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ETHNOHISTORY: A REVIEW OF THE METHOD AND ITS APPLICABILITY TO THE STUDY OF RURAL MALAYSIA*

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SINOPSIS

"Ethnohistory" ialah suatu kaedah pendekatan terhadap kajian mengenai perlakuan sosio-budaya yang mencantumkan penyelidikan-penyelidikan etnografi dan sejarah. Kertas ini menyarankan bahawa pendekatan sebegini menawarkan suatu perspektif yang berintegrasi mengenai proses sosial yang tidak boleh dicapai melalui pendekatan yang lain. Justru itu, pendekatan ini boleh dikatakan merupakan satu alat metodologi yang bernilai kepada ahli antropologi yang mengkaji perubahan-perubahan sosial dan budaya. Malaysia yang mempunyai latarbelakang sejarah tentang perubahan kebudayaan dan kontek kebudayaan yang telah dibukukan menawarkan potensi yang besar untuk penyelidikan "ethnohistorical".

Bahagian permulaan kertas ini mengupaskan dengan secara ringkas kaitan antara sejarah dengan antropologi dalam tiga suku abad yang lalu. Berikutnya ialah suatu penghuraian mengenai tujuan-tujuan pendekatan "ethnohistorical" serta juga sumber-sumber data yang mengimplimentasikan tujuan-tujuan tersebut. Kertas ini disimpulkan dengan membentangkan kepentingan penggunaan kaedah "ethnohistorical" dalam kajian mengenai perubahan sosio-budaya, dan disertai dengan seruan supaya kerjasama antara-disiplin di antara sejarah dan antropologi dieratkan lagi.

SYNOPSIS

Ethnohistory is a methodological approach to the study of socio-cultural behavior which combines the strengths of ethnographic and historical research. The thesis of this paper is that such an approach offers an integrated perspective of social process not obtainable otherwise, therefore representing a valuable methodological tool to the anthropologist studying socio-cultural change. Malaysia, whose historical background of cultural change and culture contact is richly documented, offers great potential for ethnohistorical research.

The first part of the paper briefly reviews the relation between history and anthropology during the last three-quarters of a century. Following that is a

*I would take this opportunity to acknowledge the assistance received from Prof. Robert Carmack (State University of New York at Albany) in formulating an ethnohistorical research strategy for fieldwork in Malaysia. His writing as well as his personal counsel have done much to influence the shape, and ensure the success, of the research presently in progress.

description of the aims of the ethnohistorical approach, and the data sources by which those aims are implemented. The paper concludes by illustrating the usefulness of the ethnohistorical method in a study of rural socio-cultural change, and appeals for greater interdisciplinary cooperation between historians and anthropologists.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the usefulness of combining the methods of the historian with those of the ethnographic fieldworker in the analysis of rural social organization. This type of research approach, most recently referred to as 'ethnohistory' has proven extremely useful in the study of "folk" society in Latin America,¹ as well as cultural contact and change in aboriginal North America,² to mention only a few instances. It is contended here that ethnohistory represents a particularly valuable research tool for the student of Southeast Asian ethnology, a tool which, judging from the literature, remains to be fully appreciated.

Two assumptions are critical to the thesis here. First, it is assumed that the ultimate purpose of anthropology, and of science in general, is the formulation of theory. As Denzin points out, "in theory, methods take meaning, observations become organized, and the goals of prediction and explanation are reached".³ The second assumption is contingent upon the first; namely, that if theory formulation is our stock in trade, the quality of theory will necessarily vary directly with the quantity and quality of empirical data. This second assumption deserves some qualification, since the suggestion is not being made that a large body of high quality data is sufficient in itself for the formulation of powerful theory. That this is not the case has been amply borne out by the activities of Boas and his students in the United States.⁴ However, that an exhaustive body of high quality empirical data constitutes a condition, while not necessary *and* sufficient, certainly necessary, to theory formulation is not likely to be debated. This quality requirement of primary data, and a possible means by which it may be achieved, are the subject of this paper.

