

Continuity and Change of Javanese Villages: The Case of Ungaran

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The historical origin and socio-economic structure of Javanese villages (*desa*) has been a highly debatable problem for a long time. Some scholars once argued that village communities in Java had been everlasting social entities since the ancient era, while there has been a series of theories which stress the fact that Javanese villages were colonial products in the 19th century. However, a fully convincing argument has not yet been done as to the nature of structural change which Javanese villages went through under the modern colonial rule, because few concrete data have been available on the social change and continuity of particular villages in any region of Java.

The author discovered in the Dutch National Archive a historical document which listed the name of villages in Ungaran district of Central Java at the beginning of 19th century. For this district another set of data is available such as the name of its villages and their population which was recorded by P. Bleeker at 1846. With those data of the 19th century, the author carried out a field survey on the name, location, population size and history of villages in the same area. This paper presents the result of this survey and some theoretical consideration.

First, it is demonstrated that most of old villages which were recorded at the beginning of the 19th century still survive as dwelling units at the level of hamlets (*dusun* or *lingkungan*), though administratively they have been merged into much larger territorial units (*desa* or *kelurahan*). Secondly, the historical origin of these old villages is argued by introducing folktales

(*babad desa*) which are inherited among the local people. It is concluded that some oldest villages in this area came into existence at latest in the 16th century. Then, the huge increase of village population is pointed out through comparison of Bleeker's data with the present ones. The surprising absorptiveness to the increased population as a remarkable character of Javanese village societies is clearly evidenced by this finding. Finally, it is argued that this adaptability to population increase could not be properly explained by the famous "agricultural involution" theory which attributed it to the ecosystem of wet rice production. The author's idea on this problem is that such potential absorptiveness should be primarily explained as a result of village social structure itself and various factors including production of non-rice crops as well as non-agricultural economic activities could play an important role in substantializing such a feature.