to my criticism of his treatment of empirical data, he writes that he was "unable to present an analysis of the whole use of family labour", because he did not collect the information on the subject. One feels justified in asking why, considering what Fujimoto had written at the outset of his book, with reference to previous findings of his.

...in Malaysia, where tenants actually obtained a larger net revenue, after paying rent, than owner farmers... Yet, these are not conclusive and, in evaluation of the actual effects of land tenure systems on farm income, incomes other than rice must also be taken into account.<sup>2</sup>

Later on in his reply, he adds that he had indeed provided *some* "hard data" on employment; that is quite right.<sup>3</sup> But that information concerned only *farm employment* to the total exclusion of any other form of employment. So the question still stands: how can the argument of "lowered income" for the landlords be reiterated without proper attention being given to alternative sources of economic and social advancement? Fujimoto also replies that farmers and landlords were interviewed "only after the underemployment of family labour and lowering of household income had been confirmed by statistical data". Not only are the concepts of household and household income nowhere defined by Fujimoto, but the existence of that co-called underemployment is not confirmed: it is simply proclaimed repeatedly, or referred to as "probably".<sup>4</sup> Even in his attempt to harness John Purcal's data, he had to admit: "unfortunately, I do not have the details of family labour use outside rice cultivation among the sample".<sup>5</sup> In brief, a careful examination of Fujimoto's survey procedure, as revealed in his book, leads one to conclude that his hypotheses about income transfer remain just that: hypotheses.

My criticism of his ahistorical and ageographical treatment of Malay village society is not refuted but simply rejected by Fujimoto. He reiterates what he had said in his book, namely that studying villages in two widely different locations (Province Wellesley and Kelantan), without reference to regional economic and political dynamics, provides the necessary historical and geographical depth for his argument. To that, nothing can or need be added.

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<sup>2</sup>Akimi Fujimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*, p. 193.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, p. 194.

<sup>5</sup>Idem; John T. Purcal, *Rice Economy: A Case Study of Four Villages in West Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur, University of Malaya Press, 1971).

With reference to my surprise at the apparent lack of any conflicts within the communities studied, Fujimoto retorts that indeed he witnessed no "class conflicts". It should be emphasized here that I myself did not use that expression as such but simply wrote of "conflicts" and "class formation". The distinction is not just semantic but fundamental, as I shall try and show further on. To back his statement concerning the stability of social relations and, hence, the absence of conflicts, Fujimoto repeats that this absence is related to the prevalence of the traditional norms of mutual assistance. The consistency and internal coherence of the reasoning are unquestionable: income-sharing and conflicts are incompatible. Elementary. Here again, nothing can be added.

After answering what he identified as my basic criticisms, Fujimoto raises three additional smaller issues. First he refers to table 6.3 entitled "Reasons for renting out rice land, given by the landlords" and writes, quite correctly, that the table was accompanied by a footnote indicating that landlords were indeed allowed to give more than one reason.<sup>6</sup> I will therefore state my question even more directly: how can the total number of answers be equal to the total number of respondents, as is the case in the table in question? Incidentally, the same problem applies to table 6.4 entitled "Characteristics of good landlords and good tenants as expressed by tenants and landlords respectively".<sup>7</sup>

In dealing with the second "minor" issue, Fujimoto again quite correctly writes that the never stated "that private land ownership in agriculture was an obstacle" but simply that "ownership of rice land was a rather costly aspect of rice farming". So, one is surely entitled to ask: why do owners own land after all? Or more pointedly: since all those who own rice land consciously lose money because they are good, why do they hold on to land? So that they can be good?

In his final point, Fujimoto responds to my criticism of his interpretation of *zakat* by implying that I am ignorant of the regional nuances pertaining to the collection of that Islamic religious tax in Malaysia. I indeed am no expert on *zakat*, yet I am not unaware of its basic characteristics. The results of my own relatively recent fieldwork in Kedah (1980, 1981, 1982) and Province Wellesley,<sup>8</sup> those of Diana Wong's study of a village in

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<sup>6</sup>Akimi Fujimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>8</sup>In recent publications based on that fieldwork, I have not dealt in detail with the question of *zakat* but intend to do it soon, if possible after further field verification.

