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A Field Report from Sabak Bernam: On a Javanese Immigrant Community in Peninsular Malaysia

by Teruo SEKIMOTO

This is about a Javanese immigrant community in Sabak Bernam, Selangor, Malaysia. They first came to the area in 1920s as pioneers and, while preserving their identity as Javanese, developed swampy jungle into coconut gardens almost by their own effort. Since the independence of the Malaysian state, however, these Javanese have developed double identities as Javanese on one hand, and Malays in Malaysian state on the other. Their involvement in the process of nation building has caused internal conflicts among them. They have distanced themselves from their former compatriots in Indonesia, sought their new identity somewhere between the Javanese and the politically formulated Malayness. This complicated process is still going on and the rural development programs by the Malaysian government are adding further impacts on it.

Anthropologists have not studied societies simply in terms of modern nation states. This conventional practice should be justified since common-sensical view on the contemporary world is biased in favor of the nation-states, their integrity and autonomy taken for granted too easily. It must, however, be noted that state borders, once fixed, separate people and culture which used to be one and the same. This study on an overseas Javanese community aims to explore how the modern state border affects ethnic traits of the immigrants and how people in overseas frontier react to the process of nation building.