It has been realized for some time, by anthropologists and sociologists alike, that the quality of field data may be enhanced by employing multiple data-gathering techniques. By shuttling from one observational vantage point to another, not only are we afforded a more complete perspective of social behavior, but we are also aided in formulating hypotheses, since a

1 Richard Adams, *A Community in the Andes*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1959; H.B. Nicholson, "Ethnohistory: Introduction", *Handbook of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 23, 1960.

2 William Fenton, *American Indians and White Relations to 1830: Needs and Opportunities for Study*, New York, Russell and Russell, 1957.

3 Norman Denzin, *The Research Act*, Chicago, Aldine Publishing Company, 1970, 32.

4 Cf. Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, New York, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968, 301-318.

multifaceted perspective may reveal variables initially considered as causal to be merely of peripheral significance.

This procedure by which multiple data-gathering techniques are simultaneously brought to bear upon the research problem has been referred to as “triangulation” by Denzin,

“...method triangulation combines dissimilar methods to measure the same unit.... The rationale for this strategy is that the flaws of one method are often the strengths of another, and by combining methods, observers can achieve the best of each, while overcoming their unique deficiencies.”⁵

Ethnohistory, then, represents a “triangulation” of methods, those of the historian and those of the anthropological fieldworker. Taken separately, the techniques of each are subject to limitations which restrict their usefulness for theory development; taken together, I believe it can be shown that their synthesis constitutes a powerful methodological approach. The remainder of this discussion consists of an examination of the background, the aims, and the potential of ethnohistory as a research strategy.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND HISTORY

A review of the history of anthropological thought reveals a long-standing affinity between anthropology and history, the extent of which is seldom acknowledged by either discipline. Indeed, it was the extensive utilization of historical material in a comparative framework by such anthropological forefathers as Spencer, Morgan and Tylor which contributed to the recognition of anthropology as a discipline. Nevertheless, the first four decades of the twentieth century witnessed anthropological assessments of the heuristic value of historical methods which were generally negative. For example, Lowie viewed attempts to reconstruct tribal histories of North American aboriginal societies as futile, pointing out that anthropologists would be mistaken to assume “that primitive man is endowed with historical sense or perspective”.⁶ Kroeber displayed a similar type of skepticism regarding the usefulness of historical methods, based on the fact that documentation on aboriginal history is practically non-existent.⁷ An even more unequivocal position regarding the methods of the historian was that of the English anthropologists, who categorically denied the feasibility of such methods for the anthropological enterprise. Radcliffe-Brown, attacking anthropologists’ attempts to reconstruct the histories of

⁵ Denzin, *op. cit.*, 308.

⁶ Robert Lowie, “Oral Tradition and History”, (Orig. 1917), *In Selected Papers in Anthropology*, Cora Du Bois (ed.), Berkeley, University of California Press, 1960, 206.

⁷ Alfred Kroeber, *The Nature of Culture Change*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1952, 65.

primitive groups in the absence of reliable historical records, refers to the end product of such a process as “pseudo-historical” explanations which “are not merely useless but are worse than useless”.⁸

By 1940, however, the tide of anthropological opinion had turned somewhat. It was becoming increasingly apparent to American anthropologists, due in large part to the efforts of Swanton⁹ and Speck,¹⁰ that direct historical methods could be used profitably in the diachronic analysis of culture. In 1940 the Smithsonian Institute published a volume including essays which, according to Cohen, “indicated the ethnohistorical approach that was to become formalized in the 1950’s”.¹¹ From the 1940’s onward, the use of historical and ethnographic techniques in a complementary fashion became increasingly common; the mould for a methodological synthesis had been set!

Carmack,¹² tracing the trend of acceptance of historical methods since World War II, points out that White,¹³ Eggan,¹⁴ and Kroeber¹⁵ were among those American anthropologists who acknowledged the methodological similarity between anthropology and history, and the significance of the latter for meaningful generalizations. Eggan, in particular it would seem, was instrumental in bridging the gap between the two disciplines.

“Our best insights into the nature of society and culture come from seeing social structures and culture patterns over time. Here is where we can distinguish the accidental from the general, evaluate more clearly the factors and forces operating in a given situation, and describe the processes involved in general terms. Not to take advantage of the possibility of studying social and cultural changes...is to do only half the job that needs to be done.”¹⁶

At the same time, the anthropological perspective in England was experi-

8 A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, London, Oxford University Press, 1952, 3.

9 J.R. Swanton, *Early History of the Creek Indians and their Neighbors*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin No. 73, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1922.

