

The Malay Labourer

By the Window of Capitalism

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Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>Charts, Maps, and Plates</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xvi
Introduction: By the Window of Capitalism (The making of a Malay proletarian journey)	1
1. Post-Colonial State in Terengganu (Development and reconstituting inequalities)	9
2. From <i>Kampung</i> to the Plantation (The political economy of Malay proletarianization)	25
3. Class and Ethnicity on the Plantation (Initial ambiguities)	46
4. From a Frontier to a Political Community (Administration, labour conditions, and social organization, 1967–72)	72
5. Confronting Capital in the Work-Place (The ethnography and poetics of Malay proletarian consciousness)	113
6. Living in the <i>Kongsi</i> Compound (The emerging Malay proletarian subculture)	161
7. Early Strikes and Initial Resistance (The articulation of “class” and “non-class”)	226
8. Trade Unionism and Malay Labourers (New leaders, reconsolidation, and ideology, 1973–75)	260

<i>Conclusion</i>	313
<i>Glossary</i>	324
<i>Bibliography</i>	331
<i>Index</i>	341
<i>About the Author</i>	348

	List of Tables
	Charts, Maps, and Plates
	Acknowledgements
	Abbreviations
	Introduction: By the Window of Capitalism (The making of a Malay proletarian journey)
1	1. Post-Colonial State in Terengganu (Development and reconstituting inequalities)
9	2. From Kampung to the Plantation (The political economy of Malay proletarianisation)
22	3. Class and Ethnicity on the Plantation (Initial ambiguities)
46	4. From a Frontier to a Political Community (Administration, labour conditions and social organisation, 1907-75)
72	5. Contesting Capital in the Work-Place (The ethnography and politics of Malay proletarian consciousness)
113	6. Living in the Kwasa Compound (The emerging Malay proletarian subculture)
161	7. Early Strikes and Initial Resistance (The articulation of "class" and "non-class")
220	8. Trade Unionism and Malay Labourers (New leaders, reconsolidation and ideology, 1973-75)
260	

INTRODUCTION

By the Window of Capitalism

The making of a Malay proletarian journey

The present study is about proletarianization and experiencing capital. The principal actors are Malay plantation labourers drawn predominantly from the indigenous peasantry of the peninsular Malaysian east coast state of Terengganu. Terengganu straggled into the twentieth century beset by problems of an underdeveloped economy and a rural sector with very few viable alternatives, a legacy inherited from both its "feudal" and colonial past. The opening of plantation society, first begun about two decades into the post-colonial era therefore became a logical outlet of mobility as a segment of the Malay populace, both male and female, young and old, single and married, took turns to attempt what would be to many of them, their first proletarian journey. And as they left their respective *kampung* (villages) to work and live on the plantation, a new life would begin, dictated by the terms of the new society.

"Ethnography", so say Comaroff and Comaroff, "is a historically situated mode of understanding historically situated contexts, each with its own perhaps radically different kinds of subjects and subjectivities, objects and objectivities" (1992, pp. 9–10).

In this context, the ethnography presented in the book deals with a specific historical period in the development of plantation society in

Terengganu, that is, from its phase of "frontier capitalism" in mid-1960 until about a decade later to mid-1970. Those early frontier years saw in this part of east coast society, in the hinterland of Kemaman district, the transformation of a substantial acreage of its virgin jungle into oil-palm country. The Kemaman plantation, also officially referred to as the Terengganu Oil Palm Estate, fully raised and built from the very beginning, on the backs of indigenous labour, gradually began to evolve, both socially and politically, a Malay labouring community with a distinct "proletarian" trademark of its own. The ethnography of this working-class community in the making was captured over the duration of one year's anthropological field-work, conducted during two separate periods, nine months between the years 1972 and 1973, and three months in 1975.

For the "peripheral" state of Terengganu, this changing landscape ushered in an important landmark for the beginning of the plantation alternative as an agenda for the future economic development of its land resources. Indeed, from 1973 onwards, the state began to systematically plan the expansion of its plantation base on an even larger scale into the heartland, through the Ketengah regional development, which when completed, would involve almost one-third of the state's total land acreage (see Maps 5 and 6). Thus, Terengganu, by opting to continue and emulate the above colonial mode of land appropriation and production, has indirectly created new implications for not only capital-labour relations and the "agrarian question" but also the "plantation-peasant" conflict (after Beckford 1972) in its post-colonial society.

In a contribution to *Writing Culture*, Marcus re-asserts the importance of "an ethnography sensitive to political economy", pointing out the relevance of the "self-conscious emphasis on the strategic and purposeful situating of ethnography ... linking it to broader issues of political economy" (1986, p. 172).

The first two chapters of the book represent attempts in this direction. Treating the Kemaman "joint venture" as a case-study on "development", the first chapter critically examines the inequalities reconstituted by such a development alternative, juxtaposed between the different interests of the state, capital, the middle classes, and the peasantry. The second chapter traces the biography of proletarianization of the Malay labourer back to his peasant material base, so as to eluci-