Kedah<sup>9</sup> and finally Fujimoto's own data, as presented in his book, all concur. *Zakat* is generally a mode of surplus extraction which ensures better social control and is more beneficial, materially and socially, to some members of the village elite than to the poorer members of the community. There remains, of course, the problem that Fujimoto does not seem to acknowledge that the data presented in his own book support that interpretation.<sup>10</sup> With reference to his study villages, Fujimoto writes:

the larger the absolute amount of *zakat* distributed within the village, the higher the proportion of total *zakat* going to mosque officials and Islamic associates ...mosque officials and Islamic associates in Hutan Cengal... the amount received by them constituted a rather high proportion of the total.<sup>11</sup>

More precisely, in that village, two households were left with 31% of the total *zakat* rice distributed among 18 households after the 1977/78 main season.<sup>12</sup> These two households, those of the mosque official and of an Islamic associate, together owned seven times more land than did the five households referred to by Fujimoto as very poor.<sup>13</sup> Such contradictions to Fujimoto's thesis of meaningful income transfer are quite apparent in the very data he presents concerning three of the four study villages,<sup>14</sup> and his attempt to explain these contradictions away does not appear very convincing.<sup>15</sup> For, although his data do show clearly that the village poor gain some benefit from *zakat*, it also shows that among those who do not need extra rice, some receive nearly as much and in some cases even more!

Such debates on data interpretation, while not to be dismissed, should not however distract us from the broader and more fundamental issues.

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<sup>9</sup>Diana Wong, *The Social Organization of Peasant Reproduction: a Village in Kedah* (PhD thesis, University of Bielefeld, 1984), p. 53 and 295 sq.

<sup>10</sup>Akimi Fujimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 182 to 185 particularly tables 10.4 and 10.5, p. 183 and 184.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid*, p. 185.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid*, table 10.5, p. 184.

<sup>13</sup>*Idem*.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid*, p. 183 and 184; these villages are Guar Tok Said and Guar Kepah in Province Wellesley and Hutan Cengal in Kelantan.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid*, p. 185.

## The Dynamics of Agricultural Evolution

Works like that of Fujimoto are important if only because they focus on social practises, in this case that of so called income-sharing, to which references are frequently found in the literature, maybe more frequently than among the very people who are purported to practise them! But these works may yield ambiguous results; in their attempt, through a sometimes sophisticated discourse, to elucidate the exceptional, their authors leave in the dark all other practises and processes, even some which are closely related to the object of study.

This is not to say the village studies are not important; on the contrary, they are indispensable to the understanding of agricultural and rural processes. Nor is the issue raised here that of representativeness. Nor, finally, does it mean that all examination of village communities should proceed from a global viewpoint. What is implied however is that social theory building which petrifies its object is of limited validity and can even be very misleading. Agriculture, labour relations, households and village communities are never static; they are dynamic and, in some cases, particularly so.<sup>16</sup> At times, historical processes accelerate or at least appear to, because of their exceptional visibility. That has been the case in the padi plains of peninsular Malaysia for more than a decade, a fact which renders Fujimoto's study of villages "in their cocoon" all the more surprising. In fact, this method, both widespread and seductive, even if used a thousand times, will always yield the same ambiguous results.<sup>17</sup> These may be unquestionable in their isolation, but they *remain* entirely divorced from the real dynamics of agricultural *evolution*.

## The Importance of the State

Among the more fundamental characteristics of current Malaysian agriculture are the acceleration of articulation with other sectors of the economy and the omnipresence of State intervention. To be sure, State intervention in agriculture is nothing new in the peninsula but few people would question its increasing intensity.<sup>18</sup> This is quite evident in settlement and resettlement policies, with lowland irrigated agriculture as well as

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<sup>16</sup>On this point, see Diana Wong, *op. cit.*, p. 327 sq.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Yujiro Hayami and Masao Kikuchi, *Asian Village Economy at the Crossroads* (Tokyo, University of Tokyo Press, 1981) and my review which appeared in *Pacific Affairs*, 55: 4, 1983. p. 735-737.

<sup>18</sup>For a very recent contribution on British intervention in agriculture during the colonial period, see Lim Teck Ghee "British Colonial Administration and the "Ethnic Division of Labour" in Malaysia", *Kajian Malaysia*, 11: 2, 1985, p. 28-66.

inland frontier development being the object of integrated policies, or at least of attempted integration.<sup>19</sup> The map of Malaysian agriculture is more and more the map of territories directly or indirectly administered by the State and its agencies.<sup>20</sup> The point here is not to criticize that state of affairs but to emphasize that any study of current social processes among Malay peasants that does not recognize the omnipresence and overwhelming influence of State policies is bound to be off the mark.<sup>21</sup> This was explicitly recognized recently in two major studies proceeding from widely different perspectives. Firstly in a World Bank report<sup>22</sup> and secondly by Diana Wong in the concluding statement to her rich and challenging study of a village in the Kubang Pasu district of Kedah.