10 F.G. Speck, *Territorial Subdivisions and Boundaries of the Wampanoog, Massachusetts and Nauset Indians*, Indian Notes and Monographs No. 44, New York, Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1928.

11 B.S. Cohen, “Ethnohistory”, *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 6 1968, 442.

12 Robert M. Carmack, “Ethnohistory: A Review of its Development, Definitions Methods and Aims”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 1, 1972.

13 L.A. White, “History, Evolutionism, and Functionalism: Three Types of Interpretation of Culture”, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 1, 1945.

14 Fred Eggan, “Social Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Comparison”, *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 56, 1954.

15 Alfred Kroeber, *An Anthropologist Looks at History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1963.

16 Eggan, *op. cit.*, 755-6.

encing a similar transformation. Evans-Pritchard¹⁷ and M.G. Smith,¹⁸ to cite two examples, were proponents of the relation of the historical strictures which had characterized British anthropology for the previous four decades. Smith states, "I hold that the appropriate field of study is a unit over time, not merely a unit at a particular point in time. The crucial point here is that the field of study has a historical as well as a spatial extension".¹⁹

This brief history of the relation between history and anthropology raises a question regarding the nature of ethnohistory. If, as has been shown, methods of history and anthropology were being integrated in the 1920's, indeed, as early as the 19th century, are we justified in speaking of ethnohistory as a novel, or new, approach? The answer must be no. The formula for an ethnohistorical approach is not new, as we have seen, nor, as Washburn notes, does it "contain within itself a whole new philosophy".²⁰ An ethnohistorical approach is merely a pragmatic synthesis of historical and anthropological methods which, if refined, is capable of being of immense value to the formulation of ethnological generalizations and, ultimately, anthropological theory.

ETHNOHISTORY: ITS AIMS

Robert Carmack describes ethnohistory as a method involving "a set of techniques for gathering, preparing, and analyzing oral and written traditions. The aims for which these methods are employed are those of cultural anthropology in general, and have to do with theories of culture".²¹

The aims of cultural anthropology, at the very least, have to do with the formulation of socio-cultural generalizations, and, at the very most, the eventual formulation of socio-cultural theory from such generalizations. Though anthropologists still maintain, albeit somewhat wistfully, that the worth of a theory lies in its predictive power, the retrodictive capability of theory is just as significant, and certainly more readily testable. As the above reference to Eggan, Smith and others indicates, there now exists consensus that if functional and structural studies are to be deemed useful at all, their validity can only be demonstrated historically. "History alone provides a satisfactory solution in which the hypothesis of functional anthropology can be tested".²² Complementing this consensus is the awareness that standard ethnographic techniques alone are not always sufficient to render adequate description of socio-cultural process.

17 E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology*, London, Kegan Paul, 1951. Also, "Anthropology and History", *Essays in Social Anthropology*, New York, Glencoe, 1962.

18 M.G. Smith, "History and Social Anthropology", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 92, 1962.

19 *Ibid.*, 81.

20 W.E. Washburn, "Ethnohistory: History in the Round", *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 8, 1961.

21 Carmack, *op. cit.*, 234.

22 E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology*, London, Kegan Paul, 1951, 60.

The "techniques" referred to in the above definition are generally similar to those of the ethnographer, in that their purpose is the compilation of a descriptive accounting of social behavior within a specified cultural setting. There is, however, one important difference—ethnohistorical techniques, rather than being applied to instances of concrete social behavior, must be utilized instead within the context of documentary social behavior. In other words, the resulting description, while ethnographic in a general sense, is a description once removed from its substance; the ethnohistorian "must ask the documents, rather than informants...and there are often things the documents cannot tell him that he could find out in a living society".²³ It becomes obvious, therefore, that the techniques of the ethnohistorian parallel those of the ethnographer only insofar as the goal of each is a well-rounded description of the socio-cultural unit under study. For the anthropologist to construct a descriptive account of past socio-cultural patterns, that is, shift from an ethnographic to an ethnohistorical role, he must be able to shift from a medium of observable behavior to one of historical documentation, and in so doing, treat the latter with the critical scrutiny of the historian. Such a data-gathering procedure might well be referred to as ethnographic reconstruction of social history, an historical reconstruction of the ethnographic past or, as we have chosen here, ethnohistory.

A finished product is only as good as its constituent parts, and, by the same token, an ethnohistorical account of a previous socio-cultural milieu is only as sound as the data upon which it is based. What, then, constitutes the potential data inventory of the ethnohistorian? Most writers on the subject agree that the range of data input is wide indeed.²⁴ For the sake of simplicity we may define document in its broadest sense, i.e. any vehicle capable of the expression of historical evidence, and classify ethnohistorical data as written and unwritten documentation.

Written documentation assumes a wide variety of forms. Depending on the nature of the research problem and the time period with which it is concerned, accounts of ancient chroniclers, missionaries and colonial secretaries, land transfer and taxation records, court proceedings and ancient maps all produce grist for the ethnohistorian's mill. Add to this sources as diverse as inscriptions on archeological material, personal correspondence in the form of long-forgotten handwritten letters, and works of fiction, and one has some idea of the broad and varied range of ethnohistorical source material.

Given the fact that the potential data sources for ethnohistorical research are multitudinous, the ethnohistorian now finds himself confronted with a problem considered to be the most confounding to ethnohistorical re-

23 W.C. Sturtevant, "Anthropology, History, and Ethnohistory", *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, J.A. Clifton (ed.), Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1968, 454.

24 Cohen, *op. cit.*; Sturtevant, *op. cit.*; Carmack, *op. cit.*

construction. Assuming he has been able to locate potentially rich documentary material, how is he then to critically evaluate it, separating the grain from the husks, as it were? It is this aspect of ethnohistorical research which demands that the anthropologist train himself in the skills of the historian, and which likewise results in the former developing a new-found respect for the latter.

As yet there appears to be few, if any, agreed upon guidelines for the critical evaluation of ethnohistorical sources (a possible exception to this is Fenton).²⁵ What is at once obvious, however, is that prior to analysis we must assume that distortion in historical documentation is inevitable. Individuals with backgrounds as diverse as politics, commerce and religion are certain to allow, to some extent, their social and philosophical backgrounds to act as selective influences on their observations. For example, it is not surprising that Alfonso de Albuquerque, who conquered Malacca in 1511, and the authors of the earlier portions of the *Sejarah Melayu* (circa 1535) convey dissimilar impressions of 16th century social institutions.

While it is obvious that verification of documentary data may pose a thorny problem for the ethnohistorian, the problem is in no way unique; for just as ethnohistory bears general similarities to ethnography, so too do they share similar impediments. As mentioned, documentary sources prepared by an individual with a religious status are likely to convey a differing portrayal of social behavior than those prepared by, say, a moneylender or merchant. However, is this not the same dilemma faced by the ethnographer, who constructs his description via oral and visual data? All fieldworkers will certainly concede that information gathered from interviewing a number of subjects, chosen even from a relatively homogeneous social milieu, will contain discrepancies. In fact, were this not the case, and there appeared to be perfect consensus, it is likely we would be extremely suspicious!

Therefore, regarding problems inherent to documentary research, the anthropologist doing ethnohistorical research, rather than finding himself in an unfamiliar setting, is likely to find himself very much at home. Just as he must be critically aware of the background, educational achievement, possible biases, etc. of his ethnographic informants, so too must he pose the same questions when assessing the reliability of documentary sources. In fact, in this sense the anthropologist doing ethnohistorical research enjoys an advantage the historian does not, since his experience in assessing ethnographic data is an asset in the evaluation of written documentation. Lurie mentions that the anthropologist is able to examine documentary sources forearmed with "social insights which enable him to recognize the difference between special pleading and accurate argument, a poor observer and a

25 William Fenton, "The Training of Historical Ethnologists in America", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 54, 1952.

good one, and the social status, conditions for observation, and even personal quirks reflected in some writings which can be expected to produce reliable facts or recognizable skewing of information".²⁶

Finally, it is worth noting that the anthropologist who would consider ethnographic data as 'primary' and written documentary evidence as 'secondary', with the implication that the latter was of inferior quality, would do well to keep two points in mind. First, even ethnographic data is the product of a selective process on the part of the ethnographer, who is neither more nor less human than the authors of documentary sources, and, secondly, it is often a simpler task to discern the selective biases of others than those of our own.