Far too little attention has been paid to the role of the state or the non-padi sector which have contributed to the specific form which the Green Revolution has taken in Malaysia.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, as Diana Wong explicitly recognizes, close relations between agriculture and other activities and sectors are certainly not a post-colonial creation: such links were obviously quite important well before the advent of the Malayan and Malaysian development plans.<sup>24</sup> However, the current intensity and development of the linkages between industry and agriculture have little in common with what they were twenty years ago, particularly in rice cultivation, with much more frequent double cropping, and the use of industrial inputs, mechanization, etc.

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<sup>19</sup>See Rodolphe De Koninck "Enjeux et strategies spatiales de l'Etat en Malaysia", *Herodote*, 22, 1981, p. 84-115.

<sup>20</sup>This is well illustrated in: Government of Malaysia, *Mid-Term Review of the Fourth Malaysian Plan, 1981-1985* (Kuala Lumpur 1984), p. 234.

<sup>21</sup>A documented and broader analysis of the nature of State control over Malaysian agriculture is presented in R. De Koninck "Les politiques du development agricole en Malaysia ou l'impatience de l'Etat tutelaire", *Archipel* (Paris), 1986, no 29 (to appear).

<sup>22</sup>World Bank, *Country Economic Report. Malaysia. Structural Change and Stabilization*. World Bank report no 4492, 1983, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup>Diana Wong, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

<sup>24</sup>For a good graphic illustration of this point, see Lim Teck Ghee, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

## Commodity Production and Labour Employment

Consequently, the conditions under which padi producers operate evolve: peasant reproduction is increasingly conditioned by commodity production over and above – and sometimes at the expense of – subsistence production, a process which in turn influences the relationship between land and labour. With the growth in the productivity of land, the overall social value of land can only increase. So does the competition for land among *and beyond* a community which, for a while, still relies on modes of transfer more akin to subsistence production. Land which already represented a means of control over the labour of kin<sup>25</sup>, particularly children, can become a central tool of social advancement and not only of preminence. This pattern is also strongly influenced by the seasonal, temporal, spatial and newer technical constraints which have an impact on the increase in the productivity of land and, hence, on expanded reproduction. Access to land takes on added meaning for now it allows the pursuit of control over *over labour*. As Diana Wong writes, with reference to the Green Revolution in the Kedah Plain: “Its doubling of demand for labour created a market for labour which completely overshadowed the market for land”.<sup>26</sup> But the land-labour relation was not to remain static: demands for higher remuneration by those who were increasingly selling their labour were bound to create pressure on those caught in the spiral of accumulation (not necessarily only the larger land owners): mechanization was “called” to the rescue.<sup>27</sup> And, once again, access to land was further enhanced as a *means* of reaping more relative as well as absolute surplus-value.<sup>28</sup>

These processes were already well under way during the seventies<sup>29</sup> and in the regions where Fujimoto’s study villages are located. This is especially true of the northern district of Province Wellesley and of villages such as Guar Kepah. This area has been caught up by waves of technological innovation and related social change to the same extent as the areas within

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<sup>25</sup>On this issue, see Pierre Bourdieu *Le sens pratique* (Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1980), particularly p. 249-270.

<sup>26</sup>Diana Wong, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. R. De Koninck, “Of Rice, Men, Women and Machines”. *Jurnal Ekonomik Malaysia*, no. 3-4, 1981, p. 20-37.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Muhammad Ikmal Said, *The Evolution of Large Paddy Farms in the Muda Area, Kedah* (Pulau Pinang, Pusat Penyelidikan Dasar, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Siri Monograph no. 8, 1985), particularly p. 41-49.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid*, p. 15 sq.

the Muda scheme itself. According to a detailed 1975 survey, villages in the northern district had undergone greater change.<sup>30</sup> In one of these, Paya Keladi, located about five kilometers away from Guar Kepah and Guar Tok Said (both studied by Fujimoto), the heads of thirty households that had been interviewed in 1973 and 1975<sup>31</sup> were visited again in 1980 and 1981; in fact, some of these "households" and undergone major changes, to the extent that the very definition of household becomes problematic (as well shall see later). Whatever the case, as alluded to in a preliminary report,<sup>32</sup> the more evident trends were the following: firstly, among the ten better-off households (as measured by income *and* consumption levels), in almost every case those who operated more padi land, the level of education attained by the children was markedly above average. In fact, in several cases, these children had, since 1975, left the household altogether for salaried jobs in other localities. Secondly, the more successful padi cultivators were mostly owner-tenants. Thirdly, in each of these more dynamic and generally larger households, there was at least one "resident" holding a non manual job off the fields. This job, which could be that of a broker for a combine harvester owner, always brought economic returns higher than those this member would have been responsible for, had he worked full-time on the farm. Fourthly, these households were (at least in 1980) the largest employers of salaried labour. However and fifthly, as observed in 1981 and 1982, these households were the first to rely heavily on the use of combine harvesters thereby reducing their reliance on salaried labour. Sixthly and finally two female leaders of labour gangs (both for transplanting and harvesting) testified in 1981 that, in Paya Keladi *as well as in surrounding villages*, there were conflicts between themselves and those villagers in charge of operating larger padi farms and who were turning to the use of combine harvesters. The problem was such that these women had

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<sup>30</sup>Cf. David S. Gibbons, Rodolphe De Koninck and Ibrahim Hasan, *Agricultural Modernization, Poverty and Inequality. The Distributional Impact of the Green Revolution in Regions of Malaysia and Indonesia*. (Saxon House, Farnborough, 1980), p. 36.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Rodolphe De Koninck, David S. Gibbons and Ibrahim Hasan, *The Green Revolution, Methods and Techniques of Assessment. A Handbook of a Study in Regions of Malaysia and Indonesia*. (Quebec, Université Laval, Notes et documents de recherche no 7, 1977), p. 20 and 37.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Rodolphe De Koninck "Work, Space and Power in the Rice Fields of Kedah: Reflections On the Dispossession of a Territory" in Douglas R. Webster, *The Southeast Asian Environment* (Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1983), p. 92.

to range farther and farther from their villages in order to sell their labour. This situation, which has evolved further since then (higher wages being obtained by men for the new tasks that need to be fulfilled because of the introduction of the big machines) prevailed among villages where Fujimoto had seen no conflict and could attribute no importance to non-agricultural activities and revenue.

### Villages and Households

The social processes I have summarized and briefly documented suggest that village and household studies which do not at the outset recognize the dynamic nature of their object are bound to err. Diana Wong reaches the same conclusion.

The point is clear, I believe, that social processes within the village cannot be understood in terms of the village alone.... We may thus conclude that while padi cultivation was the major occupation, village households were engaged in a multiplicity of income earning activities which were taking place increasingly outside of the village economy.<sup>33</sup>

Precisely because of the articulation of agriculture with other activities, the question of the definition of households as well as the problem of the identification of class differentiation take on added complexity. Households as such are continuously evolving in size and structure, in direct relation with the occupations of the members. As pointed out by Diana Wong, "the household does not always function as income-pooling unit".<sup>34</sup> In fact, quite frequently, particularly among the more fortunate household, members will remain nominally attached but will indeed be autonomous, whether they live under the family roof or when they study in far-away localities or work as civil servants in Kuala Lumpur. This implies that the evaluation of the social path of rural families, or of any family for that matter, should take into account members who in some cases are marginalized, in other cases gain access to better opportunities outside of agriculture, surely two very different processes which allow for the identification of class formation. As Muhammad Ikmal has recently cautioned, the same problem applies to the definition of farm units.<sup>35</sup> In fact, as these

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<sup>33</sup>Diana Wong, *op. cit.*, p. 66 and 71.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid*, p. 117.

<sup>35</sup>Muhammad Ikmal Said, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

authors (Wong and Muhammad Ikmal) along with others have shown,<sup>36</sup> changes occur over time in the composition of households, in their tenorial status as farm operators, and in the size that these "farms" represent. These changes are at the heart of agricultural evolution. Whether or not one adheres to the "life-cycle hypothesis",<sup>37</sup> it is quite apparent to all that competition for land, which allows for the application of surplus-value generating devices – the more mechanized the better – goes well beyond a closed cycle of growth and attrition rates for the farming households. In other words, some people break out of the cycle to become richer, some to become poorer.<sup>38</sup> How that happens should be a fundamental object of analysis.