The range of unwritten documentary sources is as expansive, and perhaps even more miscellaneous, as is that of written documentation. Sources most often relied upon are myth, legend and folklore, collectively referred to as folk history²⁷ and or oral tradition,²⁸ and "memory ethnography".²⁹ In addition, old photographs, linguistic usages, and archeological material are classifiable as historical documentation of an unwritten sort. Rather than expand on the list of unwritten documentary materials, I choose to make brief note of only two, myth and "memory ethnography", both of which I consider particularly useful in the context of Southeast Asian ethnology.

The precise relation of myth to history continues to be hotly debated. Carmack points out that "folklorists and anthropologists have generally turned away from the historical implication of myth and other folktales".³⁰ Further on, however, he acknowledges that "in working out the structure of meanings which folklore holds for different peoples, some clarification of their folk history is usually made, however implicitly".³¹

Regardless of current trends of thought, I am of the notion that while a myth is not sufficient in itself to afford an accurate portrayal of a people's culture, it is nonetheless useful as corroborative evidence. For example, an historical analysis of the foreign relations of Land Dayak society, undertaken by myself sometime ago, was aided by the structural analysis of a Land Dayak myth. It was able to be demonstrated, to my satisfaction at least, that there existed a transactive relationship between this particular myth and Land Dayak foreign affairs during the 18th century. That is,

26 N.O. Lurie, "Ethnohistory: An Ethnological Point of View", *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 8, 1961, 83.

27 Carmack, *op. cit.*

28 Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, Chicago, Aldine Publishing Company, 1965.

29 Charles Valentine, "Uses of Ethnohistory in an Acculturation Study", *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 7, 1960.

30 Carmack, *op. cit.*, 240.

31 *Ibid.*

foreign affairs were seen to provide the “physical matter” from which the “crystal” of the myth emerged.³²

“Memory ethnography”, the second major type of unwritten documentation, is a valuable data source to ethnohistorical approach, since it provides a data link between earlier written historical documentation and the ethnographic present. Memory ethnography, as the term is used here, refers to the reconstruction of recent historical events by “probing” the memories of the older members of the society.³³ The heuristic value of this technique is difficult to overestimate—by gaining historical insights, say, of the last fifty years or so, via living members of a society, we are afforded a congruence, or ‘fit’, between much older written documentation and the ethnographic present. This technique is perhaps most fruitful for research dealing with relatively recent cultural change. Regarding the usefulness of memory ethnography in an acculturation study, Valentine states, “Both ethnographic and historical evidence bearing on all stages of the acculturation sequence can be meaningfully integrated. It is in such a context that ethnohistory can make its greatest contribution to the analysis of culture contact and acculturation”.³⁴

ETHNOHISTORY: ITS POTENTIAL

Unfortunately, in speaking of the applicability of the ethnohistorical method to Southeast Asian ethnology, it seems we must speak in futuristic terms. This is not to say there have been no studies in which anthropologists utilized an ethnohistorical dimension;³⁵ however, in proportion to the number of works dealing with rural society in Southeast Asia, the ratio is indeed disappointing. All too often, it seems, the historical dimension receives mere lip service in the form of a cursory few pages entitled, likely as not, “Historical Background”. Especially dismaying is the fact that the existing wealth of documentary resources for the region provides abundant opportunity for the would-be ethnohistorian.

The geopolitical location of Southeast Asia within the global economic and social matrix has resulted in a documentary history perhaps unrivalled by any other region in the world. Indian, Arab and Chinese, and following that, European influences have, during the last 1,000 years, fused a cultural amalgam as fascinating, and as confusing, as is possible to imagine. Scaling down our time span to the last century, we find no less than six western colonial powers interjecting their economic and political values into resi-

32 Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, New York, Anchor Books, 1967, 226.

33 Valentine, *op. cit.* Also, Charles Valentine, “Symposium on the Concept of Ethnohistory — Comment”. *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 8, 1961.