The question of village limits should also be raised. It is well known that the physical boundaries of Malay villages are not always clear.<sup>39</sup> More often than not, they are evanescent and are perceived differently by different "villagers". Which does not imply that padi growing communities do not relate to a given work space but rather that, given the traditional political structure of rural Malay society and the current spatial dynamics of padi land operation, *villages* are hard to define in time and space.<sup>40</sup> The difficulty is so much greater considering the dynamics of household structure and activities. Can villages be defined as composed of a number of households that are themselves not clearly definable!

### **Class Formation and the Successful Operators**

Villages and households are hard to isolate, to pin down so to speak, precisely because of their increasing articulation with other spatial structures, other communities, and because of their dynamism. This is

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<sup>36</sup>Cf. in particular D.S. Gibbons, Lim Teck Ghee, G.R. Elliston and Shukor Kassim, *Land Tenure in the Muda Irrigation Area: Final Report, Part 2: Findings* (Pulau Pinang, Pusat Penyelidikan Dasar, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1981).

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid*, p. 119 sq.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. *ibid*, p. 120.

<sup>39</sup>Cf. Joel Rouffignat, *Villages en development. Use typologie de villages malaysiens et atjihais* (Quebec, universite Laval, unpublished M.A. thesis, 1975).

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Conner Bailey, *The Sociology of Production in Rural Malay Society* (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 14 sq.

particularly true of the padi growing households which operate as owner-tenants. It was pointed out clearly in a number of studies,<sup>41</sup> including Fujimoto's own,<sup>42</sup> that, more often than not, the more entrepreneurial farmers were owner-tenants. Hence, the argument I made briefly in my original criticism and to which Fujimoto did not reply.

In the Kedah plain *stricto sensu* as well as in its northern Province Wellesley extension, those who, in the recent past, have benefited most of all from the relatively low rental prices of padi land have been entrepreneurs, people who in many cases already own large parcels of land. It has certainly not been the poorer peasants; the latter have in fact been losing access to land operation for reasons which, although they have become increasingly evident over the last decade or so, still need to be underlined. Accelerating technological innovations have allowed for a substantial rise first in land productivity then, second, in labour productivity particularly with mechanization.<sup>43</sup> The resulting increase in absolute surplus value as well as in relative surplus value that can be obtained from land operation has attracted renewed or new, urban based, interests in padi cultivation. The various stages of this scenario have been clearly summarized by Muhammad Ikmal.<sup>44</sup>

Of course, it would be naive to try and identify with precision a class of capitalist large landowners or large land operators. However the very dynamism of these entrepreneurial farmers who rent in, lease out and even purchase land<sup>45</sup> has little to do with the sacrificing behaviour which, as Fujimoto would have it, still governs tenurial as well as labour relations in the padi fields of the region.

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<sup>41</sup>See, for example, Gibbons *et al*, *op. cit.*, p. 128 sq; De Koninck, 1981, *op. cit.*, Muhammad Ikmal, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>42</sup>Fujimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>43</sup>I have made these points, clearly I think, in a number of publications, for example in R. De Koninck "The Integration of the Peasantry Examples from Malaysia and Indonesia", *Pacific Affairs*, 52: 2, 1979, p. 263-293 or in "Comment capturer le potentiel productif de la petite paysannerie", *Anthropologie et sociétés*, 3: 3, 1979, p. 87-107.

<sup>44</sup>Muhammad Ikmal, *op. cit.*, see in particular p. 85-89.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid*, p. 82.

The very spatial and social spread in the assets of these entrepreneurs does not allow for a static definition of social classes. The latter are in perpetual formation and are articulated at several scales which all apply beyond the limits of village communities: classes can only form with outside articulation. But class *relations* do exist and are evident within villages to the extent that they are increasingly mediated through the market: and a major commodity on that market is labour. This commoditization of labour has become the fundamental and dynamic basis of class differentiation. This does not necessarily imply that labour employers and labour sellers are camped on opposite sides of a barricade. In a context still predominantly but far from exclusively "agrarian", class relations and class tensions rarely erupt in open conflicts, in pitch battles: tensions *and* conflicts are particularly muted, scattered spatially and socially, to an even greater extent when the State is so omnipresent as a mediator<sup>46</sup> and the elite's ideological hold on the village poor is still so pervasive as Fujimoto himself has so brilliantly demonstrated.

Control of labour then appears a crucial issue. While this is not the place to develop such an argument in detail, its historical as well as contemporary validity should be briefly alluded to.

The relationship found to be more useful for comparative social analysis is one which is mediated by the appropriation of labour, whether it be embodied in goods, services or symbols. When societies are examined in terms of the transfer of labour, a number of systems of labour exploitation can be uncovered, each with its own reproductive structures.<sup>47</sup>

This appropriation of labour as a means of achieving and maintaining social eminence goes back, in the areas under study, to well before the days of the Green Revolution. But the exploitation of kin, essentially through control of land, which still applies to-day to some extent,<sup>48</sup> has gradually been giving place to the exploitation of labour in the free market. The larger employers of this labour, whether provided by relatives or non relatives, are by definition the larger land operators: owners, owner-tenants or even tenants.

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<sup>46</sup>On this issue, see De Koninck, *op. cit.*, 1986.

<sup>47</sup>Patrick Sullivan, *Social Relations of Dependence in a Malay State: Nineteenth Century Perak* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, monograph no. 10, 1982?, p. XVIII.

<sup>48</sup>On this issue, see Diana Wong, *op. cit.*, p. 37 and R. De Koninck, "Our Work, our Problems, your Solutions. Murmurs from the Muda Scheme", *Akademika*, 22, 1983, p. 3-19; the classic source is Claude Meillassoux, *Anthropologie économique des Gouro de Côte d'Ivoire* (Paris, Mouton, 1979).

The fact that in recent years such entrepreneurial households might have reduced their reliance on hired labour, either to fall back on the use of more household labour or to rely more on mechanization or different agricultural methods (broadcasting instead of transplanting), suggests the existence of at least three interrelated and dynamic processes. First, the productivity of farm labour has improved to such an extent that the wage demands of those who provide it have increased the "need" for mechanization. Second, the comparative advantage of off-farm labour over the value generated by certain types of farm labour has decreased or simply been fluctuating. Third, the demand for land to be cultivated with padi has, as documented by Muhammad Ikmal<sup>49</sup> and as stated above, strongly disturbed so-called traditional tenurial practises. The point to be emphasized here is that these dynamic processes were well under way and well documented at the time of Fujimoto's field work.

What would then be some of the major characteristics of the more successful operators? The results of Diana Wong's and Muhammad Ikmal's studies, only recently made available,<sup>50</sup> seem to confirm the tendencies that I observed in 1980, 1981 and 1982 and that I already referred to above concerning the village of Paya Keladi. First, larger scale operators hire proportionately more labour and sometimes rely almost exclusively on hired hands.<sup>51</sup> Second, if and when mechanization is intensified, the proportional reliance on household labour might rise again. This fall back on family labour is not necessarily exclusive to the more successful operators. Because of the above mentioned competition between labour and capital and hence the greater overall cash cost of land operation, some small operators also have to be content with relying more on their own manual labour. Third, when household labour is withdrawn from farming, it frequently concerns "females between the age of 15-25 who are either unmarried or nursing and likely to be performing "productive" work of higher economic value".<sup>52</sup> But as Diana Wong shows, this is dependent on the size and structure of the households, the larger ones who also dispose of more land being better able to afford such a preference.<sup>53</sup> This is the sort of situation where Fujimoto

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<sup>49</sup>Muhammad Ikmal, *op. cit.*

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid*, 1985 and Diana Wong, *op. cit.*, 1984.

<sup>51</sup>Diana Wong, *op. cit.*, p. 101; R. De Koninck, *op. cit.*, 1983 (Our Work...), p. 16.

<sup>52</sup>Diana Wong, *op. cit.*, p. 153-154 (my emphasis).

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid*, on this issue see also Maznah Mohamed, "Gender, Class and the Sexual Division of Labour in a Rural Community in Kedah", *Kajian Malaysia*, 11:2, 1984, p. 101-122.

would argue that the reason for this "preference" is the desire to share income with poorer members of the village community who were being employed in lieu of family members and overpaid for their labour.

Fourth, these "households", or families gravitating around a farm unit, are more dynamic demographically, socially and in terms of access to land. From one year to another, changes are frequent in the composition and structure of the resident household. Tenurial arrangements between kin as well as with non kin are also frequently modified. Commonly, the origin of preeminent social status goes back to the days of land pioneering – which in some cases might mean the 1950's – when some were more successful than others.<sup>54</sup> Nowadays, it might be more related to the capacity to lease in additional land although land concentration through acquisition still occurs.<sup>55</sup> Fifth, while preserving or developing their agricultural basis, these well to do households have more, non-agricultural income opportunities.<sup>56</sup> Sixth, they benefit from an asset which has often been overlooked by researchers although its importance was brought forth by Ann Stoler in 1978 in her study of a Javanese village:<sup>57</sup> greater subsistence production is available and indeed achieved by household better endowed with land, a characteristic confirmed in 1981 with reference to the Malaysian context.