34 Valentine, 1960, *op. cit.*, 4

35 See, for example, E.R. Leach, *Pul Eliya: A Village in Ceylon*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1961.

dent Southeast Asian cultures, in addition to the cultural influx represented by the thousands of immigrants from regions adjacent.

From this kaleidoscope of cultural contact, and conflict, it is possible to compare the effects of different politico/administrative systems against a common backdrop afforded by subsistence agriculture, or, conversely, compare the resiliency of various economic modes within a common politico/administrative system. The number and variety of applications of the comparative method are limited only by the researcher's interests. Furthermore, the ecological, cultural and historical similarities of many Southeast Asian subcultures provide for a remarkably high degree of comparative control. It would seem that no other region in the world provides the anthropologist with as fertile a testing ground as does Southeast Asia, while at the same time providing historical depth as well as ethnographic breadth.

Historical data sources for the region are as diverse as they are numerous. To offer a comprehensive accounting of these sources is clearly beyond the scope of this brief paper. (However, the construction of an historical retrieval file, complete with annotation, would represent an interdisciplinary accomplishment of immense value to both anthropologists and historians). For Malaya, written documentation is plentiful. There are historical works covering the period prior to the 15th century consisting of both indigenous and alien accounts of early Malay culture. An effort along this line which has to be ranked among the finest is that of Wheatly,³⁶ who in addition to offering a concise history of Malaya prior to 1500, also reveals to his reader his source materials and rationale for using them in the manner he does.

From the beginning of the 16th century onwards, the volume of documentation increases in direct relation to the growing European interest in Malaya and areas adjacent. Numerous accountings by individuals directly and peripherally concerned with the colonial effort were produced in written form, many of which have become more accessible thanks to the Oxford in Asia Reprint series. It was also at this time that various journals became vehicles for descriptive accounts of Malaya and its peoples, accounts which are of special interest to the contemporary ethnohistorian.

With Independence there has developed among academicians a revisionary trend, fuelled in large part by the desire to rid Malaysian history of Westerncentric biases and misinterpretations. It is from this effort that a more objective historical perspective is likely to emerge, and it is in this endeavor that Malaysian social scientists can pool their various skills to best advantage. There can be no problem orientation more suitable, or more

36 Paul Wheatly, *The Golden Khersonese*, Kuala Lumpur, University of Malaya Press, 1961.

profitable, than a joint ethnohistorical effort by anthropologists and historians focusing upon the evolution of rural Malaysian society.

My use of the ethnohistorical method in recent fieldwork (as yet unfinished) demonstrates its utility, both in terms of quality and quantity of data gathered. The research currently being undertaken deals not with one, but three, villages. Since practical considerations demand that time in the field be limited, dealing with three villages makes it imperative that the data-gathering procedures employed be specific and efficient.

Since my research strategy employs a narrow-range comparative scope, the historical dimension is a variable which I desire to control for as closely as possible. By completing such historical research as was possible, given the available material, prior to arriving in this country, I was able to determine which rural areas share a relatively homogeneous ethnic, linguistic, and social history, as well as ascertain in a general manner the economic history of each. This knowledge enabled me to narrow my choices to two possible research locations prior to arriving, northern Selangor and north-west Johore. Both areas contain, within a narrow radius, villages of differing economic organization, a critical characteristic since economic organization is a variable to be examined. Furthermore, there appeared to be adequate written documentation for both areas. The Selangor location was finally decided upon, a choice prompted by practical considerations, most notably the fact that this area was relatively close to primary data sources, i.e. libraries, archives, etc. As noted by Valentine, "systematically planned alternation between field work and archival research" enables the researcher to reap the maximum benefit from the synthesis between ethnographic fieldwork and ethnohistorical research.³⁷

Knowledge of local history as is obtainable from library and archival material has proven a valuable medium for the establishment of rapport with local residents. This seems particularly true in cases where the fieldworker chances upon ethnic enclaves of relatively recent immigration, say from Java, Sumatra, etc. The fieldworker's awareness of the unique, i.e. non-indigenous, cultural background of such groups is appreciated by the members, and this appreciation often takes the form of further historical elaboration.