The economic position of such families is thus better balanced, even in terms of traditional agriculture... these families generally own more *tanah kampung* (village land), an asset allowing a level of subsistence production (fruits and poultry in particular) which the small producers, overspecialised in rice production, can rarely attain.<sup>58</sup>

Diana Wong found the same phenomenon in the village she studied in the Kedah district of Kubang Pasu.<sup>59</sup>

More could be added about the resources and dynamism of entrepreneurial households, about their very apparent material well being.<sup>60</sup> Suffice

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<sup>54</sup>Diana Wong, *op. cit.*, p. 93 sq. and R. De Koninck, *op. cit.*, 1983 (Our Work...).

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid*, and Muhammad Ikmal, *op. cit.*

<sup>56</sup>Diana Wong, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

<sup>57</sup>Ann Stoler, "Garden Use and Household Economy in Rural Java", *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, 14: 2, 1978, p. 85-101.

<sup>58</sup>R. De Koninck, *op. cit.*, 1981, p. 28.

<sup>59</sup>Diana Wong, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

<sup>60</sup>See for example Maznah Mohammed, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

it to say that the above mentioned characteristics and trends, along with those further identified by Muhammad Ikmal with specific reference to farm entrepreneurs who are not members of the traditional village community,<sup>61</sup> point to the development of social relations which clearly relegate income-sharing as a preeminent means of redistribution to a real or mythical past.

### Harmony and Conflicts

Fujimoto's desire to portray Malay rural society as harmonious stems from an approach to Southeast Asian societies which has been subjected to some rather severe criticism. Recently, Ann Stoler referred to the pioneering work of Hildred Geertz (1961).

Hildred Geertz once suggested that the concept of *rukun*, meaning "harmony, cooperation, unity of effort, minimization of conflicts", is one of the organizing moral principles of the Javanese family and more generally Javanese society (1961: 47-48). The fact that such standards are rarely attained in practice is of minor import. What is much more important is a pervasive striving for the appearance of *rukun*, rather than the actuality of it (*ibid*, 146, 149).<sup>62</sup>

Hildred Geertz also wrote:

...*rukun*, to the peasant who lives by it, means a hard-headed *modus vivendi* reached through a process of give-and-take between self interested people... The direct expression of self-interest is constrained by a desire for *rukun*. This value not only guides the participants in their discussions toward compromise but also restrains them from expression of antagonism and hostility inducing them to try and maintain an appearance of harmony throughout the process of negotiation...<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Muhammad Ikmal, *op. cit.*, see also R. De Koninck, *op. cit.*, 1981, p. 33.

<sup>62</sup>Ann L. Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985), p. 192; the references are to Hildred Geertz, *The Javanese Family. A Study of Kinship and Socialization* (New York, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).

<sup>63</sup>Hildred Geertz, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

Ben White recently added:

No observer would dispute the existence of a pervasive public ideology of sharing and reciprocity in Javanese society – nor the widespread, actual “sharing of poverty” within the marginal and landless classes (cf. Wertheim). The crucial error of “Agricultural Involution” lies in assigning to this ethic a determinant role in regulating the actual relations of distribution between classes... Geertz’ account of Javanese conceptions of the social world mirrors an elite view. This is also reflected in the curious notion... that “the delicately muted vernacular of peasant life” includes no “haves” and “have nots” but only “just-enoughs” and “not-quite-enoughs”. While *cukupan* and *kekurangan* may be used to mark stark inequalities in public and polite conversation (in a way a wealthy man describes himself for example), the poor in Javanese villages portray these differences more bluntly, in fact precisely in terms of “haves” and “have nots” (*wong duwe* and *wong ora duwe*).<sup>64</sup>