An ethnohistorical approach contributes to rapport in the field in yet another way. It has been noted in works too numerous to cite that the fieldworker is essentially an intruder, inasmuch as it becomes necessary to accommodate the existing network of social relationships to the presence of a new social identity. This accommodation may or may not be facilitated by the goals of the researcher. For example, if one were studying local stratifi-

37 Valentine, 1961, *op. cit.*, 277. Cf. also, Lurie, *op. cit.*, 87.

cation patterns, his research goals might be viewed as potentially threatening to the social status quo.³⁸ However, if the researcher explains his aims in terms of how economic patterns and associated life styles have affected village social relationships over the past 50 years, he accomplishes two things. First, by phrasing his mission in terms of historical trends, he has constructed an identity, i.e. historian, which is perceived as far less threatening than that of, say, a student of class conflict. Secondly, by examining social stratification as an historical process, his research findings have a far greater significance. We are all aware of the existence of class and status differences and the social constellations which crystallize about such differences; however, if from this we are to develop a theory of stratification, we must examine these social constellations, i.e. classes and status groups, as the results of economic processes occurring within a specified historical context.

Following selection of a research site, and entrance into the social community, the problem then became one of gathering a sufficient quantity of pertinent data within the allotted time. District land office records proved extremely useful when used in conjunction with data on contemporary ownership patterns acquired via interview techniques. By using both types of data I was better able to cope with discrepancies in each. Furthermore, land records provide insights into previous patterns of land use, and careful analysis reveals correlations between land use and shifting demographic characteristics of the kampong. Finally, the district authorities were able to provide me with old maps, population statistics, etc.

The most fruitful source of local history was, by far, the memories of the kampong residents themselves. Informants over fifty years of age have vivid recollections of Japanese and British occupations and the micro-socio economic effects of both. By gathering local history from a number of informants of differing ages and social backgrounds, and weighing one account against the other, it was possible to derive a detailed kampong history which would be otherwise unobtainable. The significance of histories such as these is difficult to overestimate, especially when we realize that history consists of acts, and the interpretations of those acts.³⁹ To accept one interpretation and overlook another is not to discharge our duties in a responsible manner, be we historian or anthropologist. Yet, by neglecting the oral history of rural society we are in effect accepting without reservation the western historical interpretation of rural Malaya and, in so doing, overlooking a perspective of Malaysian history which will soon be irretrievable.

38 Cf. S. Husin Ali, *Social Stratification in Kampong Bagan*, Monograph of the Malaysian Branch Royal Asiatic Society, Singapore, Malaysia Printers Ltd., 1964, 16.

39 Cf. Washburn, *op. cit.*, 33.

SUMMARY

This admittedly brief paper fails to do justice to the history, techniques, and, most importantly, the potential of the ethnohistorical method. For a more thorough treatment the reader is encouraged to examine articles by Sturtevant⁴⁰ and Cohen,⁴¹ both of which are highly informative and provide additional guidance in the form of extensive bibliographies. It is hoped however, that this paper, in spite of its brevity, has succeeded in making at least two points.

First, the increased use of historical sources by anthropologists is a trend which can only result in a richer description of socio-cultural behavior. To train ourselves in the methods of historical research in no way constitutes disciplinary heresy vis-a-vis anthropology. On the contrary, we are ensuring ourselves of a better rounded, more complete, body of data than is possible by use of ethnographic field techniques alone. Furthermore, the emphasis placed on history herein relates to its use as an ethnographic tool—rather than representing an end in itself, it constitutes instead “a source of enrichment of the ethnological literature”.⁴²

Secondly, ethnohistorical research used in conjunction with standard ethnographic field techniques holds a potential for rural Malaysian ethnology which is simply too promising to ignore. The student of Malay culture is twice-blessed in that he has near-inexhaustible stores of both historical and ethnographic data. To ignore this opportunity would constitute a double injustice, that of turning our backs on a rich chapter in rural Malaysian history that has yet to be written, as well as neglecting our responsibility as social scientists.

Either we limit our studies to the kind of thing a single man can readily do, and work within the bounds of traditional disciplines, or we boldly try to understand society, and to that end use all the materials and techniques available.⁴³

40 Sturtevant, *op. cit.*

41 Cohen, *op. cit.*

42 Lurie, *op. cit.*, 84.

43 Ralph G. Ross, “Elites and the Methodology of Politics”, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 16, 1952, 30.