The purpose behind these long quotations is not to try and establish exaggerated parallels between Javanese and Malay rural communities. Nor are they, by themselves, intended to refute Fujimoto’s own findings. Rather the intention is to suggest that the “pervasive striving” on the part of villagers or at least of some selected villagers to give, particularly to outsiders, the appearance of harmony is often responsible for questionable approaches to the analysis of the real problems of the farming communities. Of course, respondents’ comments and opinions about themselves should not be dismissed or simply attributed to “ideology” and “false consciousness”. After all other researchers, including Diana Wong,<sup>65</sup> have themselves used the kind of arbitrary categorization which Ben White so strongly criticizes. But, at least in Diana Wong’s case, it did not blind her to other forms of differentiation and particularly to the existence of conflicts.<sup>66</sup> In fact, the existence of the latter is so evident in Malaysian villages that it is hard to see how a seasoned researcher could not notice them. Conflicts are in fact often closely linked to agricultural relations, particularly labour relations. They result, among other things, from the increasing redundancy of several of the tasks in padi cultivation traditionally performed by women and now often replaced by machines operated by men,<sup>67</sup> they occur between *derau* groups and from operators who refuse to

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<sup>64</sup>Benjamin White, “Agricultural Involution and its Critics: Twenty Years After”, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 15: 2, 1983, p. 28. The reference *in texto* is to W. Wertheim’s *Elite en Massa* (Amsterdam, van Gennep, 1975); the comment on “Agricultural Involution” refers to Clifford Geertz *Agricultural Involution. Three Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1963).

<sup>65</sup>Diana Wong, *op. cit.*, p. 77 sq; see also her article “Differentiation Among Padi Household in the Muda Region: A Village Case Study”, *Kajian Malaysia*, 1: 2, 1984, p. 127.

<sup>66</sup>Diana Wong, *op. cit.*, 1984 (*The Social Organization...*), p. 67-70, 313 sq, etc.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid*, p. 262, see also Maznah Mohamed, *op. cit.*, and R. De Koninck, *op. cit.*, 1981.

employ them, they concern access to water, etc. Finally, several of these conflicts circle around "political factionalism based on competing loyalty to the two major national political parties, UMNO and PAS".<sup>68</sup> Whether one refers to them as "class conflicts" – which in many cases they are not, at least in the strict sense – or as something else they must be recognized as evidence of disharmony.

### The Usefulness of the Income Sharing Thesis

I would suggest that tenurial and production relations among the padi producing communities considered have evolved in an increasingly competitive manner leaving little place for a social practise such as income-sharing. The claim that such a practise is pervasive can have at least one very meaningful and useful result: its refutation – or at least attempts at its refutation – should allow for the identification of more fundamental issues, issues which are more meaningful to-day. A few that are closely related can be singled out. First there is the need to *evaluate* the role of State intervention in mediating labour relations in the countryside. Are there not some obvious contradictions between the official goals of poverty eradication and several of the active "development" programmes which seem to favour the rich and discriminate against the poor? Of course, much relevant research has been and is being done on those issues, particularly in the regions referred to here.<sup>69</sup> But, perhaps, this much needed focus on peasant poverty – another evident research priority – might benefit from more attention being given to the study of non-agricultural employment. Although a large number of studies have been completed dealing with life and work in the padi fields or in the plantations, comparatively little is being done to uncover the links between agriculture and industry, particularly at the level of employment. There is an obvious need – a third priority – to study systematically where are those people who have been forced out of agriculture as well as those who have been "promoted" out of it – and how this is all achieved. In short, more needs to be known about the external articulations of the agricultural communities, about the financial, social and geographical dynamics of these articulations.

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<sup>68</sup>Diana Wong, *op. cit.*, 1984 (*The Social Organization...*), p. 313.

<sup>69</sup>See in particular David S. Gibbons, *Paddy Poverty and Public Policy, A Preliminary Report on Poverty in the Muda Scheme Area, 1972 and 1982* (Pulau Pinang, Pusat Penyelidikan Dasar, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Siri Monograph no 7, 1984).

I do not pretend to be able at this stage to map out how this can be achieved. It seems however that village studies still have their place, as long as the arguments presented here about their increasingly dominant external articulations are taken into consideration. If not, one would expect that village studies, while no doubt very interesting, will quickly lose their social relevance, just as the thesis of income-sharing has lost its relevance and appears as a complete paradox to those who try and understand rural communities in which they witness increasing differentiation and very little "sharing".

A clear and definite resolution of this paradox would perhaps require that Fujimoto and myself agree to test our conflicting hypotheses in the same "villages", ideally together. Surely, Aristotle must have been right when he wrote, more than twenty-three centuries ago, that "underlying facts do not lend themselves equally well to the contrary views".